

FIVE MIRAGE

“Why, Tommy, I didn’t know you were such a connoisseur of classical art.”

The sound of a young woman’s voice jolts the young fireman out of his reverie. Lying on the sofa, Tommy looks up to see Denise and Aliana standing behind him. His eyes meeting hers, he sees Aliana’s sunny expression fade. And looking down at the magazine in his hand, center fold-out dangling awkwardly, it’s apparent why her smile of a few seconds ago is now a distant memory.

Is it me or did it just get colder in here?

Leaping to his feet, Tommy starts to toss the magazine into the rack next to the sofa and stops. Too late, the damage is done. Folding up the extended page, he looks up, an apologetic smile on his face. “Umm ... oh this ... aaahh ... it’s just a painting by Rembrandt,” he chuckles nervously. “Had to hide it so the guys wouldn’t get upset. You know how they are about classical art.”

“Cute, Tommy,” Denise says, setting several packages on the table and chuckling at his attempt to save face.

“Dee and I stopped by Sam’s,” Aliana says softly, also setting down two large boxes. “Sam asked if we could drop these off for Pat’s birthday party on Saturday. I’m sorry; I guess you didn’t expect us.” Obviously uncomfortable, she keeps her eyes lowered. “Make sure you refrigerate those; they’ll spoil if you leave them out.”

Looking into the largest of the packages, Steve Richmond, another fireman, smiles. “Thanks, ladies. We appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. It’s the least we could do,” Denise says. “... should be a nice party. I know we’re looking forward to it, right Al?”

“Sure, Dee, can’t wait,” Aliana says, managing a feeble smile.

Nice try, Al, but I’ve heard more enthusiasm from a kid staring at a plate of spinach.

Looking at Tommy, frozen next to the couch, panic in his eyes, Steve shakes his head. “Sorry, ladies, just weren’t expecting you.”

“C’mon Al,” Denise says. “Let’s go, things to do. Bye guys, see you Saturday.”

Watching walk out the bay doors, a single word crosses Tommy’s mind ...

...busted.

It’s a lazy Thursday afternoon here at the firehouse. Tommy and the guys are on call, lounging around and waiting for the shift to end. There’s a ball game on the TV, a few guys are playing cards, and on the table are a couple of “men’s” magazines – not unusual in an environment such as this.

Chief Flanagan’s birthday is Saturday. The girls stopped by Sam’s to pick up some goodies Pat’s wife, Sharon, had ordered for the party. Sam is Samantha Bates and her bistro, a combination bakery, deli, and coffee shop, is the morning hangout for the neighborhood. Tommy, Chief Pat, and most of the guys can often be found there on mornings off. Samantha and her husband, Dave, built it about five years ago and shortly after they opened it, she lost him to cancer. A tall, delightful, strawberry blonde, Sam has the prettiest green eyes, a smile that rivals a morning sunrise, and the voice of an angel. An all-American sweetheart.

Have you ever been in a situation where five seconds seems like an hour? Well, that’s here and now. A moment ago, Tommy was perusing one of those magazines, not noticing the silence descending over the room. Or the two young women looking down at him.

Tommy and Aliana have been going out for several weeks now; a few nice dinners, a couple of movies, the usual things. Of course, they’re still at that “getting-to-know” each other stage and from the look on Tommy’s face, I think right now he wishes the alarm would go off and a big fire would get him out of this

mess. Trouble is, he knows Aliana well enough that there aren't enough six-alarm blazes to do that. Watching Denise and Aliana leave, Tommy starts after them ...

... I think he realizes this fire needs to be put out ... now!

I don't know about you, but even though this could be a little awkward ... what do you say we listen in? ...

"Al, please ... wait up."

Saying nothing, Aliana stops and turning, looks directly at him.

"Busted, huh?" he says. "Look ... umm ... I wasn't expecting you."

"So it seems," she says, an edge in her voice.

"You're angry."

Aliana pauses, indecision creeping into her eyes. "Look ... I'm sorry, Tom. No ... not really angry ... maybe a little surprised ... disappointed ... I don't know," she says, the awkwardness in her voice palpable. "Maybe I have no right to be. After all you're with the guys ... just hanging out ... being ... you know ... guys. I'm sorry ... maybe I should have let you know I was coming."

Listening, you can hear confusion in Al's tone. I'd say she's torn between being understanding and being disappointed.

"But still, you're upset," Tommy says.

An awkward silence hangs in the air as Dee pulls a phone out of her handbag. "Look ... umm ... you two have something to talk about and I have to meet my mother across town. I'll leave you to yourselves. I'll call a taxi."

Dee walks back into the building as Tommy and Aliana say goodbye and stroll to the gazebo in the park next to the firehouse. That awkward silence doesn't want to go away. I think Aliana's torn between dropping the subject and saying what's on her mind. Taking a seat, they sit quietly for a moment as Ranger bounds over to join them, tail wagging

furiously. Lately, Aliana's become his favorite visitor. Positioning the Dalmatian between his legs, Tommy playfully scratches the dog's ears. "Come on, Al, please talk to me," he says quietly.

Stroking Ranger's side, Aliana hesitates momentarily. "Listen Tom, like I said, you didn't expect us. I mean it's not like you intentionally brought that stuff into my presence. If you did, I'd be offended. But I know you never would. You're not that kind of man."

Tommy manages a weak smile. "Thank you. But you're still not being fair with me."

"Not fair with you," she says, that note of indignation creeping back into her voice.

"No, you're not. You're upset and you won't talk to me."

Aliana turns and gazes across the river, her face again suggesting she's not sure what to say.

"C'mon, Al," Tommy says, stroking her cheek, "we're past that point where we only talk about safe things. Aren't we? To me, that magazine's harmless, it's a big boy's comic book."

"Then why'd you hide it?"

"Well..." Tommy says, his voice trailing off.

Score one for Aliana!

"If you're ashamed of something, how harmless can it be?" she asks. "You call it a comic book. Okay, but when you were a boy; when you read the superhero comic book? Don't you remember? You pretended to be the superhero? You lived the fantasy."

"Yea, when I was seven, not now."

"Are you sure? You see, because I'm not. With men who like porn, I'm never sure how they see it. Is it reality? An alternate reality? A substitution for reality?"

"And you women don't talk about men ... or look at them?" Tommy asks, a little too defensively.

"Sure we do, but we talk about real men. These women aren't real. Take away the hair extensions, the plastic surgery, the photoshopping, and for all you know, you're looking at

some old hag from a bad horror movie.”

“Or maybe Granny* from the Beverly Hillbillies?” Tommy says, a hint of a smile mixed with a question in his eyes.

“Maybe. Look, Tom, I’m sorry,” she says, hesitation still in her voice. “I don’t know, maybe it’s just the guys and sports and cards and testosterone overload. And yea, maybe a guy with great values can be unaffected by the darker side of it. But it still bothers me.”

“Why?”

“It’s not the pictures, it’s a woman’s body. I see one every morning when I step out of the shower. It’s what’s behind them.”

“The darker side ... what’s behind them?”

“The lies. Like I said, those pictures are an illusion, a mirage. But the worst part is there’s this idea in those magazines that sex isn’t about commitment or love, just irresponsible freedom with no deeper meaning. Or worse, a desire to just use a woman until she’s served her purpose, then she’s disposable. That’s the dark side. That’s what disturbs me. And women like me.”

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Tommy stares down at his hands, saying nothing.

“And even if a man says all he looks at is the ‘tamer’ stuff, I still have to wonder; is he into those movies and websites, the really dangerous ones?” Pausing, Aliana strokes Ranger’s head. “Tom, it’s the idea that women look like that day in and day out. It’s unrealistic. Do you really understand that? Do you see us as we really are? The good and the not so good? Because we wonder, when we’re no longer twenty-two, when age takes its toll as it’s inevitably going to, are we going to end up just bad porn in your eyes?”

“You could never ...” Tommy says quietly, his voice trailing off.

“Sure, you say that now, but if your image of a woman is shaped by those illusions you stay stuck believing beauty is only about youth and an impossible level of perfection. And again we ask ourselves, will you remain little boys when we want and need you to see us through a grown man’s eyes; a strong man’s eyes?”

“I never thought of it that way,” Tommy says, the faraway tone in his voice matching the look in his eyes.

A moment's silence ensues. Smiling gently, Aliana continues. "Think about this for a second. Those pictures; they don't show too much of a woman," she says, pausing, a quizzical look in her eye.

Tommy cocks his head as a hint of understanding grows in his eyes. "Are you saying? ..."

"Yes, they don't show enough. They only show the surface." Again, Aliana pauses, a mischievous look creeping into her eyes. "Tom, do you realize how silly what you're seeing is?"

"Silly?"

"Yea, the pictures." Aliana pauses a moment as Tommy says nothing. Then, with an impish smile dancing in her eyes, she continues.

"Let's see," she says, picking up an imaginary magazine, pretending to page through it. Stopping, her eyes fly open in mock surprise. "Look. Here's Candi sitting on top of an ambulance, on a sunny day in the middle of a football stadium, on a college campus with forty thousand people, typing her sports medicine doctoral thesis. And she's ... I don't believe this ... she's naked!"

A "you got me" smile tugs at the corners of Tommy's mouth.

"And of course, these women are real, aren't they?" Aliana continues, an animated look of wonder on her face. "After all, look, their profile is attached. Her deepest values and fondest hopes and dreams are on view for the world to see. Just like the rest of her."

Tommy's begins to laugh softly as Aliana drops her voice into a syrupy, coquettish tone.

Why do I get the feeling he knows what's coming?

"Let's see," she says again, opening the imaginary center fold-out page of the imaginary magazine. "Portia here is a prize-winning nuclear physicist who loves all the world's children and wants to work for world peace. Her favorite pastimes are collecting unicorns, knitting booties and mittens for newborns at the local orphanage, and feeding the hungry at a local homeless shelter. She likes to cuddle with her giant stuffed panda bear named 'Kooky' her boyfriend 'Rock' won at the state fair. She loves her Bichon Frieze' named 'Snowball,' and enjoys watching her delicate underthings bubble in Woolite. Please, Tom, it's insulting," she says, rolling her eyes as she tosses the imaginary magazine over her shoulder.

Shaking his head, Tommy's eyes meet Aliana's. "You're on a roll," he laughs, "let me guess, next you're going to tell me you don't wash and wax your Ferrari wearing only the bottom of your bikini."

"Well, of course I do. What woman doesn't?" Aliana laughs, playful sarcasm dripping from every word, "But only at three in the morning. Behind the barn, when no one's around."

The moment breaks the tension and lightens the mood, briefly. Then, resuming a more serious look, Aliana continues. "You see, Tom, that's the problem. These pictures, they're a caricature; like I said, a mirage. They're not real woman with feelings and hopes and faults and flaws."

Tommy continues laughing softly, his mirth surprising Aliana. "What's so funny?" she asks, that hint of irritation again evident in her voice.

"No, sorry Al, I was just thinking. Steve was looking at the magazine earlier and Doc stopped by. Steve went to show him the centerfold and Doc just laughed and said "naahh, not interested. Got better than that at home."

"Good for Doc."

Nodding thoughtfully and leaning over to stroke Ranger's side, Tommy looks into Aliana's eyes. "Okay, I understand what you mean by substitution for reality. You also said alternate reality. What do you mean by that?"

"It goes back to the idea of shame. Of hiding things."

"Sure, but isn't everyone entitled to a private life?"

"Private, yes, secret, no." Seeing the puzzled look on his face, Aliana takes his hand. "Sure, Tom, everyone has a right to keep some things private. But if a man hides things, a secret part of his life, something's wrong."

"Yea ..." Tommy says, his voice again drifting off.

"If a man's afraid or ashamed to let me see a part of his life, what else doesn't he want me to know about?"

Again, Tommy says nothing, the look in his eyes says he's chewing on Aliana's words.

“Tom, look around. Every day marriages are torn apart, especially by infidelity, and I have to think a lot of it is due to those lies. Those illusions.” Gazing in the direction of Morgan Park, Aliana pauses, the look in her eyes as if seeing something she hadn’t considered before. “You love kids, right?” she says, abruptly. “I know you do. Ask yourself, how many little boys on those teams of yours are products of broken homes? How many know only part-time daddies, if any daddy at all, because dad couldn’t form a lasting relationship with mom? Why, because of those illusions and the idea that relationships are transient and marriages, disposable?”

“A few ... a lot, I guess.”

“Right and two things break up most marriages. Sex and money. After all most marriages don’t break up over the color of the wallpaper in the dining room.”

“The living room, maybe?” Tommy says, a shy smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Aliana turns to Tommy as Ranger sits up, looking at him. The look on her face says his attempt at humor was dead on arrival, and Ranger’s bark seems to second Aliana’s appraisal.

Sometimes I think that dog is part human.

In a mocking gesture Tommy hangs his head, gently slapping his cheek. “Sorry, lame joke, gotta remember Bullets’ advice, no more stand-up comedy,” he says, chuckling at Ranger, and scratching the dog’s ears.

Aliana gently strokes Tommy’s cheek. “Remember that conversation we had, the one about what’s said in the ladies room? Well, I’ve heard that fear behind those same doors. Do you know how many women are afraid the man in her life can’t make a commitment because he believes what the flesh peddlers sell? That variety is the spice of life and being faithful to one woman is foolish or impossible?”

A quiet moment passes. “I’d make a joke about the secrets of the ladies room finally revealed,” Tommy says. “But I’ll pass.”

Aliana smiles softly. “I’m sorry, Tom; I really am. I don’t mean to go on like this. But there’s one more thing. I bet the police will tell you virtually all the monsters that kidnap, molest, and rape or kill young girls, women, and children usually have drowned themselves in the worst kinds of pornography.”

“I never knew it bothered you that much,” Tommy says softly, almost to himself. “I mean,

I know most women are uncomfortable around the stuff, but I never understood why. I guess we hid it because somehow we knew it was offensive.”

“Like I said, how worthwhile is something if you have to hide it?”

Tommy looks across the river at the skyline, a thoughtful look on his face. “No more centerfolds,” he says in a half-whisper.

“Tom, I don’t want ...”

“Shhh,” he says softly, “if it’s important to you, it’s important to me.”

Turning her head, Aliana gently kisses him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“Look Al, like I said, to me they’re just comic books. I don’t take them seriously. But now that I know how you feel ...

... no more classical art.”

When Moses met God on Sinai, he was commanded to take off his sandals. Why? Because Moses stood in the presence of God. He stood on Holy ground.

In the sacrament or the sacred covenant of matrimony, God lives, truly present. An invited *and a distinguished* guest. And the evils undermining that sacred relationship, evils like lust, adultery, and infidelity - be it actual or emotional - corrode and, if left unchecked, rot the foundation of that sacred relationship and eventually destroy what God has joined together.

Ask yourself, isn’t pornography just as bad? Maybe, even worse? Why? Because those who wallow in the lies and illusions pornography offers as reality or truth, develop an attitude that prevents that foundation from ever forming in the first place. It’s moral quicksand, something in which no relationship can be anchored.

Lust, adultery, infidelity, pornography; sandals that defile the union of man and woman. Where God is present. Where He lives.

His sacred ground ...

... be careful where you walk!