

# Pavlov

By Matt Shea

*This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.*

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# Dedication

'Pavlov' is dedicated to my special friends from The Psychic Spectrum Radio Show: Skip and Sha'ron Leingang.



I've done many radio shows with Skip and Sha'ron. Our topics range from Bible interpretations, to places that claim to be haunted. It's fun to visit such places and listen to the stories that the owners and staff are willing to share. They also explore the Native American culture and their rituals. Such outings take us to amazing places with history waiting to be unveiled!

Skip and Sha'ron always remain on the tame side, and never stray too far from their Christian faith. They're also never guilty of predicting the future or promising fame and fortune. Their radio shows are fascinating and allow listeners to call in from all over the world!

If the opportunity ever presents itself, I highly recommend attending one of their presentations. Feel free to contact them at anytime. They'd love to hear from you and always respond to those who reach out!

[www.psychicspectrum.com](http://www.psychicspectrum.com)

Matt Shea

Trust me, they hang out with a fun crowd! You'll also get to know them as well as their many friends who join the party!

To my special friends, Skip and Sha'ron: I thought of you every step of the way while I wrote this book.

Love ya both, and I'll see you at the next show!

Matt-



# Did someone mention radio?

Here are some great talk shows where you can find Matt's interviews!



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# Introduction

TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD SADIE COLLINS leaned back in a leather recliner and stretched. The dazzling blonde with long flowing hair and dynamic blue eyes extended her right arm to admire her freshly painted nails. Soon each hand was graciously moving in sync with the other. It was as if they were doing a ballet together.

The client, who stood at five foot eight with a perfectly tanned body, leaned forward to peer out the window. It was there her inspiration lay. Centered in front of The Infinity Salon stood a 1965 Corvette Stingray convertible. This restored masterpiece sported a breathtaking burnt-orange paint scheme which included black and gold highlights. The very colors that now graced her hands and feet.

Gina Mondello's reputation for being the best nail tech in town was second to none. The popular artist who barely stood over five feet tall spoke with an Italian accent. This spunky grandmother with curly hair had just finished a nail job that rivaled the hottest car the strip had ever known. It would serve as a perfect match for the young woman who wore designer clothes and expensive jewelry.

"Thanks, Gina!" exclaimed Sadie as she hugged the entrepreneur. "I just love what you do!"

"I'm glad you like them!" she replied. "Always let me know if you need anything."

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Such was the life of one Sadie Michelle Collins, a stunningly gorgeous woman who was driving off in a status symbol owned by her latest love interest. The very man who'd paid for her visit to the salon when she made a favorable comment about his latest purchase: "I love how those colors run together!" Words spoken with the enthusiasm of a high school cheerleader.

It was quite apparent that Sadie subscribed to one specific rule.

*Girls with looks don't need books.*

There were others in line who also wanted to have this trophy wife all to themselves. Some days yielded more than one floral arrangement waiting on her doorstep. The former homecoming queen was definitely playing the field and loving every minute of it. The woman who could grace the cover of any magazine seemed to have learned some tricks of the trade along the way. Sadly, they included some tactics that were not ethical in the eyes of the Lord.

Sadie had moments when she gave false hope to a commoner when a quick favor was needed. A trail of broken hearts illustrated the price many had paid. To make matters worse, she seemed to enjoy inflicting such pain on the multitude of nice guys who came to her aid. The ones who couldn't help but develop feelings for the raving beauty everyone talked about.

This selfish lifestyle didn't happen by accident. It developed over a period of time, starting when she first experienced the attention she was getting from boys. Those displays made other girls jealous beyond words. It didn't take long for her to realize she had lightning in a bottle. From there, she did everything she could to enhance her outward appearance. The young lady with a mind of her own also realized the value of charm. It would bring sex appeal into the game.



Sadie Collins was a highly sought-after prize in the world of men. She knew what to say, who to say it to, and when. As she approached her prime, doors were already beginning to open. The competition of the male ego had set in with Cleopatra on a pedestal. At any time, she could choose any meal ticket and enjoy the ride.

Sadie was becoming a member of the jet set and relished the image it brought. The young sex symbol adored the lavish gifts that came from all levels. Treasures ranged from flowers and dinner invitations to gift cards, fine jewelry, and even marriage proposals.

*Star light, star bright  
First star I see tonight  
I wish I may, I wish I might  
Have this wish I wish tonight*

One evening found our star all alone. She was on a stroll while thinking of the many offerings sent by her admirers. Looking off into the distance, she got caught up in the moment. At once, Sadie Michelle Collins stretched out her arms and made a proclamation to the heavens above.

*“I will accept anything that showers me with gifts.”*

Her announcement did not fall upon deaf ears. Somewhere in our universe, an entity heard her loud and clear, with a new card to be introduced. The hometown beauty would now be tantalized by much-needed money and other such wants. All by an unknown that wanted *something* in return.

And now, our story begins.



# Chapter I

THE WOMAN IN DESIGNER SHADES turned heads as she drove the topless classic. Upbeat music vented through the speakers as flowing hair and red lipstick created dreams. It was first-class all the way for the woman who loved diamonds and never went beyond high school. Soon she would be parked in a monogrammed stall with the name 'John A. Castle' stenciled on its concrete barrier.

John Andrew Castle was a seasoned attorney and the vice president of his father's practice, Castle and Associates. He was also the owner of the car she was driving. At present, the handsome thirty-one-year-old was in a state of limbo. The clean-shaven man who stood several inches taller than her was hoping to advance his present status of being *just a friend*. After all, he was a member of the town's 'who's who' and was graced with stylish black hair and rich brown eyes. He also possessed a warm personality and showed an abundance of compassion.

There was more. John Castle was a pillar of society who was involved with practically every charitable organization. This included various church committees and youth programs.

What more could a woman ask for?

Sadie entered John's office bearing gifts. In appreciation for his thoughtfulness, she'd dropped by his favorite deli and ordered their famous club sandwich meal. It included a Caesar salad, iced

tea, and some warm chocolate chip cookies. The unexpected delivery brought delight to the bachelor who had been putting in long hours. The packaged food was placed on his desk. Next, she pirouetted like a ballerina and proudly displayed her freshly painted nails. “Are you from Hollywood?” he asked in a joking manner.

Such compliments were music to Sadie’s ears. Anything that bumped her status to a higher level was welcome. “I could be, if you were my agent!” she replied. Next came the traditional hug followed by a kiss on the cheek. “I appreciate all the things you do for me,” she said with direct eye contact.

“You are well worth it,” he commented in a soft voice. Pain trembled through his body as he embraced the woman he loved.

It was now time for the changing of the guards. It was no secret that the beauty of Valley Ridge loved rubbing elbows with the upper crust. The problem, however, was that she wasn’t ready to settle down in a committed relationship. At this stage of her life, she’d rather be single. She craved the attention that came with it.

John was already two steps ahead and understood where Sadie’s mind was. He accepted that for the time being, he could best serve as a father figure. A special kind of *dad* who would always be there for the young woman who never knew her own father.

After a little bantering, a final hug was given along with a peck on the cheek. “Well, I might as well let you get back to your work,” she said. Seconds later, she was gone.

John stood motionless as he stared at the closed door. His heart sank to the floor as he absorbed the cruel silence. The good man was very aware of who he was dealing with, however. After all, he’d figured out her pattern long ago when she was one of his pupils in a Bible study class. John knew that some time would pass before he saw her again. Typically, it would be a contact based on himself making the first move, *unless she needed something*.

The evening was young, and more important, it was Friday night! Soon she would find herself in another part of town. It would be at a packed hotspot where live music thundered. A place where her mere presence would take center stage...

## Chapter II

SATURDAY MORNING ARRIVED with Sadie Collins making a mad dash out the front door. Frantically, she applied her lipstick while gargling mouthwash, all while taking long strides in the heels that matched her attire. It was quite apparent that the unemployed model had stayed out too late the night before. In time, she was sitting at a table with her mom and two stepsisters. “Forgive me!” she exclaimed while catching her breath.

“Forgive you for what?” replied her mother. “We just got here ourselves!”

Forty-one-year-old Sandra Collins gazed at her children. Sitting to her right was sixteen-year-old Rachel. To her left was fourteen-year-old Rebecca. It was obvious they were sisters. After all, they shared shoulder-length auburn hair that highlighted their rich brown eyes. That, along with their minimal height and hourglass figure, assured that they were the daughters of one Roger Collins. A hard-working, forty-five-year-old construction worker who saw the goodness in the single mom and promptly married her.

It was there the problem lay.

The sisters inherited many attributes from their dad. This ranged from his stocky build to his below-average height.

Sadie, on the other hand, was graced with her mom’s beauty. She too was a slender blue-eyed blond who possessed a vivacious

personality. When Sadie received compliments on how much she resembled her mom, her rebellious nature often kicked in.

There was more. The oldest daughter was Sandra's biggest concern. She feared that Sadie might be going down the wrong path in life. The very one she took that resulted in becoming a single parent. After all, the oldest had missed a few family gatherings in recent years, along with an occasional church service. That, along with not hearing from her for weeks at a time and noticing her on the back of a motorcycle late at night, caused many a sleepless night.

There was a ray of light to all of this, however. The mother greatly approved of John Castle and often asked about him. "Have you seen John lately?" she inquired while holding a cup of coffee.

"Where do you think I got these nails from?" came the reply as Sadie waved the glistening polish about.

Rebecca's eyes bulged at the masterpiece being displayed. "Wow..." was all she could say.

Rachel was more direct. "Well, if you're not going to marry him, I will!" Nods of approval were directed at the family member who had a different upbringing.

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Sadie's early childhood captured the beauty of a Helen Reddy song. It was just her and her mom, with no father figure in the picture. This void brought the small family closer, with each being there for the other.

The day came when a prayer was answered. A good man had entered their world! Initially, his induction appeared to be a perfect fit. Roger Christopher Collins went to work every day and came home every night. The good man had no vices to speak of and

adored his new bride. He was also well-respected and took his family to church every Sunday.

It wasn't long before the dynamics of the new family took a turn. Two more children would soon arrive. At first, young Sadie was delighted to be a big sister, but it was short-lived. In time, it became clear that she was becoming more of a relative than a family member. Her wonderful stepdad would nonchalantly treat *his* daughters with special care while showing great respect to *Sandra's child*.

Sadie grew up feeling that she was 'a woman without a country.' Every day she saw a family of four sharing a happy home. There was a mother, a father, and their two children. When she looked at the family portraits, it was obvious to her that she was an outsider. It was common for her to see one of her stepsisters having a heart-to-heart with their father. Such occurrences opened old wounds for the girl who never knew hers.

Regardless, Sadie Collins would be the first to admit that the home she was raised in always had love for her.

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The women of the family enjoyed their meal as updated stories circulated. Without warning, intense laughter would erupt, causing nearby tables to take notice. Finally, the morning visit was coming to an end with hugs being exchanged. Deep inside, Sadie knew that she couldn't have picked a better family. Still, things seemed to have fallen into place once she moved out on her own. Things that her family couldn't quite understand.

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It seemed that Sadie's life story was to be approached by men from all walks of life with offers in the making. Impromptu suggestions such as meeting at a fine restaurant or enjoying a ride in the



country were common practice. Once in a while, the beauty recognized on billboards and local television would stun her admirer by accepting his proposition. It was all in the name of adventure.

Contrary to her public good-girl image, Sadie Collins shared a hidden quality that most women could relate to. The sexy woman in tight jeans had a yen for the unknown, *especially when it came to the bad-boy image*. The controversial family member would now focus on the other plans she had that day. Soon, she would meet up with a crowd that her mother might not approve of...

## Chapter III

MIKE'S PLACE WAS A WELL-KNOWN HOTSPOT. The establishment that resembled the O. K. Corral from the 1880s was definitely a landmark. It was also renowned for its steaks, live music, and pool tournaments.

This throwback to the Wild West days was not for the faint of heart. It was a noisy bar on the outskirts of town that was a constant headache for the local police. It was common for a pushing contest to get out of hand with an inebriated someone spending a night in jail.

Regardless of the drunkards and riffraff trying to make a name for themselves, Mike's did have some redeeming qualities. Practically all of their patrons were standup locals, mixed with a few tourists. There were even times when a celebrity was spotted and had their picture taken. Local personalities such as Sadie Collins were among those who graced their wall of fame.

It was approaching nightfall when the cavalcade of white lights outlining the famous honky-tonk came to life. Mike's Place was now taking center stage in this desert town. Soon its dirt lot would be packed with Harleys, jeeps, and pickups. It was there the pick of the litter would make her presence known.

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What brought her there was a friendly encounter earlier that week. It was a biker who seemed to come out of a Clint Eastwood movie. One who pulled up next to her at a crosswalk. To her surprise, he was ruggedly handsome with a charming voice. The man in leather offered to take her where she was going. His offer was tactfully rejected, though much appreciated.

He commented that he fully understood as he looked down and laughed at himself. The stranger took his charm a step further and extended an open invitation to her. "By the way, my name is Barry. My friends and I will be at Mike's Place this Saturday night. You're welcome to join us if you'd like."

"That sounds nice, Barry," she replied. "My name is Sadie."

A smile flashed as he gestured a thumbs-up. "Hope to see you there," he said in a cute tone that resembled a kindergarten teacher. Barry had left his mark and drove off. Sadie felt her heart drop as she watched him cruise off into the distance.

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Sadie was determined to run into Barry and his friends that evening. Utilizing the town's only taxi service, she chose to go solo. In her mind, it would enhance the mystique of her image. It would be a grand entrance, causing the room to go silent as all present would take notice of who she was. One that would captivate everyone, including the man on the motorcycle.

Sadie had arrived just after sunset. Surveying the parking lot, she saw a cluster of bikes that caught her eye with one standing out. It was decked out with western saddlebags and matching handle grips. The distinct dark red paint and shiny chrome left no doubt that Barry was indeed there with his friends. In moments the lady from the car commercials walked toward a corner full of black leather jackets and spotted her interest. "How are you tonight, Barry?" she called out.

The dark-haired twenty-eight-year-old who hadn't shaved in days remembered her well. "Sadie! I'm so glad you could make it!"

In no time, introductions were made. Handshakes and hugs secured the newly formed friendships with elements of humor sweetening the pot. Sadie was 'in,' and Barry was the man of the hour!

In time, the tempo had changed a bit. Sadie began to ask Barry about his life and what he did for a living. "My dad has a used car lot, and I work for him," he said. "We primarily sell American-made cars and motorcycles," he added. Sadie was a fun-loving person who appreciated a good man with dignity and work ethic. Still, she was an up-and-coming member of the town's upper crust and wanted the finer things in life. In essence, she was a gold digger who knew that a nice guy working for the family business in a used car lot simply would not do.

She began to grow a little distant without the gentleman making any advances. In time, Sadie decided to roll the dice and mingle around the bar a bit. *Just in case there were any good candidates to be found.*

Barry was pure class. He expressed his gratitude for the fact that she showed up in the first place. "It's great to see you," he said. "Have fun tonight, and always know that you're welcome here!"

A gentle kiss graced the good man on his cheek. "Thank you, Barry. I had a wonderful time."

The evening transgressed into a who's who search at Mike's Place. Barry and his friends realized they didn't meet the local star's criteria and were promptly thrown by the wayside. They looked at one another, realizing that Barry was not the problem. Next, the group formed a circle and said a prayer for her behalf.

Sadie was on a different mission as she walked by the pool tables. Immediately, she took notice of the advanced players who were

winning. She marveled at the amount of money changing hands and drew closer. Soon she was talking to a man in a three-piece suit who seemed unbeatable. He was what .007 movies were made of, from his short wavy black hair to his cold-steel blue eyes. The pool shark was equipped with a glistening silver cue that bore his initials in gold. The stranger stood several inches taller than her and spoke firmly in a baritone voice.

The clean-shaven, dignified man introduced himself. "My name is, William Anton Grace, and I owe you a huge thank you."

Sadie was taken by his comment and found herself at a loss for words. She then recalled what he said. "You owe *me* a thank you?" she questioned in a high pitch.

"Yes," he replied graciously. "It was that car commercial I saw you on a while back. You convinced me to buy a dream car that I'm absolutely proud of." Leaning closer, he whispered, "We guys do things like that when we're single!"

William's compliment registered deep. After all, she did commercials for the state's most exotic dealership. At that moment it dawned on her that he was quite possibly what she was looking for. The man who sat in front of her was obviously rich, good-looking, debonair, and available! He was seemingly a perfect 10 who was in the same league as John Castle.

William Grace wasted no time finding a table. Together, they had a drink and shared some appetizers. The forty-year-old's conversation was flawless. He held her attention with tidbits of trivia intertwined with a touch of humor. He also asked Sadie about herself and expressed great interest in her. That included asking permission to hold her hands in order to admire her extravagant fingernails. "They're just lovely!" he commented.

"Thank you," she replied. Sadie eventually commented on his skill at billiards.

Leaning back, he replied in a smug tone, “Well, let’s face it. I always believed that a person should be an opportunist whenever it’s possible to obtain money.” Looking directly at her, he continued, “Pool is just one of the ways I accomplish that.”

Sadie loved what the hustler had to say about money and subscribed to his philosophy one hundred percent. “I can only agree,” she said with a wink.

Gazing at the woman who lusted for money, he said, “Get close to me, and I’ll show you some other tricks.” Sadie smiled back in approval.

The evening with William Grace was seemingly a dream come true. In fact, it was possibly too perfect. He seemed to possess everything a woman could ever ask for. For a girl like Sadie, it went much deeper. He also displayed a ruthless touch when it came to the world of money. A dark side that had always beckoned to her. One that she often surrendered to in order to survive. It was at that table where Sadie’s world would change forever.

It was time for William to head home. “Will I get to see you again?” he asked with a touch of Clark Gable. At that moment, phone numbers were exchanged. Holding Sadie’s number high in the air, he proclaimed, “Great! I’ll call you tomorrow around noon. If it sounds good, we can get a meal somewhere, and then I’ll take you to a place where I usually do pretty good.”

“I’d like that a lot!” came her reply.

In stylish fashion, William hugged his date and gave her a soft kiss on the lips. “Don’t forget me!” he jokingly said as he put on his coat.

Sadie had a successful outing. She had once again met a member of the upper crust who could take her places and introduce her to others. On the way home, a peculiar incident took place at a traffic light. Out of nowhere came a dejected figure who appeared to be

a hunched-up old man in tattered clothing. This individual ran across the dark street, calling Sadie's name. The cab driver rolled down his window to see what the stranger wanted.

"Get out before it's too late!" he screamed while pointing to the woman in the back seat. "It knows you're here! It's trying to own you!" he cried out.

"I have never seen that man before in my life!" Sadie explained to the driver.

The man who appeared homeless continued. "I was like you!" he explained. "I wanted a money tree in my back yard that could never be picked dry. I wanted things handed to me because I thought it would give me a better life!" Taking a deep breath, he continued. "Leave while you still can!" he pleaded. "It knows everything about you. It knows where you're going and what you're going to do next!"

The cabbie rolled up his window and punched it when the light changed. The man forewarning of doom could still be heard a block away.

## Chapter IV

IT WAS SUNDAY MORNING and the sun shone through Sadie Collin's bedroom window. The young woman in pajamas with messed-up hair woke up late. Once again, she found herself missing church services. "Drat!" she cried out in frustration. "I'll lose my family if I keep this up!"

Sadie had trouble falling asleep the night before. She couldn't stop thinking about the pool shark she met that evening. The one who took money from any and all who dared to accept his challenges. There was something about his confidence and style that impressed her one way and scared her another. Sadie also thought about the derelict she encountered on the way home. The one who knew her by name. To make matters worse, she was recently sifting through her mail and found a dentist bill to the tune of four hundred and sixty-five dollars. Money she didn't have.

True, there was always 'old reliable,' who came in the form of one John Castle. There was also her mother and a few select friends who had rescued her in the past. *Perhaps it was time to extend a personal loan, or get another credit card*, she thought to herself. Decisions, decisions...

Sadie's thoughts were interrupted when her phone rang. Looking at the caller ID, she saw that its latest entry was reaching out. It was William Grace, the seemingly prominent man she had met less than twenty-four hours ago. "Hi, William!" she answered with the enthusiasm of a high school cheerleader.



“Why hello, Sadie, and a good morning to you!” came his response. William’s greeting was short, sweet, and to the point. It was agreed that they would have a late lunch at Victoria’s, an upscale restaurant in a neighboring town. Victoria’s was also known for having a lounge and casino. “I’ll show you what games I play,” he added. “Would you like me to pick you up or just meet you there?”

Sadie was very interested in all the possibilities that could come with a man like William. Still, she was a bit street-wise from past Romeos who turned out to be duds. Wisely, she opted to play it safe. “I’ll just meet you there, if that’s all right with you.”

“Sounds good to me,” came his jovial reply.

Soon the couple was reunited at the five-star restaurant that had waterfalls, dancing flames, and chandeliers. It was there the first red flag was spotted. The charming man seemed to be a bit nervous this time. William Grace stuttered a bit as he tried to maintain his composure. Sadie was on top of things and played the role of the dumb blonde. Compliments were doled out systematically, but the professional gambler seemed to be off his rhythm.

He apparently remembered what day it was by claiming to have attended a church service that morning. The problem was that he named a congregation that didn’t worship on Sundays. William’s posh character seemed to be unraveling a bit. “Oh, great!” he said while looking at the menu. “It’s Happy Hour, and they have the most marvelous appetizers here!”

The local television personality remembered that last night’s meal was also a Happy Hour deluxe. It seemed strange to her that a seemingly wealthy man would take financial shortcuts, especially in the early rounds of trying to win over a would-be trophy wife.

Thinking deeper, she recalled the evening before and remembered how he didn’t leave a tip. Sadie also recalled how he was a master

at duping strangers into a high-stakes game of billiards, knowing that his superior skill left them little or no chance at all.

William gathered himself and tipped his hand further. "I'm surprised they still allow me in here," he gloated. "All I have to do is find the right card dealer, then it's off to the races I go..."

Sadie did admire his savvy when it came to fast money and knew that she could learn from him. After all, *like attracts like*. She herself had been guilty of having her hand in the cookie jar on more than one occasion. Petty crimes such as shoplifting, along with a few purses and billfolds that suddenly reappeared minus their valuables, were part of her repertoire. That, along with a stint of identity theft, only made her more sure of herself. An episode where the innocence of a young prom queen was used to charm the pants off a judge, a case that was later dismissed.

Sadie could relate to his kind and knew not to trust him. Her shortcomings in life had taught her long ago that there was no honor among thieves. Extra precautionary measures had to be taken to avoid being his next victim. It was a foregone conclusion that this would be the last time she would step out with him.

William was perceptive but had no clue that he was already figured out. Instead, he greatly underestimated the arm candy that sat before him. In a cocky voice, he asked, "You don't gamble, do you?"

Sadie felt comfortable in telling the truth. "I've never gambled before, but I always wondered how good I would do." It was an honest-to-goodness answer from the goddess who would rather watch the cream of the crop compete for her. Often, the victors in such casinos and pool halls would display their winnings to gain her approval. Drinks were bought and money shared. *That* was how Sadie Michelle Collins understood gambling.

William interpreted her answer as a compliment and gave assurance. "Why don't you start with Gambling 101? The slots are

a great place for you to get started.” Leaning forward, he offered a tip. In a soft tone he said, “Keep your eyes open. It’s common for drunks to leave machines that still have money in them. It’s also common for someone to drop their money on the floor when they get up to go to the bathroom,” he added.

“Shouldn’t I try to find out whose money it is, or notify security?” she asked.

William began to laugh. “This ain’t church, lady! We’re all here to get money any way we can.” William’s true colors were exposed as the duo drank more wine and snacked on their appetizers. In time, he instructed his date on how to get a player’s card. “They always put in some free playing money when you enroll,” he said. “Look around and play something that looks fun. I’ll be at the card tables with the big boys!”

Looking at the brash card player, she asked in a high-pitched tone, “Any machine?”

A final message was conveyed, a peculiar one that would go on to haunt her.

“Don’t worry, my love. Just follow your nose...”

It would be the last time she would ever see William Anton Grace. He seemed to vanish once she left the table.

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Sadie acquired her game card with ten dollars of playing money tacked on. Meticulously, she strolled throughout the casino looking at the many slot machines and their amusing themes. She saw games built around old sitcoms that she grew up with. There were others capturing civilizations that existed centuries ago, along with those that projected a space-age future thousands of years from now. Tropical islands and big cities were also represented. Amused but not impressed, she kept exploring her

options as she wandered about, admiring the flashing lights and upbeat music.

In time, a unique sensation introduced itself. It came in the form of a sweet fragrance she found to be tantalizing. Instinctively, she followed the invisible scent that resembled a field of flowers touched with the richness of honey. Sadie was now alone and being guided down a dark corridor. The intoxicating aroma grew stronger as she marched forward in anticipation.

Turning a final corner, she found what was reaching out to her. It was a glistening slot machine that seemed to be outlined by rotating diamonds. Ironically, it was also covered in a metallic burnt-orange paint scheme with black and gold highlights. She looked at her fingernails and saw that it matched perfectly. It was as if they were one and the same.

Sadie forgot that she was all alone and took a step closer to the automated masterpiece. It was at that moment an unsuspected rush of cold air seemed to pass through her. An unexplainable Arctic chill that seemed to target her. What happened next caused the high-maintenance showpiece to tense up. The radiant machine off the beaten path spoke to her in a raspy voice that seemed to be out of this world. It was a commanding projection that seemed to be echoing from the far ends of eternity. It also carried a static-like residual that felt like it hailed from another dimension. “Good evening, Sadie. I’m so glad that you could join me today.”

Her mouth dropped in disbelief as she leaned forward with bulging eyes. Within a minute she remembered how far technology had developed regarding cell phones and anything affiliated with computers. She took a deep breath and began to laugh at the situation. It was now her turn. “Well, it’s nice to meet you,” she responded in a cheerful tone. “And what’s your name, if I may ask?”

The lone slot machine seemed to contort a bit, as if it were human. It actually seemed to dance a bit as it replied in a monotone. “Why don’t you just call me *Pavlov*?” it suggested.

There was something eerie about Pavlov’s delivery. It seemed to be too real, too personal. Pavlov then cut deeper and addressed its client with an important matter. “Why don’t you play me?” it asked. “I know that I have four hundred and sixty-five dollars in here somewhere for you.”

Sadie tensed, knowing what Pavlov was referring to. At that point she didn’t know what to think. What she did know was that she had a bill over her head that she couldn’t pay. The struggling actress also had a lot of guts and dared to challenge the unknown. The brave woman opted to move forward and sat in the soft leather recliner that faced the machine. “Are you comfortable?” asked Pavlov in a polite tone.

“I feel just fine,” she responded.

“Here, let me do this,” said Pavlov. At once a warm, penetrating, therapeutic massage-like action began to nurture her back. It was equal to the massages she received at the spa she frequented. “You have a nice back,” it commented.

“Thank you, Pavlov,” she replied. Next she placed her game card into the slot machine and watched it greet her. The screen welcomed her by name and presented the amounts she could bet on.

“Let’s go easy, Sadie. Take the minimum,” advised Pavlov. What came next was images of the Roman empire with chariots driven by soldiers waving swords. Off in the distance was a hill with three crosses standing tall. A closer look showed a gathering of people dressed in robes. The images shown weren’t necessarily a thing of beauty. They weren’t at all like the ones portrayed in other games.

The contestant watched the digital numbers on the scoreboard climb as the primitive mayhem took place. Her lust for money had her salivating like a dog wanting more. Finally, her goal was reached. The machine stopped at exactly four hundred and sixty-five dollars! “There!” commented Pavlov. “I knew you could do it!”

Another feature presented itself. Her much-needed winnings were paid in cash! It was like an ATM sliding a money drawer forward. From there, Pavlov gave its parting words. “It was very nice to have met you, Sadie. I look forward to seeing you again.”

Sadie had a gut feeling that it would be wise for her to leave *immediately*. “It was nice meeting you,” she said. Looking at the bills, she looked up at Pavlov one last time. “Thanks for the help.” The slot machine seemed to blush as its colors pulsated with slight movement.

Sadie was elated to have won the money she desperately needed. She was also a chance-taker and knew to never look a gift horse in the mouth. The first-time gambler stopped questioning herself and concluded that Pavlov was just the latest state-of-the-art slot machine, one with all the bells and whistles.

## Chapter V

SADIE COLLINS SPENT THE FIRST HOUR OF HER DAY contending with her mother. The call was essentially a welfare check due to her recent absence from church services and her rare family appearances. “We’re worried about you,” cried her mother. “Is everything all right?”

“I’m okay, Mom,” she explained. “It’s just that I’ve been very busy trying to line up work.” In time, the oldest daughter calmed her mother down and lifted her spirits. “Hey,” she injected. “I’m free to do lunch today. Want to meet me at Charles’ Cafe? It will be my treat!”

The mother who’d watched her firstborn grow distant from the family relished the idea. “I’d love that!” she replied.

“Great!” came the immediate response. “Let’s have it be just us today. We’re overdue to spend some time together and play catchup.” The mother/daughter team agreed to meet at noon. This gave Sadie ample time to stop by her dentist and pay her bill in cash.

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An anxious Sandra Collins arrived at Charles’ Cafe. To her delight, Sadie was already there. True to form, the oldest had already set the stage by securing the best seat in the house. It was a corner

table that guaranteed privacy. It also had a grand view of their lavish dining room, including a window that overlooked Main Street. The setting was perfect for a special bond to be revitalized.

“You look so good today!” exclaimed the mother. Sandra leaned over and hugged her favorite child. In time, classic dishes were being savored as humorous childhood stories came to life. The outing served its purpose, with each knowing that their love was as strong as ever. Never once did a sensitive topic come up that could ruffle feathers.

That all changed when it was time to pay the bill. Sadie’s debit card was rejected due to lack of funds.

The picture got worse when she fumbled around her purse, knowing that she didn’t have enough currency to cover the tab. “Let me get it,” volunteered Sandra in a calm voice. She handed the server her card and soon all was paid for.

Sadie was embarrassed, to say the least. If there was one person she never wanted to disappoint, it would be her mother. “I get paid in a few days,” she said. “I didn’t realize that I was behind.”

The loving mother placed her hand over her daughter’s. In a comforting tone, she said, “That’s okay. This is what family is for.” There was a slight pause, then she reached into her purse and handed her some money. Sadie looked at the gift and saw that it easily amounted to over a few hundred dollars. “Take it!” her mother insisted. “Consider it a part of your inheritance.” Leaning close, she whispered into her ear, “I would rather you get some of it *now* instead of waiting until it’s too late.” She winked at her daughter while giving a smirk. “Always know that you have a place with us for the rest of your life.”

Sadie almost cried with the realization of how much her nonjudgmental mother loved her. She embraced the woman who was always there and whispered, “Thanks, Mom. I love you so much.”



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Sadie Collins returned to her apartment and promptly called her agent. The best she could do was identify herself and leave a short message. Her final words sounded more like a distress call.

“Look, it’s been a while, and I’ll take anything...”

Sadie Collins decided to jumpstart herself and get self-motivated. She would now spend her afternoon tying up some loose ends. She went to the gym to polish up the tools needed for her trade. After that, it was addressing a load of laundry and sorting out the day’s mail. Sadly, there were more bills to juggle. Finally, some good news had arrived. John Castle had called and asked if she was free that evening. “Forgive me for such short notice, but I was just invited to go on a dinner cruise this evening. I was told that I could bring a date. I’d like to pick you up at six, if your dance card isn’t full.”

The offer was just what the doctor ordered! Sadie accepted and said she’d be ready.

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An outing with John Castle was always fun. The high-priced attorney knew where all the good spots were in town, with money being no exception. He also knew any and all who were deemed prominent in the town of Valley Ridge. This was John Andrew Castle’s chief selling point to the lovely Sadie Collins. He was the doorway to a galaxy full of connections that could advance her to fame and fortune.

John arrived on time in the classy showpiece that matched her lovely nails. Sadie always looked the part when attending such social gatherings. She’d picked a black outfit with gold stripes that resembled an admiral’s uniform. She also had a matching white

nautical hat. She ran up to the '65 Stingray and began to spin around while swaying her arms. It was if she were participating in a Miss Universe Contest. At once she stopped in place and said, "Ahoy, matey!"

John smiled in approval and yelled, "Get in here!" The fun-loving couple resembled Jonathan and Jennifer Hart driving off to another adventure. Soon they were on a yacht watching the sunset with John's elite business associates. It was there when Sadie's radar detected something of major importance.

Sitting on the upper deck was none other than Paul Clemens himself, a forty-eight-year-old tycoon who was clearly the most wealthy man the state had even known. The cagey land developer who owned everything from shopping malls to television studios was not alone. Near him stood two well-dressed men in casual suits. Their job was to continuously scan the general area they occupied. A necessary price to pay when a renowned multimillionaire was constantly in the public eye. The men in dark sunglasses recognized the local celebrity and smiled at her.

Sadie had always idolized the heavyset man in the wicker chair. Numerous times, she had been on ads that promoted one of his business ventures. Still, the model had never officially met him before.

Sadie was already the center of attention that evening. Her outrageous outfit and professionally-tuned charm was running on all cylinders. In no time flat, she took the fight to the man with thinning gray hair. The tanned beauty with a bubbly personality approached him. "Mr. Clemens, I just wanted to thank you for letting me do commercials for you."

Paul Clemens was two steps ahead. The man in a formal dinner jacket stood up and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Sadie," he replied with flair. "I wanted you to represent us!" From there, he extended his hand and introduced himself. Next, a hug was thrown in. Looking around, he exclaimed, "Hey! This lady needs a drink!"

The divorced entrepreneur who always leaned on John Castle for legal representation was happy to meet the pick of the litter. Sadie never lost sight of her motives and extended her services to him. "I'm always there for you if you ever need anything from me."

"I'll remember that," he said in an encouraging tone. "You've always done a good job for us in the past." There was a little more bantering between the two, with an occasional amusing story thrown in. In time, business cards were exchanged as they parted with a final hug.

"I'm so glad to have finally met you, Mr. Clemens!" she said.

"Call me, Paul!" he replied.

Dinner was served in the most luxurious galley that was ever conceived. From there, a seven-course meal with all the trimmings was enjoyed by all. It was agreed by many that this was one of the finest outings they had ever experienced.

Things would soon take a turn for the worse.

After dinner, Sadie went downstairs to the ladies' room. After passing the bar that played live music, she noticed a money clip with the initials A.C.R. in the hallway. It was then the advice from a former acquaintance played back in her head. It was the unmistakable voice of the shark himself, William Grace. His candid advice about drunks dropping their money while leaving to go to the bathroom came in loud and clear. Sadie seemed to be running on automatic at that point. Instinctively, she looked around for any witnesses. The coast was clear, and she picked it up without any hesitation. In a millisecond it was already in her purse. Experience taught her to leave the scene of a crime before being detected.

A moment later, she was above deck seeking her date. The monogrammed clip made of pure silver had already been thrown

overboard with the wad of cash now in her possession. The adorable woman in the admiral getup would stay with John for the rest of the cruise. Once docked, she commented that she didn't feel well. "Can I get you anything?" asked John.

"No," she calmly replied. "It was just a long day that I didn't see coming, but I'm glad I came!" Sadie meant what she said.

Her date drove her home and kissed her goodnight. "I'm so glad that you were able to make it tonight. I'm always so proud to be seen with you!"

"Thanks, John," replied Sadie. "I'm proud of you, too."

Sadie entered her apartment knowing that her reconnaissance mission had been a success! The dinner engagement she accepted had also proved to be quite lucrative. Not only did she meet the state's most influential man, but she was now over twelve hundred dollars richer. Dirty money that she would keep separate in an old cigar tin.