

99 Cent Deal

E.B. Sullivan

## Chapter One

My boozing husband left me years ago. Good thing we never had kids, 'cause if we had, he'd have slapped them around just like he did me. Always angry, the lazy, no good was a total waste never working an honest day in his life.

Since then I eked out a decent salary as a cashier in a ninety-nine cent store. Even though I lived in a slummy part of town, with him gone, I considered myself darn lucky. Without his hands in my pockets grabbing every nickel and dime, I had enough cash to pay rent, buy groceries, and cover my electric and gas bills. Most other things I once thought of as luxuries, like liquor and cigarettes; they no longer thrilled me. Maybe I just used them as momentary escapes from the chaos the mean jerk created.

It was a boring repetitive job passing one item after another over the point of sales scanner. Nevertheless, it pulled me out of my sordid past, took pressure off my present, and gave me hope for my future.

When I first took the neighborhood position, I daydreamed about every customer.

I imagined some had swell lives.

I envisioned mothers doting over children and husbands pampering wives. I thought of hot cooked meals spread out nightly on tabletops surrounded by laughing, happy families. I realized my musings centered on what I had hoped for as a kid.

Don't get me wrong. Even though I did a whole lot of wishing in those days, I was always grateful for the sacrifices my folks made. Working overtime hours, to pay for our doublewide located in a desert trailer park, they weren't home much. Their schedules made me independent. I fixed my own grub usually popping open a can of spaghetti or chili. What kid wouldn't like eating bowls of popcorn and drinking caseloads of cokes. After their shifts, they were exhausted and often went straight to bed. Instead of them asking me about my day or needling me about my homework, I was free to sit in front of our small TV, watching my favorite shows.

When a homeless person came into the store, I reminded myself how fortunate I'd had it. I was never hungry or without a bed to sleep in. My generous dad liked giving me little surprises: toys when I was young and CD's of my favorite songs when I got older. Mom took me shopping, let me pick out my own clothes, and taught me how to use the washing machine so I could keep my pretty things clean and fresh.

I felt sorry for the poor souls who came into the store on cold days to buy a carton of instant ramen soup. I figured they'd boil water over an open tin can fire to add to the dry mix. On hot days, they grabbed chilled sodas and started drinking one before they reached the checkout aisle. They dropped wrinkled bills and spilled pennies on the conveyer belt. I felt thankful to kind-hearted strangers for giving these unfortunates generous gifts.

Most of all, I liked listening to teenage girls chatting and giggling with their friends. Regardless of how poorly they were dressed, I pictured them a few years from now, wearing fashionable outfits, as professional women calling their own shots.

Guess I was just projecting my once upon a time dreams. Truth be told, I was a better than average student. That is until I decided to hang with the wrong crowd, ditch classes, and suck on way too many bottles of beer. From then on, I felt like I was traveling fast on a downhill slide to nowhereville.

Lately, I was in a funk. I'd had my full of studying the clientele. Guess I was a bit disillusioned by how life's demands could negatively affect even the nicest people.

I'd seen too many mothers yell at their innocent little ones.

Childhood memories of my stressed out mom being short with me flooded my mind.

I'd heard scores of couples engage in disrespectful, foulmouthed exchanges reminding me of how my overworked parents had spoken to each other during my growing years.

I'd witnessed undernourished folks grab teeth rotting sweets.

Despite me offering healthier suggestions, nobody heeded my advice.

To top it off, I worked with people who hated their jobs and complained every chance they got.

Playing my favorite tunes in my head, I tried to avoid noticing anything about anyone. While keeping my eyes on the computer screen, I robotically asked, "Did you find everything you wanted?" After hearing a beep for each item I had passed over the scanner, I stuffed merchandise into plastic bags.

One night, minutes before closing time, the door swung open. In walked the most gorgeous guy I'd ever seen. Well-toned muscles swelled from his snug fitting shirt. His ebony hair was thick and curly.

His booming voice asked, "Where can I find gum?"

Pointing to the display closest to me, I told him, "Right here."

While he was checking out our selection, I peered out the storefront window. Under the parking lot's lights, I spied a sleek, black Corvette.

He regained my attention by clearing his throat.

I noticed he had chosen a Wrigley's winter mint four-pack.

His free hand placed a bill into mine. "This should cover it."

I glanced down and saw Ben Franklin's face looking up at me.

"Sir, I can't accept anything larger than a twenty."

"Sorry." He pulled out a wad of cash and thumbed through it. "Looks like I only have hundreds."

“But I can’t make change for such a large bill.”

“Just keep the rest. Consider it a tip”

As tempting as it was, I knew I shouldn’t accept it.

Instead, I should simply offer to buy his gum.

## Chapter Two

I glanced at the wall clock. It read eight-fifty almost time to go home.

Still clutching his money, I looked up at his handsome face and made eye contact with him.

His stare mesmerized me.

His pupils seemed to be moving in circles like whirlpools.

I pulled away from his penetrating gaze and looked around. No one was in the store. The manager was in the office, tallying up receipts from earlier sales.

As I folded my fingers around the hundred-dollar bill, I thought, *Ruth, just to be honest, put a dollar of your own money into the cash drawer.*

I flashed him a shy smile. "Thank you, sir."

He walked away searching his pants' pockets for his keys. "Got them," he said as something fell from his hand.

I shouted, "Wait. You dropped..."

As if he hadn't heard me, he made a quick exit.

I noticed a red envelope on the floor. I stepped out of the aisle, picked it up, and read the name Mr. Voland. I opened the door, stepped outside, and noticed his black vintage Corvette was cherry. Its license plate read VOLAND.

As if frozen to the spot rather than shouting to him, I watched him drive away.

While returning to the store I was convinced if there was something important in the envelope, Mr. Voland would come back to get it.

I quickly closed out my register, said goodnight to my manager, and rushed home.

Winded from racing up the two flights of stairs to my apartment, I unlocked the door, kicked off my shoes, flicked on the kitchen light, and took a few deep breaths before opening the red envelope.

It contained one slip of paper.

I pulled it out, stared at it not believing my eyes.

"Holy cow," I screamed, "three million dollars."

*This has to be a joke.*

*Surely, it's not a genuine cashier's check.*

*Maybe my tired eyes are seeing things.*

I grabbed a bottle of water, twisted off the cap, took a few swigs, and thought, *What if it is the real thing? Anyone can cash it. Right? That means I'm a rich lady.*

My mind spun out scenarios.

Instead of going to work every day, with a high limit credit card in my pocket, I could shop 'til I dropped.

I saw myself decked out in jewels wearing an evening gown surrounded by handsome men.

I envisioned me standing on a sleek deck of a long yacht, clad in a tiny bikini, the wind blowing my hair around my tanned face.

While my money earned interest in a respectable bank, I'd live in a mansion never having to worry about how I'd pay my bills ever again.

Heck, I could travel the world. Reality like a bop on my head, woke me from my reverie.

Next day, as soon as the ninety-nine cent store opened, Mr. Voland would demand I give him back his envelope containing the three million dollar check.

Feeling dejected, I washed my face, changed into pajamas, and slipped under my covers.

An upset stomach and a pounding headache made it impossible for me to sleep.

After tossing around for a few hours, I jumped out of bed, changed my clothes, threw some things in a plastic bag, left my apartment, and started driving my old heap of a car.

Before getting on the I-15 N, I stopped for gas. When my debit card let me fill the tank, I felt overjoyed.

Leaving Pomona in the dust, I'd easily be able to make the four and half hour trip to Las Vegas.

While driving before daylight, I once again thought about what it would be like to be a millionaire. I could have a personal maid, a chauffeur, and dine at the best restaurants. Every week I could get a manicure, pedicure, and facial. I could get my hair dyed and styled.

Suddenly, an oversized vehicle pulled behind me.

It accelerated and came too close for comfort.

Blinded by its lights, I couldn't see if it was safe to switch lanes.

Gradually, I slowed down thinking the driver would grow antsy and move over, but he didn't. Instead, he tailgated even more.

Scores of cars whizzed past me, but the truck kept breathing down my neck.

My heart pounded. My thoughts were irrational.

*Is Mr. Voland furious with me for running off with his check? Is he chasing me?*

Sweat dampened my clothes.

In a panic, I darted to the right.

The driver beside me honked his horn, but I continued moving barely managing to slip in front of his car without hitting it. Still flooring the accelerator, I sped forward.

Sighing, I tried to regain my composure by thinking about the good life. Every day would be a holiday. There'd be no end to the gifts I'd shower upon myself. I'd live in the lap of luxury for the rest of my life.

As I traveled east, the sun rose in the west. With its light, I felt an intense excitement, a confidence that this was a sign of a bright future.

When I neared the Barstow exit where my parents lived, too intent on depositing the check in a Vegas bank I didn't stop to visit them. In the last few years, as their responsibilities decreased their mutual respect increased. With their improved relationship, even though they didn't act lovey-dovey, it was a pleasure seeing them together.

While passing the off ramp closest to their home, I promised myself, once I had a fresh start, I'd give them a call. Hell, I'd fly them out to see me. Maybe they'd be interested in relocating. Certainly, I could afford to buy them a real house on a piece of their own land. Dad would be overjoyed and maybe Mom could retire.

Suddenly, a black SUV pulled up behind me.

I glanced into my side mirror. Even though it was daytime, I couldn't see the driver's face through the tinted windshield.

I quickly changed one, two, three lanes.

The bulky vehicle followed and tailgated within a few feet of my rear bumper.

Blood rapidly pumped through my veins.

It felt as if my heart was going to leap out of my chest.

My foot stepped on the gas. I erratically wove between cars changing lanes.

Realizing I'd been speeding for some time, out of fear of getting a ticket, I slowed down to the lawful limit.

The black SUV was no longer in sight.

Starting to relax, I realized I'd just been paranoid. Neither the truck nor SUV had been after me. My guilt for taking Mr. Voland's check had made me irrationally suspicious.

### Chapter Three

I drove at a reasonable pace all the way to the first Las Vegas exit.

Slowly perusing surface streets, I located a bank, but it wouldn't open until nine.

Since it was only seven-thirty, I kept driving stopping at a few more places before I found one that opened at eight.

Nervously sitting in my car, I waited twelve minutes.

All the while, I anxiously peered at the parking lot's entrance expecting to see Mr. Voland's Corvette pulling in and quickly parking next to me.

Mustering up courage, at five minutes after eight, I stepped into the neighborhood bank. I went up to a teller's window and whispered, "I'd like to open an account."

A young man smiled and directed me to a woman seated at a desk.

Swallowing my fear, I listened to her.

"Good morning, I'm Sandy Reynolds."

She paused.

Hesitantly I said, "I'm Ruth Benton."

"Ms. Benton, did you want a savings or checking account?"

I opened the envelope, pulled out the check, and gave it to her. "Can I deposit this here?"

She took the check from my shaky fingers and studied it. Her eyebrows rose.

She answered, "I can't see why not. Excuse me, while I consult with my manager."

It seemed like a really, long time before I saw her coming toward me. I wondered if she'd called the cops. I searched for a security guard, but didn't see one. Maybe I still had time to run out of the building, drive home, and go to the ninety-nine cent store before Mr. Voland arrived.

Ms. Reynolds' voice accompanied by a cheerful lilt interrupted by escape plan. "Why not open a few accounts."

She rattled off information.

Robotically, I nodded.

As she filled out computer forms, another staff member approached and addressed me. "I'm going next door to the coffee shop. What can I get you? They have great lattes and sumptuous croissants."

I liked the special treatment, but didn't know anything about designer coffees. "I'll have what you're having."



When Ms. Reynolds asked to see my license, I told her. “I’ll soon be moving to another state.” Feeling tired I added. “But I may spend the night in town. Have any suggestions?”

She recommended a recently built, high-end hotel. “Just give me a call when you get situated. I’ll update your contact information.”

An hour clicked by. I signed numerous documents. Ms. Reynolds filled a folder with copies. She handed me a gold plastic card and explained, “Regular customers usually have to wait to get this processed, but our manager insisted it be made available to you today.”

Her next words were like music to my ears. “Of course you can use this debit card to pay for expenses. And, you’ll be able to access funds from most ATM machines worldwide. But before you leave, would you like to withdraw cash from your checking or savings account?”

I nodded.

The bank manager stopped by Ms. Reynolds’ deck. He vigorously shook my hand. “Thank you for trusting our institution with your funds.”

Feeling like an important lady, I sashayed toward the front double doors.

When I noticed two overhead cameras, my esteem shriveled.

To calm my frazzled nerves I patted the wad of cash in my sweater pocket.

On the outskirts of downtown, I stopped at a Jaguar dealership. A silver sports car caught and held my attention. Quicker than I expected, I was driving a two-hundred ninety-six hp turbo charged flashy convertible.

I still couldn’t get over how the salesman fawned over me especially when I said, “I don’t need a loan.” I handed him my debit card. “I’ll be paying for the car in full.”

Next stop was the posh hotel Ms. Reynolds recommended.

On the circular drive, a valet let out a catcall. His young eyes danced with excitement.

Before he could speak, I warned, “You take extra care of my baby,” I gave him a sinister grin, “or else.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Like most hotels in Vegas, it was necessary to walk through a casino before reaching the reception desk.

Although I wasn’t usually tempted to gamble, one slot machine beckoned. Its lights reflected the colors of the rainbow. Its beeps seemed to call my name. Using my debit card, I made a one-hundred dollar bet.

I pulled back the lever thinking of all the money my sorry excuse for a husband had wasted on slots.

I wouldn't make the same mistake. I vowed this was my first and last bet.

Right before my eyes, three identical pictures filled the screen.

Bells rang.

Whistles blew.

Customers surrounded me.

People shouted and some applauded.

A classy looking hostess instructed. "Pull out your receipt."

I stared at the staggering amount.

The hostess said, "I'll take you to the floor manager's office."

Strangers congratulated me as I followed her across the crowded area.

From a door concealed in the ornately decorated wall, a tall woman dressed in a stylish suit stepped out to shake my hand. I assumed she was the pit boss. I couldn't get over how sophisticated she looked. Not even a remote resemblance to the thugs who on several occasions threw my former husband out of establishments when he was caught cheating at one of the card tables.

She extended her hand.

Instinctively I recoiled wondering if she was about to tear up my receipt.

Her soft-spoken voice told me otherwise. "As a congratulatory gesture for winning our progressive jackpot, the hotel would like you to be our all expense paid guest in one of our most luxurious suites."

While the hostess snapped a few photos, I shook the dignified manager's hand.

I wondered, *How could this day possibly get any better?*

## Chapter Four

In a word, the hotel's suite was spectacular. It was grander than anything I'd ever seen.

An abundance of exotic flowers scented the rooms. Luscious looking fruit in a clear crystal bowl atop a glass table appeared to be floating in space. Next to the fruit was a silver bucket holding a bottle of French champagne flanking a dish filled with a variety of hors d'oeuvres.

"Let us know if we can be of further service," the bellhop said.

"Open the bottle of bubbly," I ordered

He did so and filled one of the fluted glasses.

I briefly thought of giving him a tip, but stopped myself. Since the hotel was picking up my tab, I figured they'd take care of the hired help.

Waving my hands, I told him, "You can go now."

While savoring a ripe peach, I strolled through the suite, fingered fine fabrics, peered at lovely furnishings, and wondered about the cost of exquisite accessories.

Basking in the extravagant surroundings, I felt I had made a wise choice to keep Mr. Voland's check. Without it, while slaving away at a job just to scrape by, none of this would've been part of my existence.

Sipping my champagne, I thought it tasted far better than the cheap stuff I'd had at a few New Year's Eve parties.

It was quite obvious, money did make a difference and a big one at that.

Stepping out onto the terrace, being on the highest floor, I took in a panoramic view of sin city.

Rather than feeling exhausted, I felt exhilarated.

I glanced down at my raggedy clothes. I figured my face and hair were just as unappealing.

After choosing from an array of sample sized soaps, gels, and shampoos I took a long hot shower.

Wrapped in a white, fluffy, terrycloth robe, I picked up the phone and dialed the beauty salon.

Within minutes, right in my suite, beauticians pampered me from head to toe.

One stylist asked, "Would you like someone from our fashion boutique to bring up clothes to try?"

"Why not?" I replied.

When it came to paying for these extra services and overpriced purchases, I used my gold debit card.

Rather than adding a little something extra to say thank you to the overly solicitous personnel, reminding myself these people probably made more money than I had when I was a ninety-nine cent cashier, I didn't tip anyone.

Donning a glamorous outfit, I went down to the casino.

I realized I was playing right into the hotel management's hands by gambling. Just by looking at all the expensive details in the lavish place, I was fully aware the house, not the gambler, always came out on top.

Feeling a bit generous, I didn't mind parting with a hundred dollars. It was a pittance compared to what I had won.

My intention was to linger around the busy casino and get as many free drinks as I could consume. Once I felt high, I'd go straight to bed. First thing in the morning, I'd check out of this glitzy joint, and sneak out of Vegas. I wanted to find a quiet town somewhere in Middle America, a place where Mr. Voland would never dream of looking for me. I figured I'd buy a house with my winnings and live off his money for the rest of my days.

That night I started and ended my adventure at a roulette table.

No matter if I bet on black or red I couldn't lose.

A crowd hovered over me. I could feel them holding their breath when I kept pushing my growing number of chips from one number to the next.

Rather than me strategizing my moves, it felt as if an unseen hand was guiding me to place my bets on the exact right spot.

At four in the morning, I stretched out on my bed. When I closed my eyes, I saw stacks of hundred dollar bills, my money, reaching skyward.

After sleeping for much of the day, I didn't attempt to check out of the hotel until sunset.

Trying to entice me to stay the manager offered to comp the suite for an additional week.

Reluctantly, I agreed.

To make the most of my time, I purchased a laptop computer and spent my days studying real estate markets across the country.

At precisely nine o'clock, I moseyed down to the casino. No matter if I played slot machines, blackjack, or roulette I was always a big winner.

Staff and customers considered me a celebrity, addressed me by name, and treated me with respect.

Some people asked, "What's your secret? How did you learn to beat the house?"

Despite assuming the pit boss was watching my every move, knowing I hadn't or wouldn't do anything against the rules, I wasn't worried.

While folks seemed happy for me on the surface, most eyes oozed with envy and made me relish in the reality of them wishing to be me.

From my online research I learned about Vegas' growth potential, I realized my idea of hiding in an out of the way place was foolish. Since I no longer had to work, what would I do in a small town? What would I have in common with dull, boring people?

Las Vegas was where the action was. With the air fused with electricity, this city offered me chances to multiply rather than hoard my cash. In a town that never slept, I could flaunt my millions wearing expensive clothes and jewelry, be pampered, get attention from rich, handsome men, and never run out of fun things to do.

Surprising myself, I seemed to have business acumen. Once I learned the hotel sold exclusive penthouse suites, I met with its real estate agent. Without ever owning as much as a shack, I asked intelligent questions, insisted on seeing profit and loss statements, and studied the sales transactions of comparable units. Most importantly, I investigated the solvency of the hotel's parent company. It was comforting to learn the corporation had a string of similar first class, prosperous properties around the globe.

After weighing my options, and calculating the best return on my money, I purchased a deluxe suite. Along with all the hotel's amenities at my fingertips, I now owned an upwardly mobile investment in this growing metropolis.

Over the next few months, it amazed me how easily I adapted to my opulent life style.

I never gave Pomona or my former cashier position a second thought except to wonder if my coworkers thought I'd one day turn up in a dumpster the victim of rape and a fatal assault.

Although I occasionally thought about contacting my folks, to satisfy a burning desire to punish them for neglecting me, I chose not to. Visions of them frantically worrying about my whereabouts delighted me. Maybe they'd feel remorse for the years they didn't choose their only child to be their top priority. One day in the distant future, I'd surprise them by showing them how far I'd come in the world without their help.

I stopped stressing about Mr. Voland finding me. With the passing of time, rather than caring about him needing or wanting the cashier's check, I focused on how to parlay his money for my own use.

I busied my days buying and selling stocks and bonds. I must have entered the market at just the right moment, because as if I was riding a giant wave the money poured into my accounts like a tsunami.

Yet, certain situations were annoying.

There was a large number of greedy individuals who offered me false friendships, reached out their hands waiting for me to part with my cash, and a never ending line of do-gooders who tried to make me feel guilty enough to donate to their so called worthy charities.

But I was no fool and quickly became a pro at simply saying no.

When I saw a homeless person, I regretted the times I took dollars out of my own pocket to pay for loaves of bread and tubs of peanut butter for street people. I no longer felt sorry for the dirty ones who littered the clean alleys of every fair city.

I often became irritated with the riffraff I saw loitering and told many of them “What’s wrong with you? Get a job. Get a life.”

A steady stream of men flocked at my feet. Not trusting any of them I treated them like toys, played with guys until I was bored, and carelessly threw them back into the pool of male rejects.

Unhappy with my appearance I longed to be shapelier, prettier. In my thirties, I cringed at the first signs of wrinkles. I saw value in Botox treatments. Trying to stave off the aging process, I underwent cosmetic surgery to lift and enlarge my breasts. I worked out daily at the gym, had a personal trainer, and ran a few miles a day.

Life was busy and profitable, but in truth, disappointing. I couldn’t shake off an overwhelming loneliness. I wanted much more, but couldn’t quite figure out what would make me happy or how to pull from the air the illusive something that would truly please me.

## Chapter Five

Late one Sunday morning, while I was waiting for my masseuse to arrive, the doorbell rang.

With the morning staff gone, I was alone in the penthouse.

Feeling annoyed by her being a few minutes late, I put down the Wall Street Journal and went to the door prepared to shout obscenities.

Without checking who was there, I flung open the door.

To my astonishment, standing before me was Mr. Voland the handsome man who a year earlier had given me the hundred-dollar tip and had dropped the red envelope containing the three million dollar cashier's check.

His deep voice rang out, "Hi there, Ruth."

My stomach lurched with anxiety. *Has he come back for his money or did he come here out of revenge to hurt me?*

He stepped into the foyer and slammed the door shut.

Knowing I could easily pay him back and still be a rich woman, I calmed down.

I gave him a beguiling smile. "I'm prepared to give you your three million and will gladly tack on a generous ten percent as interest."

He reached out his hand, gripped my wrist, and pulled me close.

"You're hurting me," I shouted.

He squeezed harder.

Involuntarily I glanced at his hand. Rather than fingernails, he had long black claws dripping with liquid resembling molten lava. I feared the slime would soon burn my flesh.

I shuddered.

"Look at me," he ordered.

I turned my gaze upward.

Horns sprouted out of his black, curly hair. Steam hissed from his ears. Dark holes under wildly bushy brows held spinning, green eyeballs. Fire flared from his nostrils.

There was no doubt he embodied evil.

Thinking I had lost my sanity. I thought, *Maybe I had too much to drink last night. My mind is playing tricks on me.*

I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head trying to kick out the horrid image. When I gradually opened my lids and glanced at him, his facial features took on grotesque festering boils. Maggots squirmed in yellow pus.

Gagging, I turned away. I desperately struggled to free myself from his hold but, as if I were a statue, I wasn't able to budge.

I stammered, "Who... are... are you?"

"I think you know the answer to that question."

With each word, his hot breath scorched my skin.

"What do you want from me?"

A hideous laugh preceded his words, "I came to take back what's mine."

"I've already told you. I'll gladly give you your money. I'm good for the loan. Do you want a higher interest rate on the money you lent me?"

"Loan?" He jerked me within inches of his torrid form. "Or, these days is that what people call stealing?"

"I'm sorry. I assumed you didn't miss it, need it, or care about it."

He laughed again. "You're right. I don't need or care about mere dollars."

I attempted to bargain with him. "Still I'd like to wire transfer any amount you'd like into your account."

He shook his head. Sparks flew downward and burnt holes in my robe. "I think you know why I'm here."

Every inch of me trembled with intense fear. "You came for my soul."

As if I'd told the funniest joke, he cackled repeatedly. In the process, he loosened his grip, but still I couldn't pull free.

A dreadful stench preceded his words. "I've had your soul from the second you accepted my hundred dollar bill.

"Shame on you, my dear Ruth, you didn't pay the ninety-nine cents for the gum I took."

He slammed my body into the wall. Upon impact, I felt the room shake.

Despite the excruciating pain my mind rambled, *What is he talking about? What have I done to deserve this punishment?*

A host of things paraded in my brain. I'd lied. I'd cheated. I'd been nasty, hateful, selfish, and spiteful. But I never murdered anyone. I never even wished anyone dead.



His oversized hand grabbed me by my waist. His nails ripped through my robe and punctured my flesh. I felt my blood seep from my wounds. Despite the intense agony, screams caught in my throat.

In my weakened, dazed condition I thought, I have to be sleeping and having an outlandish nightmare.

His words brought me back to the moment. “Young lady, face reality. You know why I’m here.”

“You’re going to torture me.”

He nodded.

“You’re going to kill me.” He nodded. “You’re going to send me straight to ...”

“There are worse things my dear.” Again, he laughed showing long hideous fangs. “You’re not going to burn until you pay me back.”

My pulse slowed. It was still possible to fall into his good graces. “I already offered to give you cash, lots of it, but if that’s not what you desire, I’ll gladly do whatever you wish.”

“I know you will, my dear Ruth, or should I call you Ruthless?”

He cackled. “The moment I peered into your wretched soul, I knew you’d be willing to carry out every imaginable evil deed. As I’ve watched you take and take without ever giving you proved you’d have no qualms in making other people’s lives hell on earth.”

Terror washed over me.

Subsequently, a perverse excitement led me to realize Mr. Voland was right about me thirsting for and thriving on wickedness.

## Chapter Six

I glanced at the wall clock. It read eight-fifty-five.

*Where have the last five minutes gone?*

Still clutching his money, I looked up at the customer's face and thought he really wasn't that cute.

His booming voice asked, "Need more time to think?"

I handed the stranger his hundred-dollar bill. "Here, mister."

I reached in my pocket and pulled out a single. "Just this once. Seeing that you didn't know about us not taking anything over a twenty, I'll pay for your gum."

"That's awfully nice of you, but I insist you take the hundred." He raised his arm, released the bill and let it sail down toward the moving conveyer belt.

"I don't want it, but thank you anyway. Better pick it up before it gets caught in the machine."

"Are you sure? No one will know if you accept my tip."

"Yeah. I'm sure." I rang up the item and put my dollar bill in the cash draw, took out one cent, and tossed it in the penny dish. "Good night, sir."

Just as Ben Franklin's face was about to be sucked downward, the man scooped up his money. He walked away searching his pants' pockets for his keys. "Got them," he said as something fell from his hand.

I shouted, "Wait. You dropped... "

As if he didn't hear me, he made a quick exit.

I noticed a red envelope on the floor. I stepped out of the aisle, picked it up, and read the name Mr. Voland.

I opened the door.

As I rushed outside, I shivered remembering my German great-grandmother using the word voland to refer to the devil.

The man's black Corvette parked under a bright light had the letters VOLAND on his license plate.

I felt the hairs on my arms prickle as I knocked on the driver's tinted window.

He lowered the glass and waved the hundred-dollar bill in my face. "Changed your mind, Ruth?"

"No." I presented him with the red envelope. "You dropped this."

He didn't attempt to take it.

My anxiety quickly turned to anger. No matter who he was, he couldn't make me violate my conscience.

I tossed the envelope in his lap, turned away, and ran back to the store.

A sense of peace replaced my angst.

My lips turned upward into a broad smile. My heartbeat returned to normal.

While I was closing out my receipts, my manager came to my side. "Ruth, you're a good worker. What're your plans for the future?" she asked.

"I'm almost ready to take my GED exam. Then I'm going to enroll in college."

"Glad to hear it."

"So were my parents."

"Are they going to pay for your education? Will you be quitting?"

"Although I was happy they offered to help me, I'd feel terrible taking their hard earned money. I told them I'd like to keep my job and try to make my dreams come true on my own."

"I'm happy you'll be staying with us, because I think you can go far with this company."

"Thank you."

As I walked home, I counted my blessings and knew I was rich 'cause life was good, really good.