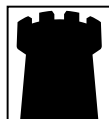


A  
TANGLED  
WEB

A Cyberstalker, a Deadly Obsession, and  
the Twisted Path to Justice

LESLIE  
RULE



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*The best of friends stick with us through the darkest of times,  
and laugh with us when the sun comes out.  
I dedicate this book to my friend, Anne Bradley Jaeger,  
who laughed with me in the sunshine  
and walked beside me when the shadows grew long and cold.*



## PREFACE

I will never forget the first time I felt a killer's eyes burning into me. Yes, the *first* time. It happened more than once, because it was my job to photograph murderers on trial, and they were not always pleased when I walked up to them and boldly aimed my camera. I was true crime author Ann Rule's photographer and research assistant. I'm also her daughter.

I was seventeen when my mom started bringing me to trials to take photos for the articles she published in the pulpy-paged detective magazines sold in supermarkets. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, she saw over a thousand of her articles appear in *True Detective* and its sister publications—articles she typed on an old-style typewriter in the middle of the rec room with the TV blaring and four noisy kids playing around her. She wrote under male pen names because her editor told her, “No one will believe a woman knows anything about crime.” When I started working with her, I was studying photography at a vocational school where I spent half of my high school day, and my teachers tried to discourage me from pursuing a career in a male dominated field. Female professional photographers were rare at the time.

There may not have been many women working as crime reporters and photographers, but, *unfortunately*, there were plenty of murderesses. While the majority of killers are male, cases of females who kill go back as far as history can reach. Cynthia Marler was the first murderess I met. She looked more like a movie star than the hit woman she was. The twenty-eight-year-old Hayward,

California, mother of three stood 5'0", weighed ninety-five pounds, and her thick waves of dark hair spilled past her shoulders.

On August 10, 1980, Marler boarded a Seattle-bound plane under an assumed name and prepared to earn the \$3,000 and the 1976 Chevy pickup truck she'd been promised for putting an end to an ugly divorce dispute.

The petite killer disguised herself in a blonde wig and stalked Wanda Touchstone, following the thirty-four-year-old University of Washington student to a parking lot where she fatally shot her in the neck and head.

Witnesses saw Marler fleeing the scene and later picked her out of a police lineup. Testifying in court, one witness remarked that she "was very, very small and had a hard stare." I found myself the recipient of that hard stare soon after I approached her during a trial break in a stuffy Seattle courtroom and asked if I could photograph her. "Yes," Marler replied, "but don't take a picture of me when I'm smoking." I took a few shots and was so nervous I forgot her stipulation. I snapped a photo just as she held a Camel cigarette near her face after exhaling a cloud of smoke. Marler reprimanded me, her voice chilled and unforgiving. "I told you not to take a picture of me smoking!" Her dark eyes bore into me, and I squirmed as I felt the uncomfortable prickle of a killer's wrath.

Ann wrote Cynthia Marler's story twice, once for a magazine and then years later as a case included in her book, *A Rose for Her Grave—Ann Rule's Crime Files: Volume One*. The photo I shot of the petite killer with cigarette in hand appeared in the book. She's smiling brightly in the image, but an instant later, she was angry. I wish I had captured *that* on film!

It might seem odd that my mother exposed her teenage daughter to killers, but she herself met a murderess when she was only nine years old. In fact, the woman taught her to crochet! Viola was a prisoner in the "Mom and Pop jail" run by my mother's grandparents in Stanton, Michigan. My great-grandfather, Chris Hansen, was the sheriff, and Anna, my great-grandmother, cooked for the residents. When little Ann spent her summers there, it was her job to carry trays of food to the female prisoners.

In addition to the crochet lessons, Viola gave her advice, warning,

“never trust those women who pluck their eyebrows into itty-bitty lines.”

Young Ann wondered why such a nice lady was behind bars awaiting trial for murder. It was “justifiable homicide” the prisoner explained. Yes, she *had* shot and killed her husband, but she’d caught him in the arms of her best friend in the truck she’d bought for him with tips she made waitressing.

The explanation didn’t satisfy Ann’s curiosity. How could someone take the life of another? The question intrigued her, and she’d one day explore it in the three dozen true crime books she authored. She was also fascinated by the methods her family used to solve crimes. Not only was her grandfather the Montcalm County sheriff, an uncle was the undersheriff, another uncle was the medical examiner, and her aunt worked in the juvenile court.

*How do they do it?* little Ann wondered as she watched her grandfather and uncles solve crimes. *How do they take a button and trace it back to the killer?* Sometimes she was allowed to watch them work, and sometimes she *helped*. She was about eleven when her grandfather and uncle recovered the remains of a John Doe. The man had apparently gone missing a long time before and had been reduced to a pile of bones by the time he was discovered. Ann helped spread the bones out on a table as they attempted to identify him.

While forensic science has changed tremendously since my great-grandfather’s day, evil has not. It still comes in all shapes and sizes, and he saw his share of it when he hosted some of the Midwest’s most dangerous criminals at his jailhouse. He treated them all with respect, and that might be one of the reasons he was legendary for his uncanny ability to coax confessions from killers. He was also famous for the fact he’d never fired a gun in the line of duty in his twenty-four-year career, a distinction so unusual that the story was picked up by wire services in November 1939 and published in dozens of newspapers, along with the caveat, “he still is mighty quick on the draw and a tolerably good marksman.”

One of Sheriff Hansen’s most widely publicized cases occurred on a cold January night in 1941. It was a little after 6 P.M. when seventy-three-year-old farmer Benjamin Perrien bent over a washbasin in his kitchen in his Clearlake, Michigan, home. He splashed water on his

face, unaware of the gun pointed at him. Had he known of the rage building in his killer, he probably wouldn't have turned his back on him. The blast from the 16-gauge shotgun ended Ben's life.

Sheriff Hansen and his deputies drove to the crime scene, forty miles west of their Stanton headquarters. They were greeted by thirteen-year-old Robert Eberhardt and the victim's wife, Sylvia, sixty-three, who'd been milking the cow in the barn at the time of the attack. Partially deaf, she was unaware of the trouble until she found her husband crumpled on the kitchen floor.

Young Robert, however, had seen everything. A sixth-grader at a rural schoolhouse, he was small for his age. He'd moved in with the Perriens two years earlier because his poverty-stricken family had too many children to feed. Robert did chores to earn his keep. Now, he said he'd witnessed the shooting and gave a detailed description of the intruders.

The bullet had entered the back of Ben's head, just as Robert had indicated, but Sheriff Hansen doubted the story—especially when it kept changing. His suspicions were confirmed when the Perriens' dog retrieved evidence from a snowdrift, carrying it gingerly in his mouth as he trotted back to the house. The killer was none other than the small boy with the wild story. His four-footed friend had watched him throw the shotgun shell into the snowbank. Whether the pooch thought they were playing a game of fetch or somehow understood that Robert had harmed Ben, the evidence was undeniable.

When the dog dropped the shell on the floor, Robert hastily hid it beneath his bed, but deputies soon found it, along with the boy's gun. Confronted with the proof, he claimed intruders had placed the shotgun in his hands and forced him to kill Ben. Eventually Hansen persuaded him to reveal the truth and sign a confession. While Robert admitted to the murder, he was later quoted saying he felt only a little sorry about what he'd done. In the kid's mind, it was justified. He told Sheriff Hansen that Ben had been "mean" to him, refusing to give him a vacation and had once thumped him on the head with a pail.

The Perrien case was one of many shocking crimes that Hansen helped to solve. Inspired by her grandfather, Ann dreamed of becoming a police woman, a dream she achieved at age twenty-two



when she was hired by the Seattle Police Department. Her beat was the city's Pioneer Square area. In a skirt and high heels—part of the required uniform for female cops in the 1950s—she was not allowed to carry a gun. That was a privilege reserved for male officers. Still, she loved her job and was heartbroken when her career in law enforcement was cut short. She'd been on the force about eight months when the annual physical rolled around, and she flunked the eye exam. The sympathetic examiner allowed her to step up close to the chart, but she still couldn't see the big E. Legally blind without her glasses, she'd be helpless if they were knocked off during a struggle. She was asked to surrender her badge. Devastated, she couldn't bear to drive past Seattle PD and took detours for years.

She got married at twenty-three and had four kids by the time she was thirty-two. My father was stricken with what would turn out to be a fatal skin cancer and couldn't contribute much to support the family, so my mother became a freelance writer, publishing a dozen articles each month in detective magazines. Her old friends at the Seattle PD welcomed her back and gave her access to confidential files. To enrich her reporting, she went back to school to study police science, enrolling in classes such as Crime Scene Investigation and Arrest, Search and Seizure. (I took these same classes in 1978, *not* because I was planning on going into the field, but because I found them interesting and chose them as electives.)

In 1971, Ann was not only a busy mother, she was a full-time writer and part-time student. I took it for granted then, but now I wonder how she found time to volunteer. She would later say it was something she felt she *had* to do. She was partly motivated by her guilt over the fact she'd been unable to rescue her only sibling. At age twenty-one, Don was overcome with a depression his family couldn't help him shake. News of his fate appeared on the front page of the December 31, 1954, edition of the *San Mateo Times*, beneath the headline: "*Wiz*" Student Can't Face Life, Dies Suicide. He was discovered in his carbon monoxide-filled car, parked with the engine running. In his last note, Don Rex Stackhouse apologized, said he loved his family, and asked for his body to be given to Stanford Medical School where he was an honor student.

While Ann couldn't help her brother, she hoped to help other suicidal people and saw an opportunity to do that at the Crisis Clinic, a

nonprofit telephone hotline for troubled people. She signed up to volunteer and went through the training program. Teams worked in pairs, answering phones around the clock at the Crisis Clinic headquarters, a somewhat creepy and otherwise empty Victorian house on Seattle's Capitol Hill.

Ann was given the Tuesday-night shift, and her hotline partner was a work-study law student, paid an hourly wage. He was twenty years her junior and reminded her of the brother she'd lost. She developed a sisterly affection toward the man who sat beside her and was so gentle with callers. Together they saved many lives. If one partner discovered they had a suicide in progress, they'd signal the other to alert authorities to trace the call, a process that could take over an hour in the 1970s.

I remember my mom fixing sandwiches to bring to her Crisis Clinic partner because she worried Ted Bundy was too skinny. *Yes, Ted Bundy!* Today his name is almost synonymous with the term "serial killer," but he wasn't infamous back then. Ann considered him a good friend, and they had long conversations about their personal lives on slow nights when the phones didn't light up.

Eventually their time together on the hotlines ended, but they kept in touch and saw each other at the Crisis Clinic's 1973 Christmas party. Soon after, Seattle was on high alert because of the sudden and inexplicable disappearances of several local teen girls and young women. Everyone was mystified because the victims weren't the type to take risks and had vanished from populated areas, often in the light of day. Detectives suspected a cult was sacrificing maidens. Ann submitted a proposal about the disappearances to a publisher and got her first book contract. There was, however, a condition. If the case was not solved, the book would not be published.

The case, of course, *was* solved, and the bizarre coincidence would have been too contrived to be believable in fiction. *What are the chances a writer would contract to write a book about an unknown killer only to learn that the culprit was her friend?* After he was arrested, charged, convicted and sent to death row to await execution for homicides in Florida, Ted confessed to some of the Washington murders. Ann's editor balked, unsure if her book was worth

publishing. “No one has ever heard of Ted Bundy,” he told her, but he saw the project through. *The Stranger Beside Me* was published in 1980.

Several bestselling books later, she’d learned so much about killers she was invited to serve on the FBI panel that developed the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (ViCAP). Created in 1985, it was the first computer system to link unsolved violent crimes from police departments nationwide. Prior to that, serial killers and rapists could attack in various counties and states to avoid detection. For the first time, detectives became aware of crimes committed in other jurisdictions, detected patterns, and worked together to make swift arrests.

While I’m proud of my mom’s accomplishments, I’m most proud that she remained a kind and down-to-earth person. She never let fame go to her head, preferred costume jewelry to diamond rings and loved to shop at Goodwill. I inherited my mom’s fondness for thrift shops *and* her fascination for dark mysteries. But true crime was *her* thing. I wanted to carve out my own niche and sought out mysteries of another sort.

After writing dozens of articles for national magazines in the early 1990s, I published a number of bestselling books with paranormal themes. When my mom and I traveled together, I accompanied her to trials to photograph the cops and killers for her books, and afterward I investigated haunted places for my books. Sometimes she went with me. She, too, had a fascination for ghosts and possessed a strong sixth sense. I had no desire to move into her territory, though I did come close with one book. *When the Ghost Screams—True Stories of Victims Who Haunt* covered cases of haunted locations where the earthbound spirits of victims have been seen wandering.

It must be a combination of DNA and osmosis that has finally compelled me to embrace my mother’s genre and write *A Tangled Web*. I was also influenced by hundreds of emails from my mom’s readers, some who’ve practically begged me to write a true crime book. Ann had authored two books each year for the last two decades of her career. She has been gone since the summer of 2015, and her readers desperately miss her books. I won’t pretend to have my mother’s expertise on crime or expect to replace her in her readers’

hearts, but she was a wonderful mentor to me, and I've tried to honor her with a carefully researched story that I hope will help me to carry on the family tradition of saving lives. Sheriff Hansen did it first as he protected his community from criminals, and Ann did it with her books that warned about the dangerous people who walk among us. Nothing made her happier than the letters from readers, thanking her for saving their lives. Because of her books, they recognized danger when they saw it headed their way.

With this story, I hope to warn readers about crimes my great-grandfather could not have imagined as he embarked upon his police career over a century ago. In his pre-computer world, cyber stalkers did not yet exist. Murderers have not changed since the 1920s when he began arresting them. They remain as cold-hearted as they were in the 1960s when my mother first began to write about them. Killers have not changed, but their methods have. They now have an arsenal of electronic devices they can use to dupe us, but we can outsmart them by learning their tricks.

# INTRODUCTION

*Oh, what a tangled web we weave,  
when first we practice to deceive.*  
—SIR WALTER SCOTT (1771–1832),  
SCOTTISH NOVELIST, PLAYWRIGHT,  
AND POET

A SPIDER, SOME BELIEVE, cannot be trapped in its own web. While rare, a careless spider *can* be caught in the net it constructed to capture prey. The fact it happens so seldom is a mystery that scientists have yet to solve. One theory suggests that the nimble creatures avoid becoming tangled in their webs by dancing lightly across the sticky strands with only the hairs on the tips of their legs making contact with their clever traps.

While *A Tangled Web* is *not* the story of an actual spider's web, it does follow the wicked journey of a predator who showed no more compassion for victims than a spider shows for the hapless fly caught in its web. The predator in this account used a *different* kind of web to commit cruel crimes. *The World Wide Web!* The majority of us using the Web today are still in awe of the fact that billions of people around the globe have the ability to connect instantaneously with a soft tap of a finger on a computer keyboard—that we can access an electronic system interlinking *millions* of information venues sooner than we can inhale our next breath.

Invented in 1989, the Web has become an integral part of most Americans' lives in only the last two decades. As of this writing, it is still so new that most of us are too naïve to realize the extent of the myriad ways it can be used to set traps designed to deceive us. We often fail to recognize the predators that prowl there, intent upon stealing our money and sometimes our lives. The killer in *A Tangled Web* developed an expertise in the electronic world and used it to as-

sist in not only *committing* crimes, but in the concealment of them. Like the rare spider caught in its own web, the human counterpart in this tragedy spun deceptions so complex that they eventually became trapped in a web of their own making. Unfortunately, it was not before blood was shed and many hearts were broken.

## CHAPTER ONE

WHEN CHEROKEE MONTROYA HEARD that her friend had been shot, she was stunned. The violence occurred on December 5, 2015. The 911 operator took the call at 6:41 P.M., and she soon dispatched emergency vehicles to the scene, Big Lake Park in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Most people called Shanna Elizabeth Golyar by her nickname, Liz, but to Cherokee she had always been Shanna. Cherokee was not surprised to hear that Shanna had gone alone to a deserted park after dark. “She was trying to clear her head—trying to gather herself together. It’s what she usually did, quite often. She would just go somewhere silent, so she could think.”

Cherokee is still unclear about what occurred that night. “I don’t have all the facts,” she admits, and there is a hint of bitterness in her voice as she describes what happened, exactly as it was told to her. “She saw the shadow first. They told her to get on the ground. If she didn’t do it, they were going to shoot her,” she explains, adding that Shanna got down on the cold ground as instructed. “They shot her anyway.”

Cherokee and Shanna had met while working in a distribution warehouse about a year earlier in Omaha, Nebraska, and had hit it off immediately. Though Shanna was about a decade older than Cherokee, they seemed to have a lot in common. Both were mothers, and she noted that Shanna appeared to work as hard as she did. “We met, and we bonded really quickly. We just started hanging out. She’d come over and watch my kids, and I’d watch her kids.”

She has no problem recalling the good times, but Cherokee is still

bewildered by the shooting and the craziness that led up to it. “I don’t watch the news,” she confides. No one can blame her for being confused about the dark sequence of events that led to crimes so complex that they confounded seasoned detectives. And no one can blame her for turning away from the news. Friends had told her bits and pieces, and that was upsetting enough, especially because Cherokee blames herself. “I didn’t stop it. I didn’t see it. I could have *said* something . . .” Her voice trails off, as she shakes her head.

In reality, there was nothing she could have done to prevent the horror that tiptoed so quietly into the lives it ruined that no one saw it coming. It, in fact, began long before Cherokee entered the picture.

Dave Kroupa liked women. He made no secret about that, and he made no apologies. He was upfront with every woman he met. He was *not* looking for a commitment, and he made no promises to the contrary.

He had, after all, recently ended a twelve-year relationship with Amy Flora, the mother of his two children, and he was just getting used to being on his own again. Both Dave and Amy had tried very hard to make it work, to hold their family together for the kids’ sake. In the end, they came to the painful realization that they just weren’t meant to be together. They agreed to remain friends and to work together to make the transition as easy as possible on the children.

The summer of 2012, Dave was still smarting from the breakup and a little bit lonely. He was glad to have regular visits with his kids, but he was otherwise alone. He lived in a barebones Omaha apartment in a huge complex near Hyatt Tire, the shop he managed. At age thirty-four, he was healthy, attractive, and faced years of empty nights if he didn’t make an effort to socialize. He realized very quickly that it wasn’t hard to meet women. They were as close as his laptop computer, and with the press of a key, he could bring up the profiles of hundreds of attractive females who were hoping for friendship and romance.

Most computer-savvy singles looking for companionship are aware of the many dating websites they can join. Match.com, Coffee Meets Bagel, OKCupid, eHarmony, Tinder, and Plenty of Fish, are among the more popular sites where those seeking romance can view the profiles of thousands of others looking for the same.



Dave was drawn to Plenty of Fish, a website claiming to be the largest dating venue in the world. Founded in 2003, the site boasts 80 million members, with 14 million daily visitors, 60,000 new people joining each day, and over a billion messages exchanged between singles each month. A basic membership is free, and visitors to the site can search for new friends by gender, age, ethnicity, and location, and then scroll through the results like a kid leafing through a toy catalogue, though no one is for sale, of course, and the interest must be mutual before arrangements for dates are made.

Each profile features a photograph, a nickname, and whatever general information the poster is willing to share such as: *Non-smoker with average body type, born under the sign of Gemini, Caucasian, no kids, works in the service industry* or *Curvy single mother, loves to dance and eat chocolate, just looking to have some fun on Friday nights when the ex has the kids.*

As with any dating website, there are risks. There is no guarantee that the poster's information is accurate. There is no guarantee that the attractive, seemingly charming individual with the enticing description is not a dangerous felon. While the majority of people seeking dates are harmless, not everyone is truthful. Most of the fibs are benign—a few years or pounds shaved off or a photo that was taken last century represented as recent. Sometimes those trolling for romance are married, pretending to be unattached.

One dissatisfied member of Plenty of Fish recently lashed out online, complaining, "I was guaranteed a *single* man. The company did not screen this person well! I am very angry! This site needs to do better!" The grumbler clearly felt betrayed, but she was naïve to think that website managers had the capability to screen out liars. It is simply not possible to vet 60,000 new members each day. Even if *thousands* of website employees worked around the clock to try to verify information supplied by members, they would fall short. It is far too easy to create fake profiles in online venues.

Females are particularly vulnerable when it comes to dating strangers met online. Many women refuse to meet a first date anywhere but a public place, and some even snap photos of the license plates on the cars of their new beaus, sending the images via text to friends, a somewhat morbid precaution should they go missing. Dave Kroupa understood why women were cautious. He couldn't really blame them. He had

heard the news stories about women attacked by men they met online. He didn't argue when the women he was interested in suggested coffee in a public place for their first dates.

It did not occur to Dave that online dating could be hazardous for *him*. A former member of the National Guard, he could take care of himself. "I don't think of myself as really bad ass. But I'm not going to hide under a rock. You do what you do, and hopefully it turns out alright."

Dave knew some of the ladies he chatted with had jealous ex-boyfriends. Were any of these men so possessive that they would resort to violence to eliminate the competition? It was not something he worried about. He saw nothing risky about online flirting.

For every online dating horror story, there are thousands of romantic connections so successful they result in marriage. According to a June 2013 article in the New York *Daily News*, a study by researchers working with Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) found that more than one-third of marriages in the U.S. began with online dating. But marriage was the furthest thing from Dave's mind. "I wanted to have a little fun," he confides. "I did my thirteen, fourteen years. I was never married, but it was as good as. We had the house, and the two kids, and the white picket fence."

Few breakups are *not* painful, and Dave had barely begun to process the end of his relationship when he made the decision to start dating. He wanted to cut loose and enjoy the company of like-minded women. He found lots of profiles for attractive women on the Plenty of Fish website, and he dated his share of them. *Sue. Pam. Joanne. Kelly . . .*

Not in his worst nightmares could Dave have imagined there would come a day when an attorney in a murder trial would rattle off the names of the women he had met that summer of 2012.

*Mary. Cathy. Joyce. Beth. Margaret. Sandra . . .*

If the chemistry was there, and the woman was willing, Dave was more than happy to explore a sexual relationship, but he had standards. "I wouldn't say I have exceptionally high morals. I'm not against hooking up or booty calls, but I like to *know* the woman." Not everyone subscribing to online dating sites has manners, he notes. "A couple of times I responded to somebody I met online, went over to her house, and immediately she was jumping on me.

That's a little off-putting for me. I'm crazy. I'm kinky. But I'm not that wild."

*Jenna. Diane. Megan. June. Lori. Tracy . . .*

When the names are read from a list, it seems like Dave has had a lot of dates, but it was not as if he had sex with *all* of them. In fact, in most cases it was only a coffee date. The chemistry just wasn't there, and they quickly parted.

Females are drawn to Dave. He exudes the kind of masculine confidence that comes with humility. At his core—even if he does not consciously recognize it—he is so sure of who he is that he has no need for arrogance, and the self-effacing comments come easily. He is attractive with or without the beard he sometimes allows to grow. With his intense blue eyes and the kind of wavy, blond hair that women are tempted to rake their fingers through, he gets his share of looks from the ladies, but it may be his laugh that is most endearing. He likes to have fun, and his laugh is rich and warm and frequent.

While Dave had a healthy sex drive, he wasn't seeking casual sex with a large number of women *or* a monogamous relationship. He was looking for something somewhere in between. Ideally, he would date several women he enjoyed spending time with, and none of them would put demands on him. They, too, would be as free as he was, and it would be none of his business what they did when they weren't with him. Unfortunately, few women seemed to be seeking this type of arrangement.

Dave did not want to hurt anyone, and he made it clear to the females he met that he was not looking for a commitment. Despite the fact he tried to be careful not to hurt the ladies' feelings, sometimes they got hurt anyway. He hated it when they cried. He was upfront about his desire to maintain his bachelor status, and most of the women had nodded and smiled, seeming to understand when he laid down the rules. But when he pulled away after a few dates, they were too often offended. Did they think he was playing hard to get when he insisted he wasn't looking for a commitment? Did they think he was playing a game? Dave was *not* playing a game. But someone else was.

A very dangerous game, indeed.

## CHAPTER TWO

DAVID ALEXANDER KROUPA was born on October 9, 1976, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the first child of Tom and Trish Kroupa. As he gulped in his first breath of air, news of Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford's debates was dominating headlines. The presidential candidates accused each other of "telling untruths," in what by today's standards would be considered gentlemanly allegations but were seen as controversial enough to be newsworthy at the time. Headlines were also buzzing with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to reinstate the death penalty after a nine-year nationwide ban. Gary Mark Gilmore, convicted of killing motel manager Ben Bushnell in Provo, Utah, was the first death row inmate to trudge to his doom after the moratorium was lifted. He faced a firing squad in Provo twelve weeks later.

But none of the controversies or evils in the world touched young David's life. He was the eldest of three boys. Brother Adam was born in 1978, followed by Max in 1983. "We had a *Leave it to Beaver* family," Dave remarks, referencing the Cleavers, the fictitious squeaky-clean family in the popular television drama that debuted in 1957. The Kroupa family, however, was not only formed a whole generation after the Cleavers, they were also far more devoted to their religion than the TV family who were vague about their beliefs. "We grew up going to church. Southern Baptist. We went three times a week, once on Wednesday and twice on Sunday."

The Southern Baptist Church is considered to be much more strict than the Baptist Church, and followers believe that each word in the

Bible is the truth, while Baptists allow for looser interpretations. Their many differences include their stance on female clergy. The Baptists allow it, but Southern Baptists forbid it. Leaders of both denominations encourage old-fashioned family values, and neither is a fan of divorce or promiscuity. Southern Baptist ministers often preach the virtues of marriage and monogamy, but despite the indoctrination in their formative years, neither Dave nor his brothers embraced it. “My brothers never married, and I’m the only one who had kids.”

Their parents, however, have been happily married for over forty-five years. Tom and Trish worked hard to give their boys everything they needed. “My father worked at a printing company for forty years, and my mother was a county veteran-service officer for thirty-seven years,” says Dave, explaining that she processed documents to help veterans obtain their benefits.

The Kroupa home was inviting with its shuttered windows, peaked roof, and a big backyard for the boys to play in. It sat on a quiet, gently curving street where the sidewalks were shaded by American elms, hackberry, and sycamore trees. Yards were kept up in the family-oriented neighborhood where gardens bloomed in the summertime with bright red and yellow daylilies. Jack-o’-lanterns grinned from the porches in October, and nearly every house on the block wore strands of twinkling lights in December. Neighbors knew each other’s names, and they smiled and waved to each other.

It was an innocent era in Dave’s life, one that seems almost surreal when he looks back on it from the perspective of someone exposed to an evil he could not have imagined as a kid. The biggest crime to touch his life had been the theft of his father’s fishing tackle. Back then the Kroupa family looked forward to warm days when they could take their sixteen-foot boat out on one of the area’s many lakes. Between fishing trips, the boat was parked in front of their home. As the family slept one night, someone climbed onto their boat and stole the fishing tackle. It certainly wasn’t a violent crime, and it wasn’t even a mystery. The thief was a kid from down the street “who was always in trouble.”

“I grew up in the perfect household.” Dave is grateful for the good times and his idyllic childhood. His parents had a harmonious

marriage, and the brothers usually got along pretty well with each other, too. His parents not only made their sons feel secure, they also encouraged their interests.

Dave gravitated toward sports, playing football on a City League team. "I was a football jock up until my freshman year of high school. I was good enough, but I wasn't the fastest or the biggest or the smartest. I got plenty of trophies, but they hand out trophies to everybody. One year we won the championship. We beat the hell out of a team from Minneapolis. Some fancy team. Must have been seventh grade."

The next year he fractured his leg the night before the first game of the season. "I broke my leg in three places during practice. It was the last time I ever played." It was around that time that Dave started to rebel. "I grew my hair out long, I hung out with the wrong people, and I smoked. I even sported a Mohawk for a while." It was the typical teenage rebellion, but Dave never got into real trouble.

After high school he moved to Denver and joined the National Guard, but after two years, "They stopped paying me. So, I asked them about it. Nothing happened. So, I asked them about it *again*. Nothing happened. So, I just didn't go to drill. A lieutenant called me up one day and said, 'You have to come to drill. We own you. If you don't come, we'll send MPs after you.' I told him, 'It's a job. I get paid. I'll come when I get paid.' I never heard from them again. I got my discharge papers, and that was it. It was around the time they were scaling back, and they were pushing people out left and right."

While living in Denver, he went to college and earned his associate's degree in automotive engineering. "I came back to Sioux Falls for a girl," he confesses. He enrolled in a college there and pursued his bachelor's degree. "It must have been three or four months into the year when we all showed up at school one day, but the doors were padlocked shut. We found out that the owner of the school had gambled away everyone's tuition in Vegas. The feds were there, confiscating everything, and she was going away in cuffs."

The students were told that the government would forgive their student loans, or they could transfer their credits to a new school. "I just said, 'I'm done. I'm out.'" He was barely twenty years old and wasn't sure what to do with his life. Twice burned by administra-

tions mishandling funds, he decided to stick with what he knew best, fixing cars. “That’s why I’m still doing this for a living. I never did figure out what I wanted to do.”

A couple of years after the school closed its doors, Dave was working at a truck stop’s gas station in Council Bluffs, Iowa, when a cute young woman caught his eye. Amy Flora, petite and sweet natured, also worked at the truck stop. She said yes when Dave asked her out. They ended up staying together for over a decade, and they had two children, Calista, born in 2001, and Trey, in 2003. The little family moved to Wisconsin when Dave was promoted. They started out in Madison, later relocating to Oshkosh.

Almost all relationships have conflicts, and Dave and Amy’s was no exception. Perhaps their biggest issue was their stance on marriage. “I wanted to get married, and he didn’t want to,” Amy explains. She needed the security of a forever commitment, but Dave saw marriage as a trap. For all practical purposes, they *were* married. They were monogamous and lived together, raising their two kids, but Amy wondered why the father of her children was reluctant to make it legal. The conflict over the marriage question created an undercurrent of resentment, and their smaller disagreements escalated because of that.

In addition, finances were tight, and it was a stressful time. “We didn’t get to do fun things together,” Amy emphasizes. “We were working hard to make ends meet, and we worked opposite shifts.” They arranged their schedules so that one of them would always be with the children, but it left little time for the couple to spend time with each other.

Wisconsin had never felt like home to Amy. Born and raised in Council Bluffs, she missed her family and friends there. “I lived in Wisconsin for twelve years, and I didn’t have too many friends there. I was just lonely. I said, ‘If we aren’t going to go forward, and we’re just going to sit still, I want to go home.’” In the fall of 2011, the family moved into an apartment in Council Bluffs. Amy was glad to be near her friends again, but she and Dave weren’t getting along. They made an effort to be civil to each other for the sake of the children, but tensions were high. As painful as it was, they decided they could not stay together.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE SUMMER OF 2012 did not start out well for Dave. “I moved into my apartment with a pile of clothes and a computer.” He had left the furniture for Amy and his kids. “I had nothing else. Not even a bowl.” The new apartment was in Omaha, about twenty minutes from Amy’s place across the Missouri River.

When locals claim Omaha “invented hospitality,” and encourage tourists to “talk to strangers,” they might be joking but visitors agree it’s a downright friendly place. Neighbor helps neighbor, and when folks pass on the street, they smile and nod. It’s an attitude bred out of necessity because people here *need* each other to survive.

Crippling blizzards can bear down with little warning, while warmer months beckon the deadly gusts that roar through the Midwest’s “Tornado Alley,” with Omaha smack in the middle. Nebraska averages fifty-seven tornadoes yearly, the most deadly to hit Omaha on Easter Sunday of 1913. With a lethal, quarter-mile girth, it cut a diagonal path through the city, flattening entire neighborhoods, injuring over 350 people and killing 103. The twister ripped open gas lines, igniting the rubble, but citizens toiled through the night to rescue neighbors trapped beneath their collapsed homes.

Despite their own injuries, Omaha’s switchboard operators worked in blood-drenched dresses to keep the city’s communication lines open so others could survive. The altruistic grit displayed a century ago shaped an attitude of helpfulness that still prevails.

While its natural disasters are remarkable, Omahaians would rather talk about the city’s notable contributions. Omaha is the birth-



place of thirty-eighth president Gerald Ford, civil rights activist Malcolm X, *and* the TV dinner—the frozen single-serving suppers in aluminum trays created by Swanson in 1954. It's also movie star dancer Fred Astaire's hometown, and the place where Johnny Carson launched his broadcasting career in 1950.

The city's number one tourist attraction, the Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, covers 130 acres, is home to 962 species, and was crowned “the best zoo in the world,” by reviewers of a leading travel website.

Omaha may stand alone as a city, but as a region, its “metropolitan statistical area” includes Council Bluffs. While the Missouri River separates Nebraska from Iowa, Omaha and Council Bluffs are linked by bridges. The two cities have little in common other than capricious weather and incredible sunsets, burning brilliant shades of crimson in the endless sky. Council Bluffs, founded in 1804, a half century before Omaha, is much smaller and home to 62,316 people versus Omaha's 466,893.

A Council Bluffs-born resident who now makes her home in Omaha, notes that while both cities have “hardworking people willing to help their neighbor,” an unspoken feud exists between them, running deeper than their obvious choices for football teams. (Omaha roots for the Huskers, of course, while Council Bluffs cheers for the Hawkeyes.) Cross the river and political views shift—as do speed limits, slightly higher in Nebraska. Median income is higher in Omaha, but so are taxes and the cost of housing! The median value of homes in Council Bluffs is about 25 percent lower than its counterpart.

Apartments in Council Bluffs might have been cheaper, but Dave chose to live in Omaha to avoid long commutes to work. He rented a place in a huge complex with over a dozen brick buildings, each holding three floors of apartments. The grounds had a park-like feel with lots of grassy spaces and big shade trees. It was affordable, close to his work, and he knew his kids would like the clubhouse and swimming pool. It was fun when they visited, but most of the time it was too quiet.

As Dave settled into his new place, it was summertime, uncomfortably warm with temperatures creeping into the nineties, and his apartment was a stifling and lonely place. “I'd work all day, then see

my kids, and then there was nothing else to do. I was lonely at first because I didn't know anybody. The people I did know around here were all Amy's friends." He decided to check out some online dating sites and discovered Plenty of Fish. It was free to create a profile and sign up for a basic membership. He figured there was nothing to lose, so he typed in the requested information and was soon scrolling through photos of dozens of attractive females who lived in the area.

Before long, Dave was chatting online with Liz, a lady about his age, and they made a date to meet in person. She was the first woman he met online. Attractive with dark hair almost to her shoulders, Liz had a nice figure. She was slender but large breasted, and he was a little bit intimidated by her when they met at the agreed-upon place, Perkins, a twenty-four-hour restaurant, in Omaha.

"I was nervous," he admits. "I was fresh out of the thing with Amy, and I didn't even know how to date at that point. I was out of the groove." Dave had been only 22 the last time he was single. Just a kid. Nearly everyone else in his age group had also been unattached, and there were lots of casual get-togethers. Hooking up had been easy, and no one stood on ceremony. Now, a dozen years later, he was not only rusty, he was uncertain how to interact with a mature woman on an official date.

They chose a booth and sat across from each other, making small talk and drinking coffee. Dave added lots of sugar to his. Not only did he like his coffee sweet, it gave him something to do during the awkward pauses. He ripped open packet after packet, poured the sugar in and then stirred vigorously, his spoon clinking loudly against the cup, as he tried to think of what to say next.

He looked across the table into Liz's brown eyes as she stared intently back at him. With a nose slightly too large for her face, she was not classically pretty, but there was something appealing about her. Her heavy-lidded eyes were sexy, and her teeth appeared perfect. Straight and almost too white, they were most likely veneers.

Their kids were about the same ages, and they each had two, a boy and a girl. That was good. They had something in common they could talk about. Dave explained his last relationship had recently ended and that he was not looking for anything serious. Liz nodded. She understood. Frankly, she was very busy with her kids and pets

and her own cleaning business, “Liz’s Housekeeping,” she explained. She had way too much going on to add more commitments.

“We had four or five similar coffee dates,” Dave remembers. Liz stayed on her side of the table, and he stayed on his. He couldn’t tell if she was attracted to him or if they were destined to be nothing more than platonic friends. “She might have been giving me signals, but I wasn’t catching any of them.” Finally, on the fifth date, as they left the restaurant, he got up his nerve to kiss her for the first time.

“Why did it take you so long?” she asked him.

“’Cause I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing,” he confessed. Whatever he had forgotten came back to him very quickly. They had sex that night, and on nearly every date after that. “I would have to credit Liz with helping me get my confidence back. I was feeling pretty low, pretty worthless, after my breakup with Amy.”

Liz obviously liked him. She was an enthusiastic lover, and they saw each other regularly over the next two weeks, but it didn’t take him long to get restless. He found her attractive, and she was easy to be with, but there was no deep connection. She was always up for sex, and that was fine with Dave, but he needed more than that. “One of the reasons I would never be with Liz is that she was not well read. I couldn’t have a conversation with her about the news.”

Though self-deprecating and the last to acknowledge his strengths, Dave is highly intelligent. If he ever *were* to commit again, he would need a woman who challenged him intellectually. Liz was definitely not that woman. He continued to scroll through the profiles of women on the Plenty of Fish website. “I really kind of started hitting the books, as it were, and seeing what was out there.”

Liz wanted more from Dave than he was willing to give her, and that became apparent just weeks after he had met her. “She got really clingy. She wanted all of my time.” He didn’t want to be a jerk about it, but he wished she would back off and give him room to breathe.

“What did you do last night?” she often asked with more than a casual interest when he had not spent the evening before with her. “That’s my business,” Dave replied. “I do what I want to do. I told you that when we met.”

He went on a few dates, usually meeting the women in a coffee-

house. Most of the time it was obvious within the first minute that there was absolutely no attraction. Sometimes there was a spark, and a second and third date followed. Sometimes the connections resulted in sex. Always he made it clear that he was not looking to commit. His reason for avoiding commitment changed over time. “Initially, my reason for not wanting anything serious was because I had just got out of a long relationship. And then once I got my confidence back, and I was meeting women, I thought, ‘Okay, I’m not doing this whole monogamous thing!’”

He told Liz, “You can be here or not. Your call, but I’m going to do what I’m going to do.” He had no objection to sex with Liz, but she had to understand that that’s *all* it was. He was going to see other women. He was not Liz’s boyfriend and never would be. He looked her in the eye and said, “We’re not going to ever be together.”

Though Dave didn’t volunteer details about the other women he saw, he didn’t hesitate to tell Liz the reason he was unavailable if she tried to arrange to get together on a night he had other plans. “I can’t tonight,” he’d tell her. “I’ve got a date.”

The first time Liz popped into Dave’s place just before he was about to leave to meet someone, he didn’t think much of it. She wanted sex, and he obliged. It took a while for him to notice a pattern. “She’d call and ask me, ‘What are you doing tonight?’ and I’d say, ‘I’m going on a date. This is my night. *Good-bye.*’ And then I’d come home from work, and she’d be waiting for me, just to get it on with me before I went on a date. It took me about three times to catch on, and then I thought, ‘Wait a minute! She’s trying to wear me out!’ Afterward she’d say, ‘Okay, bye,’ like now she thought I wasn’t motivated to go out and chase anybody else. It didn’t slow me down. She was trying, but I’m not that old,” he says, explaining that by the time he wined and dined his date that enough time had passed to revive him.

While Dave continued to remind Liz that he was not committed to her, she made it clear that she wasn’t seeing anyone else. “I’m not all there is,” he told her. “I’m just a guy. Go on some dates! Go get laid!”

“I’m not like that,” she insisted, stressing that her morals were too high to do as he suggested. “I’m not going to do what you’re doing!”

“Don’t expect me to change,” he warned her. “You’re wasting

your time if you're waiting around for me to change. I'm going to date, and you should, too."

Liz shook her head, adamant that she didn't plan to see anyone else. She told him that she had deleted her profile from the Plenty of Fish website.

"I'll help you make a new profile," he suggested, but she demurred, saying she wouldn't feel comfortable dating more than one man at a time. If Liz wanted to hang around hoping he'd change his mind, that was her choice. Short of telling her to get lost, he didn't know how to make his position more clear. He never deliberately hurt anyone's feelings, and he didn't want to crush Liz. Maybe she would move on once she realized he wasn't going to change. He continued to see other ladies, but there was no one who knocked his socks off, no one who made him rethink his vow to remain a bachelor.

Not only did Liz try to fulfill Dave sexually before he left for dates, she made their nights together sizzle. "Liz was very kinky." She wasn't shy about trying new things and trying them in new places, including public places. Smack in the middle of a bright, sunny day, the two were visiting a park, and they set out on one of the many well-traveled nature trails. Suddenly, Liz grabbed Dave's arm and pulled him off the path, making her intentions clear as her hands traveled over his body and tugged at his jeans. They sunk into the grass, just out of view of people walking by. "There I was with the sun shining on my bare butt!" he recalls.

Though no one could see them, they were well aware of the passersby just a few feet away, and the risk of getting caught made the sex all the more thrilling. Dave had come a long way from the days he sat on the hard pew in the Southern Baptist Church and listened to the preacher's warnings about sinning and Hell. He'd long since shed the religion and did not believe sex outside of marriage was a sin, but he certainly didn't want to be arrested for public indecency. No one caught them, and they pulled their clothes back on quickly, giggling as they slipped back onto the trail.

Dave had to admit that Liz had it going on when she dressed up for nights on the town. "I remember a group of guys hooting when we walked down the street together," he says, recalling how Liz turned heads in a short skirt. The guys gave Dave the thumbs up as they hollered their approval.

Liz was a lot of fun, *most of the time*. But there was a “real issue. She resented the amount of time that I spent with my kids.” She was worried he was hanging out with Amy when he went to Council Bluffs. While Dave and Amy eventually got over their disagreements, they went through a rough period when they split. Their breakup was so contentious that they tolerated each other only for their children in the first months after their relationship had disintegrated.

“Amy and I got along like two pieces of sandpaper, so I didn’t hang out at her place. I’d just pull up, pick up my kids and leave. I was living in Omaha, a twenty-minute drive, so we’d find a place to sit down and eat and drink coffee.” Glancing around the casual restaurant where he met with this author, he adds, “My kids know this place way too well. We spent a lot of time here early on.”

Liz, however, regularly dropped by and made snide comments when he returned from visits with his children. “Oh,” she’d say pointedly. “I see you spent a lot of time with *Amy*.”

“I wasn’t with Amy. I saw my kids,” Dave would retort. “But it’s none of your damn business what I do with my time.”

Liz’s approach was passive aggressive, often so subtle her resentment was barely noticeable as she quietly fumed, but before too long, it began to sound like nagging. “As time went on, it would get worse and worse and worse, until I’d say, ‘You know what? That’s it. I don’t need this bullshit. Goodbye.’ And then she’d go away for a week or two. Then she’d call and say, ‘Oh, can you help me out with this or that?’”

Once Dave had helped Liz with whatever thing she needed help with, she’d get back in his good graces by initiating sex, and the cycle would start all over again. Liz was an expert seductress, and she knew exactly what Dave liked. He was too nice of a guy to tell her to take a hike right afterward, so she would spend the night, the blowup all but forgotten.

All humans are influenced by biology whether we’re aware of it or not, and studies have shown that a hormone released by the hypothalamus during sex can create such a physical high that both males and females are often confused by their feelings. Are those warm, fuzzy feelings a genuine indication of caring or are they a temporary rush of “feel good” chemicals? The answer is not always simple. Oxy-

tocin, dubbed “the love hormone” and “the cuddle hormone,” fosters bonding in couples, and the natural high can be so powerful that it overrides common sense.

Research continues on the sometimes controversial and debatable effects of human-generated chemicals and how they affect social interaction, but there is no denying the fact that sexual connections make it much more difficult to sever relationships. Dave *did* feel more fondly toward Liz because of their physical involvement. Sex relaxed him, numbing his concerns about her possessiveness. After their reunions, things would be peaceful for a couple of weeks, and then Liz would once again begin to pout and insinuate he had slept with Amy.

Neither Amy nor Dave had any inclination to rekindle their romantic relationship, but Liz refused to believe that. It was exasperating, he recalls. “It was just nag, nag, nag, nag when I’d already told her a thousand times, ‘It’s none of your damn business. If I get back with Amy tomorrow, that’s none of your damn business.’”

The longer he knew Liz, the less inclined she was to back down when he told her off. With each passing week, she kept count of the time she had “invested” in him since their first meeting, as if she were counting dollars deposited in the bank.

“I would think you would give me a little more consideration with three months invested in this relationship,” she said in the middle of one of her snits over her suspicions that he was hooking up with Amy. Even the weeks they had spent apart counted as “time invested,” as far as Liz was concerned.

Sometimes it was easier to ignore her than argue. As long as he steered clear of the subject of Amy, Dave and Liz got along fine. Sex between them continued to be good, and he didn’t mind falling asleep next to her. “I sleep like a brick.” Once he closed his eyes for the night, he was almost instantly in too deep of a sleep to be affected by whoever was resting next to him. Liz spent the night often.

When she wasn’t obsessing over Amy, Liz was docile and agreeable. While she didn’t possess a quick wit or the ability to engage in fascinating conversation, she was okay company for those nights that would have been otherwise lonely. As long as she understood that he would *never* commit to her, he figured he could keep from breaking her heart, so he reminded her often that he wasn’t in love

with her and never would be. His plan did not work. Liz didn't get the hint, and she continued to push him to give her more. She sought him out constantly, often dropping by without warning. What was he supposed to do? Shut the door in her face? Shove her off when she climbed onto his lap and kissed him?

Two things betrayed him: his body, too easily aroused when an attractive and sexually aggressive woman was insistent upon having him. And his conscience. "I didn't want to be a dick. I'd already been a jerk on numerous occasions because she would push at me until I had to be. And I don't want to be that guy, but sometimes you have to be."

Kindhearted people have a particularly tough time ending relationships, and though David wished Liz would quietly go away, he hoped that would happen without him having to be cruel. He doesn't remember when Paul Simon's sensation "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" first hit the airwaves in late 1975, because he wasn't born yet. In January 1976, right around the time he was conceived and just before his mother probably sensed the new life stirring within her, the song climbed to the top of the charts. The catchy tune with rhyming suggestions such as "Get on the bus, Gus," and "Drop off the key, Lee," listed various ways to dump a lover and "Get yourself free."

The song makes rejecting someone sound easy, but in reality, it can be just as painful for the dumper with a conscience as it is for the "dumpee." Dave didn't want to see Liz's tears or feel the burden of her broken heart. People have been known to go so far as to fake their own deaths rather than see the pain of rejection in the eyes of their jilted lovers. The more common brush off, however, is used so often it has become a cliché.

*"It's not you, it's me."*

In theory, the deserted partner is supposed to feel better about themselves when the one severing the ties takes responsibility for the failure of the relationship. Do those five monosyllable words *really* help rejected people salvage their egos? Perhaps in some cases, but most of the time the brokenhearted recognize a platitude when they hear one and end up feeling insulted *and* rejected.

In September 2012, as the nights grew cold, and the deciduous trees were afire with autumn hues, Liz insisted on having serious



talks with Dave about the direction of their relationship. He bristled, but she read that as a sign that he was afraid to show his feelings. She had so many questions for him. *How did he really feel about her?*

Backed into a corner, he told her she was attractive and a great gal, and sure, he cared about her. Yeah, they had fun together. “But I’m never going to commit to you,” he added. How many times did they have to have this discussion? Dave was irritated.

Liz, however, plucked out the parts of his response she liked the best and discarded the rest. *Dave cared about her!* She decided he might be more comfortable relaying his feelings in writing, and she began to send him long texts and emails, all built around a brilliant idea that had occurred to her. What if Dave committed to her for just four weeks? It would be “a fresh start” for them, and maybe it would “move their relationship forward.”

He grimaced when he saw the text she’d sent him outlining her proposal. Why was she suggesting *any* kind of commitment when she knew he wanted his freedom? “I ignored it the first time,” he says. “Like it didn’t happen.”

In another email she asked if he would rather that she just go away. Trying to soften the rejection, he repeated what he had told her from the beginning. As long as she didn’t expect anything from him, he didn’t mind hanging out with her.

In one of the following emails she wrote, *I know you have things to think over. Do you really not want to try? Stop overanalyzing everything. What did you feel? I got you to say a little bit today, which was nice to hear. That’s all I want, really, is for you to tell me how you feel honestly, and I know it’s hard for you. You’re very vague about things, and I wish you would open up.*

Dave didn’t think he was vague. Maybe he was a *little* vague when she put him on the spot and insisted that he tell her exactly what he thought of her. He had hemmed and hawed and tried to change the subject, so he wouldn’t say something mean. But he did not think he was vague when it came to where he stood on their future. *There wasn’t one!*

He had once made the mistake of telling Liz about his past disappointments in failed romances. Almost everyone has had their heart broken at least once, and he was no exception. Liz concluded that his past pain was the main obstacle they had to overcome to find

bliss. *I know your past isn't very good, and I'm sorry for that, she wrote. You're a wonderful man and deserve someone who will respect you. I don't want to be full of myself, but I am very good to the man I am seeing. Sorry, but I deserve someone like you, finally.*

The onslaught of words continued, and he responded with about one word for every hundred she expressed. In that September's exhaustive email exchange, Liz continued to ask him for answers to questions he had already answered. *Either you want me to stay, or you want me to go, she wrote, adding that she would not stop wanting more from Dave. I understand your position at the moment, she stated. She ended that email saying he could expect her to continue to ask for a commitment from him in the following months.*

Liz was trying to pin Dave down, and it made him extremely uncomfortable. How could he make it clear that he absolutely did not want to be in a monogamous, permanent relationship with her? He didn't want to hurt her feelings, and he wished she would drop the subject.

Dave took a deep breath and typed a reply that he hoped would make her back off but not completely crush her. He wrote that he'd thought he'd made his position clear and added, "I'm prepared to understand that you want more and will ask again. That's cool. Are you prepared to hear 'no' again?" *How much more-blunt could he be?* he wondered as he hit the send button.

*Maybe,* Liz responded and pointed out that they'd been seeing each other for months, as if that gave her the right to demand more from him. She ended that email asking, *What do I need to do to get you to take a chance?* Seven minutes later, before he could respond, she sent another email. *I guess hearing "no" isn't that big of a deal. It does make me wonder what is wrong with me. Wonder if I'm just a rebound. I guess with almost four months invested, I figured I'd get more from you.*

Dave felt bad that Liz felt bad. Why couldn't she grasp that the fact that he wanted his freedom wasn't a rejection of her? There was so much that she didn't seem to get. When he read her next words, he realized how true that was. Liz wrote, *I always feel we take a small step forward, then you go to Amy, then we take ten steps backward. Am I really always going to have to play this tug of war for you to drop the damn past?*

Once again, he tried to explain that the mother of his children wasn't the issue. *Well, I hardly talk to Amy, and I never see her, so it's not that.* He hit send, and a reply appeared almost immediately.

*Are you scared of me?* Liz asked. *Do you think I will cheat on you? Do you think you're not good enough?*

He'd rather put the blame on himself than hurt her feelings and was glad she'd steered the discussion in that direction. Elaborating on the standard rejection, "It's not you, it's me," he typed, *I'm not good enough for you. Just because you have low standards, obviously, since you like me, doesn't mean I'm good for you.*

A flurry of emails flew back and forth, and then Liz got right to the point. *Answer the stupid question. Do you want to keep going with us or not? Not that hard, stay or go.* There it was again. The ultimatum.

If she would just stop nagging him to commit and give him room to breathe, they could hang out, but if she vanished from his life forever, he would not shed any tears. "I didn't care if she came or went," he admits, but he was trying hard to be tactful. He typed, *I said "stay" 27 emails ago. But maybe we should back off again. Emotions getting high and all*

*Oh my fucking God!* Liz shot back. *Whatever. As always, I bring something up, and Dave runs for the hills! You're the only one that has a problem here. It's always easier to run.* She was needling him, calling him a coward for refusing to face a love she was certain he'd see if he weren't so afraid. He did not take the bait.

The most irritating part of their exchanges was her persistence about the four-week commitment. He could hardly believe she'd suggest such a thing, and he was frustrated when he read, *I guess at the end of four weeks this is what I'm hoping for. Maybe persuade you to move a little forward with us. LOL.* Laughing out loud? She obviously wasn't joking, and the use of the Internet abbreviation for laughter ironically came off like a nervous giggle. Dave wished she were joking, because the suggestion was truly laughable to him.

Liz stressed in that email, *I'd like a guy who was kind of like mine, someone I could go out with, have fun with, or sit at home with and enjoy playing PS3, cards or whatever.* She added that she was afraid of a commitment as he was, but a few sentences later she wrote that she was "asking for constants." She rattled on, basically

repeating what she had already said, and then ended with, *Does that make sense, or did I just make it worse?*

What did Liz think a one-month commitment would accomplish? Did she believe he'd realize he was hopelessly in love with her after thirty days of an exclusive arrangement? "She was dumb to think that would be the case." He shakes his head. The first time she'd suggested the four-week commitment, he ignored her, hoping she'd drop it, but she asked again. "I just shut her down. And then she asked *again*, and I shut her down. She just *wouldn't* let it go. Finally, I'm like, 'okay, whatever.' By then I was already talking to Cari."

*Cari*. Incredibly smart, funny, *and sexy*, she was the only woman he had met organically since his breakup with Amy. While all the others had stepped into his world through his computer screen, Cari was the only one he had met the old-fashioned way, face-to-face in a chance encounter. "She was a customer, and it was purely professional," Dave stresses, recalling the day the vivacious Cari Farver brought her Ford Explorer into Hyatt Tire for a minor repair.

He was instantly attracted to the tall, slender lady with the smiling hazel eyes. A powerful energy crackled between them as they met each other's gaze, and Dave sensed she felt it, too. *Should he ask her out?* No. He was at work, and she was a client. Asking her for a date would be inappropriate, he told himself. Besides, he couldn't be certain she'd be receptive. Her eyes seemed to say she was interested, but maybe he had misread her. If she said no, it would be embarrassing and awkward.

About two weeks later while perusing the Plenty of Fish dating site, Dave was pleasantly surprised to see Cari's profile pop up on the screen. He sent her a message: *Hi! I know you!* "It was a chance to say hello without being too creepy."

Cari wrote back, and the exchange was friendly but brief. About two weeks later, she came back to the shop with her Explorer. Dave went with her to the parking lot to check out one of the vehicle's windows that had been sticking. This time they were both acutely aware that the other was single and looking to date. "Sparks kind of flew," Dave remembers. "We weren't making out in the parking lot, but right then and there we exchanged phone numbers and expressed our interest in each other."

He hadn't dated anyone but Liz in the past month, the month she had insisted should belong exclusively to the two of them. While Liz seemed to be desperately holding onto the idea that the monogamous month would seal them as a couple, he didn't pay much attention to it. He'd gotten very tired of Liz nagging him about it, and had half-heartedly agreed to shut her up.

No, he had not dated anyone else in the last weeks, but not because of a sense of obligation. He'd been busy. Between work, his kids, and the hours Liz gobbled up, there wasn't time for much else. Their exclusive month was almost up, and if she thought he was going to drop to one knee and profess his undying devotion toward her, she was about to be very disappointed.

Dave was excited about Cari and was looking forward to seeing her, but he did have an obligation to Liz. It was not a commitment to a lifetime together but a promise of a date Liz had made with him weeks earlier when she got tickets to the Freaker's Ball. Hosted by *Z-92s Todd N Tyler Radio Empire*, the Freaker's Ball was a big Halloween bash at Harrah's Council Bluffs Casino and Hotel. The doors opened at 7:30 P.M. on Friday, October 26, 2012, and partygoers danced to music played by the band, The Vybe, "bobbed for bullets," and competed for best costume in a contest sponsored by Coors Light Beer. The generous prizes included a thousand-dollar award for the best costumed pair.

Liz fashioned their costumes, togas made partly from white sheets. Dave wore a gold armband, gold sash, and incongruous blue tennis shoes that peeked out beneath his floor-length getup in a snapshot. "We handed our cell phones to someone and asked them to take pictures of us," Dave remembers. The pair, with Liz cuddled close to Dave, are forever frozen in that instant. Liz's chest looks so huge she's top heavy, and her toga is strategically draped to show off her high heels with the long, gold straps crisscrossing up her shapely calves.

The costumes weren't authentic, and they didn't win any prizes, but if Liz's goal was to present herself and Dave as a couple, she succeeded. The Roman themed outfits left no question that they were a matched set. At least for the night of the Freaker's Ball, Liz got what she wanted. But just as Cinderella's magic night at the ball

ended when her magnificent coach morphed back into a pumpkin, Liz's ball, too, came to a disappointing end. As the night wound down, Dave did not exactly behave like a besotted Prince Charming. Sure, he was as into the sex as he always was. She knew just how to touch him to drive him wild, and at the end of their date, she made sure he was satiated. But afterward he seemed more distracted than usual. If Liz suspected he had another woman on his mind, she was right.