

Girl Next Door

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eISBN 9781682521427
Editor: Jana Armstrong
Cover Artist: Dar Albert
Published in the United States of America

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San Francisco CA 94117-0549
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Chapter One

The Spot was a straight-up meat market—a bar where people went to meet for no-strings-attached sex. The music was loud. The drinks were cheap. There was no cover charge for ladies. The furniture was old, and the carpet was filthy, but the lights were dim enough to disguise cosmetic flaws, in the club and in the patrons.

John Krulak was a regular.

He was tall and trim and good-looking, and he could generally hook a woman and have her out of the tank before he'd paid for her second drink. Sometimes it took less than that.

Wednesday night, he slid up to the crowded bar just as happy hour ended and drinks went back to full price. Jake, the regular bartender, waved, then finished making a tray of cosmopolitans for the waitress. He came down with a bourbon on the rocks, John's usual order. "Hey," he said.

"Hey, Jake," Krulak returned. "Busy tonight."

"Yeah. Happy hour special packs 'em in after work." The bartender shrugged. "You been kinda scarce lately. Find a new playground?"

"No, just working my ass off."

Jake grunted. "Least you got a job."

"Hard to outsource paramedics."

"Yeah, till the Japanese build a medtech robot."

"Thanks, Jake."

The bartender grinned. "Happy hunting."

John sipped his drink and turned to look over the dance floor. Everyone there had come from the office; they still wore their suits and their sensible shoes. But they'd all had a couple cheap drinks too. Ties were loosened, blouses unbuttoned to show a little cleavage. Everybody looking to have a good time after work.

John Krulak didn't have to wear a tie to work, and his workday rarely ended when it was supposed to. But that wouldn't matter to any of the half dozen women he'd spotted checking him out. They didn't care what he did during the day. They were just interested in what he was doing tonight.

And that, he told himself firmly, was just the way he liked it.

When he was younger, he would have eased onto the dance floor and chatted up one of the prospects. These days, he just waited. He turned back around, watching casually in the mirror behind the back bar. Very soon, a tall blonde slipped out of the crowd and moved to join him.

"Hey there," she purred.

John smiled and turned. "Hello."

There was a ten-second pause while they checked each other out at close range. The woman was probably just north of thirty years old. Her makeup was fresh. She had on a bit too much blush and wore four or five different colors of eye shadow, skillfully blended. Her mascara was a little clumpy. Her hair was dyed, and the dark roots were just beginning to show. It looked sculpted, stiff.

Her body said she went to the gym and actually worked out. She had fine, prominent breasts, probably assisted by serious Victoria's Secret support, but her waist and arms were slim. Her legs, almost entirely displayed under a black miniskirt, were magnificent. Strong and long. Just the way John liked them.

He finished his drink. The liquor warmed down to his stomach, and the warmth just kept going lower as he studied the woman.

She tilted her head a little, and John could see in her eyes that he'd passed inspection too.

He said, "I'm John. Can I buy you a drink?"

She said, "I'm Sherry. Yes, you can."

John nodded, and Jake brought them a round of drinks. Hers was another cosmopolitan. John felt his lip curl and fought to conceal it. A cosmo was the perfect drink for a girl who wanted to get hammered without the inconvenience of tasting alcohol. Or one who watched too many chick shows on basic cable.

Still, she had great legs.

Sherry took a long sip of her drink and said, "So, John, what do you do?"

"I'm a paramedic."

She lit up. "Oooh, I've always wanted to fuck a fireman."

John sighed. Usually that kind of talk would make him certain of his catch. Tonight it just annoyed him. "I'm a *paramedic*, not a fireman. There's a difference."

Sherry leaned closer. "Okay."

She didn't ask what the difference was. John knew she didn't care. But he cared, very much. *If I was a fireman, Nolan wouldn't be my partner. Because firemen live together, you see, in twenty-four-hour shifts. They sleep together in a dorm. So there are no openly gay firemen, not in this town. Because it might be contagious or something. They stay in the closet. My partner couldn't be a fireman even if he was the most qualified person in the world. Because he's gay, and he won't hide it. And I'm glad, actually, because this way I get to work with him, and he's the best paramedic I've ever known.*

But it's still not fair.

He glanced around the bar, spotted a table of firefighters over by the back door. They weren't from his station, but he knew most of them. One of the guys nodded to him, an acknowledgment that Krulak had once again hooked a hottie without getting off his bar stool.

In the department, they knew all about him. He had a reputation as a famous cocksman, and he lived up to it. Been proud of it too. Until lately.

Lately, it all felt fake.

John shook his head. No. That wasn't true. It was the same easy casual sex he'd scored since he was in college. He wasn't losing his touch or his desire. He wanted this beautiful woman next to him, and he was going to have her.

There didn't seem to be much need for small talk. She was halfway through her drink. "You live around here?" he asked.

She raised one eyebrow. "About four blocks."

"Good."

"You don't waste any time, do you?"

John drained his bourbon. "Do you want me to?"

"No." Sherry grinned. "That's what I like about firemen. They're always so direct."

She leaned forward and gave him a full view down her ample cleavage. She was ready to go. On most nights, John Krulak would have been ready to go with her. But tonight it was just too easy. Too cheap. Too stupid.

When, he asked himself seriously, did you start wanting the women you bed to be smart? It's not like you plan some kind of relationship with them. It's just sex. Holy shit, you're turning into Nolan.

He stopped that thought firmly. He looked at the woman again. Beautiful and not too drunk and very willing. What more did he want?

He wanted someone he could have a conversation with in the morning.

Someone like—

No.

He was out of condoms, anyhow. He always carried one in his wallet and another in his car, but he'd used them both last weekend with Candy—which wasn't her real name, and he didn't care. Well, Sherry probably had one. Or he could get one in the

men's room, or there was a convenience store right across the street. He was sure she wouldn't mind a brief detour in the name of protection.

It suddenly just seemed like too much trouble.

"You know what?" John asked. He pulled out his wallet, slid two tens across the bar for Jake, waved off his change. "I'm really tired. All that firefighting."

Sherry's expression wavered in confusion. "What?"

"Tired," John repeated. "But if you've really got your heart set on fucking a firefighter"—he gestured to the table by the back door—"you go over there and tell them Krulak sent you. Believe me, they'll take care of you."

"*What?* What kind of girl do you think I am?" she demanded. "You think I just go from one man to the next?"

That was exactly what kind of girl John thought she was actually. But it seemed unkind to say so. "I don't mean anything," he said in the soothing tone he used for strung-out addicts at work. "I just—I'm getting over something, and I really just want to be alone tonight."

Sherry slammed back the rest of her pink drink, slid to her feet, and put one defiant hand on her hip. "Then what the fuck are you doing *here?*" She didn't wait for an answer. She just spun expertly on her stiletto heels and walked away, with a definite *see what you're missing* sway to her hips.

Krulak watched her go, then finished his own drink. "Strike out?" Jake asked sympathetically.

"Not in the mood," John answered.

"For *that?* Really?"

"Really."

Jake shook his head. "I don't think I'd ever not be in the mood for a piece like that."

A piece. That's exactly what she'd be. A piece. Not a person, not anyone I cared about. And that's what I'd be to her too.

It had never bothered him before.

He put his glass down. "Tell her you're a fireman, Jake."

* * * *

It was early, by John's standards, when he pulled into the parking lot outside his apartment building. He was restless, unsettled. It had been a long, long time since he'd taken a pass on a sure thing. In a way, he was proud of himself. And in another, he was shaken. He was thinking of things he'd tried not to think about.

A walk, he decided. He was still out of condoms anyhow. And milk.

There was a drugstore two blocks down. He threw his jacket back in the car; it was too warm for it. Then he walked briskly down to the bright store. He got the milk and noticed that they had Sam Adams beer on sale. He was on his last razor blade too, he remembered. And then there were the condoms.

He snagged a three-pack of his regular brand, got his razor blades, and went to check out.

The cashier looked as if she were still in her teens. She had teenage skin, anyhow. Her hair was straight, short, and dyed dead black, and she had a silver stud in each nostril. As a paramedic, John almost recommended that she remove them and swab her nose down with hydrogen peroxide immediately. But he remembered that he was off-duty, so he kept his mouth shut. She didn't look as if she'd be receptive to free medical advice, anyhow.

"These are on special," she said, cracking her gum. "Buy one, get one half off."

"The beer?" John asked hopefully.

"The rubbers."

“Oh.” He tried to ignore the fact that he was buying condoms—and beer—from someone young enough to have serious acne. “Well, the way my luck’s been lately, I don’t need any more than this.”

The clerk looked him up and down with brutal frankness. “I’d do you.”

He could feel his face heating up. With as many women as he’d had, he should not be flustered by a wayward child. “Thanks,” he said, “but I’m afraid of nose studs.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself. But take the half-price ones. You don’t want to get a jinx.”

“A jinx?”

“You pass up cheap condoms, you might never need ’em again.”

John sighed. He just wanted to be gone. The fastest way to that goal seemed to be to go along with her. “Don’t want that,” he agreed. He ducked back into the aisle and picked up another three-pack.

Holy crap. I just turned down an easy lay in a bar, and I’m going to have six condoms in my stash. What’s wrong with this picture?

The cashier smiled, a tight, smart-ass smile, when he got back to her. “You get a specialty free when you buy two.”

“A what?”

“Specialty.” She rolled her eyes, obviously bored with explaining things to this old fart, even if he was, in her words, doable. “On the top row, in the single packs. Specialties. You know, spikes, studs, glow-in-the-dark. The freak stuff.”

John Krulak had had enough. He straightened up and looked the teen with the soon-to-be-infected nose squarely in the eye. “What do you recommend, angel?”

She blinked, and her cheeks turned just a little pink under her very white makeup. “The spikes hurt. The ridges are pretty cool.”

“Not glow-in-the-dark?” John asked sweetly.

“Kid stuff.” She smirked.

“God forbid.” He strolled back to the condom aisle yet again and made a show of considering the options. They were, in fact, a little frightening. He took the ridges.

The cashier nodded when he got back. “Good choice.” She took his money, letting her black-lacquered fingernails scrape over his palm. “I get off at ten.”

John shook his head. “I bet you do. But that’s past my bedtime.”

He picked up his bag and fled.

Seven condoms. I’m turning down sex, and I have seven condoms. If this keeps up, I’m going to have to start checking expiration dates.

John had never been a good Scout, or even a bad Scout, but he did believe in preparation. Before he went inside his apartment building, he stopped at his car, tore off one of the foil packets, and put it in the console. He put another in his wallet before he went to bed.

Chapter Two

For a change, John got a good night's sleep before his next shift. He got to the medic shed a little before seven. Night shift still had the squad out.

Originally the rescue squad had been housed in the main fire station. But the firemen had acquired new trucks and pushed the paramedics out to an old two-car outbuilding at the back of the courtyard. One garage bay had been remodeled—badly—into a ready room. There was a full-size refrigerator and a sink, a coffeepot, and an ancient microwave. Someone had brought in an old dining room table and some chairs. Someone else had donated a battered couch. There was a decent TV, one of the old bulky kind that wasn't worth stealing.

At the back of the room was a very small office with an ancient desk and chair. They kept their extra forms there but not much else. There was a tiny locker room and a tinier bathroom.

The fire station was much more elegant, with bunks and recliners, a full kitchen, showers, and a large-screen TV. The paramedics were welcome to wait for calls there, but they rarely had that much spare time.

There was half a pot of coffee on the burner. John sniffed it suspiciously. It looked like mud and smelled like an old sneaker on a coffee plantation. Clearly it had been made the night before and left on the hot burner for hours. He dumped it out and started a fresh pot.

Before it was done, Garcia and Lawson came in from the firehouse across the courtyard. Garcia was red-faced with excitement, which was normal for him. "Krulak, I heard a rumor, a terrible, terrible rumor. You have to tell me it's not true, John! You have to tell me you didn't turn down a willing woman!"

John shook his head. He should have known the guys in the bar would blab. There were damn few secrets in the department. "I turned down a willing woman, Garcia."

Lawson grabbed at his chest. "Say it ain't so!" he gasped weakly. "We all heard the story, but we knew it couldn't be true."

John shrugged. "It's true."

"She was a dog," Garcia suggested. "Please tell me she was a dog."

"She was okay."

"Too drunk?" Lawson offered. "Underage?"

"Worse," John told them. "She was determined to bang a *fireman*."

Both of the firefighters looked temporarily affronted, but it passed. "You could have lied to her," Lawson said.

"I thought about it," John admitted. "But then she bent over and showed me her breasts, and I just couldn't."

Garcia was panting for breath in mock panic. "Why, John? In the name of all that's holy to men, why?"

John made a show of looking around to be sure they were alone. "It's like this. We're in this bar, and over by the door, there's a whole table of these guys from Twenty-One. And they're, well, you know, they got no chance. Because they're all, you know...firemen."

"If you're about to tell me," Garcia said, "that you took a pity pass, I'm going to have to punch you in the kidneys."

John grinned. "Like you could even find my kidneys. It wasn't pity, exactly. But there I am with this woman who keeps saying how much she wants to fuck a fireman, and I tell her I'm a paramedic like fifteen times, and she keeps going back to wanting a fireman."

"I am not seeing your point," Lawson said.

The shed door opened, and Nolan Crane came in. He looked, as always, bright-eyed and freshly washed and much too clean for the job. He waved his greeting and went to stow his lunch.

"The thing is," John went on, "the whole time she's talking, I keep thinking I know her from somewhere. Her face is familiar, you know? And then she shows me her cleavage, and it hits me. Remember last week when *Gossip Tonight* had that story about Crush Segura having another mistress?"

"Hey," Garcia protested, "the man's the heavyweight champion of the world. He can afford as many mistresses as he wants."

"He could," Lawson answered, "until his last wife took every dime he had because she found out about it."

"I thought they were in marriage counseling," Nolan added as an aside. His tone said he wasn't very interested.

"They were," Garcia confirmed. "And then this story came out, he's got a new one on the side."

John grinned. "Right, right. Anyhow, I'm looking at this woman, and she's giving me all the right signs, and all I can think about is how much she looks like Crush Segura's new mistress."

The two firemen paused, looked at each other. "He was in town last week," Lawson admitted slowly.

"Yeah. That fight promo," Garcia agreed.

Lawson turned back to Krulak. "So wait. You had a chance to bang the mistress of the heavyweight champion of the world, and you took a pass? Man, that had to be some quality ass there."

"Yeah, I'm sure it was," John agreed. "But I've seen Crush Segura hit. And I am telling you, it was not quality enough to risk that kind of beating."

"You're sure it was her?" Garcia insisted.

“Not positive, no. But sure enough that I wasn’t going to touch her. And besides, she really, really wanted a fireman.” He threw his hands up. “So of course I had to send her over to Twenty-One’s table.”

The firemen burst out laughing. “You are such a bastard!” Garcia said.

“Hey, you guys are always saying how tough you are. If one of them wants to take a beatdown from Crush, I am not going to stand in his way.”

“I wonder if it was really her,” Lawson mused.

“Call Twenty-One and ask them.”

“Shit.”

“You had us worried,” Garcia said. “We were afraid you were off the skirt. And if John Krulak goes off the skirt, there’s just no hope for the rest of us.” He glanced at the other paramedic. “Right, Nolan?”

Crane shook his head. “No hope for me anyhow,” he answered drily.

“Coffee’s done,” John said. He got down a mug for himself and another for Nolan. Lawson pushed past him and got down two more. “What the hell, guys? You just come over here to get fresh coffee?”

“Yeah,” Garcia answered. “And to bust your balls a little.”

“Damn shame,” Nolan offered. “That big fancy firehouse with those recliner chairs and that wide-screen TV, and they have to come out to the medic shed to get a decent cup of coffee.”

“Just goes to show you,” John agreed. “It’s all about your priorities.”

Armed with fresh coffee, the firemen finally went away. John sat down at the small table. The linoleum top had been white once. Now it was stained and yellow and looked as if it belonged in the little shed. “How was your day off?” Krulak had picked up an extra shift the day before, partnered with a part-timer named Neibecker.

Nolan shrugged. “Same old same old.”

He sounded just a little defeated, a little sad. John knew his partner had spent his day off alone, missing his longtime lover. "You should get out more, Nolan." His partner just shrugged. "See people. Make new friends."

"Yeah."

"He's been gone for six months, Nolan."

Crane flinched and looked away. "It's not him, John. It's not Kevin anymore. It's just...figuring out where I want to be now. *Who* I want to be." He shrugged. "We were together a long time. Even when I don't miss the cheating bastard, it's still hard starting over."

John stood and refilled his mug with the last of the fresh coffee. He immediately went through the routine of starting a new pot. Coffee was the lifeblood of first responders. He wished he could say something intelligent or comforting to his friend. Nolan and Kevin had been together for ten years. Last fall, Nolan had stopped by their house in the middle of a shift to get a clean shirt and found Kevin in bed with another man.

"This," John said, "is why I don't get into long-term relationships. Love 'em and leave 'em. No complications. No rebuilding to do."

Nolan smiled tightly. "Yeah, I know."

"No, you don't. You're already looking for your next true love."

"Maybe." Nolan sat down at the far side of the table. "So, what's the real story with the woman in the bar?"

John shook his head. "I told her I wasn't a fireman. She didn't care."

"Why do you care that she didn't care?"

"What, you think I want to be lumped in with those knuckleheads across the yard?" John gestured with his mug. "Those guys'll hump anything that doesn't run away."

"Oh yeah," Nolan nodded. "Whereas you have higher standards."

“Well, maybe I’m working to *develop* higher standards.”

“Riiight.”

“And maybe I’m just getting too old to tag every doe that crosses my path.”

Nolan still looked skeptical. “Crush Segura’s mistress, huh?”

John sighed. He couldn’t tell Nolan the truth. Not after Kevin, the way he’d been hurt. Hell, he couldn’t even tell *himself* the truth.

The motor that raised the overhead door beeped twice in warning and then slowly opened the door. “Night shift’s home,” John said in relief.

“Oh hell,” Nolan muttered, “Bennett was on last night.”

John growled. Bennett was a pig. The squad would be trashed whether they’d had any runs or not. He could think of better ways to start a morning than by throwing away someone else’s greasy fast-food trash.

He could think of a *lot* better ways.

* * * *

Lucy Bellino said, “Let’s go out. Let’s go to a club or something.”

“Ehh,” her lover answered, “I don’t feel like it tonight.”

“You didn’t feel like it last night.”

“But I worked all day,” Alex complained. “You know how it is. Besides, the game’s on. I thought you liked baseball.”

“I like baseball,” Lucy answered. “But not every night.”

Alex smirked. “Yeah, honey, I know what you like every night.”

“True enough.” Lucy gazed at the TV, not really paying attention to the game. Two weeks ago Alex couldn’t get enough of her. Now she was just a distraction. “So is that why you asked me to come over?”

He grinned without looking away from the screen. “For the hot sex? Hell yeah.”

Lucy unbuttoned the top three buttons of her blouse. “Then let’s get to it.”

“Uhhh...” Alex finally glanced at her. He grinned even wider. “God, you’re gorgeous,” he said. “Just, uh, just one more inning, okay? We’re tied in the ninth.”

“Oh. Okay.” She slid to her feet and buttoned her blouse. “I’m just going to go then.”

She was at the door and slipping her shoes on before he reacted. “Baby, don’t be that way. C’mon, come back here. Just watch the end of the game with me, and then we’ll play some games of our own.”

“No.” Lucy shook her head. “Good-bye, Alex.”

“I’ll call you, okay?”

“Don’t call me.” She let herself out and closed the door softly behind her. She didn’t wait to see if he’d come after her. She knew he wouldn’t. And honestly, she didn’t care. She was as tired of Alex as he was of her.

She walked to the end of the hall and pressed the call button for the elevator. While she waited, she tugged her skirt down. It was a little too short, a little too tight. Just the way she liked it. Just the way Alex had liked it, two weeks ago.

There was a time when I would have driven myself crazy wondering what was wrong with me. Why can’t I meet a nice guy? Why do they get tired of me so fast? But not anymore. They’re all alike. All on the lookout for the next thing. And I’m just like them.

It’s all about the thrill of the hunt.

The elevator came, and she stepped on, pressed the lobby button. As expected, Alex hadn’t come after her. Most of her lovers lasted a little longer than this. Usually a whole month passed before they got bored with each other. She’d known this was shallow from the word go. But he had the biggest blue eyes she’d ever seen.

Maybe if you stopped picking men based on their eye color or the size of their hands, you’d find one who’s worth more than one calendar page.

She shook her head as she walked across the lobby. *No point in a man who lasts more than that, is there? Even if he wasn’t tired of me, I’d be tired of him.*

The only man I wasn't completely bored with at the end of a year was gay.

Thinking about Nolan made her smile, shook off some of her funk. She hadn't heard from him in a while. She should check up on him.

But first, she decided, she was going out dancing.

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Want to know what happens next?

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