

H I R A E T H

Jasmine was standing at the side of the road with her arm extended and her thumb raised. She was at a crossroads, symbolic of her mental state of existence. She believed she was still in Colorado. The last driver who had given her a ride had been hauling a trailer with two horses. He dropped her off when she turned down his offer to come stay as a guest at his ranch. Since she had no place she had to be, Jasmine momentarily considered his invite but abruptly exited the vehicle when the driver placed a hand on her knee.

She was not averse to engaging in a one-off, sexual fling with a ruggedly handsome middle-aged man. Something in his smile didn't feel right. She thanked him with a sunny smile and felt relieved when he drove off down a dirt road.

Another car passed her, a family filled with kids, girls waving, boys sticking out their tongues. Jasmine reached into the side pocket of her backpack and removed a tube of sunscreen. She wiped the cream on her face while gazing at the mountains and the afternoon sun settling down toward the horizon. She saw a truck approaching, going the opposite direction, but decided to stick out her thumb.

The semi-truck driver braked to a slow stop several yards away. She ran, crossing to the other side of the road, and stepped up to climb into the cab.

"Thank you for stopping," said Jasmine with a bright smile as she examined the driver, a largish man who actually was a woman. Dressed in overalls and baseball cap turned backwards, the driver returned her smile.

"Where ya traveling to, sister?"

Jasmine didn't know, uncertain which direction would take her to where she wanted to be. She had a longing for a home, some place that no longer existed or never existed. "I'm not sure."

The woman laughed as they drove off. “I know the exact same feeling. I’d be traveling there too if I didn’t have this cargo to deliver day after day. Keeps me on track. Know what I mean?”

Jasmine nodded, not sure how to respond.

“Name’s Ruth. Yours?”

“Jasmine.”

“Pretty. A young thing, such as yourself, hitchhiking out there all alone, it’s dangerous.”

“I suppose.”

“And you have no idea where you’re going?”

“That’s right. Is that a problem?”

“Not for me!” She tooted the air horn. “Freedom of the road. It isn’t called a freeway for nothing. She burst into song, singing, *Freedom is just another name for nothing else to lose!*”

“*Me and Bobby McGee,*” said Jasmine.

“So you know the song. How old are you?”

“Around thirty, I think.”

“You think?” She laughed. “You hungry?”

“A little. Why?”

“Truck stop coming up soon. They have a cafe. You okay with stopping over for a bit? Or stick out your thumb when we get there. Either way is fine by me.”

“I will have dinner with you, Ruth.”

“Then it’s settled. I like having company. Gets real lonely on the road, which I’m sure you know. Plus, I’m eager to hear all about your travels and who you are.”



Jasmine debated whether to tell her story based on the truth or lies. They were seated facing each other in a small booth. While they were waiting for the waitress to bring their meal order, Ruth asked

the question again, inquiring about her situation.

“I’m what is called a Jane Doe. I renamed myself Jasmine.”

Ruth drank from her complimentary glass of water. “I thought a Jane Doe was for dead people who can’t be identified.”

“You’re partially correct.” Jasmine fiddled with her fork. “I did almost die. I was, apparently, in an automobile accident. That’s what I was told by the doctors when I awoke. A head impact to my frontal lobe left me with no memory.”

“Good lord,” said Ruth. “Did anyone die?”

“The driver. A man around my age. And another man. I have no idea who they were or if there was any relationship. An autopsy said they were both under the influence of alcohol and methamphetamine when we went over an embankment and struck a tree.

“Where did this happen?”

“Somewhere outside of Chicago.”

“And you don’t recall anything?”

“Nothing. No drugs were in my system. I asked.”

The waitress set down their plates on the table. “Here you go, Ruth. And friend.” She winked.

“Thanks, Debs.”

“Is there anything else I can get you two?”

“The check when you get a chance.” She looked over at Jasmine and said, “This is on me.”

“You don’t have to do that. I have cash.”

“Don’t be silly. I want to hear the rest of your story.”

“Not much to tell.”

Ruth bit into her cheeseburger. “Hum, you must’ve had some kind of identification on you when the crash occurred.”

“I know,” said Jasmine. She took a bite of her cheeseburger and shook her head. “I asked the same thing to the doctors and police but they found nothing.”

“Maybe you were abducted.”

“Maybe.”

“Did they identify who these people were?”

“The police suspected they were criminals. Drug runners. Both had multiple fake IDs. A gun was found in the glove compartment. Drugs in the trunk. Their fingerprints proved a match. Both with a record of arrests. Assaults. Car theft. Drug dealing.”

Ruth whistled as she exhaled. “They must’ve suspected you too, I imagine. Being complicit. A girlfriend?”

“They did. They took my fingerprints. No record for any arrests were found in the database. A DNA search came up empty too.”

“No one reported you missing?”

“Apparently not. That’s how I became a Jane Doe.”

“What happened next?”

“How do you mean?”

“How long ago did this happen?”

“About six months. I got friendly with the doctors and nurses at the hospital while I recovered physically. They felt sorry for me, I guess. A psychiatrist, also a social worker, who repeatedly asked me questions I couldn’t answer, I didn’t like so much. I decided to escape one night. It wasn’t that hard.”

“Where did you go?”

“I found shelter at this sleazy bar in Chicago. The owner hired me because of my looks, most likely. I worked the tables, serving drinks to make some money. In a way, I became his captive. He knew I had no place to go, so he took advantage of me.”

“Sexually?”

“That too. I didn’t mind. He wasn’t that bad really.”

“He sounds like an asshole to me.”

“Once I saved up enough money I took off.”

“And here you are.”

“Here I am. Except I don’t know exactly where.”

“Wyoming.”

“Oh. I thought we were still in Colorado.”

“You poor thing. You *are* truly lost.”

“I thought maybe by traveling around I might recognize some place that seemed familiar.”

“To reboot your memory?”

“Yes. Nothing yet.”

“I had a whole bunch of questions ready to ask you but with no memory, what’s the point? How was your cheeseburger?”

“Pretty good. Thanks.”

“I have to hit the can before we go, then it’s back on the road. I’ll be right back. Did you need to pee too?”

“In a minute.”

“Okay, but hurry up. I’m on a tight schedule.”



The light had faded, the sky getting darker. The semi-truck was rumbling down the freeway.

“Nearest town is several miles away.” Ruth was turning the dial on the radio to find a country western station. “A stretch of nothing ‘till bedtime. Where were you planning on sleeping tonight?”

“Side of the road. I have a down mummy bag.”

“You’ll freeze your ass off, Jasmine.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing. It’s not so bad.”

“I like my privacy and sleeping alone. But with your situation, a loner like me, I’ll make an exception. There’s a spacious bed behind us in this cab. You’re welcome to stay the night. No way can I let you sleep outside, camping out on the road. It’s dangerous.”

“Okay. Thanks for the offer.”

“Listen to that. Old Hank. Do you like country songs?”

“Sure. Songs are one of the few things I can remember. Maybe I was a musician. I don’t know. It’s just a feeling I get when I hear music. It’s my way back home. Assuming I have one.”



Ruth pulled off the freeway into a rest stop around midnight.

“Fourteen hour shifts, Jasmine. I’m beat.” She pushed open the wall behind the seats which had a compact space with a bed and a refrigerator. “Care for a shot of whiskey?”

“Okay.” Jasmine left her backpack on the seat and crawled through the opening and onto the bed. After locking the doors, Ruth followed her and plopped down on the mattress beside Jasmine.

“Tight but cozy. I’m not complaining. Are you?”

“No,” said Jasmine.

From the refrigerator, Ruth removed a bottle of Maker's Mark. She filled two shot glasses with whiskey and handed one to Jasmine. “To us. Two free-flying birds coming in for a landing.”

Jasmine sipped the whiskey. “What about you, Ruth? I’ve told you everything I know about myself. What’s your story?”

She downed her shot of whiskey all at once and poured herself another round. “Nothing much to tell. No relationships to speak of except broken dreams and what I experience on the road.”

Jasmine was feeling slightly claustrophobic and asked for more of the liquor. Ruth generously poured. “Are you married?”

Ruth laughed. “Hell no. Free as a bird, same as you.”

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t be shy,” said Ruth, undressing. “I sleep in the nude. You do what you want. Go ahead, get comfortable. I won’t bite.”

Ruth slipped under the covers and turned away, facing the cab wall. “I’ll turn off the light now, if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure. Okay.”

The cab went dark. Jasmine took off her clothing, except for her underwear and slipped under the blankets. She heard Ruth snoring which helped settle her into a much needed sleep herself.

Jasmine awoke in the dark not knowing what time it was, but feeling a hand between her legs. She froze, not sure how to react to this gentle assault on her private parts. She was a captive again with nowhere to go. Unable to escape her situation, she shut her eyes and didn't protest nor resist, allowing this fingering massage to continue as she shuddered and sighed.

"Let it flow, Honey," Ruth whispered. "Jane Doe or Jasmine, whoever you are, feel free to rub my Lady Jane too."



At the break of day, Jasmine hastily dressed. She avoided eye contact with Ruth. She felt embarrassed and violated. She climbed from the bed into the passenger's seat, clutched her backpack, and waited for Ruth to start the truck. She began to shiver.

As Ruth lumbered into the driver's seat, she turned to Jasmine, looking stoic, and said, "How was last night? You sleep okay?"

"Fine."

"You're awfully quiet. I'm not a morning person either. Time to get this beast back on the road."

The engine started up and Ruth pulled out of the rest stop and onto the freeway. She noticed Jasmine's body shaking.

"The cab will be toasty soon."

"When's the next town?" Jasmine was focused on the road.

"In an hour we'll hit Rawlins."

"You can let me off there."

"Not much to see in Rawlins. I prefer Rock Springs. We'll be coming to that town after—"

"Drop me off at Rawlins. Please."

"Any particular reason?"

"A hunch. Maybe I'll recognize something there."

"Feeling psychic vibes today, are we?"

Jasmine didn't respond, staring through the windshield. "You never know what to expect with each day."

"Ain't that the truth!"



As Jasmine exited the cab, Ruth said, "It was a treat getting to know you, Jasmine. Let's hope you find what you're looking for."

Once on the ground, Jasmine turned and looked up, adjusting the backpack over her shoulders. She forced a smile. "Thank you for the ride."

"Who knows, maybe we'll cross paths again some day. You take care now, Sugar."

Jasmine had a memory flash. She recalled something pink and red when she heard the word "sugar." The vision of a watermelon, she realized as she walked into town, haunted by this elusive image that left her with nothing more than a clue.

The city of Rawlins appeared as one more rural destination in the middle of nowhere with several historic brick buildings. Quaint, but nothing inspiring to reboot her memory. She entered a building with a black-tile front called the Bucking Horse Bar. The walls were cluttered with antique paraphernalia – mounted heads of animals, deer horns, wagon wheels, and rifles.

At this hour of the morning the place was empty of customers. Jasmine walked up to the sole bartender.

"Are you hiring?"

"Are you of legal age?"

"I'm in my thirties."

"I need to see some identification."

"I have none. It was stolen off me while on the road."

"Then I'm afraid I can't help you."

Jasmine started to leave, then turned back. "I can make it worth

your while.”

“How so? What are you offering?”

“A trade.”

The bartender rubbed the bristles on his face, looking her over. “You’re damned pretty, I’ll give you that. Do you have experience working in a bar?”

“I do. Waitressing. Mixing drinks too.”

“With your looks, you’d be an asset for bringing in customers. Do you carry any better clothes in that backpack you can wear?”

“Are you saying this bar has a dress code?”

He laughed. “You said a trade. What did you have in mind?”

“Is there a back room?”

“There is.”

“Do you have protection?”

“How do you mean, protection?”

“If you don’t, I do.”

The bartender grinned, comprehending the message behind her words. “What should I call you?”

“Jasmine. You?”

“I go by Gunner. That’s what my dad kept calling me as a kid. And, like a tattoo, it stuck, became permanent.” He came out from behind the bar. “I better lock up first. Then I’ll show you the way around this place since you’ll be working here.”



Months later, having taken up residence in the bar’s back room, Jasmine was waitressing one night when a regular customer grabbed her by the arm.

“No touching,” she said. “What is it you want?”

He smiled slyly. “I knew I recognized you from somewhere.”

“Where?”

“I work part time at the police station doing janitorial stuff. No one bothers to look at all the printouts of faces pinned to the wall. Except for me. It’s sort of my hobby. Like playing the lottery. Wanted posters. Missing persons. One day I figured I might get lucky and solve a case. And bingo!”

Other customers were listening.

Jasmine became nervous but expressed annoyance. “And by that, you mean what?”

“I saw your face. On that wall.”

“You’re mistaken.”

“Come and look yourself. You’re a dead ringer.”

“What does this poster, or printout, say?”

“That you’re a runaway. Wanted for questioning. Suspected of being involved with a drug trafficking ring.”

“I don’t *do* drugs,” said Jasmine sharply so others could hear.

“Dope peddlers often don’t.”

“Like I said, you’re mistaken. And you’re annoying me.”

“If it involved the Mafia, they’d be looking to find you too.”

Jasmine nearly spilled her tray holding two beers. “I have to get back to work. I don’t have time for this bullshit.”

“Never steal from the bad guys, Honey.” He chuckled.

“I’m not who you think I am!”

A man at a nearby table said, “Leave her the hell alone, Jeff. You’re beginning to piss me off too.”

“Thank you,” said Jasmine to this man. She set down his draft of beer and left to deliver the other glasses of beer.



Before dawn the following morning, Jasmine walked to locate the Greyhound station on the outskirts of town. The sun was rising as she reached the bus depot. She payed cash, purchasing a ticket to

Las Vegas, Nevada. She was infuriated that she was being coerced to leave town based on this man's alleged sighting of her face on a wall. Wanted for questioning? The Mafia? She had no idea if any of this was true but didn't want to risk being arrested. So she doled out one hundred and fifty two dollars – most of her hard-earned savings. She also left without notice, unable to collect a week's worth of pay.

She found a seat at the back of the bus and stuffed her backpack in the overhead luggage compartment. There were other passengers already on board traveling to and from who knows where or why. Grumbling to herself, she wondered if what this Jeff person said was true. Was she complicit in some illegal drug operation?

She was surprised when two people boarded the bus. Rawlins had less than nine thousand people. She was further irritated when one of these new passengers, a man wearing a Stetson cowboy hat, stared down at the aisle seat next to her.

“Good morning, Miss. Mind if I join you?”

“It's a free country. Help yourself.”

With a quiet laugh, he removed his hat, placing it on his lap as he sat down. “It's not actually. Nothing is free. Not even the air we breathe. We get taxed for simply living.”

Jasmine stared at his hand extended toward her. It took her a moment to realize the gesture. She shook his hand.

“Nelson.”

“Jasmine.”

“Where are you traveling to?”

She thought, “*None of your business,*” but told him, “No place in particular.”

“Las Vegas?”

“I figured I might go there.”

“Are you a gambler?”

“We're all gamblers. Every move we make is a gamble.”

“Nothing's free and life's a gamble. I agree.”

Jasmine was intrigued by him. She liked his smile. He wasn't bad looking either. A man in his forties, she guessed. "What's your destination?"

"Green River."

"Where's that?"

"Utah."

"Never heard of it. Is it remote?"

"Incredibly."

"Why go there?"

"I own a watermelon farm."

"That's different."

"Watermelons are what Green River is famous for."

The image of an enormous watermelon, the size of a home, had stirred her mind again. She wondered if these watermelon visions meant anything. "I like watermelons."

"Who doesn't? Did you know watermelons symbolize fertility, intellect, and happiness? If you dream about a watermelon, it means your life will only get better."

Doubtful, thought Jasmine. She kept imagining a watermelon. Split open. She could almost taste its pink, watery deliciousness. The essence of it filled her thoughts and she heard a song inside her head. It was called "Watermelon Sugar," and she knew, somehow, the term was slang for a female orgasm, also the sweetness in life. This sudden remembrance of its meaning made her blush.

Nelson noticed. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She turned away to look at the passing scenery. She realized she was attracted to this man. He had an ease about him. She felt warm and comfortable in his presence.

"I saw you last night. In the Bucking Horse. I overheard what was said."

Jasmine turned back, semi-alarmed.

"No need to worry. I choose to believe you. Not Jeff. He's a

known troublemaker and bullshitter.”

“Why were you in Rawlins?”

“Conducting business with the local markets.”

“Watermelons?”

“That’s what I grow and sell.”

Would you like to hear my story?”

“Sure. Whatever you want to tell me, Jasmine. We have a long ride ahead of us before we get to where we’re both going.”



“And you still have no recollection of who you are?”

“None,” said Jasmine. “Except when I hear songs. They trigger vague, out-of-reach memories . When you mentioned watermelons a little while ago, I recalled a song and sensed something. There was a connection. But I don’t know what it means. I’m a wreck.”

“You don’t look like a wreck to me.” Nelsen rubbed the rim of his Stetson as he thought. “Could there actually be a warrant out for your arrest? And a crime syndicate looking to find you too?”

“I honestly don’t know. That got me worrying. I didn’t want to take the chance of being arrested. So I ran. That’s what I do.”

Nelson said, “Las Vegas is not a place I would to go if the Mafia was looking to find me.”

“Why?”

“The hotels and casinos have cameras everywhere.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought this through. You’re right.”

“Come with me to Green River.”

“Why? What’s there besides watermelons?”

“Well, me, for one.” He smiled. “A safer place to be. Folks are friendly. And, like I said, it’s remote.”

Jasmine said, “I’ll think about it.”

“The bus will arrive there in about five hours. Plenty of time to

consider your options. It's incredibly scenic. I believe you will love living there."

"Is there actually a green river?"

Nelson laughed and stroked the rim of his hat. "Yes, there just happens to be a green river in Green River, coincidentally."

"And watermelons." Jasmine returned his smile.

"Plenty of watermelons. You'll see."



Jasmine's first impression of Green River as she stepped off the bus at the Greyhound station was shock. Uninspiring was the first word that came to mind. Remote was an understatement. The view was downright ugly, she thought.

Nelson noticed her reaction. "Trust me, it gets better."

A newish red jeep with no doors or top except roll bars and off-road tires was waiting to pick Nelson up.

The driver waved. "Hola, Nelson."

"Hey, Mario. Thanks for coming. This is Jasmine. She's here for a visit or a stay. Options still open."

"Welcome, Jasmine," said Mario.

"Hola, Mario. Encantado de conocerte."

"Likewise, bonita senorita."

"I didn't know you spoke Spanish," said Nelson.

"Neither did I. The words just came to me."

"I'd open the door for you if there was one. Hop in the front. I'll ride in the back."

"The back is fine." She tossed her backpack on one of the seats and sat in the other.

As they drove off, Nelson looked backwards from the passenger seat to tell Jasmine, "A fun fact. Green River was once the stomping ground and hideout for Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch." He

pointed to the surrounding mountains.

As they crossed over the river on a trestle bridge, Jasmine saw that the scenery was improving. An abundance of green foliage and trees adorned the banks of the river. The towering buttes off in the distance were dramatic.

“What’s the population here?”

“About one thousand,” said Nelson.

“Best melons in the world,” said Mario.

“I’ve heard,” said Jasmine.

Driving through the downtown section of Green River, Jasmine saw the sparse number of buildings. There was a bright green tracker with an enormous painted replica of a watermelon slice on top of a flat-bed trailer. There were people decorating other floats.

“What’s going on here?”

“Getting ready for the Green River Melon Days Celebration.”

“What’s that?”

“As it sounds. A celebration.”



After showing Jasmine his modest home – a one story structure built in the fifties but modernized – Nelson offered to take her on a tour of the watermelon fields. Jasmine sat in his small convertible off-road vehicle with only two seats and received a flash of terror but brushed it off with a smile.

“This feels more like a toy,” she said as they drove off.

“Easier to navigate around all those melons.”

They zipped down a bumpy dirt road, over ravines, and through rows and rows of green-striped melons.

Over the loud motor she shouted, “There are so many!”

Nelson laughed, shouting back, “That’s the idea!”

He drove onto another stretch of gravel and dirt with rows of

melons on both sides of the road. Jasmine held onto whatever she could as Nelson gunned the engine.

“Ready to have some fun? Hold on tight!”

Jasmine heard the song start up inside her head. It was on some kind of loop, playing again and again. She shut her eyes and blanked out for a moment.



“Hop in.”

The driver, a man in his thirties, opened the door to his bright red convertible.

“Thanks for stopping.” She hesitated, noticing a body stretched out behind the two bucket seats.

“That’s Earl. Don’t mind him. He’s sleeping off a hangover. I’m Devin and wide awake.” He widened his dilated eyes, grinning. “So what should I call you?”

“Jazz.” She settled down into the passenger seat. “My last boss nicknamed me that. He said it was for the way I moved.”

“Like the music. Cool.”

She was pressed against the seat as Devin floored the gas pedal, burning rubber, launching them onto the road.

“What kind of car is this?”

“Ferrari Portofino.”

“Looks expensive. What do you do for a living?”

“Steal cars.” He laughed. “I’m joking. I’m a broker. Stocks and bonds. That’s my deal. How I got rich. And you?”

She doubted his sincerity. He looked and dressed more like a car thief than a stock broker. “Unemployed at the moment. I waitress in bars mostly.”

“I can picture that.”

“My cell phone is almost dead. Do you have a charger?”

“Plug her right in there.”

He pointed to the dashboard. The array of electronics confused her so he took hold of her phone, placing it onto the wireless charger station. “A magnetic holder. See? Pretty cool, huh? This baby can go two hundred miles per hour.”

“Impressive,” She saw a sign zip past. The road was posted with a thirty-five MPH speed limit. The speedometer arrow was pointed straight up to sixty. Feeling uneasy, she hugged her purse.

“Do you like this song?” Devin pushed a button and music was blasted over the roar of the car’s motor and the rush of wind.

“I’ve never heard this before.”

“It’s called Watermelon Sugar.” He flashed her a grin and began singing along to the lyrics. “*Watermelon sugar high, I just wanna taste it, I just wanna taste it, watermelon sugar high!*”

Jazz smiled back to be friendly. “I like it.”

“Do you? That’s good, *real* good.” He laughed. “Because you know what that means? Watermelon Sugar?”

She shook her head. “No. What?”

“A female orgasm!”

Devin licked his lips then laughed just as Jasmine felt her purse yanked loose from her hands. “Hey!”

The man behind the seats was awake and rooting through the contents of her bag.

“Credit cards and cash,” said Devin. “Leave the rest.”

“No cards. About three hundred dollars. That’s a good score.” Earl held the money in his fist with the wind flapping the bills.”

“Give that back!” she screamed.

“Here you go!”

Earl held up her purse. Devin slowed the car to a crawl beside a river bank. Earl tossed her purse into the river.

“You won’t be needing this either.” Devin unplugged her cell phone and tossed that into the river too.

Jazz screamed and grabbed the door handle to escape but was restrained from behind by Earl, choking her. “Stay put!”

Devin gunned the engine to get back on the two-lane road.

Traveling at seventy miles an hour, Devin reached over to grab Jazz between her legs, groping her as she flailed her arms to fight him off. She struck his face and he lost control of the car.



Jasmine let out a horrified scream. “Oh, God! They were going to rape and murder me!”

Nelson released the gas pedal and brought them to a stop.

“Jasmine, what’s going on?”

“They were going to rape and murder me!”

“Who was?”

“Those two men who died in the car crash. The ones that had stopped to give me a ride.”

“You were hitchhiking?”

Jasmine was shaking. “Yes. I almost died. Twice!”

Nelson reached over to comfort her. She pushed his hand away and began to cry. A backwash of memories was overwhelming her all at once. “I remember now what happened! I know who I am. Oh, God. God, please. Make it stop!”

Nelson could see she was inconsolable and didn’t know what to do to comfort her. So he waited while she covered her face with both hands and continued to sob, head swaying back and forth.

“I’m not a good person. I’m not a good person.”

“Tell me who you are.”

She finally looked at Nelson. “Not a good person.”

“I see just the opposite, Jasmine.”

“I’m *Janet*. Something. Multiple last names that never took.”

“How do you mean they—”

“I was a *foster* kid. I don’t even know my birth name. You can just call me Janet Foster.”

“I prefer Jasmine.”

“That’s not who I am. I wasn’t wanted. My mother abandoned me. I don’t even know what she looked like. Or who she was. I was never told. They said I was a troubled child.”

“Who did?”

“Foster care. The state welfare system. That’s why I was never adopted. I was unlovable.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true. I was too angry to trust these fake parents who took me into their homes, letting me think I had a home, but abandoning me too. Like my birth mother. The last time I got returned, I decided to run away.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen, maybe? It’s a guess. No one knew for certain my exact age or my birthday. Dates like that mean nothing to me.”

“Where did you go?”

Jasmine turned away from Nelson. “I did what I had to do to survive. I’m not proud of a lot of the things I did—”

“Hey, that’s in the past. You’re *Jasmine* now.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“A new beginning.”

Jasmine took a moment to look around at where she was – at the fields of watermelons surrounding her. A man staring at her with a look of compassion. He touched her leg and she didn’t flinch.

“Be Jasmine. Not this Janet *whoever*.”

“How do I go about doing that?”

“Accept that you have a home if you want one.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“A place where you feel safe and loved.”

“I’ve never felt that. I live with this feeling of homesickness for

a place from my past that I can't return to because it never existed. No one has ever really wanted me, except for having sex."

"I want you for more than sex."

"We hardly know each other. We only just met on a bus."

"Isn't that the wonder of falling in love?"

She was confused by a sense of hope. His smile had a warmth. She wiped at her tears and tentatively smiled back.

"This could be your home, Jasmine, if that is what you want. There is only one caveat to my offer."

His grin had a sweetness, a mischievousness.

"And what might that be?"

"If you stay with me you must *vow* to love watermelons."

She laughed. "Okay. I can do that."