

Love's Illusions

Chapter One

On the Sidewalk

I was unceremoniously draped around a telephone pole. On my feet, but draped nonetheless, with no firm memory of how I got there – just stoned and maybe drunk, *yes I remember drinking more than usual – why the hell had I done that?...* out of my mind, leaning, swaying, trying very hard to maintain an upright position, and wondering how on earth I was going to manage to walk the three blocks to my apartment. The street was deserted even for the wee hours of the morning, which I knew it had to be since I worked until 4 am. Only an extraneous car here or there. *But what am I doing out here?* I wondered. I knew this corner well – Diversey and... what's the name of this little street, it doesn't matter... just one, no two, short blocks from the main intersection of N. Clark Street and Broadway where I could see cars going by. I'd been there a thousand times or more – everyday, as a matter of fact, since moving to this neighborhood in Chicago. Diversey was never deserted – was I just not seeing the traffic? I shook my head – trying to clear my brain, but the movement caused the street lights to blur and whiz around almost knocking me off my feet. Oh fuck *no...* I was going to puke!

I pushed back hard against the telephone pole trying to steady myself, trying to keep myself upright, and the contents of my stomach down. I hated the idea of throwing up, I always have, ever since I was a kid; the mere thought of being nauseous sending my mind into full-fledged revolt against it. I fought with all my might against the feeling of queasiness that was overcoming me. *"No, no, no - you will not puke on the street corner!"* Only drunks, druggies, and street scum puked on the corner and I was *not* one of those people! I was a 20 year old college student from a decent, conservative, middle-class family; at least that was the mental image I carried around of myself. This was supposed to be one of the best periods of my life or at least that's what everyone had told me before I moved to Chicago: go to college, get a great education, find a great job, marry the man of your dreams, have kids, and live happily ever after. I was supposed

to be living the fairy tale - nowhere in that life plan did it say I should be stoned and drunk on the friggin' street corner. But tonight, that's exactly what I was... just like all the other scumbags.

I managed to turn so my shoulder was against the pole. It was made of wood, old and weathered and splintered from people stapling flyers for upcoming events and lost dogs to it, and it had a vague smell of tar or asphalt or something like that – that was currently making my stomach turn even more. One of the staples from an old flyer was there next to my right eyeball with the tattered remains of a show notice on a green – *was that green? Yes a green piece of worn cardboard. What was that notice about?* I wondered. It was blurry, but I could still make out the date. *October 1970 – last year for Christ's Sake! There should be a law making people take down this old shit instead of leaving it to decay.* I remember moaning, and rolling my forehead on the wood, trying again to focus and stand up straight – trying not to smell the nasty tar, but it was no use. I needed to get away from this pole before I was overcome by the odor. And I just needed a little more time, just a little, then I was sure I'd be able to stand up and walk home – and without *puking!* ***I REFUSE TO PUKE ON THE GODDAMN STREET CORNER!***

My hands took a solid hold on the rough wooden pole, and while muttering a wish to myself that I would be steady enough to hold on without getting tiny splinters in my palms, I managed to push my body into an upright position. *Good*, I thought, but I couldn't let go, not yet, not if I wanted to remain standing that was. At least this way I was back enough that I didn't have to smell that horrid tar stench – in fact, the clear, crisp air seemed to be doing me some good. It was fall, so the nights in Chicago were cool, if not downright cold. Tonight wasn't cold – cold in Chicago could pierce through your lungs and freeze your limbs clear to the bone. It wasn't bone chilling cold, just cool, I was only wearing a long sleeved shirt and vest, not my winter jacket. No, no, I welcomed this cool air, and I drew in several deep breaths – relishing the relief and clarity it was bringing to my swirling head. And the coolness seemed to be having a soothing effect on my stomach too. Who would have ever thought that Chicago air, with all the cars jamming the streets, backfiring and dumping pollution and exhaust fumes 24 hours a day could actually feel fresh and soothing – of course, *“there weren't any cars on the streets right now,”* I reminded myself. *“No, no no! Don't think about pollution now – why the hell did that thought even cross*

my mind, anyhow? You have to focus on the task at hand – getting home and into bed... without throwing up on the friggin' sidewalk!"

I was used to being stoned most nights; there weren't many street drugs I hadn't tried at this point – my favorites being grass and Quaaludes, with the occasional dose of window pane acid. I stayed away from poppers and cocaine or any form of speed – it tied my stomach into knots, and made it churn as though it was being beaten like egg whites into a stiff meringue topping. It gave me jitters that sent shivers and trembling throughout my body and made me totally – I mean totally – paranoid. No, just give me a nice mellow high, a soothing, mind-numbing buzz, something to help me let go of reality, allow a sense of oblivion to set in; but still maintain just enough control to keep my overall hold on life. Tenuous as it may be, I wasn't ready to give up completely – to not care at all, to live like many of my so called 'friends'. I still needed to be able to tell myself that I was in control and Goddamn it... I had lost that control tonight!

I blamed the nauseous feeling on the booze. I could smell it now on my own breath which meant I had strayed from my usual vodka to something else, but what? With painstaking effort, I lifted my left hand from the telephone pole, raised it to within a couple inches of my mouth, and noticed for the first time that I could see just the faintest hint of my breath fogging the air. *Shit it must be colder than I thought – why wasn't I wearing my jacket – and what the hell are you doing trying to smell your own breath? Ridiculous!* I didn't need to smell it; I knew what it was... only one possibility: *Janis Joplin's drink of choice – yep, no mistaking that sweet, not quite whiskey, not quite bourbon aroma.* Southern Comfort. Janis Joplin had died a year or so ago of a heroin overdose, and I had switched from Southern Comfort to vodka thinking it would be ever so much safer.

"Well this fuckin' proves it – drink Southern Comfort – end up alone on the Goddamn street corner, unable to let go of this shit-eatin' telephone pole!" I thought I was berating myself under my breath, but in reality, I must have been vocalizing it out loud. The next thing I knew I heard a car door slam, and loud footsteps behind me. A pair of large, work-hardened hands grabbed my shoulders, pulled me away from the pole, and spun me around demanding to know where the fuck I'd gone to, and who the fuck I was talking to? Startled... street lights swirling around my

head, and my vision coming in and out of focus – before my brain could even register who or what was going on – my stomach protested being moved in such a jarring fashion and proceeded to wretch into a hard ball. My mind was whirling in circles – *you know that voice – no you don't – what the hell are you doing standing on the fuckin' street corner ALONE in the City of Chicago at 4 am – of course some sleaze ball is going to come along – of course you're going to get raped!* As total panic set in; I pushed away flailing and kicking and screaming “GET AWAY FROM ME!” With an unexpected force, my body doubled over as I clutched my midsection with both arms. The big, muscular hands had long since let go, and as I lunged for the other side of the sidewalk, I saw Michael's face, stunned, looking at me as if I'd lost my mind – still talking to me, although I had no idea what he was saying. I reached out for the red brick wall of the building as I stumbled into it just in time to remain upright, but with no hope of holding back my stomach any longer. I vomited for what seemed like forever. My hair kept falling forward, my eyes were watering, my nose was running, and all I could do was puke. *GODDAMN IT!*

By that time Michael had come to my side. He had grabbed a grease stained, old mechanic's rag from his car which he shoved into my hands, and was trying to help hold back my hair while steadying me so I wouldn't fall. His voice had lost the pissed-off edge it had when he startled me out of my trance, and had transformed into slight irritation. “Where did you go? Why didn't you stay with the others? What the fuck did you take? How much? ...For Christ sake, Jackie, answer me!” The questions were coming one after another. I couldn't focus on any of them, let alone answer.

I was standing now – more or less on my own, with only one shoulder leaning on the red bricks – wiping my mouth on the soiled rag. I spit, coughed, and spit again – eyes watering and blurry, I wiped the salty tears running down my cheeks on my shirt sleeve, the only good thing was that my stomach was settling back into its proper place.

“What the fuck are you doing coming up behind me like that – you scared the shit out of me!” I yelled and stammered as I felt my mind starting to focus. “I didn't go anywhere... I didn't do... ahhh, take anything. I was just standing there – trying not to do that!” I blurted out as I pointed to the disgusting mess on the sidewalk, my throat still thick with spittle, feeling my anger

beginning to rise. “Now, look – you made me puke!” I wiped my eyes on my shirt sleeve once more, spit again and used the rag to dislodge something very nasty from the ends of my hair. Michael, who had been talking at the same time saying something about how I was supposed to be with Rick at the bar not out here on the street corner, took the rag from my trembling hands, threw it on the ground, and put his arm around me, attaching one hand to each of my elbows, leading me back to his car.

We only made it a few steps when I burst into tears. I had no idea why I was crying, and neither did he. I looked up at Michael and tried to bring his face into focus. His long, straight, dark hair was falling into his eyes, and he kept flicking his head to get it back. I could see that the fire in his eyes was beginning to soften as he pushed the remains of his irritation with me away. “What’s wrong? Why are you crying? I’ll take you home now... it’ll be okay,” were all said with a touch of understanding in his voice. But I knew he didn’t understand, not really. Neither did I for that matter, and I refused to get in the car. He turned me towards him, sat me down on the hood of his dark green 1965 Mustang fastback, and held me gently by the shoulders so I wouldn’t fall over. I braced my feet on the edge of the curb. He took a small step down, stood in the gutter and straddled my legs, bringing his face almost level with mine, then leaning back a little he said, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Taking as deep a breath as I could – the air seemed to be getting colder, but it did help me to concentrate and relax – I tried to explain. Through my tears I said, “I puked on the sidewalk. Puking on the sidewalk is something the junkies and drunks do – not me.”

Michael just smiled, his lips pressed together as if he was trying to conceal a laugh.

“Don’t you dare laugh at me, I’m being serious, I mean it – don’t you dare laugh!” I demanded with as much determination as I could muster through my tears. “I’ve told you, I’ve always told you that I could do this and not get hooked and not end up on the street corner, and where the hell do you find me? *On* the fuckin’ street corner – that’s where, and what happens as soon as you show up? I PUKE!” I tried to free myself from his grip while I was talking, but didn’t have the strength and wiggling around only made the lights spin, so I gave up. “If I hadn’t thrown

up, if I only hadn't thrown up, then I'd have been sure I could make it, but I've failed, and so I might as well give up," I said, as I continued to sob and shake.

Michael's smile broadened – the corners of his lips turned up as he said, "Babe, I'm stoned too, but that makes no sense at all, and I'm *sure* it wouldn't make sense if I was straight. Puking on the sidewalk doesn't mean you've failed or that you're a permanent stoner or drunk, it just means you puked. What were you drinking?"

"Southern Comfort" I replied, "Why?"

His hands had moved from my shoulders, and were now cupped on each side of my face, his brown eyes narrowed, searching my own for answers. "I thought you gave that up?" he asked, wiping away tears from my cheeks with his work hardened thumbs.

"I did," I murmured, bringing my own emotions more under control again.

"And tell me again why you gave up Southern Comfort?" he said, in a tone of voice that told me that he already knew the answer.

"So I wouldn't die of a heroin overdose like Janis Joplin," I replied.

We'd had this conversation before – he'd laughed at my logic then, and he laughed at it again now. With a big smile on those perfect lips, wiping away my final tears, he pulled me up off the hood of the Mustang, gave me a simple hug and said, "Don't worry, you'll never do heroin, at least not if you stick with me. Let's go back to the apartment now."

Chapter Two

The Morning After

I tried to move, but couldn't. Every fiber of my body hurt – my head felt like someone had swung an ax and split it wide open; my mouth was dry as cotton and tasted nasty. My eyes refused to focus, and the sunlight coming through the bedroom window was way too bright. I had put up rather heavy drapes made of rough cotton homespun fabric – in deep blood red, my favorite color – to make sure I never had to see the sun on mornings like this. *But obviously, it doesn't work if you don't freaking close them!* I thought.

I squinted at the large, rectangular clock radio on the night stand beside me – the digital readout showed 11:42 am. “Oh God – what the hell...” I moaned, as my arm reached over to find Michael's naked body lying asleep beside me. Strange: he was naked, but I wasn't – my boots and jeans and vest were off, but my panties, shirt and daisy patterned socks were still in place. *My shirt – damn – what is that smell? Had some drunk from The Canteen slobbered on me while I was serving him a drink last night? No, no, that isn't it, and why the fuck does my head... Oh shit! It was me... Some of the events of last night were coming back... I was the one who puked!*

“Michael, wake up,” I murmured. No response. “Michael, wake up,” I said again with a little more force, as I managed to gather enough saliva in my mouth to actually form words. He started to stir beside me. “Tell me I didn't puke on the sidewalk last night... and what day is it?” I asked.

He raised one arm and rubbed his hand over his face, making sure he kept his eyes closed. “You did... and it's... ahhh, Saturday, I think,” he replied as he rolled towards me, and gathered me into his arms. He pulled me close, wiggling, squirming and adjusting until my head was snuggled on his left shoulder, our legs wrapped around each other pretzel fashion, my thigh resting against his half-hard morning cock. He placed a soft kiss on my forehead and sighed, “Go back to sleep, it's early.”

“Oh God... my head hurts, and it’s not early, it’s past noon, well almost,” I said starting to enjoy the warmth and comfort of his shoulder under my pounding head – this was my favorite position. “Wait... Oh shit, if it’s Saturday then I have to get up... Oh shit, shit, shit – is it the 16th? I’m supposed to meet Bernie in two hours... Christ I have to get up!”

I attempted to scramble out of bed, only to be knocked back by the piercing pain in my head.

“Is that today, are you sure?” Michael groaned, trying to pull me back towards him.

“Yeah shit, it’s October 16th. I haven’t seen him in months – I don’t want to be late. We’re supposed to meet downtown at that little pastry and coffee joint off North Michigan at 2 pm – I have to get up now... Oh Christ, I wish that sun would go away, the light is killing my eyes.” I struggled to sit up again – this time moving in a slow, deliberate fashion, feeling my way to the window with my eyes shut, and drew the heavy drapes closed. That made that damn sun disappear, and filled the room with a muted, yet still brilliant, burning shade of red that both soothed my head, and created a sensual atmosphere.

Michael was arranging the pillows under his head, his dark hair spilling over the edge trying to entice me to come back to bed, lifting the yellow and white striped sheet just a bit, exposing more of his well-muscled physique. I knew what that inviting smile on his lips meant; especially when he combined it with those sexy squinted eyes – a look of longing I found almost impossible to resist.

“You’re in no shape to talk to Bernie today... Why don’t you cancel and come back to bed?” he purred. As a scowl crossed my face, he said, “Okay, you don’t have to cancel – I’ll just help you ahhh... wake up.” His eyes glinting and seductive in the red tinged light, “I’ll drive you down there so you don’t have to wait for the bus or look for parking for your car – that will save time and well... it’s still warm in here.”

“Hmm,” I said, tempted. “Can you make my head stop hurting?”

“Well I don’t know if I can make it stop hurting, but I can definitely take your mind off it for a while,” he replied, his smile broadening. He had me convinced, and he knew it. With that, he

watched me remove my shirt, socks and panties and I filled with an instant calmness as he pulled me back beside him.

“It is still warm in here,” I murmured as he rolled on top of me, propping himself up on his elbows, massaging and kissing my forehead.

“Does that help?” he asked.

Closing my eyes, my body melted under him. “Yes, a little,” I said.

“Just a little?” he questioned.

“Ah-huh, I need more...” My voice faded – his soft lips stirring over my cheeks and onto my neck.

Michael and I had a lot of differences. We came from different backgrounds, and had different visions of what life had to offer. He was almost three years older than me, but had no education past high school. He grew up on the south side of Chicago in a working class family with two brothers, one sister, a father that had disappeared several years ago, and a semi-alcoholic mother who had constant problems paying her bills – the electric bill in particular. I grew up in a middle class family in Weymouth, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, was an only child, and my parents – even though they argued incessantly – were still together, and though money was far from abundant, the electricity had never been turned off. And they were determined, above all else, that I would get a college education so I could have a better life.

I met Michael in late June about two weeks after I turned 20, at The Canteen, the sleazy bar I started working at when my life turned upside down. He was a friend of one of the bartenders. It was one of those irresistible, overwhelming attractions based on lust – not that I needed much of an attraction to spend the night with some guy at that point – but I was drawn to Michael, like a moth to a flame. The first time he entered the bar I felt his presence. As surreptitiously as possible I watched him, studied his movements, and was aroused by his air of confidence and the way his lips curled at the corners when he smiled at me; they were very sensuous lips. I could feel him peering at me as I served drinks, following me with his eyes even when he was speaking

to someone else. It was as if some external force was drawing us together. When we were introduced and I heard the deep, perfect fullness of his voice, I felt a pang of shyness overtake me (something that hadn't happened in a long time). I could feel my heart pound in my chest as I prayed that he'd be attracted to me too. He was.

He looked Italian, but he wasn't, he was pure Polish – Nowak was his last name, everyone called him Mike, except me – and he was exactly the physical type that made me melt. He wasn't all that tall, but tall enough, about six feet with strong, broad shoulders, and a beautiful, well-formed body with firm, carved muscles defining his chest and his strong arms and legs. I loved playing with the sprinkling of dark hair that covered his upper chest. It wasn't a body builder's type of muscle – I knew for a fact that he never went to a gym; it was the kind of muscle that comes from doing manual labor every day. And he had beautiful hands – large palms with exquisite fingers, the callouses only adding to their character. There was a scar, about five inches long, under his ribs on the left side (from some teenage 'stupidity' as he termed it). Those strong arms now pressed me against him. He was handsome, but not at all like the all-American, perfectly featured, male models that plastered the pages of every trashy magazine I read – no, Michael had a more classic face; long, straight nose with a wide forehead, high cheek bones, with the faintest hint of a cleft in his chin and skin that always had a touch of tan. His full, soft lips balanced his dark mustache, and he had the most beautiful whiskey brown eyes I could ever remember seeing – his eyes were the color of Southern Comfort, framed by long, dark lashes. Lashes so long I was envious. He wore his thick, dark brown hair long, cut midway down his neck.

What was astonishing to me though was that we had developed a connection that somehow went beyond our mutual physical infatuation. The first time we left The Canteen together, about a week after meeting, for what I assumed would be yet another one night stand; we stayed with each other for almost 48 hours. Stoned on some very potent hashish, screwing on the mattress on the floor of his studio apartment over his garage, eating pepperoni pizza with extra cheese, sleeping, taking showers, listening to music – he played the guitar – fucking some more, ordering take-out Chinese food, exploring each other's bodies in minute detail, and staying wasted; we also started talking. I still can't remember exactly what we talked about, but by the time he took

me home, he knew more about me than I had told anyone in a very long time, and I knew some of his secrets as well. So when he showed up, smiling, at the bar again the next night I wasn't surprised – I was delighted. Right away he made sure all the regulars knew we had been together the last few days – almost like staking his claim. Although we didn't have any defined commitment to each other, there was something going on from the very beginning. We were very different people who somehow needed each other. From the time we met, I had no problem brushing off other advances and being 'his', at least for the time being.

The one place where Michael and I had no difference was in bed – he was tuned into every square inch of my body and could play me as well as... no, better – much better – than he could play his old Gibson guitar, and that was what he was doing now. He was an incredibly generous lover. He lifted himself onto one elbow, cupped my breast in his hand and circled my rising nipple with the thumb that had last night dried my tears. He nibbled the base of my neck in a way he knew would send shivers through my capillaries, and drive me insane. My back arched in an instinctual response to his touch, and my hips pressed against him feeling that he was more than ready. My hands glided down his back enjoying the soft curve of his muscles and as I reached his firm round butt, he pushed naturally inside me.

"Oh God," he whispered gazing down at me. "I've died and gone to heaven."

"Hmm, smart-ass," I laughed, "That's good, as long as you take me with you."