

E.J. RUNYON

900
MILES



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Chapter One

THE SCALE READS 185.

“Cool.” Christina nods, her damp hand against the wall to steady herself, bath towel pressed tight to her middle so she could see the jiggling numbers. “Eighteen and five. Cool. Just three more to find and I’m a rich girl.” She steps off the scale and sets her leg up on the rim of the tub to squirt pale yellow lotion along the length of her shin.

Her towel drops away and the remaining patches of dampness tingle on the back of her thighs and neck, giving her goosebumps. “Maybe twenty again?” She wouldn’t be twenty-one for another nine months. Twenty is a valid number. No? “Sure. Five, eighteen, and twenty.”

She tries saying the numbers aloud but the leaning over and rubbing with the lotion takes her breath away, so she straightens up.

Fingertips pressing at her sternum, her inhale whistling through her mouth; air-drying while considering the last two numbers. Christina waits then exhales, pondering whether she should bother cutting her toenails too. She goes easier with lotioning the other

leg, leaning to the left and only using one hand, that way she wasn't pressing her ribs up against her thigh.

Nicky walks into the bathroom and stands, staring. She feels his eyes on her behind, what the view must be like from back there. Ignores him until he rubs his head against her already lotioned leg and meows, low and hungry. "Okay, just a minute, big boy. Mama's busy." Two more to find. Two more. And maybe 19 was better than 20. She thinks about it... *five, eighteen, and nineteen. Yeah. nineteen.*



Harrison sits at the table, drinking his morning pot of coffee. His empty bong at his elbow, and the usual murk of sweet smoke wreathing his head and shoulders. From as far back as Christina could remember, way back when she was small, even when her mother was still there with them, Harrison's morning ritual started this way. Three bowls in the bong and a full pot of coffee just for him; that was breakfast.

He blamed it on being a lineman for the phone company: "Up this pole in the wind and rain, down that smelly vault all fricken' summer, all kinds of crummy weather; hell of a life."

Years had passed. Her mother kicked it in a pretty ugly way. The trees out front and Christina herself grew taller; both of them passing up Harrison's 5'6". But Harrison's song remained the same.

She pulls a chocolate-chip muffin and a can of cat food from the fridge. "Hey, gimme a number."

"God, it's Wednesday, isn't it?"

She sets the can down for Nicky. "I need two more. Got anything?"

Harrison sips, staring down at the big Maine Coon's fluffy rear-end, considering. Christina waits. Peels the paper off her

muffin, careful with any fugitive chips, but he shakes his head. “Nope. I’m blank, baby.”

“Okay.” She touches the top of his head and reaches for her house key and bus pass from the bowl on the counter. “I’ll leave your dinner in the fridge.”

They live on West Heil Avenue, west of Imperial. In El Centro, California. One of the newest and poorest of all of California’s fifty-eight counties. Bordering both Arizona and Mexico. The zipper tongue on the open jacket. *Birthplace of Cher*, Christina thinks whenever she sees a state map.

Because of the house’s southern exposure on its rear side and before the trees had gotten big enough to shade the kitchen window, her mom took to calling it Hell Avenue. Back when they first moved in. The family there only seven months before that day in January. Rain; red-light runner.



The walk to the bus is a short one. She only minds it during the summers. And the winters. And it’s the beginning of February now. She doesn’t drive. Doesn’t want to see Harrison’s stricken face if she ever climbs behind the wheel of something.

At the newspaper, the El Centro Outlook, *the Outrage* as the employees thought of it, Christina spends part of each morning taking ads over the phone and, on rare occasions, from those who bother walking in. She’s also responsible for proofing the ads that come in through the new website, before sending them on for copy setting. The rest of her morning, she files the Account Receivables from last week, and apologizes with her eyes every time someone gripes about having to come to her for the key to the supply cabinet.

Today the dryness of the papers that she shoves into the tight file drawers rubs her bitten cuticles raw, and so she hisses a lot between shaking and blowing on her fingertips; which leave pale trails of bright red on all the file folders.

In between customers at the counter, she tries coming up with her last two numbers. “Gina, gimme a number, I only need two more.”

“You gonna give me a fifth a’ what you win?”

“Yeah, right.” The two girls go through this dance every week Christina buys a ticket. It’s part of the purchase now. She wouldn’t feel right skipping it.

“Then figure out your own damn numbers.” Gina grins, turning back to her stack of payables.

Just before their 10 o’clock break Gina walks her blue ledger printout over to Christina’s desk, and sets it down, pointing to the last line posted. She taps her long orange fingernail at the final amount listed in the column: \$27.27. “There you go, dearie, twenty-seven. How’s that for a winner, huh?”

“I’ll take it.” Christina stands and stretches. “No charge?”

“You win with this; you owe me a lunch. A full on, hour an’ a half, call in and lie to The Beast, my choice of food—Margaritas included—no arguments, celebratory lunch.”

“You got a deal.”

Finding her last number was a fluke.

A tall guy waited at the Ads counter when morning break ended, Native American looking, hair parted down the middle and falling below his earlobes. Bleached chambray shirt with a little rip fraying the collar; his once-black jeans heading toward a charcoal grey. He tapped his pink Ad card against the counter and smiled. Christina took it and read it back to him out loud; standard procedure.

“Harold Two Threes?” She narrowed her eyes, looked up. The guy grinned. His teeth were very white.

“Harold Two Trees.”

She stopped noticing his teeth. Hid her grin. 2-3. She returned her attention to his card. Baby furniture for sale. She took his payment for a two-week run and smiled like her teeth were just as shiny.

He told her, “You’ve got the biggest smile.” And added, “Thanks.” Touching the rim of his hat.

She handed over his change, told him, “No, thank *you*.” Really meaning it as she watched him dip his chin and pocket his receipt.

“Whoa.” Gina said when Christina hurried over to her desk and whispered about Mr. Two Trees and his number. “You owe me a lunch, Baby Doll. I feel it in my bones.”



By noon, Christina has them all: 5, 18, 19, 23, and 27. During her lunch break an hour later, there are four other folks in line buying tickets, two in front of her, two behind. Matt at the 7-Eleven prints out her ticket, holding it to his forehead, not quite squinting, as he predicts, “Yep. This’s a good one, here. Big bucks for sure.” But then something like that comes out of his mouth every week, and the squinting is just a ploy for some discreet staring at her chest, like she can’t tell that. Skinny fool.

“If it makes it, I’ll buy you a carton of Marlboros.”

“Camels.” Matt winks, handing her the ticket. “If it makes it, buy me a case.” The girl behind her shifts. Sighs. None too subtle.

“We’ll see. Thanks.” And the irritated girl moves forward, squeezing past Christina’s elbow, and hands Matt the numbers she’s chosen.

Now Christina stands back out on the sidewalk, sending up a prayer that this one would make it, so she'd never have to be sure to get back from lunch to the Outrage by 1:45. Never have to deal with all those little pink 6 x 4 cards with the bad handwriting, and the tight A/R file drawers. Never have to wait through Matt's squinting either, ever again.

Christina stops for dinner stuff at the Safeway. She's been cooking for Harrison since she was eleven and her mom bought her a Better Homes and Gardens Step-By-Step Kids Cookbook. They spent days deciding on a special menu for his twenty-seventh birthday. Her mom showed her the trick of staggering the starting times of the courses to make everything come out warm and ready at the same time.

"Well look at this!" Harrison kept saying with each new spoonful she proudly heaped on his plate. She remembered how his ironed shirt smelled of fabric softener as he leaned toward her at the table, whispering just to her, 'Is it our anniversary?' eyebrows raised. The cranberry juice in tall plastic wine glasses, cobalt blue. Her mom's favorite color.

Four months later Harrison was burning dinners left and right, when they remembered to eat, until she stepped up and began risking things from the cookbook to try on her own. She started picking at her cuticles then, too, the same way her mom always did. Christina felt it allowed her to hold onto her in some little way...

She runs her Debit card and selects cash back \$7.00. The cashier asks, "No coupons today?"



In the kitchen, Nicky waits, studious about staring intently at the floor, in case food magically appears. It could happen. Christina makes sure it does. She sets Harrison's wrapped plate of *arroz con*

pollo, with peas on the side, in the refrigerator. Cleans up the frying pan and the spatula before she sits down to her own heaped plate. The radio plays some old singer, some ballad Harrison would know all the words to. Christina usually eats alone. Every day he said he would, but Harrison never came directly home. When she was in high school it felt great and she could bring her homework to the kitchen table. But now, without homework, eating alone kind of sucked.

I gotta meet some new people, she thinks. She pushes a piece of chicken off her plate and over the edge of the table. It bounces and she watches Nicky pounce. She rubs her eyes, asks Nicky, “So, what’s on the agenda tonight, Big Boy?”

It takes her under 10 minutes to finish dinner.



She’s cleaned the kitchen. Dinner sits waiting for Harrison, if he drags his skinniness home from wherever he is. Now, there was just the half hour till they pulled the numbers. She could drink a soda from the fridge or walk to the corner and get a Big Gulp before the show. Chips might be nice. *Yeah. That sounds good.*

At 7 o’clock Nicky meows and crawls up next to Christina’s lap, pushing his wide head under her hand for a scratch. She sits with her Lotto ticket and takes pink lemonade sips from her plastic Big Gulp cup. Tapping the cup’s side, waiting to hear the numbers. A bag of chips leans against her thigh. Cool Ranch. Consolation, in case. She’d eaten the two York Peppermint Patties walking home from the corner store.

The commercial ends and as the familiar music rises up, her shoulders round, she sets her elbows on her knees, chanting her numbers: *5-18-19-23-27. 5-18-19-23-27. 5-18-19-23-27*, till she

realizes she can't breathe that way and sits back against the sofa, feet up on the coffee table, jeans unbuttoned.

The first one they call is Gina's number: 27. *Good co-worker*, Christina thinks, *I owe you*. One down.

Then comes the 18. She takes another sip and pushes the bangs off her forehead. *If I win, I'm cutting my hair off, all of it and I'm never wearing it long again*.

Then they read off the five. *Oh my God. Three of 'em!*