



‘The Scarf’ Writing Competition

Short story - Crime, mystery, thriller

The Winners

1st [The One from Chatuchak Market](#) by Nikki Crutchley

2nd [Rose and Sharleen](#) by Janet Pates

3rd [Profile](#) by Angie Barrett

Writer's Plot
Readers Read

Thank you to all who competed in the competition, all were great stories and we look forward to reading more of your work. A condition of entry was that all entries be available for future publication or promotional purposes. Copyright remains with the author.

The One from Chatuchak Market

By Nikki Crutchley

Entering Charles Plimmer Park, the southern walkway this time, I see the scarf before I see the body. My eye is trained to look for it now. It is tied to the branch of a gnarled pohutukawa. Its shock of lime green and yellow is bright against the windswept background. It flutters up and whips back, then billows out again. It's alive, doing some interpretive dance for its audience made up of policemen and the usual rubber-neckers.

There are whispers from the public who know exactly what is going on and have still chosen to stay and watch. Their shocked faces fail to conceal the excitement in their voices. Ignoring them I nod grim hellos to the small gathering who are going about their jobs. Faces betray anger. Whoever has done this has got away with it — again.

I make myself look at the body. Something that never ever gets any easier. Never mind having been on the job for over twenty years.

She looks to be in her mid-thirties. Like the other ones. She is dressed for a night out. Little black dress, peep toe boots, painted black nails. A hot pink leather clutch lies off to the side. All look wrong in the insipid light of a winter's afternoon in Wellington.

The bruises she sustained during the last terrifying moments of her life bloom the colour of a bruised plum on one side of her face and both arms.

She wears the same necklace as the others; an angry wide welt that wraps around her neck and disappears into her hair line.

We've learnt he does it with the scarf. Then he ties it to a tree. A banner, a flag, victorious.

I seethe at his brazenness.

"Detective Cooper."

"Hi, Charlie, what have you got?" I ask my fellow detective. His pock marked skin is a shade paler than usual and the bags under his eyes tell me this has got to him as much as me.

"Fourth one in seven weeks. This one's different though." He's holding the scarf in his hands. Captured, it is now still and limp. "Take a look."

He presents the scarf's label. I sigh and rummage in my bag for my glasses, deciding it would be more embarrassing to ask him to read whatever it was to me than for me to put the damned things on.

"Handmade in Bangkok for Rose Behrer," I read out loud. "Rose Behrer? Is she the victim?" I ask.

"We don't think so. Licence in her purse says her name's Matilda Walsh."

The adrenaline kicks in. Finally a lead. Or is it a trap? A red herring? I don't care. I need to be doing something.

I replace my glasses and bring out my cell phone. I fire a quick text to the nanny to tell her I'll be late. I compose a more thoughtful text to Nathan. I cringe inwardly as I imagine him getting the text. It's just gone five o'clock. He'll be on his way home now. We're supposed to be going to a work dinner at 6.30. It's not going to happen.

My phone vibrates. I brace myself for the reply.

“Fine.”

Just four small letters. The meaning, however, hits me right in the guts. We both know it's not fine.

I turn to what's important now.

“Thanks Charlie. I'll get on to this ok?”

“Sure thing.”

Tracking down Rose Behrer is simple. There is only one woman by that name in Wellington. She lives on Hawker Road. I calculate this to be a five-minute drive to Charles Plimmer Park and maybe a twenty-minute walk.

I pull up outside the tidy weatherboard house not sure what to expect.

I know better than to jump to conclusions, but when Rose Behrer answers the door it's hard not to. This is not my murderer.

“Rose Behrer?”

She nods. She still hasn't fully opened the door. Eyes that are almost black stare at me unblinking behind purple-rimmed glasses that cover half of her face.

“I'm Detective Cooper. If you don't mind I have some questions I need to ask you in relation to the murders we've been having. You've probably read about it in the papers.”

Her eyes grow wider and the door opens.

“Please come in.”

I follow her. The front door leads directly into her lounge. She offers me a seat on the floral couch and she sits on the edge of a dusky pink arm chair. She plants her croc-clad feet on the floor and smooths down her beige skirt.

“As you know three women have been murdered at Charles Plimmer Park over the last seven weeks.”

“Yes. Horrible,” she says, her voice only fractionally louder than a whisper.

“There has been another murder. I'm here today because we found something that belonged to you at the site.”

“What” she asked, hand to her chest.

“A silk scarf with your name embroidered on the tag.”

“Oh.”

I can see her mind working. Her face is an open book. It goes from confusion to realisation to horror.

“Rose?”

“I collect scarves from all of the world. Do you want to see?”

She gets up from her chair so fast the clawed feed scrape on the wooden floor. I follow. Happy to play along for now.

She leads me into her bedroom. The cloying smell of potpourri fills the room.

Rose walks past her double bed covered with a pale pink duvet. I can't even count the number of lace-edged pillows amassed on the bed. Two cats, eyes hooded, look up and, uninterested in proceedings, go back to dozing.

I watch as Rose opens the top drawer of a tall boy and ushers me over.

Rolled up in neat bundles are over a dozen silk scarves. My stomach twists uncomfortably at the resemblance they have to the scarves from the crime scenes I've been to over the last few weeks.

I point to the gaps up the front.

"Some of my scarves went missing."

"When was this" I ask, the adrenalin starts to pump again and makes me feel queasy.

She raises her eyes to the ceiling, thinking. "Probably a couple of months ago. I looked everywhere for them. Four missing in total. I hand wash them often. I thought they could've been stolen from the washing line. They were very special to me. They're from all over the world."

"You travel?" I ask, looking at this woman who did not look like a globe trotter.

"No, my parents do. They go away once, sometimes twice a year and always bring me back one. I'll show you the one in the lounge."

In the lounge she points to the frame on the wall.

"This one's from Chatuchak Market in Bangkok. Handmade, pure silk."

I look at the blur of colours. I can understand why it's been framed. It's a work of art. A midnight blue background with swirls of rusty orange and bright yellow.

"It's beautiful."

She nods. "My father told me it represented night and day. A simple idea, but I liked it, that in this piece of art — I call it art — the darkness and the light come together, one no more stronger than the other, not competing, but existing in harmony."

I nod and take a breath, not sure if this woman realises the seriousness of the situation.

"Rose, I don't mean to frighten you, but it looks like whoever has taken your scarves is the person who's murdered these women. Do you have a boyfriend? Current or ex?"

"Ah no." The blush snakes its way up from her neck until her cheeks blotch red-pink.

"How about friends? Someone that's visited recently?"

"No. No one."

I couldn't figure out if she had no friends, or no one had been around recently. I was afraid it was the former.

"How about handymen? Someone who's been in your house while you were out, or even while you were here?"

"No."

"Any signs of a break in?"

"No. I would've called the police if that was the case. I just thought someone had stolen them from the line. I even thought I'd misplaced them but ... I don't know."

“OK. Look I’m going to give you my card. We’ll definitely be in touch. I’m afraid a team will be around first thing tomorrow to search your place to see if we can make any more connections.”

She nods.

Back in the car I check my watch. Nine pm. The kids would be in bed. Nathan would hear my car pull up and pretend to be asleep. Something he’s hopeless at. But tonight it didn’t bother me. Rose and her scarves had given me too much to think about.

Three days later I read the autopsy report from the latest victim plus what was found at Rose’s place. It was two pages of a lot of technical jargon to sum up that absolutely nothing was found.

Rose had told me four scarves had been stolen. We in turn had discovered four bodies. No more scarves meant no more bodies. But I know he won’t stop, can’t stop. My nerves are taut as I wait for his next move.

It comes sooner than I thought.

I respond to the call of another female body found on the southern walkway of Charles Plimmer Park.

I enter the park for the second time in four days and walk towards the group of policemen. Ignoring the views of the harbour, my eyes dart left and right up into the trees searching for the bright blur of a silk scarf waving in the funereal sky. But there are no more scarves left. Maybe it had nothing to do with him.

I make my way through the undergrowth and nod at the policeman standing guard.

The sensible shoes hit me first, then the long plum coloured skirt. I lift my eyes to the face, swollen and bruised. She sports the same marks around her neck as the last four victims. But this time there is blood, so much blood. It stains her white frill-necked shirt a dark pink. It reminds me of the colour of the potpourri in her bedroom.

“Rose,” I whisper.

“You know her?”

“Kind of.”

I fill the other detective in on what I know and leave.

I pull up outside Rose’s house on Hawker Street five minutes later. The front door is partially open.

I call it in but don’t wait.

I make my way up the four cracked concrete steps to the front door. My eyes are open for any kind of movement but it’s quiet. Whoever was here is long gone.

I scan the room. Everything is in its place, just as it was four days ago when I visited her. Pillows sit plump on the couch, magazines are fanned out on the coffee table and coasters are stacked in a pile on an end table by the couch. Her desk in the corner is pristine, a laptop, a framed photo of older people, possibly the parents with wander lust.

I jump as a cat startles in the corner. She hisses, her tail an indignant tortoiseshell brush. Soon realising I'm not a threat she comes back to me dancing around my ankles, meowing. Two-faced creatures.

The laptop is open. I jiggle the mouse and it instantly comes to life. It's still logged on. I sit and look at the page that appears.

I read the banner along the top of the website. *Lonely Hearts. Finding lifelong friendships and relationships.*

I click onto Rose's profile. A photo of her sporting one of her many silk scarves, wrapped around her neck.

A vision of her pale, prone body comes to mind but I shut it down.

There is a tab marked "Messages". I click on it and see she hasn't had any messages from anyone in a while. She has only had communication with one person this year. The name sends a shiver of recognition up my spine.

SilkSam.

Their first conversation was May 1, just over two months ago. Three weeks before the first body was found.

The conversations were tentative at first. Getting to know each other. Rose talked of her job at Te Papa, her cats, her parents travelling and then her scarves.

SilkSam: Would love to see your scarves some time. Maybe we could meet? Maybe I could visit?

RosiePie: I don't know.

SilkSam: It would be great. The scarf in your profile picture was what first attracted me to you.

RosiePie: Really? I didn't think a guy would notice that kind of thing.

SilkSam: I do. So how about it? You could show me your beautiful collection.

RosiePie: No I don't think so.

That conversation ended with nothing more. The last conversation was dated May 29. The last one I could see.

I begin to read. Rose says hello and talks about her day but straight away he was on at her to meet again. Again she says no.

SilkSam then goes into a detailed story of his love for anything silk. The conversation is one-sided and after a very graphic sexual account of what SilkSam wanted to do to Rose with her scarves all communication had ended.

I wonder how SilkSam knew of Rose's love for her scarves. Was it just the profile photo and he got lucky? Did he know her personally? Had they met before? Had he stalked her?

My eye is drawn again to the profile picture Rose had posted. I look closer and see the framed scarf in her lounge is visible in the background.

I realise then that SilkSam knew exactly what he was looking for when he came across Rose Behrer. Who knew how long he searched the site until he came across the perfect woman to enact his fantasies.

I was certain the tech boys could track this sicko down. And then, case closed.

I swivel in her chair and came face to face with the scarf on the wall.

Needing my glasses, but squinting instead, not trusting what I am seeing, I walk towards it.

The frame is crooked, I see that now. Bloodied prints mar each side.

He had taken Rose and her scarf. He'd killed her, like all the others, and had returned with the scarf, sodden with her blood and reframed it.

This time, instead of waving from a tree, this last scarf, her pride and joy, the one from Chatachuk Market hung on her wall. The orange and yellow were stained with her own blood. It had blended and seeped into the midnight blue background leaving it the colour of a bruised sky before a thunderstorm.

Any light that had been was now eclipsed by the darkness.

The End

Rose and Sharleen

By Janet Pates

Liz Barnet, new cop on the street slowed to watch the little drama playing out in front of the butcher shop window.

“Hang on. I need some meat for Jess.” In spite of rugby shorts, work boots and battered felt hat, Liz recognised the voice as that of a woman.

“Always the dog. The hell with the dog. It’s me you need to feed.” Her younger, skinnier companion strode on, flinging the words over her shoulder, mousy blond ponytail bouncing high on the back of her head. Around her neck she wore a pink scarf which seemed a little superfluous considering the heat of the day but, Liz thought, at least it relieved the drabness of black tee shirt and faded jeans.

The young woman turned to a smiling passer-by and, in a voice loud enough to attract the street’s attention, she asked, “Richie! Who would you feed first. Me or the dog?”

“You love. Every time!” he replied, doffing his pale cream, cheesecutter cap. Reluctantly, the window shopper trudged after her companion and they entered the Ritz cafe a few doors along the street.

Liz grinned. She’d served her time among big city misfits - all pretty much cast in the same alcohol or drug addled mould. At least small town eccentrics promised to have some individuality. Back at the station she spoke to Dave West, the other constable on duty. “A big slab of a woman and a younger, blond one. A bit loud. Know them?”

“Yeah. Rose and Sharleen,” he replied. “Weird but harmless.” She’d have liked to ask more but he carried on staring at his computer screen, as if the word ‘harmless’ said it all. No matter. Maisie would know the women for sure.

Until she retired six months ago Maisie Rix had been the clerical worker at the station. These days she rented her downstairs flat to the new constable, took a proprietorial interest and provided useful snippets of information. More than anyone at the station, she knew her local community, its subtle nuances of history, relationships and families.

That evening, drinking coffee in Maisie’s kitchen, Liz asked, “A big woman in shorts and a skinny blond. D’you know them?”

“Rose and Sharleen” said Maisie. “They’re usually in town on sale day.” She waved her coffee mug toward the window and the dark range of hills on the skyline. “They live on Rose’s bit of a farm up at the end of Bushline Road.”

“The big one looks like a tough piece of work.”

“Rose? No. She’s a big softie. My sister taught her at school. She was bright but so big and shy the other kids gave her a hard time. Her mother shot through when she was a kid. She left school and got into casual farm work with her father. Still does it. She’s a real good fencer.”

“Is her father still around?”

“No. He died a couple of years back. Rose looked after him till the end. These days’ people have a lot of respect for her.”

“And Sharleen?”

“She just turned up. According to the gossip she’s either a distant cousin or Rose found her on the lonely hearts page of a magazine. Either way, Rose is a real sucker for strays.”

“And are they, a couple? “

“Some would say yes, others no. People believe what they feel comfortable believing.”

“And what about you?”

For a moment Maisie didn’t reply and Liz wondered if she knew this woman quite as well as she’d thought. Then Maisie said, “I say, who knows? Who cares?”

After the next fortnightly sale, Liz and her fellow constable checked out the pub. In the parking area, they passed a dust covered ute with a border Collie on the back which thumped the deck with its tail as they passed. Inside the bar, the walls were decorated with photographs of bygone rugby and cricket teams. A soccer game on the large screen TV was largely ignored by the patrons and in a far corner two pokey machines chirped and blinked. In front of them sat Sharleen and the nattily dressed gent she’d spoken to in the street. In spite of the late summer heat, the pink scarf was still in place around Sharleen’s throat. While Dave went off to check out the so called garden bar, - a couple of umbrellas and two pots of desiccated petunias, Liz perched on a stool and ordered an orange juice. Next to her Rose sat with a beer in front of her, boot heel hooked over the rung of her stool, hat on her knee. Her size, Liz noticed, was comprised more of muscle and bone than fat. Liz sent her a smile and received a grave nod in return.

The barman poured Liz’s juice but his greeting was drowned by a clatter and a shout from across the room. They turned to see the man’s machine disgorge a load of coins. Sharleen danced up and down and gave him a congratulatory hug as he scooped up his winnings. Rose made no comment but Liz fancied she saw a dark flush rise beneath the tan of her cheeks. Sharleen sashayed over to the bar, picked up Rose’s glass and took a swig.

“Hey Phil,” she called to the barman, “How about another karaoke night?”

“Good idea Shar,” he said. “I’ll talk to the boss.”

Rose drained her glass, stood up and said, “We should be going.”

“What’s the rush?” asked Sharleen.”

“Jess’s been waiting long enough.”

Sharleen rolled her eyes. “The dog,” she said. “Always the bloody dog.” But she followed Rose and as they passed, Liz noticed the scarf was wound twice, high around her neck.

“D’you know those two well?” Liz asked the barman.

He nodded. “Everyone knows Rose and Sharleen.”

“And who’s the lucky winner?”

The barman grunted. “Richie Simms. New stock buyer. Thinks he’s God’s gift.”

On the way back to the station Liz asked Dave, “Is there something between Sharleen and this Richie guy?”

“Nah. He’s a married man. They just do this karaoke thing sometimes. Not bad, either.”

“Does she always wear a scarf?”

“I think so.”

“I wonder why?”

“Probably thinks its high style. I tell you. She and Rose are weird but harmless.”

That evening Liz put the same question to Maisie who confirmed, Sharleen was never seen without her scarf. “She told me her neck goes stiff if it gets cold.”

“In this heat? Really?” asked Liz.

Maisie nodded. “Mind you, no one sees her apart from sale days. God knows what she does with herself up there all day while Rose is away working.”

Liz had learned to detach, to leave her job at the station at the end of the day, yet she often found Rose and Sharleen intruding on her thoughts. When she saw the pair in the street or the pub on sale days, Rose would nod or even give a faint smile, but Sharleen’s attention always skittered sideways to focus on something or someone else.

One day as Liz drove back to town after a weekend away, she came to Bushline Road and, on an impulse, turned and followed it. The road wound up through bleached hill pasture, past a couple of named mail boxes then ended at a lichen encrusted gate. The mail box here was nameless. The mailman would know whose it was, did no one else ever come? A scattering of young cattle grazed the front paddock which was crossed by a pair of metal wheel tracks. Back against the bush covered hill sat a small house, its colour leached away by time, garden fence almost buried in kikuyu grass. Beside it, sat Rose’s ute.

Not wanting to be seen spying, Liz quickly turned her car and drove away. She could see what was in this partnership for Rose; company, someone to housekeep while she went out to work, but Sharleen? She thought of her bouncing like a puppy on a short leash, openly flirting with Richie who seemed happy to play along. Rose appeared unfazed by these displays. It took a close observer like Liz to pick up the tightening of a fist, the jiggling of a heel. The woman, she suspected, had years of practice at suppressing her emotions.

One still, mist laden autumn morning, Liz was behind the desk at the station when she heard the sound of the ambulance siren. No accident report had come in, maybe there’d been a nice, tidy heart attack. Shortly after, a car raced into the station car park and slewed to a stop. Richie hurried into the station, dropped his arms on the desk and lowered his bare head onto them. “Hey, steady on,” said Liz. “What’s the problem?”

She’d never felt any great liking for the man, largely agreeing with the barman’s description but now as she stared at his incipient bald patch she felt a stirring of pity as he babbled his story.

He’d gone up to the farm to check out some cattle for Rose, he said, but she was off shooting rabbits. He and Shar were by his car, fooling around, talking about their karaoke act. Richie took a shuddering breath. “She snatched my cap and put it on her head so I made a grab at her scarf and she gave this God awful scream. “Next thing there was a shot and, and she just dropped.”

He'd rung for the ambulance on his cell phone then left Rose with her while he came to report the accident. Ten minutes later Liz and Dave were on their way to the scene, leaving the sergeant to deal with Richie.

"So he reckoned it was an accident?" asked Dave.

Liz nodded. "Apparently Rose had just come out of the bush. She said she was about to fire at a rabbit when she heard the scream and she turned and tripped over the dog and the shotgun went off."

Dave answered with a grunt and Liz wondered if he was revising his "harmless" assessment. In the meantime, Liz decided, she would follow Maisie's lead and believe what she felt comfortable believing.

Up at the farm, a shroud of fog hung over the little house and the dark hills behind it. The ambulance was parked by the house gate, its two attendants kneeling beside Sharleen.

"Where's Rose?" asked Dave. One of the pair looked up. "She was here, but then she disappeared."

"Went that way," said the other. Liz looked over towards the barely visible edge of the bush. Rose wouldn't have been able to see much from there, she mused, except, perhaps, the pale gleam of a cream coloured cap.

Leaving Dave with the ambulance attendants, Liz took a look inside the house. A picture of cosy domesticity this was not. The kitchen living room held a heavy legged table and chairs, ashes spilt from an open fireplace onto cold, worn lino. Beside one of the two sagging armchairs sat a pile of Mills and Boon paperbacks – the answer she guessed, to how Sharleen filled her days. She went into the bedroom and ran an eye over two slightly stale smelling, unmade beds. Rose had known nothing better. What of Sharleen? Liz felt her sympathies shift a little.

She went back outside. The ambulance attendants had given up and they and Dave stood looking down on what was now simply, a body. She leaned between them for a closer look. Beside the body, Richie's cap and Sharleen's pink scarf made an oddly artistic arrangement as they lay together on the grass. There was nothing artistic about the crudely tattooed noose of barbed wire around Sharleen's pale throat. Liz looked up at the bush covered slope, brooding under a sky the colour of old tin. Somewhere up there, was Rose. But, as with Sharleen, no hiding place could shield her forever. Or could it? From the hillside, the blast of a shotgun rang out, quickly followed by another. Dave looked up and swore under his breath. "It'll be a bastard looking for a body up there," he muttered.

"Two," said Liz.

"What?"

"Two bodies," Liz replied. "The dog. Remember? There's always the dog."

The End

Profile

By Angie Barrett

She had been talking to him for two weeks.

Could he be the one? At first, they all had possibility.

Would this time prove to be different?

His profile photos showed him to be relaxed and confident.

A normal guy doing fashionable outdoor activities. Just another triathlete, who liked to fish and take long walks on the beach.

He has bright blue eyes that squint into the sun, his lazy smile adds a touch of softness to his strong masculine face.

It was a face she'd looked at often, his images now burned into her mind.

When she closed her eyes and allowed herself the freedom to think about him, it was a face that held promise.

Promise of what exactly, she would discover later.

Initially their conversations were stilted and polite. Now they were more relaxed and easy, littered with bouts of laughter.

Why is he still single? She hoped there was more to him than the profile alluded.

Today was the day she would finally do it. Meet him in the real world.

She suggested they meet at a boutique hotel she frequented, he strangely went quiet at her choice, but didn't offer an explanation or an alternative.

Finally, it was agreed, they would meet in the hotel lobby.

Her clothes were neatly laid out on the bed. This outfit had been chosen with care.

It was vital that she looked cover girl, knockout.

Stepping into her dress, she smoothed out the imagined wrinkles across her thighs and slid her stockinged feet into the classic black stiletto heels.

Checking that her hair and makeup were still flawless, she took one last look at her 5'8" slender frame in the full length mirror.

The overall effect was indeed, nothing short of picture perfect.

On her way out of her apartment, she slipped into her coat arranging the red silk scarf around her slender neck.

Her eyes skimmed over her watch, she was early.

It was too soon, they weren't supposed to meet just yet.

She scanned the lobby as she walked through the foyer, but she couldn't see anyone that resembled his photos.

Her heart was beating loudly in her ears.

Shot full of adrenaline and anticipation she could hardly wait to see him.

The excitement of first dates was always such a rush.

Pausing mid-step, she considered whether to ask for him at the reservations desk.

What could she say?

She only knew his first name, and his profile nom de plume and it wasn't likely that he'd have booked anything under either of those!

Annoyed, she chided herself that this would be the last time.

Next time, she would remember to get their full name before, she agreed to meet them.

Killing time, she loosened her coat.

It was surprisingly warmer inside the hotel today than she had anticipated.

She couldn't take the coat off completely.

They had agreed to wear a red scarf so they would easily recognise each other from the other hotel guests.

Unintentionally, she smiled at their secret code.

How many others had suggested the same thing?

Hearing a familiar noise behind her, she turned toward it.

Suddenly he was looming before her.

Her senses went into overload.

His aftershave filled her nose, his eyes were more intensely blue, and his hair was carelessly perfect. Blonder than the profile.

Taller in person with the suggestion of a powerfully built body lurking beneath his loose clothing. Casually handsome.

He held his red scarf in one hand and he was smiling down at her.

Uncomfortably she realised, she was just staring up at him.

Shaking his blonde head, he scratched his freshly shaved chin. The last action lost on him, too deep in his own thoughts to notice the habit.

His recall of her was immediate, there was no need to check his phone. She was quite the looker, tall and slim, at least from what he could see from her photos.

Quickly he finished dressing, this was one time he did not want to be late.

The hotel was just as he remembered it; he'd been working the last time he'd been here.

Wistfully, he hoped the staff wouldn't recognise him tonight.

This place held no happy memories for the families or the victims.

Positioning himself at the bar, he ensured the reflection in the mirror gave him a clear view of the hotel entrance.

Trying to erase his memories, he concentrated on the fact that this time, she was all pleasure. No working tonight.

He didn't want to miss her but he wanted to admire her openly before she recognised him from his profile.

Checking his watch; he saw he still had a few minutes before the agreed meeting time.

The idea of just one drink, just the one shot of courage to clear his head was appealing.

It went down easy, it really hit the spot.

His eyes flicked up to the mirror.

She was early, at least it looked like her from the profile.

The woman was wearing a red scarf.

The bar tender interrupted his view of her by enquiring if he wanted another drink.

He shook his head no, as he moved off the bar stool to go to her, the waiter quickly forgotten.

The distance between them was quickly closed.

She was looking away from the bar, so she didn't notice his approach.

He was behind her, and he gently cleared his throat in order to catch her attention. He didn't want to startle her.

As she turned toward him, he realised his mistake.

She was even more stunning in person than the profile had led him to believe.

Naturally, his smile broadened with his recognition of her.

His own red scarf in his hand.

Composing herself, she returned his smile and extended her hand to shake his.

"Hi, Ryan? That's a lovely red scarf you have there" she said with a hint of a smile in her voice. Breaking his intense eye contact to quickly glance down at the hand his scarf was nestled in.

"Thanks, nice scarf yourself! You must be Ashley," he replied.

His smile and humour extending into his greeting.

He moved in closer to her, enclosing her small hand within his large one.

"Let's head to the bar" he suggested "I've reserved a table for dinner" he added.

"Yes, let's get a drink. It's great you've made a dinner booking. It gets busy here" she replied knowingly.

The waiter bought the flutes over, poured their drinks and stashed the opened bottle into the ice bucket. They sat comfortably enclosed in a private booth.

Their conversation and the drinks flowed easily.

Ryan excused himself to visit the bathroom and without her knowledge, booked a room.

This date was going well, she was sure there was chemistry between them.
She really liked him. He might just be different, he might just be worth keeping.
She made a mental note to contact the broker with her feedback.
All too soon it was time for them to move into the restaurant.
Ryan stood to take Ashley's arm and escort her from the bar.
The room around him rippled before his eyes, and everything was quickly becoming a blur.
He swayed and fell back into his seat heavily. His hands cradling his head.
"Ryan! Are you okay?" concern flooded into Ashley's voice as she stood to go to him.
"Just give me a minute" he said, shaking his head, trying to clear the fog. "I'll be okay in a minute."
"Waiter, Waiter!" she called out, "could we have a glass of water, please?"
"Ryan, Ryan!" Ashley said, shaking him gently by the shoulder.
The colour had drained from his face, and he was starting to slump in the chair.
The paramedics arrived quickly, but it felt like forever.
Ashley had stayed beside Ryan until they lifted him onto the stretcher.
He was drifting in and out of consciousness. The oxygen mask covering both his nose and mouth.
His pulse was erratic.
"I'll ride with you Ryan. Ryan can you hear me?" she looked to the closest medic.
He shook his head.
"He's out to it, you can ride with him, but be quick. We've got to get him to the hospital."
Ashley nodded mutely and gathered up their belongings.
She just made it out to the ambulance as they were closing the doors to leave.

Ashley sat near the end of Ryan's bed on a hard visitor's chair.
She hated hospitals. It was always the same.
The smells and the endless waiting for answers that seemed to never come.
The constant stream of doctors and nurses.
The emergency department was Saturday night busy.
A sea of uniforms, the teams looking harried and acting professionally detached.
It was a symphony of organised chaos.
In contrast, Ryan was very still.
He looked a lot smaller lying in the hospital bed.

A doctor who looked like he was fresh out of kindergarten entered the cubicle. He was sending Ryan for a CAT scan.

A saline bag was hanging from a pole beside him, the fluid dripped steadily into his right arm.

Ryan still looked too pale and the oxygen mask looked overly large on his face. The white stickers on his chest stood out against his tan, they were still monitoring his heart rate.

The machines noises within the confined space were in contest with each other.

Ashley found the cadence oddly reassuring in its annoyingness.

The front of Ryan's gown lay open to below the sheet.

Ashley hadn't been in the room when they removed his clothing. She had been filling in hospital forms and looking for his identification.

Her earlier suspicions were now confirmed, he was bodybuilder defined.

And, she had to admit, it was a good look on him. He was profile perfect.

His chest was rising and falling rhythmically and his breathing seemed easier now.

A lot more stable. She resisted a strong urge to caress him.

Ashely had draped his red scarf over the end of the bed when they arrived.

The red now stood out vividly in the colourless cubicle.

Absently she picked it up to refold it, needing to do something else with her hands.

Was that his aftershave she could smell on it?

She nuzzled the scarf, just feeling the soft cashmere against her skin.

Inhaling, the smell of him washed over her.

Quickly she put his scarf down, remembering that someone could walk in.

Ashley's own scarf was in her handbag.

They had only let her stay because she had been in the ambulance with Ryan.

The admissions team needed more personal information about him. She had already rifled through his jacket pockets looking for his wallet to locate his driver's licence.

Once found, it had given them his full name and birth date.

Ryan she discovered, was an organ donor. No blood type was listed.

The photo was a good likeness of him, she had seen worse.

Mr Ryan James McKenzie.

Ashley liked his name, it suited him.

Should she recheck his wallet, or go through his mobile phone contacts to locate a family member?

Shaking she picked up his cellphone.

She hoped the gravity of the situation would outweigh her actions.

Maybe he wouldn't know she'd done it.

They had after all, only just met.

Ashley thought he would forgive her everything ... eventually.

The orderly appeared, breaking her concentration as he started to release the brakes on the bed. He manoeuvred it so he could get Ryan out of the cubicle and to the radiology department for the scan.

Ashley rose to accompany the bed and its sleeping occupant.

She slipped Ryan's mobile phone into her pocket.

Ryan didn't stir as the electric lights overhead plunged him into moments of bright light and inky darkness.

The strip lighting casting foreboding shadows up the walls of the unfamiliar corridors.

The orderly was pushing Ryan quickly.

Ashley tried to stay close to the bed, but it wasn't a smooth ride for Ryan.

The whole situation felt surreal.

They entered the Radiology department, it was brightly lit and Ashley squinted with the sudden stark glare.

They were the only ones there and Ryan was taken immediately into the scanning chamber.

Ashley was alone again.

Sitting, she resumed her search through his phone directory.

She really needed to contact someone, anyone.

Maybe she should contact the broker?

Staying with him all night was never part of the plan, it was too risky.

Her thoughts had strayed and she almost missed the ICE number.

Stepping into the corridor she waited for the number to connect.

She hoped the cellphone wouldn't interfere with the scanning equipment.

"I've told you. You know I won't change my mind! How many times do I have to tell you Ryan!" snapped the irate ICE lady.

Ashley was taken aback,

"Oh, um sorry to bother you, but it's not actually Ryan speaking" she said.

"I'm Ashley, a friend of his and you're listed in his phone as his 'in case of an emergency' person. Is this right?" She asked, worried at the way the call had been answered.

"You can't be much of a friend if you don't know who I am!" said the ICE lady.

"Sorry, who did you say you were?" replied Ashley, trying to stand her ground.

What if the ICE lady was his wife or his girlfriend?

Ashley was now regretting that she had dialled the number at all.

"I'm his sister," said the ICE lady. "Well, his step-sister to be more precise, is he alright?"

Where did you say he was?" asked the ICE step-sister.

“I think you need to come to the emergency department at the Collard Memorial Hospital, Ryan collapsed earlier and he hasn’t regained consciousness yet. They are running tests. Are you able to contact his parents, or come yourself?” Ashley asked.

This was not the way she had planned to spend this evening.

“What!? Oh my god! Emergency room, Collard Memorial you said? I’ll ring our Father, we’ll be there as soon as we can. Call me if there’s any change, okay? You call me!” demanded the step-sister.

“Yes, yes of course I will” said Ashley, “and I’ll wait with him until you both get here.” The step-sister had hung up, no doubt to phone Ryan’s Father.

Ashley moved back into the waiting room and sat down.

Her eyebrows furrowed, trying to think back over their conversations. To see if she could recall Ryan mentioning a step-sister or close family.

Nothing was listed on the profile.

They had only been in contact for two weeks so it was too soon to swap family histories she rationalised.

She still didn’t even know if he was compatible!

This was moving in the wrong direction, and fast.

She felt like she was losing control of the situation, he might not be a match after all.

Unbelievably, she was going to meet his Father and his step-sister.

All before she really had, had the chance to meet him.

The date had started well enough, he held the most promise yet.

She was beginning to have second thoughts now.

Ashley updated the broker.

The radiology chamber doors banged open and she jumped at the sudden noise.

The orderly was pushing Ryan back up to the emergency department.

Ashley had no option but to follow them as they retraced the same route that had bought them there.

Ashley’s stomach rumbled in protest as they passed a vending machine that she hadn’t noticed on the trip down, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten since lunch that day.

Her feet had started a different protest of their own, her stilettos were not made for running around hospital corridors.

Her brisk footsteps echoed loudly off the walls as she pulled her coat closer around her, shrinking into its warmth, and deeper into her own dark thoughts.

Back in the cubicle, the child-doctor reappeared and began checking the scan results that lay on the bed at Ryan’s feet.

“Do you know what he’s eaten in the last 24 hours?” he asked, peering at her over Ryan’s chart.

“No, sorry I don’t, we did have a few drinks before the dizzy spell” she volunteered, “If that’s helpful?”

“Do you know, of what exactly?” he asked.

“Um it was Champaign, bubbly” she offered. “His family are on their way, they might be able to tell you more” she said, looking at him to see where this was going.

The Doctor just looked at her. He was making her feel uncomfortable.

“I don’t know him that well. Actually we really only met each other tonight. We were on a blind date of sorts” she trailed off, the heat of the admission causing a blush to creep into her cheeks.

The Doctor smiled at her, “Oh that might explain it then.”

“It does?” she said, “What does it explain? What’s going on with Ryan?” Ashley was confused by the sudden change in the Doctor’s demeanour and his responses to her.

The broker had been updated, this night needed to end and soon.

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a slightly shorter, older version of Ryan, this man just had to be his Father, and the woman with him, could only be the step-sister.

The step-sister was the polar opposite of Ryan, she was short, dark and intense.

There was no family resemblance to the man or Ryan; it was obvious that they didn’t share the same gene pool.

Ryan’s Dad must have married the step-sister’s Mother. Ryan had a step-Mother.

Ashley had time to register that his step-sister was strikingly good looking.

“Hello Doctor, I’m Ryan’s Father, James McKenzie,” he said, extending his hand.

“Ah, Mr McKenzie, I’m Dr Collard. It’s good you’re here. I have some questions for you” he said, stepping closer to shake hands.

The step-sister shot Ashley a look that both sized her up and implied she was no longer needed. Turning her attention from Ashley to James she said,

“Dad, this is Ryan’s date. She was with him when he collapsed.”

“Oh yes, forgive me Miss...”

“Richards” said Ashley, “I’m so sorry to meet you both under these circumstances” as she started to stand.

“Perhaps I had better go now that you’re here? Give you a chance to speak to Dr Collard in private” Ashley offered.

“That would be very kind of you Miss Richards, but I think you should stay with Ryan. He would much rather see your pretty face when he wakes, than ours.” Said James.

“We’ll step out with the Doctor for a chat, I’m sure we won’t be long”.

Ryan’s Father had definitely taken charge of the situation.

Ashley began to mentally list the things she knew about Ryan, realising it really wasn’t a lot.

He had a full time job that he enjoyed, it provided a good income.

He owned his own home and he was currently single.

He did travel for work and he worked long hours. She knew this by the times of his text and email responses to her.

His phone calls were often made when he was at home, never from an office. She thought this because she could hear music or the TV playing in the background when he moved around chatting to her.

He lived a clean, healthy lifestyle and this above all else, was important for the profile.

Ashley smiled at the sleeping figure, remembering his witty comebacks and easy laugh.

Wishing he would wake up, she called his name softly, but he didn't appear to hear her. Or did he?

Was that his eyelids flickering in recognition of his name?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the cubicle curtain being pulled back by the step-sister.

"I think we need to talk" she said softly, "I'm sorry for being rude earlier. I didn't mean to take it out on you. Ryan and I don't always agree on everything, but he is a good guy. He's not 'that' sort of guy" she paused briefly.

"I'm Alex, Ryan calls me Lexi" she inclined her head toward the bed.

The step-sister did have a name, a pretty one at that too, thought Ashley.

"How long have you been here?" Alex asked.

"About 4 hours. We were just heading into the restaurant when Ryan got dizzy. He lost his balance and passed out. They've been running tests on him since we got here."

Ashley added, nodding in the direction of the doctors and nurses.

"You must be starving, have you eaten or had a coffee or ... anything?" concern flitted across Alex's face.

"No, not yet. I didn't want to leave Ryan in case he came round. He lost consciousness before they got him into the ambulance and he won't know what's happened to him" Ashley said.

"Well, as soon as Dad gets back, I'll take you out to get something. That is, if you still want to stay with us and Ryan? We understand if you'd like to leave?" Alex said, looking up at Ashley.

Alex had absently picked up Ryan's scarf from the end of the bed.

"I'd like that" Ashley replied, surprised by the turnaround in Alex's manner.

Alex looked at Ryan's scarf in her hand

"I'm surprised Ryan has this with him" she said.

"It looks like the scarf that belonged to his mum. If it's the same one, it's his prized possession.

His mum was killed by a hit and run driver and they never found out who did it." She said, shaking her head.

"He took it really hard his Dad said, and her scarf was the only thing he kept. Maybe she was wearing it at the time of the accident" Alex said, more talking to herself than Ashley.

"Oh I'm so sorry. That must have been very hard for both of them" Ashley said, unsure where this turn of events was headed.

"I'm not sure if it's the same scarf. We just agreed to both bring red scarves with us to the date, so we could identify each other. Blind dates can be a little nerve wracking at the best of times, without mistaking other people for your date" Ashley conceded.

Alex laughed, "Oh no, so this was a first date. Ryan you old dog ... you sure know how to impress a lady!" She sobered quickly when she looked at his inert form in the bed.

She dropped his scarf back over the bed end.

Before Ashley could say anything more, Alex burst into tears.

Her shoulders were shaking as the sobbing escalated.

"There, there" Ashley said woodenly, as she tried to pull Alex into an awkward hug.

"He's going to be okay, the doctors will look after him. He'll be fine, I just know it" Ashley said with a feeble smile on her face, trying hard to lighten the awkward situation.

James chose that exact moment to walk back into the room.

"Now, now Alex" he said, pulling her into a one-armed hug.

"You don't want Ryan to wake up and see all of this, now - do you?"

Let's go get a coffee and get to know Miss Richards a little better, shall we?"

"The Doctor hopes he'll sleep tonight and they'll run some more tests on him later."

He looked down at his son, worry creasing his forehead; he was leaning on the red scarf and a far-away look came into his eyes.

Alex sniffed back her tears, and took a tissue from the bedside cabinet to dry her eyes.

"Sorry", she snuffled "Ryan hates cry-babies" her smile faltered and she looked like a fresh batch of tears was on its way.

"That's right, I do. What's all the noise?" Ryan mumbled thickly. "Where am I, why are you here?" Ryan although groggy, was fighting to keep his eyes open, his speech was still slurred.

"It's alright son, we're here, just rest. You're in the hospital, some sort of dizzy spell and fainting fit I hear. The doctors want to keep you in for some more tests" said his dad, patting Ryan's feet at the end of the bed.

Ryan still looked vague and disorientated.

Alex pushed the call button, for the doctor.

"Jesus Ryan, you almost gave us a heart attack!"

"Ryan, it's Ashley, how are you feeling now?" she cut in.

Ryan trying to focus on her voice, turned his head in her general direction.

"Ashley? You here too? I'm so sorry, didn't plan for this, did we?" he said, starting to sound a little stronger.

Dr Collard appeared and immediately put a thermometer in Ryan's mouth, ceasing any further conversation. He shone a bright light into each of Ryan's eyes, making him wince.

"Well, we weren't expecting to see you awake until tomorrow Ryan" Dr Collard said.

"I'd still like to admit you to a ward overnight; we need to keep an eye on you for a bit longer. I've got a few questions for you too, so perhaps your visitors could give us a minute while we have a little chat, hmmm?"

Ashley didn't need to be asked twice, she gathered up her handbag and coat.

Alex followed Ashley out of the cubicle, while James stayed with Ryan and the Doctor.

“What do you think happened tonight, Ryan?” he asked.

“Did you do anything out of your normal routine, eat or drink anything odd?”

“I didn’t get much to eat today, been working long hours so maybe I’m just tired. I had an important date to get out to” Ryan’s speech was thick, he was struggling to speak clearly.

The Doctor smiled and nodded, “Yes, I’ve met her. Your blood tests aren’t back yet, the CAT scan didn’t show anything to worry about but from your symptoms, I think someone might have spiked your drink. We’ll know more once we do some more tests. We’ve had similar cases over the past few months. How’s your head feeling now?”

“Like it’s going to explode” Ryan moaned.

James just nodded, concern etched on his face.

Dr Collard continued, “I think you need more monitoring, some fluids and to sleep it off. The orderly will be in to take you up to a ward and I’ll check on you later, give you something to help you sleep.”

The doctor left, leaving the two men alone.

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, each with their own thoughts about what the doctor had said.

“I see you have your Mum’s scarf with you. I thought you’d lost that year’s ago” James said. Ryan winced.

“Still working undercover then, that call tonight had us worried” James saw the look on Ryan’s face, and quickly changed the subject.

“Ashley seems like a nice enough girl, son. At least Alex seems to like her” he added.

“Sorry Dad, yeah still undercover, black market trafficking is a nasty business. Tonight was our first date but trust me, it wasn’t her ... we’ve been...”

Ashley and Alex walked back in, mid-conversation.

James nodded and stood, he looked at Alex “Okay, young lady, time to show an old man around the place.”

Alex smiled at him and replied,

“Sure Dad, let’s leave these two lovebirds to it. I’m sure they have things to discuss, in private” she joked.

“Lexi” growled Ryan from the bed.

Ashley could feel the heat of a blush starting.

Once they had left, Ashley moved a little closer to Ryan.

“How are you feeling? You gave me quite a scare tonight you know” she said leaning down to him.

“Embarrassed” he slurred sounding drunk.

“We need to finish our date, I think I still owe you a dinner, if you’ll see me again, that is?”

“Yes, of course we do” She smiled at him. “We can go out again anytime you want, but let’s get you out of here first, okay? It’s also getting late, so now you’re awake, I’ll go home and let you get some rest.”

He nodded back at her.

“Alex has my number, and she’s going to let me know how you’re doing before she leaves.

Oh, and she also has your wallet and mobile, I didn’t think it was safe to leave them lying around.”

“Ashley” he said, “that Hotel, don’t go back there. The doctor thinks my drink was spiked tonight. Just don’t take any chances, promise me you won’t?” Ryan was becoming agitated.

Ashley considered calling the doctor back in.

“Ryan, it’s okay. We had the same drinks, from the same bottle, so they must be mistaken” she said, trying to soothe him.

Ryan was shaking his head,

“Just promise me, you won’t go back and please, do one more thing for me Ashley, please?

Take my scarf with you, it belonged to my Mum – it’s a long story but I’ll come get it from you. I trust you.”

His words were coming out thick and disjointed. His strength was ebbing, he was beginning to tire.

Sudden tears welled in her eyes, “I won’t go back to the hotel and of course I’ll look after your beautiful scarf.”

It was past time to go, she had to leave.

She had stayed with him for too long already.

Ashley bent to kiss his cheek goodbye.

He turned his head toward her, and the kiss landed on his upturned mouth.

His mouth was soft, warm and inviting.

She lingered. It promised more, if only she had the time.

This wasn’t exactly the way she had anticipated their date ending.

Ryan watched her place his scarf in her handbag.

He had no idea that it lay on top of her scarf, both covering the bottle of sleeping pills.

The label on that bottle read, Rohypnol.

Living kidney donors were still in demand.

Ashley really needed to go and update that donor profile.

The End