

#### 4. THE HARD ROAD

After two short years, Clayton returns to Birmingham. He is now the Regional Sales Director for his company. His success is due to his ability to give his customers a clear picture of the appeals of his products. He is also able to convince them of the benefits of the automobile part that his company offers over those of other manufacturers. He has come to believe in his product as if he makes it himself.

When he last left Birmingham, he carried with him the image of Jenna. He still remembers the sickly orange glow that emanated from her apartment as he looked up there for the final time. As circumstances happen, he again finds himself looking up at the same window. He wonders if she is still a resident in the same building. He can hardly bring himself to ring the bell. Now there view is one full of color and the joyous light seems to light the whole street around. He strains to see if she is still roaming around those same rooms.

He relents and rings the bell. She lets him come up. She is now a student at University of Alabama at Birmingham. She finished her Associates Degree and transferred. She has made quite a name for herself in local theater. She is somewhat of a local celebrity. And she continues to work at Macy's.

When she opens the door she seems to be more angelic than ever. The years have filled out the contours in a glorious way. The color of her cheeks are richer. Her eyes glimmer with a vibrancy that he had never noticed before. She moves with grace and ease. She seems so sprightly and agile.

She hugs him, but she still seems reserved.

"It's been a while, Clayton," she comments rather matter of fact tone.

"I've missed you," he expresses his enthusiasm for her.

"And I missed you to." She is holding back from expressing any real excitement.

"I hope that I didn't catch you in the middle of something."

She makes an excuse, "I was catching up on some studying before bed. Nothing too intense."

He has heard about her success. "I'm surprised that you haven't packed up and headed to Hollywood."

"I want to finish my bachelor's degree before I leave. I don't want to have to wait tables."

She is so full of purpose. That has always been a hallmark of her character. He wonders why he left her. But then it is so clear. She could never give him credit for his dreams. On her vision of success, she expected so much more.

"I wish that I had stayed with you." He has deliberately changed the story to absolve her of any blame.

She accuses him. But her tone is more muted than in the past, "You slept with my best friend. You betrayed me."

He has his defense, "You pushed me away."

He can feel the electricity between them. She is using a night breeze to cool what remains of their passion.

He asks, "Do you want me to go?"

“Not for good. You surprised me. You could come over some evening and we could go out for dinner.”

She has the same telephone number that she had years ago. He feels a little sheepish about not keeping in touch.

When he returns two days later, she greets him wearing nothing but a satin robe.

She has the most attractive legs. He is turned on.

“What’s wrong, Jenna. I thought we were going to go out for dinner.”

“I feel a little down about things. I broke up with the guy that I was going with. He told me that he had no money. All his ventures went down the drain.”

He had experienced the same rejection on her part. Still it surprises him. It seems as if she has been making her own way. Even indisposed she seems appealing to him. In a fit of passion he bolts from his seat to be by her side.

With this hands, he works his way up her smooth legs until the bath robe gives ways and falls to the floor. She is completely naked. He has never beheld such beauty. He can barely contain himself. At this moment, she owns his world. She can ask for anything!

Clayton stops by a couple of days later. He feels the beckoning light from her apartment. Again, he comes up unannounced. She only opens the door part way. “I’m with someone tonight. You can come in for a few minutes.”

He feels like he should go, but she enjoys taunting him.

“This is Matt.” She introduces her lover for the night.

Matt says, “Hello,” somewhat triumphantly. He looks like the family cat who has just eaten the pet canary.

Clayton sits down. He can quite figure out her purpose. But he’s going to use it for his advantage as long as he can. She’ll probably award a prize to the most civil of the two guys.

He tries to hang on even though he can already feel the tension. Matt really has no idea what is going on. But he is going to be the last of the two to leave. He is looking for that opening that will send Clayton on his way.

In his own way, Clayton is clever. He waits until Matt is starting to get mad. Jenna is a little confused about what is going on. She is trying to protect herself. She almost wants to send both guys on their way. But this would only be a victory for Clayton. She doesn’t want to give that much attention.

When Clayton gets up to go, he makes it pretty obvious that he does not take kindly to her game. Even though she wants to be alone with Matt, she feels a little slighted by the whole affair. Matt is hardly the winner in this match.

As soon as Clayton closes the door, she tries to do her best to make it up to Matt. She can tell that he is ready to clear out. Only some heavy loving gets him back in her corner.

Meanwhile, Clayton is well on his way. He hardly comprehends what had just happened. This only makes him want her more. He can only imagine what is going on behind his back. And his twinge of jealousy is now only a rage. What can he do?

Matt is whispering sweet nothings in her ear. He hopes to seal the deal once and forever. But there is little hope for that. Matt is the simple foil for Clayton, and she feels that she can use Matt to make Clayton more committed to her.

Of course, it could all backfire. Clayton could give up when he realizes her scheming.

On the other hand, he believes that his offer is all the more promising for her.

As he settles in to bed, he can only imagine the silly games that she is playing at this moment. He wishes that there was somewhere else where he could realize his feelings. But he only wants her more. If only he could interrupt their mischief. He wonders what options there are for him. He thinks that maybe it has been a mistake to come back to Birmingham.

There really has never been a place in her life for him. He always felt that if he did better at work then he might be more worthy of her love. He is feeling all the more despised. There is very little that he can do at this point. He wants to bang on the walls. He wants to stomp his feet and scream at the top of his lungs. Things will be OK in the morning.

He doesn't hear from Jenna for a couple of days. Then she invites him to dinner.

"We'll really go out this time."

But by the time that he arrives at her place, she has changed her mind.

"I've made some crab cakes. We don't have to go out."

He agrees to stay in and enjoy her sparkling company.

With the ups and downs of Jenna, Clayton learns to accommodate to his first great love. He really believes her celebrity. No one else can offer that providential assurance that he needs to get thing in order. She recognizes her power over him and continues to play him like a bouncing ball.

"I promise not to let Matt come over for a couple of days."

But she only uses her separation from him as an excuse to find another suitor. Clayton starts to feel as if he is on a merry-go-round.

"I wouldn't have come back to you if I knew it was going to be this difficult."

She tries to ignore what he has just said to her. "I wish that you would say nice things to me."

"What do you want, Jenna? I'm here for you."

She wants tenderness and flowers. She feels that he has become hard in his time away. Now he just expects her to be there waiting for him.

"Why do you think that I see other guys?"

"I don't know. To piss me off."

She is angry with him, "You only think about yourself."

He stares back at her, "I'm thinking about your delicious lips."

"Flattery will get you everywhere."

She kisses him deeply. He has forgotten about their problems. All that he can think about is her tight body pressed against his. He pulls her closer.

He wonders how long this can last. She would love to clear out of Alabama and start anew. But she has to finish school. So they can keep playing this game of cat and mouse. And other boys have such an appeal for her.

"I'm young. I don't have to settle down," she tells him so confidently. Down deep, she is more motivated by her fear. She knows that she can't hold on to him. And when they separate, it will throw her for a loop. She works to stay calm and let nothing ruffler her feathers.

When she finally agrees to meet him out of her apartment, at the last minute, she stands him up for another guy that she just met at the theater. She knows how fleeting is her fame. She has to take advantage of the burning heat while it still is this intense.

He tries to look at other girls. But he feels like the moviegoer who wants to ignore the antics of the star actress. The supporting players never have the same magic. He is always a victim of the casting director's art.

He has a sensitive heart. And he wants to realize it in romance. Jenna is resistant to his proposals. At the same time, she realizes that no one offers her as much promise as Clayton. So she will not put aside her games while he is inspired by the competition.

He wants to pin her down once and for all. "What do I have to do to for you to settle down with just me?"

"Are you asking me to marry you?" she questions him.

"Not exactly. I just want to know what you'd say."

"I don't respond to hypothetical questions. If you want to ask to marry me, I want you to show up with a ring."

He doesn't know what to say, "And you'll just refuse me once I go to all the trouble."

"I don't know what I'll do." She is defensive.

He has little to say. She has trapped him again. And he is feeling really stupid. What can he possibly do at this point?

"I really need to go," he maintains.

"Please, don't go. I want you to stay with me for the night."

He agrees reluctantly. She is only trying to show him up.

One of the locals writes a play about growing up in Alabama during the 70's. Clayton is excited to see her act in it. After the show, he goes back stage to congratulate her. She has her arm around her co-star, Patrick..

"Is something going on between the two of you?" he asks.

She denies it all, "No nothing. Patrick and I have just become good friends."

He knows that she is hiding something from him.

"If you don't want to hang out with us, you can just go," she tells him.

He is too embarrassed to stay. But he doesn't want to admit defeat at this point. He mopes in the corner with a glass of champagne. Everyone else is dancing and enjoying themselves. She can hardly coddle him.

"You don't have to stay. I can make it home on my own."

He can imagine her making love in the prop room. Maybe it's better that he just leaves. He goes back to his place in the corner and nurses another glass of champagne. Meanwhile, she is jumping around with the other actors. She gives Patrick a big kiss. He puts his hands on her hips and rubs her gently. She doesn't let go. They kiss more romantically. This is probably his cue.

Surprisingly she comes back to him after ten minutes.

"I want to go home now. Are you coming?"

He doesn't know what to think. She is very intoxicated. She is warming up to him. He can't make sense of any of it. They make passionate love back at her place. It all seems so automatic.

He still can't pierce that shell of hers. It only gets thicker.

She'll disappear from his life for days at a time and then magically reappear as if nothing happened. What can he do but accept it. He keeps dangling a proposal over her. But nothing is

forthcoming. He can discern little consistency in her behavior. He wonders what it is like being Jenna. How can she hold herself together. Clayton just wants a girl who can be the same once and forever.

“I don’t want to be boring. I want to live. I don’t want to be dead.”

He listens to her words as if he is listening to a mystic. In fact, she is uttering nonsense to get him going.

“Jenna, this can’t go on forever.”

“Of course not. I told you that I’m going to move to Hollywood.”

“But until you do, you need stability in your life.” He is again trying to tell her what to do.”

“I’ve got a job. I’ve got school. That’s just enough order for me. If I had any more order in my life, I’d be a robot. I just want to stay sane.”

Maybe this can keep her sane, but it is just driving him crazy. He doesn’t know what to do. Maybe a transfer is in order.

“What would you do if I left?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I’d feel bad for a while. Then I’d have to get over you. I can’t follow you at this point. I have to finish college.”

She seems so practical when she has to be. This only serves as the basis for her flights of fancy. He feels that he is only encouraging her. He is offering her stability. This only makes her more flighty. She feels that Clayton will be there to rescue her. Many a night she calls him lost somewhere with the hope that he will get dressed and take her home.

“Jenna, this has to stop.” He attempts to be forceful. But time and time again, she does the same thing and there he is ready to provide his services.

The old Jenna was a bundle of nerves. She could never hide what she really felt. The new Jenna is cool as a cucumber. Each Clayton believes that he has her pinned down once and for all, she throws a new road block his way.

He believes that he is finished with her once and for all. He decides to take Bridget Moran out for dinner. He had met her when he first lived in Birmingham. But they were never that serious. Since Jenna has played it cool with him, he has started seeing Bridget again. Who knows? It might develop into something more lasting.

Once they start eating, the night seems to be going really well. Bridget helps Clayton pick out a wine. The salad is fresh. Their conversation is entirely pleasant. Clayton starts to wonder why he hasn’t spent more time with her. She doesn’t seem to have any of the insecurities of Jenna.

When the entrees arrive, Clayton is starting to get excited about his date. They both seem to have similar personalities, both so even going. There is none of the showing off with Bridget. She gives off such joy. A little ways into the meal, Clayton begins to notice a commotion in the restaurant. The place is all abuzz from the moment that Jenna walks in. Her dark hair has never been more lustrous. Her evening gown sparkles like the sun. All eyes are on her. She commands everyone’s attention. She sees Clayton and calls him over.

“What is going on here?” asks Jenna in a matter of fact tone. Clayton could simply ignore her. But he feels obligated to give her an answer.

“I’m eating with a friend.”

She stares at Clayton, "Clayton, you're going out with me, and now you're on a date with another woman."

"I thought that we had broken up. We never really said that there's anything between us.

She is rather forceful. "You're playing a game with me. I don't like it."

He is totally apologetic "I'm really sorry."

She snaps back, "That's enough I'm leaving in a few minutes. And I don't want to have to take a cab back."

"How did you get here?"

She is mysterious about her motives, "I heard that you were here with someone. I was too upset to drive so I had a friend drop me off."

He is obsequious like a little lap dog, "I'll be right there." There is little that he can do to save face. He abandons Bridget for the night and for good in the restaurant. He takes his chances with Jenna.

When he gets back to Jenna's, she plants the deepest kiss on his lips. He has never been taken to such heights so quickly before. Bridget is now the furthest thing from his mind. He surrenders to a most devious soul who has plied her craft in the ultimate manipulation.

Her touch is white hot. He melts. She can have anything that she wants. She lets herself lapse into trance. There is something almost other-worldly about their communion.

He stays with her for days. They cool down in her tub. It is late summer and the apartment burns with their passion. They can hardly tell where one ends and the other begins, they merge so completely.

Days later Clayton makes a lame excuse about a family emergency to Bridget. He tells Bridget that Jenna is his cousin. No one could believe such a preposterous fib. Everyone in Birmingham knows of Jenna's reputation. Bridget gives him another chance.

When Jenna calls, he again jumps. He tells a convenient lie and escapes Bridget's clutches. Once he arrives at Jenna's, she has a surprise for him.

"Are you going to give me a yes to my proposal, Jenna? I asked you to marry me."

"I don't recall. Besides, you're late. I'm going to marry a steel magnate. He is positively rolling in money. He can give me anything that I desire."

Down deep, she knows that this will not satisfy her, but she loves to taunt him.

"There's no more steel mills in Birmingham," he answers.

Jenna informs him, "He has old money from the days of big industry."

Clayton has a question, "Where's your tag-along buddy from the old days? Where's Sammy?"

"I don't need her anymore. Isn't it obvious?"

Clayton realizes the dire truth. Jenna has taken on all of Sam's worse mannerisms.

"You know no shame, Jenna. You're not the girl that I knew when I first lived here."

"The girl that you knew was afraid of her own shadow." Jenna replies.

For a week or so, they live together as man and wife. At least, that is how Clayton sees it. She swears off her steel magnate. She keeps away from other men. Jenna seems like the girl that he first met when he came to the city.

"You don't feel tempted to go out," he wonders.

"I have my school work. I have things to occupy me while you're at work."

Even at the supermarket, she won't look at another man. This is what he has always wanted. He no longer questions himself about turning over Bridget. Everything seems so perfect.

One day he comes home and she isn't in the apartment. He waits all that evening. She doesn't answer her cell. She is nowhere to be seen. He wonders what has happened.

Even by midnight she has not come back. He doesn't see her for days. He begins to wonder what has happened to her. He is at a loss to explain the change. Then she turns up.

"Where have you been?"

"I had to visit my parents in Tampa."

He doesn't believe her at all. But he can't prove a thing.

They continue living as they have been. Then one day she gets weird again.

"I really would like you to move out, Clayton."

"I thought that we were getting on so well," Clayton tells her.

"You don't know a thing. As long as I make you dinner, and keep the house clean, you're satisfied. I've got a life to live. I'm famous. I don't need your shit. I don't need you."

Her tirade seems unprovoked. There is little that he can do. He lets her disappear from his life. He goes on working, and think nothing of it. He does not want to dwell on his misfortune. It is too late to go back to Bridget. He lives on his own for a while.

He sees Jenna in the street one day. He tries to catch up to her. She doesn't notice. So he follows her. She meets a man at a deli for lunch. She gives him a kiss. They seem so familiar together. He is Clayton's replacement.

Clayton desperately wants to rush up to them and confront them. He wants to tell the man his story. He waits until they are finished. She is leaving the restaurant. He runs after her.

She turns around, "Clayton, I didn't notice you."

He says ironically, "you seem to be doing fine for yourself."

"You have no idea. I miss you."

He listens. "I guess you do."

He wants to come up with something clever to say. He wants her back.

"I can't be with you anymore. We were always at each other's throats."

He can only remember the passion. He can imagine an ice cube melting on her flesh. The image sends him into fits. He reaches out for her. She pushes him away. Her answer is dramatic. "It's over. For good Clayton. I never want to see you again."

A few weeks later, he gets a call in the middle of the night. It is Jenna.

"Are you sleeping?"

He answers meekly, "Of course I am."

"I need you to come quickly."

He arrives at her place. She is in tears. She has been dumped by Mr. Wonderful.

She is a mess. She seems to be on something. She is dressed in her robe. She is letting it fall from her body. He stares at her naked breasts. The robe is hiked up to her hips.

He pulls her close and begins to kiss her. He is on top of her, and her robe is spread upon the bed.

"I want you to stay with me forever," she reassures him. But by the morning, she wants him to leave.

“I can’t explain now. I have to be somewhere this morning. Last night just happened for old time sake. Meet me at the tea room in Homewood at 3, and I’ll explain everything.”

He has an appointment that afternoon that he cancels. He rushes over to be with him.

She tells her story, “For months, I have been involved with this very abusive man. I don’t know why I stayed with him. But I did. I had to call the police on him a few times. But he kept following me and bringing me back. I was with you, and he took me away. That’s what happened when I went away for all those days.”

Things barely make sense. He continues to listen to her story.

“Tonight, he threatened to kill me if I left him. I told him that no one can threaten me. I told him that he would go to jail if he didn’t leave me immediately. I have things on him that could send him away.”

Clayton asks, “Are you sure that he’s gone?”

“I assume that he has. But you have to stay away until I can be sure. I’ve always wanted to be with you. You know that. He just has been standing in my way.”

Clayton thinks about the host of other men. Something doesn’t make sense about her story. But he listens anyway.

He doesn’t hear back from her. He goes by her apartment, and it is all dark. This seems more than he can bear. He can hardly understand what has been happening to her.

His life goes back to normal. He believes that she is out of his life for good. She knocks at his door one evening.

“I had some things of yours. I thought that you might want them back.”

He thanks her. “So are you leaving town. Don’t you have to finish school?”

“I’m going to finish. I’ve made arrangements with my professors. They understand my circumstances.”

Indeed they do. Everyone has learned to accommodate Jenna.

“What about your career in acting? You’ve been out of that for a while.”

“He forced me out of the limelight. But I’m going to make a comeback.”

Indeed she is. But for the time being, Birmingham acts as if they have never known Jenna Davis.

When Clayton passes her window, she is no longer there. He still looks up in the hope that he might see that intense glow.

He again realizes his mistake about Bridget. He has always been playing a risky hand. And he keeps getting caught. First, it was Samantha. And then Jenna herself. He can never settle for the sure thing. He loves the gamble.

He thinks about Bridget again. She was such an even person. Nothing really made her angry. She was creative. She encouraged him. She was tolerant. On the other hand, he fell again and again for Jenna’s vanity. But no more. The time away helps him shore up his defenses.

One day he is driving home after a late dinner, and someone tosses a rock at his windshield. The impact is intense. It shatters glass everywhere. He isn’t cut, but the effect is so disconcerting that he almost loses control. It is such a mess. He just wants to get home.

He begins to wonder if this is a random act. He suspects that Jenna’s mystery man may have done this to him. He starts to feel like a marked man.

In the morning, he calls the police and files a report. He notes his suspicions. His insurance company refers him to a specialist to get the window fixed. It takes him half a day to get out there and get the repair done.

He still feels under a bad sign. Something strange is going on. Clayton has really no one to tell. He almost feels as if it is time to leave Birmingham.

Once he gets the window fixed, he pretends that nothing has happened. Every so often he notices a small sliver of glass that wasn't vacuumed up from the seat. It is all too weird.

Sometimes he thinks that Jenna made up the story to excuse her erratic behavior. He doesn't notice conspiracy anymore. Just random events that don't connect. He suspects that this is how she feels all the time. Maybe he needed to stay more constant to her when he first lived here. He should have never taken up with Samantha. He feels as if he is being punished for his mischievous deeds.

It's been over a month. He hasn't seen Jenna. There are rumors that she's back in town. He doesn't dare call or go over there. But he misses her so badly. He is worried that she may be trouble. If the guy is around, he may decide to go after Clayton. He decides to leave it all along. He has enough to preoccupy himself at work.

When he finally sees Jenna again, he is taken aback. She has cut her hair. Her fashions show a much more intentional line. None of the soft colors and gentle fabrics. She shows off more of her body. She is entirely provocative. He feels that he can barely get close to her. She is again working at the cosmetics counter.

"Girl, you look fabulous," he tells her. "We have to get together to catch up." He feels that he is acting by necessity. He is afraid of her.

"I'll call you." She has to get back to her client.

When they finally meet, it is about a week later. She has delayed calling.

"I've got everything squared away," she tells him.

They meet at the tea room.

"Did you have to call the police?"

"He explained his behavior. I agreed not to pursue things if he went away. I think that he moved to Maine or something."

"You seem to be your usual lively self. Why the change?"

"I felt like an old woman. I'm not even twenty-five. I want to live."

"You're barely twenty two if I have it right."

"I guess you're right."

She can barely discern the truth. It is all so relative to her, like last year's fashions.

"What color was I wearing when you last saw me?" She laughs.

He notices more of her skin in the tight clothes. He wants to be with her more than ever.

"I don't think that is possible anymore. We can be friends. I just don't want to be involved. I hate being encumbered." She is so brutal to him.

He is so weak, "I still love you."

"Sure you do. Everyone does."

She is acting the part of the celeb. He is trying to pin her down. He just wants an honest emotion from her.

"What do you want? Tender loving care. You never gave me enough for that, dear." she

oozes with cheap flattery. He can't take it. He wants to burst the bubble.

They keep hanging out until cocktail hour. She starts to drink early. He has never seen her like this. He was used to her drinking Dr. Pepper.

By later in the night, she is sloshed. He decides to help her get home. Once home, she comes alive again. She is stumbling around. But she starts to dance and sing as if she is on stage. She becomes an exhibitionist. She is running around without a shirt or bra on.

He is digging her supposed lack of inhibition. He coaxes her pants off of her. He tries to relive old times.

At first, she acts as if he is doing something to her. She screams. She attempts all sorts of dramatics. Then she takes the lead. Her hands are everywhere touching him without restraint. They roll around together, her legs wrapped around his body. He cannot control himself. Neither can she.

They spend a passionate night together. He seems to catch her intoxication. He tastes her deep kisses. He feels transported by her breath.

It is very different than other times together. He feels that she is hardly with him. But her body has never been so unrestrained. She lets him try new things. She cannot hold back. All former constraint is gone.

As the night progresses, she becomes more aggressive. She is the willing partner that he has always sought.

She doesn't wake up until late. He is lucky that it is a Saturday, and he doesn't have to go in for work.

When she meets him at breakfast, she is petulant. She resents his intrusion.

"I don't think that I would have slept with you if I wasn't drunk. I wish that I'd never seen you again."

He has his own version of the events, "I think that you got drunk so that you could sleep with me. Isn't that more your modus operandi?"

She is put off by his tone. She becomes more and more catty.

They have a couple more encounters of pretty much the same nature. Initial hesitation. Crazy partying, and then anonymous sex. He wants more.

"The only reason that you are with woman is so that you can steal their personality. I sized you up from the beginning. I know what you've always been like. And you act so different."

"You didn't seem to complain last night."

"I don't usually complain when I'm getting pleased the way that I like. But that's all you are. A pleasure hound."

"Clever name!"

"I do fancy it myself," she claims.

She seems to be starving herself. Again he wonders if she is on something. Whatever, she has found a new god.

He is surprised that she can keep up with her school work. But as the semester progresses, she has more and more success. This is her only ticket out of the city. She can hardly wait.

"I'm going to graduate a semester early."

She plans to move in December.

‘I’m going to say good by to all this shit.’

He asks, ‘To me too.’

‘You’ve just become a so-so lay. I used to think that you had guts.’

She finds that she is advancing in her insults of him.

She levels with him, ‘Down deep, I think that you are just like that abusive guy that I was with. You pretended that you wanted to marry me. That was just an excuse on your part.’ And so it continues.

She pulls him upstairs and uses her body to pour out all her pain. She feels love and hate with him. It is too raw to bear. And he can hardly keep up.

‘This is not about revelation, sweetheart,’ Jenna tells him. ‘This is about lies. I only lied to you because you couldn’t be honest with yourself. Just consider it my form of revenge.’

And so Clayton goes the way of Beau and Reggie. He was good for her for a while. But now he has become a burden. She doesn’t cry when he leaves town. She knows that she will be soon to follow.

He has tried to touch her. But he has learned how to deflect touch. She can feel pleasure. Even pain. But she has become numb to so much.

Before she leaves, she is involved in one more piece of theater. It is an experimental work that tries to convey the melodrama of a Puccini opera. She is a woman abandoned by a lover. Her face has such expression. The skin is now pulled tighter. Her body is more muscular. She really sinks her teeth into the role. The audience is lulled by her.