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JUST DIAL ZERO (EXCERPT)

Megan Lynn

Welcome to Paradise.

The scent of stale booze, fresh urine and dejection washed over her as she opened the glass door with a crack carefully patched by a duct tape diagonal slash. A small bell jingled above her head. She wondered where anyone would go.

Anywhere but here.

“What can I do for ya, hon?” The woman behind the desk asked as she scratched her nose. She was heavysset, with a three-pack-a-day voice, more scrape than tone lacing her words. Her yellow hair was teased to new heights while lines, crevices and crannies outlined pretty blue eyes, and around her neck hung a delicate beaded necklace, a stark contrast to the beige room.

“I need a room.”

The woman nodded and rotated around to the cabinet behind her with the room keys. “Room twenty-nine. It’s upstairs to the right, last one at the end of the hall.”

The girl nodded and reached for the key.

“It’s thirty a night. Most guests just go down to the shopping center three blocks north of here with cheap fast food. Check out time is noon.”

The girl reached down to her right into a huge black cloth bag hanging precariously off her shoulder. After rooting around for a few moments, she set three crumpled bills on the counter. “I need ten nights.”

The woman nodded and slid the money off of the ledge. “If you need anything, just dial zero on the phone. Someone’s always here. Local is free, long distance they charge you out your wazoo, so buy a card if you need to phone home. Welcome to Paradise. Enjoy your stay.”

The parking lot was deserted, except for a P.O.S. Nissan sedan that looked as if it couldn’t move even if it wanted to parked next to the stairs. Cracks zigged, zagged, intersected, paralleled, twirled and looped around each other across the asphalt. Poor mother’s back would never be the same. The sun beat down, as relentless at one in the afternoon as it had been at nine that morning through the bus window. The waves

seemed to reflect off the pavement and settle just above her head, pushing down more forcefully than gravity. A swimming pool sat in the middle of the parking lot, empty except for a deflated whale fading in the deep end. A few scattered lounge chairs remained around the edge, the ghosts of parents past watching the pool toy.

The girl made her way up the stairs and found her room. Two single beds, covered in comforters that seemed to have been made by Rosie the Riveter, faced a small television set on top of a three-drawer dresser that had passed “chic” and was firmly settled at “shabby.” The room was even hotter than outside, the air still and old. A wall air conditioning unit sat in one of the two windows, but the “ON” button was missing.

She dropped her bag on one bed, careful to avoid the slightly ambiguous brown stain in the middle. After stripping down to her underwear, she dropped herself onto the other.

“Hey girlie,” a voice from the shadows whispered. “Yeah, you. You wanna make twenty bucks?”

The girl set her ice bucket next to the machine and prepared to run as a hunched-over figure stepped into the light, a cup held outstretched in his gnarled hand.

“Would you pee in this?” It was the most promising job offer she’d received all day. And she was running out of money. Twenty bucks would buy a lot of happy meals.

“Come on,” the man moved closer and she could see his face. Long, stringy, mangy grey hair fell past his shoulders, a strand caught in the spittle at the corners of his mouth. His watery brown eyes looked at her almost hopefully. She could smell the bourbon on his breath and the pot on his clothes. “I’ll give you ten now and ten after, but you have to do it right. I don’t need piss on the side like the last time.” He reached into the pocket of his ratty corduroys and waved the bill in front of her face. She could almost smell the greasy fries.

She nodded, desperation winning over all of her sense, her senses begging her to just get away from the filthy man. She took the ten.

“Which room you in?”

“Twenty. Wait for me here.” There was no way she was letting this creep anywhere near her.

He hesitated and she worried that he would take back his offer, but he just nodded and smiled. “Smart girl.”

She walked away, rounded the corner and quickly let herself into her room. Making her way to the small bathroom, she told herself money is money. Just squat and pee. Squat and pee. Don't think about what is growing on the toilet seat. Think of the cash.

She hovered above the bowl, waiting, hoping, but nothing came. Maybe she should have taken a swallow of the tepid water sitting on the nightstand, the water that was her reason for going to the ice machine. Come on, something, anything. She could add water if she needed to, right? It's not like they really test it. Think of the ten.

Finally, a small stream. It barely filled one-third of the tiny cup, but it was all she had.

Welcome to Paradise.

The first thing the woman noticed was the girl's pierced nose. It wasn't a religious thing— people pierced places a lot weirder than a nostril. No, it was the fact that the nostril in question was swollen and red. The woman unconsciously reached up and touched her own nose before asking, "What can I do for ya, hon?"

The girl asked for a room and the woman spun around, hoping twenty-nine was available. It was at the end of the hallway and the furthest away from him, though the woman knew he would find the girl eventually. They all did. Maybe it was a sixth sense or something.

"It's thirty a night." The woman almost snorted as she said this. Thirty a night! she would have exclaimed had she the luxury of being on the other side of the desk. For this dump? I don't think so. But the girl merely nodded and set three bills on the counter. The woman noticed delicate hands marred by scars, slender fingers but nails bitten and jagged. Her clothing looked comfortably worn in and a few sizes too big, but not older than a few months. Her dark brown hair was pulled tightly behind her head, pulling the delicate skin by her eyes up slightly. She had all of her teeth, no sores or otherwise open wounds, and had recently bathed. Nothing about this girl fit in Paradise, but a customer was a customer.

"Ace in the hole. All bets are off. All's well that ends well. Batten down the hatches, there's no place like home."

"How's it goin', Stereo?" the woman asked as the lanky man walked into the reception area and began pacing around the edge of a faded rug in the middle of the small, hot room.

“Bet the farm, it’s not over till it’s over.”

“Is that right?” She flipped the page in her magazine. “Anything new?”

“Out sowing your wild oats.”

“Nope, ran out of oats in the sixties. Have you called Sam today?”

“Same song and dance...stop the presses!” But the woman was already dialing.

“Hey, Sam...Yeah, he’s here...Nope, he looks okay today...Okay, well I just wanted to make sure you knew where he was...Yeah, they got creamed. Screw the Giants. They wouldn’t know a curveball if it curved into their balls...I’m with you, blue and white forever...Yeah Sam, I’ll make sure he stays with me until you get here...Okay, see you in a few.”

“Jump on the bandwagon.”

Returning to her magazine, the woman turned another page. “I would if it weren’t overcrowded with the stupid and crazy—no offense, Stereo.”

“You’re going to get it.”

Watching the man as he carefully lapped the ratted rug, the woman sighed, “Oh, Stereo. Why is it that sometimes you’re the only one who gets me?”

At precisely five that evening, the woman turned down the ringer on the phone and put away her latest issue of People. She saved it for Fridays because it was the only bright spot in her week. Five days, ten hour shifts dealing with drunks, potheads and crazies. They did not pay her enough. Well, they didn’t pay her at all, if you didn’t count free rent. Yeah, free rent in hell.

She crossed the parking lot, sparing a sympathetic glance over at Mack. Poor, sweet Mack sat next to the stairs. Dependable Mack. Man, did she have memories. Driving down the five, radio blasting, engine humming. Mack’s engine hadn’t run in five...no six months now. She blew Mack a kiss over the railing as she walked down to her room. Lucky number twenty-eight. Well, her lucky number was fifty-eight, but whatcha gonna do?

A blast of stale warm air hit her in the face as she opened the door. Would it kill Bob to put in a decent air conditioning unit? Probably, the cheap bastard. She set her purse on the top of the dresser and rifled around until she came up with enough change for a soda and candy bar from the vending machine. If the candy had nuts, that

counted as protein, right? She locked her door and was walking to the machine located just on the other side of the stairs when she heard, “Thanks girlie.”

Standing just next to the stairs were the girl and the old man, Creeper. No one knew his name, nor was brave enough to talk to him for the amount of time required to find out, so he was just Creeper.

“Everything okay?” the woman asked as she approached slowly. She casually looked over at the girl. Though every fiber in her body was yelling, “Go back to your room,” she had learned the hard way to never startle the filthy old man.

“Everythin’s fine, darlin’,” Creeper smiled and leaned against the machine as she fed her dollars into it and made her selections. His gums were illuminated by the light on the wall and the woman saw brown, toothless gums, an endorsement for dentists everywhere. The woman noticed the girl staring. Yeah, honey, life’s just one big slide down a rainbow here. “We’s just doin’ a bit of conversatin’. Isn’t that right, Peachy?”

The woman merely raised an eyebrow at the girl, who looked in her eyes long enough to not; but there was intense fear in that one glance. Bone-deep, swallow you whole, engulf your soul fear.

“See, Rosie, Peachy and I here have made a connection of the financial sort.”

The woman just looked over at him in disgust. “Leave her alone.” She turned her back on the man (not the brightest idea, but he preferred them decades younger than she) and asked the girl, “Would you like me to walk you back to your room?”

The girl nodded and slunk next to the woman. The woman saw her shove a few bills into her oversized coat. Great, a financial connection with a pedophile. They turned around and began walking down towards their rooms. “You know, if you need anything, I’m right next door,” the woman began carefully, knowing she could easily spook the girl. “Now, I don’t have much, but I’d rather you come to me than deal with Creeper.”

“Creeper?” the girl asked.

“Yeah, that’s what everyone calls him. Just like everyone calls me Rosie. Back in the day, I had a bit of a heavy hand with the rouge.” The woman laughed as she opened her door. “These days, I’m happy if I shower. Some of the people around here...”