

# A SLAVE TO KARMA

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written by  
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**B**eth was still holding her mobile phone when she saw Leo's clean, brown leather shoes out the window walking briskly toward her front door. She had been rushing around her apartment, trying to make sense of why he was visiting when the news had predicted a heavy snow storm. By the time he'd pulled up to the curb, her eyes cast up to the tires bumping against the gutter and a slushy tide of snow pushed up onto the sidewalk, the majority of her apartment was presentable. It still smelled like noodles from lunchtime but she couldn't open the windows and fate herself to hypothermia.

She crossed her long studio and paused in front of the mirror to check her reflection. The long strands of her blond hair were brushed back from her face and shoulders, over a thin grey cardigan with a low V line buttoned loosely at the front over a white shirt.

Her hands came down to smooth out the wrinkles in her jeans. The winter had done a turn on her skin, any colour now drained out to resemble the

snow out her window. She moved from behind the room divider and headed toward the door to get there before he knocked. Tilting left she scooped up the last of the noodles sitting cold on the coffee table to hide in the kitchen. Her toes caught on the corner of the rug. As she planted her foot down to balance herself a split second relief cut through her as the bowl steadied in her fingers. Suddenly it tilted and came toward her as her left sock slid away. Her thighs contracted, the muscles in her waist tensing to stop her legs scissoring into the splits. Her knee locked into place to support her buckling body.

The noodles and their cold water sludge spilled over her white shirt. She froze in place with the bowl up in the air. The trickle of cold noodle water began down her bra and her stomach. Her face scrunched up to stop the chill down her spine but it travelled anyway, all the way down to her coccyx. The knock came on the door. Her lungs were burning. She was forced to exhale after realising she'd been holding her breath and she shot into the kitchen.

"Just a second!" she called behind her and pat herself down with a tea towel but the stain didn't dry. There were noodle pieces down into her cardigan and a large dark stain on her shirt that caused her red bra to show through. Another knock on the door. She discarded the towel and rushed to the door.

An excited knot twisted up in her stomach when she greeted him. Leo was impeccable. A thick black coat over the dark charcoal suit square on his shoulders and measured perfectly at the cuff. He had a ocean blue tie and an ironed, pale blue striped shirt. She looked down at his shoes again. She couldn't even help but admire how the hem of the pants fell upon the neatly tied laces. It was the small things that made the difference. He was shaved, his brown hair brushed straight back and his long eyebrows set heavy over dark eyes. He had a strong neck that filled out the collar of his shirt, her eyes focused on his large adams apple but it didn't move. She had to swallow a few times to calm herself; she needed a cigarette.

His eyes cast down. "I can see through your T-shirt." The monotone voice indicated how disconnected he was. She could have been another man for all he cared. With a long, large smile she buried her disappointment and leaned against the edge of open door.

"Did you see the snow?"

The darker patches on his shoulders told her he'd been caught in the mounting storm. "I did."

His lack of enthusiasm bored her. "Why do we have to do this on the weekend?"

"Are you going to invite me in?" he asked formally.

Stiffening, she stood back and gave him way into her apartment. She couldn't figure out if the cold she felt off him was the snow damp on his suit or a chill that emanated from his eyes.

"Not that I had much to do this weekend. I'm usually out working or I'd have gone out to drinks with friends tonight but this snow is keeping everyone in. I was sure it was going to start piling in an hour ago but the traffic still looked heavy. Now I don't know," she said as she closed the door and squinted to see the darkening outside through her grated windows. He was ignoring her but she kept on as she reached for her cigarettes on the coffee table. "I feel sorry for people like you who don't feel like they actually have a choice to work. I go out just because I have nothing better to do. I like being with people and watching what they're doing in their day and driving them to places but the only time I ever really have to drive is if my money is out the window. It's mostly cash in hand anyway."

"Why would anyone enjoy being a cab driver in New York?" he asked as he turned to her on the opposite side of the lounge room, in front of the room divider. "I believe it's illegal to own your own cab and take the profits."

"My dad owned a rank, I joined. He gets the bookwork and I get to drive.

You're right- no person in their right mind would enjoy cab driving but I wanted something different and I'm tougher than I look."

"Undoubtedly," Leo said and unbuttoned his suit jacket before taking a seat on the lounge. Outside the wind howled and the snow blanketed the sidewalk so thick the concrete was disappearing and the streets were emptying. No sound of cars, no footsteps, no chattering. Besides the wind all she could hear was the hum of her heater on the wall.

"Ok... so what is it that's so urgent?"

Breaking his attention from the full ashtray on her heavy, red wood coffee table he stared at her with empty eyes. Something was distracting him- most likely the state of her apartment, she thought. He was a man of class, and luxury, not cigarette stench and a bra dangling over the corner of the divider. She plucked at her shirt to draw it away from her chest.

From inside his heavy black coat he produced folded papers and a pen and placed them on the coffee table. She came over, dragging on her cigarette, to get a closer look.

"I can't find the original contract that you signed, and the gallery needs it as soon as possible."

"You lost my contract? Really?" She scanned the paper but couldn't identify anything that had altered. "That's something unexpected for such an organised guy like yourself. You can't even leave the house without an iron shirt I imagine. You'd have your cereal in alphabetical order I bet. Do you go a day without shaving? Unless you do that 5 o'clock shadow that you do so you look sexy for your girlfriend." She paused, her heart skipping a beat at her choice of words. "Not that I'm saying you're sexy," she corrected and tried to assess his expression. Was that disdain or insult? Was there a chance in hell he liked her at all? Did she now appear to be uninterested, and kill any opportunity she might have with him?

Her rational thinking went out the door. She drew more smoke into her lungs but it didn't abate her nerves. "Or that you're not sexy. I think you're an incredibly sexy guy. I think- I mean you have good features. You have a strong nose... and face. You have a strong face." She turned to escape into the kitchen but her mouth didn't heed her own warning to shut up. "Some guys have really mousy features. That sort of description is usually just for women but some guys will meet you in a bar and buy you eight rounds of drinks and put your hand up your shirt and you'll go on two dates with them and you can't remember them from the next guy. Three different men could turn up at my door and I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. They're all the same."

She busied her hands making coffee and checking what she had to eat for dinner in the fridge. "I think I have some good face parts. I don't know if I'm memorable but I'm not forgettable. There's a wide line there and I'm in it."

When she returned to the lounge room with a face flushed from self inflicted humiliation he hadn't moved an inch. It caused her to stop in her tracks, and her socks almost slipped on the rug again. She held fast to the coffee cup in each hand. "Do you have life in you?"

That got a rise out of him. Slightly. His eyebrows rose and there was a fluctuation in his jaw as he tensed. She handed him the coffee, almost spilling it on his pants and placing her own down onto the table before taking up the paper again. He put the coffee cautiously down onto the table, the black liquid almost overflowing from when she had over-poured the kettle water, and he leaned forward on his knees.

"So this is exactly the same? You're not trying to con me out of anything?"

"There's nothing that's been altered," he said frustratedly.

She took up a pen off the edge of the dining table, one of her calligraphy pens and bent down over the coffee table to sign. Pieces of noodles tumbled out from her cardigan. As she went to clean them up she found black ink on her

hand. She sought the cause and saw the tip of her pen leaking. She looked at the paper and gasped. The bottom of the contract was soaked in black ink and it bled into the paper wider, like a rising tide.

"Oh fuck..." The mounting clumsiness was not in her character. Awkwardness was now wedged sharply between them to such a climax she looked at him for a response. She felt a bulging hopelessness grow within her stomach when she saw the lifelessness replaced by practiced disapproval. His jaw was slightly set aside and forward and there was no escaping the ferocity that made him look like a King lion about to swipe a Zebra crossing the planes.

"How can you possibly be this sort of person?" he asked. Again he didn't move and it unnerved her; how could someone sit so still for so long?

"It'll be fine," she rushed around to grab a sponge and mop up the ink soaking fast into the paper. The silence stretched on. The wet sponge tugging at the edges of the paper was one sound. The coffee machine clicking over in the kitchen was another. The breathing was the most unnerving sound. Silence was a dirty and devious way of exposing her humiliation. Leo watched her. He watched her on her knees with her fingers wrapped tightly around the sponge, and he wasn't coned by her expression of peace and calm. Her eyes gave away everything, if they had lips they would have been talking at twice the speed she usually clocks. The sound coming out of them would have caused complaints from the neighbours but at least it would have blocked out the sound of breathing.

"Drink your coffee. You're making me so nervous," she urged, the back of her hand tipping his coffee cup. Coffee tipped over onto the table. Finally the page was looking only partially damaged, and she ignored the hot coffee on the glass table. She kept patting the paper. He still didn't say anything. She searched his cold brown eyes for a soul, her hand coming to a rest on the paper. The only way she knew to overcome her loud heartbeat and sensitive nerves was

to face the silence and face Leo. There wasn't a crease on his face that mapped out a single thought or emotion for her.

The staring contest broke when he looked down at the contract and gestured to it with a slight nod. Her gaze slipped from his face to behind him, at the window above her bed. There was nothing but snow. She'd never seen such a thing, all light blocked out.

"You won't be able to leave," she told him.

He followed her gaze and twisted to look at the window. He sprang into life like an action figure, turning his full attention to the window pane and beyond where the sidewalk used to be.

"The window is only small, it doesn't mean I can't leave."

"I wouldn't be fooled. That filled up in only a few minutes, means the snow is heavy and thick."

"You can drive me back," he said.

Beth suddenly locked up. Her brain fizzled away all the last remnants of confidence she had tucked away for a rainy day. "What?" She smiled at him, lifting the paper off the coffee table so that the edges weren't stained by the drooling puddle.

"Where's your taxi? You can drive me."

She laughed him off and went to retrieve a tea towel from the kitchen.

"I'll call you tomorrow then, Beth," he said as she returned, the contract in one hand the towel in the other. She tossed the towel on to the table, his hand briefly making contact with her own as he took the paper from her. She lit a new cigarette and watched him don his jacket again and head to the door. She glanced to the window, completely white. The apartment filled with smoke and he coughed and waved his hand in front of his face. He didn't look at her as he left her apartment but she followed him anyway to see if he would make it out or not. She knew immediately as they left the room that it was no good.

The hall was too dark, the light through the glass on the front door had been extinguished by the heavy blizzard but he jumped up the stairs two at a time to the door and pulled it open without hesitancy. His jacket was blown open. The icy blast of air clung to her skin and she stopped, took a few steps back, hunched her shoulders up. His hand came up into his face to block out the snow but it was too thick. She couldn't make heads or tails of anything, let alone getting in her car and driving in it.

He looked over his shoulder and saw her. "Why won't you drive me home? It's your job to drive people!"

"I feel a higher calling to survive Leo," she called back up the stairs above the sound of the howling wind, drawing in the smoke on her cigarette as deeply as she could to stop it from going out. The hall was filling with snow, gathering at her feet and soaking the bottom of his pants. Her skin was cold under her clothes, and her attitude to Leo was following suit. She wasn't going to risk her life, or give in to another exhausting cold just for him. Any other time she might have felt like her career put her in a place where she might have dropped to her knees and shuffled out into the snow to find her cab and drive him home but no. This was too much.

She left the freezing cold hallway and slammed the door behind her. The coffee had spilled into the carpet from beneath the towel. The cigarette smoke lingered along the ceiling. She smelled like oily noodle water. She wasn't surprised by the rising sense of depression and wished she was someone more impressive or likeable. Had she been someone else she wouldn't want to be around herself.

He knocked at the door. Her fingers tightened on the cigarette, almost flattening the filter. She waited a long time, waited for the sound of his shoes to fade away into the street but he knocked again.

With a great sigh of surrender she opened the door, ajar with enough room

for him to see half of her face. He moved forward but stopped when he realised she was blocking the way and his eyes met hers. The sense of entitlement she saw on his face disgusted her and she jammed her foot behind the door to stop him from opening it at will.

“Are you going to leave me out here to freeze?”

She didn't say anything but her mind split down the middle. Compassion, or slam the door in his face? The tension on her brow and in her eyes meant her emotions were easy to read and he tilted his head disapprovingly, like a big brother. She was going to need some Vodka.

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