*Commutative*

Chapter 1

A dark night sky hangs over the quietly fidgeting late-night populous, the people skittering about from restaurant to gas station to clothing outlet. It’s a quiet night, with the light pollution blotting out the early night stars, giving a cramped feeling to the area as the black sky weighs down on the world like a heavy blanket.

I check my watch and read nine-twenty. I’ve been walking for almost fifteen damn minutes to pick up some more damn liquor for my damn roommate and long-time friend Karen. She’s far too tipsy at this point to go walking in public. I fear for the safety of anyone who would dare slight her in her current state.

*She’s a hell of a fighter, and a bit too much of a braggart about it, at that.* I think out to nobody in particular, to the resounding reply of absolutely nothing. Granted, she does practice martial arts for her main hobby, with her secondary hobby getting drunk off of her ass at the blossoming young age of twenty-three, so I guess she has to brag about something at least a little more socially acceptable than ‘I can do five shots of Jaeger without gagging’. She works some cushy, quiet job in an office, her looks apparently appeasing the baser instincts of some higher-up, even though whoever it is knows damn well that he will never be allowed to make a move on that woman. I think last week he moved up from one-liners and passive flirting to leaning on her desk while he talked with a half-grin when he stopped to visit. What a hound dog, that stud of a fat forty-year-old man. Well, I can’t blame him; a lot of guys seem to get their eyes caught on what Karen throws around with a tad more reckless abandon than I wish she would.

Still, she only got a decent promotion. I personally would have taken it a step further and gotten him into a situation where I could blackmail him into a nice raise, but I’m the thinker in this relationship, not that drunken slob that is currently having intermittent dry-heaves while lying prostrate on the couch.

I work a job as an investigator for the local police department. I have to deal with mostly petty crimes like theft and burglary, given that I’m only twenty-four and lacking experience, but on occasion, when they’re short-staffed during a holiday, I get called in for heavy things like armed robberies and homicides. To this day, I think I’ve seen five brutally murdered bodies in various degrees of decomposition. It’s a strange thing, how I got used to it so quickly. I’ve talked to a couple other homicide investigators, but even they’re a bit astonished that I didn’t do much more than wrinkle my nose and twitch my arm a little from shock at my first murder scene.

I stop and look up at the sky, sighing in frustration at myself. *I shouldn’t have agreed to this. That woman does not need a single extra drop of alcohol. She’s more thoroughly marinated in alcohol than my dad’s smoked ribs.* I make an aimless complaint while standing at the edge of the closest gas station parking lot. I take another glance at my watch, and barely register that it’s nine-thirty before something comes blasting into my head from far away.

*Did…did I ask for…uh…shit-* I get the voice of a clearly drunken woman blaring in my head far louder than she has any right to. On top of that, she can’t even get the thought formulated before she starts hurling her harassment at me. I hear her loudly sigh as she tries to collect herself. *Look, I…didn’t ask for any of your damn whining, just more…of the Captain.* Her voice changes to a whine. *Robert, I want to sail the high seas with the Cap.* She starts giggling at her own terrible joke, and doesn’t stop for well over twenty seconds, while I stand in the parking lot with my eyes shut trying not to grind my teeth into flakes.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. *The only reason I’m not shutting you out is because you’re so buzzed I’m afraid you’re going to become radioactive. Could you please just let me complain in peace?*

*If you want to complain in peace, then stop sending me the complaints.* A small moment of sobriety washes over her voice as she finds it in her to make a witty comeback. *I’m drunk and I’m the one telling you to shut up. Robbie, that’s a problem.* She giggles again.

*It’s no fun to complain if you can’t hear it.* I cross my arms and fire back. *Anyways, I never said I wasn’t going to get your booze, did I? I know you’re far from your limit.* I take a breath and start to tell her I’ll be back soon when a hand grabs my shoulder. I reflexively knock it away and spin to face the grabber.

It’s some hooded hooligan with one eye closed just a little more than the other. His half-grin has some of the most yellowed teeth I’ve ever seen. I see the same thing on the mouth of a meth addict, so I’m going to make the wild assumption that it’s more of the same. The hoodie he’s wearing looks like it might fall into its individual threads with one wrong movement, and pieces are already missing from it. Most of the holes are burns and acid damage, which is only helping my earlier assumption.

“Hey, bud, sorry for scaring you like that.” He has a thick accent about him, but he seems to be able to speak clearly. He must be one hell of a smooth-talker amongst the drug rings. “I was just wondering if you had a few bucks to spare for me. I need to stop at the burger joint and get some food.” Again, I’ll just assume ‘burger joint’ is the local drugstore and ‘food’ is something with a high concentration of pseudoephedrine.

I raise one hand in consolation. “Sorry, man, I only have plastic on me. I don’t carry around cash this late at night, because, well, you know.” I turn away and walk to the gas station store door. “Have a nice night, though.”

“Oh, no, plastic will be fine, too. In fact,” the man whistles, and his accomplice comes out from behind a nearby gas pump, “We’ll just take your whole wallet.” The two close in on me. I take a look around and find nobody else is looking at us. It would be just my luck that the nearest gas station is the farthest from the rest of the busy places for the late night.

The accomplice closes up behind me while I try to keep my composure and think with force. *Problem.* I take a glance at both of them. They’re about two steps closer. *Problem, woman. Need help.* I know she’s not blocking me out, so why the hell isn’t she responding?

The men are now seven steps away. *Karen, please, I really need your help right about now.* I prime the thought to swap preemptively, just in case this comes down to the wire. Four steps away. *Karen, really, this isn’t funny, I know damn well you can hear me. We need to do a swap now. You’re way better at this than I am.* Two steps away.  *If you’re screwing with me, I hope you know I won’t be able to get you alcohol for a real long time if my wallet gets stolen.* I send that last thought with more force than was ever necessary. The men are right up against me, and the accomplice has grabbed one of my arms.

I hear an irritated sigh from Karen. *Jeez, look at the mess you got yourself in. Fine, let’s do this.* I close my eyes hard and reach out to Karen as panic settles in, and I feel her make contact with me on a level that is completely unnatural.

In that instant, our minds and our perspectives invert and slide past each other. The next thing I know, I’m sinking into the thick, muddy grime of a drunken haze in Karen’s heavily boozed body, and Karen has turned my body into a mobile weapon. If I focus hard enough, I can feel the fists of my body making contact with something. It’s probably that meth addict’s face.

I look down at my current self to see Karen’s body with clothes barely in the right places. I try to move my hand to pull a shoulder strap back above the shoulder, but my hand fumbles stupidly because of the booze. I can barely think straight. I don’t know how she can tolerate this level of drunkenness. I’ve taken control of this body more times than I can recall, but usually, I’m knocking things over because I’m not used to having such power behind my movements, not this sluggish fumbling. When I get back, I’m going to forcibly redress this woman before this goes from sloppy to indecent.

As I finish my slurred thoughts and spend the following moments trying to keep myself composed, Karen comes bounding into my buzzing head with a cheery voice. *I got the booze!* She hums a little tune as the ring of the gas station store door comes into my head. *Hey, switch back with me so I can enjoy my drunk again. Getting sober this quickly is really annoying.*

*God, gladly. Fix your damn clothes before I get back, though. You look like a whore getting half-way into some regrettable life-decision right now.* I absently complain as I stretch my psyche out to her, and the pull takes me back into my body, a sense of clear-headedness filling me as I survey the once-again dark atmosphere of the outskirts of town.

I look behind to see the two muggers are now flopped over on their sides on the sidewalk. There’s a police car going down the street, lights flashing without the sirens on, pulling toward the scene. Now would be the time to take my leave. I check the bags handing from my hands to find not only the expected spiced rum, but also a dark green square bottle with a brass cap clanking against it, “Jaegermeister” printed in fancy lettering over the front label. Also, my hands hurt like hell.

Right as I’m about to start yelling about budget, Karen comes and cuts me off. *Oh, hey, they let me have it for free, so I took two.* She hiccups and clears her throat. *I need to practice my Jaeger shots, so I figured why not?* A not-so-innocent giggle bubbles out of her. *Tonight is going to be fun.*

*Fine, I guess I can’t complain if it was free. Just fix your clothes and don’t puke on the rug again before I get back.* That rug has gone through so many steam treatments that I’m surprised the bottom hasn’t disintegrated into little gooey chunks. I might as well just throw it out, because it’s going to get constantly stained by the drunk’s expulsions until the day we leave that apartment. With a sigh, I begin trudging my way back to the building.

At about ten-fifteen, I open the door to the bracing freshness of a wall of booze-stink. There, on the couch, with her clothes still on the border of failing in their purpose is Karen, drifting between wakefulness and sleep. I set the bag of liquor on the granite counter with an excessively loud clank. She jerks up at the sound like a dog that just heard the dinner bell.

“Booze?” She darts her head around a bit before finally settling on me and the bag. “Robert, Booze!” She jumps up to collect her prize, but stumbles as she stands up, and only manages to flop back down on the couch.

“Yes, booze, and you can wait patiently until I’m finished.” I take a shot glass from the cabinet and uncap the bottle of Jaegermeister. I pour myself a shot. “This is for making me get your booze.” I down the shot and slam the glass back on the counter, refilling it. “This is for waiting so long before helping with those muggers.” I repeat the process, and make sure my final shot is a bit more than usual. “This one, most importantly, is because you still look like a half-dressed tramp, and it’s embarrassing to come home to that.” I savor the last shot, and then toss the glass in the sink. “Seriously, hold still for a second.”

I pick up the two bottles and make my way over to the couch, setting them on the table in front of Karen. She reaches out to grab one, but I swat her hand. “No, you have to wait until I’m done.” I reach over and jerk her clothes back into position to cover her properly. “You are such a mess.” I say this as I stare down a fairly large stain on the front of her shirt from when she drank too much, the liquid dribbling out of the corners of her mouth.

After I finish, and motion to her, she greedily grabs the bottle of rum all for herself. She makes a look with sultry eyes at me. “You redressed a drunken girl. That’s, like, the opposite of what you should do.” She giggles again, and then breaks out into laughter, which devolves into hysterics. “You are such a little goody-two-shoes!” She continues laughing, interrupted by hiccups or swigs of booze. I sigh and turn on the television to distract myself.

I toss the remote between us. “Two reasons.” I hold up two fingers, which she stares at with a happy kind of drunken face. “First, if at least one of us didn’t behave, we’d be much worse off, and you wouldn’t get so much of your wonderful alcohol.” I put down my middle finger, and am about to name my second reason, when Karen attempts to bite my finger. Failing that, she titters, teeters, and totters, until she finally falls backwards onto the couch, clearly unable to compose herself any more. “Second, you know exactly how awkward that would be if we went that far.”

“Mmm, I think it’d be fun.” She slurs while rolling over to face the back of the couch. “We could feel each other at the same time.” A licentious laugh spills out of her mouth as she prods me with her foot. “Or maybe we could switch roles. Literally.” Her laughter turns downright sinister at this point, like she wants to force me to try it. If she weren’t so slack-arm wasted, I’d be legitimately worried that she would try.

“Jesus Christ, you are seriously drunk if you’ve forgotten the ‘accidents’ from our university years. Back when you were in college, you almost beat me senseless when I didn’t ‘shut the damn door’, as you put it.” There was no way to mistake what she meant, considering she was across campus in her accounting class. ‘Experimenting’ took on a whole new level as far we were concerned.

I went to handle standard teenage boy business, and in my rush, forgot to block my transmissions to Karen. That was the day we discovered that the sensation of touch transfers between us flawlessly. It took at least two or three times more from each of us to make it a priority to block each other out during our business. While it wasn’t exactly painful or discomforting, it was certainly awkward sitting in the middle of an auditorium stifling myself while Karen went to town, and probably vice versa for her. She managed to ignore my mental screams of distress the whole time. Apparently, when someone wants their privacy, it only stops the inbound, not the outbound.

Karen recalls those times, clearly hazy in her swill-soaked brain, and sighs with a nod. “Okay, yeah, let’s not.” The memories must have sobered her up a bit. Her eyes flicker faintly from a drunken idea. “Wait, why didn’t we just shut it out when it started happening?” Her eyes are unfocused as she has a reaction similar to having an epiphany. “I think I might have been a bit curious the first time, honestly, but uh, yeah, why didn’t I just ignore it after that?” She furrows her brow in the deepest state of drunken deliberation I’ve ever seen her in.

“We can’t shut out something once it starts receiving. We’d have to know beforehand about the…event.” I grab the throw blanket from the couch and wrap myself up. I glance over at her with squinted eyes. “Also, since when in the hell were you such a horny drunk?”

She shrugs with one shoulder, still lying on the couch. “I don’t know, must be the booze talking. I’ve never drank this much rum in one night.” She shuts her eyes, drifting into another thin, fragile nap.

I use the opportunity to take a closer look at her. Aside from the usual brown shoulder-length hair being a total mess, with her excessive bangs all pushed to one side, everything seems about the same as usual. She’s got a pure, drunken smile of contentment about her, and if I left her alone for long enough, I’m fairly sure she’d sleep the rest of the night away. Maybe the booze is starting to get to me, but she looks unmistakably sort-of cute right now, like an oversized puppy that ate a little too much. I watch her moan uncomfortably and curl up, as a hard knock comes from the door.

Karen jerks a little, but only manages to roll over and stare in the direction of the disturbance. Another series of knocks echoes through the room. She shuts her eyes and covers her ears. “Robert, door.” She mutters her orders through a haze of drink and sleepiness, as yet another set of knocks come from the door. “Robert, door! Now!” She twists around like it’s insufferable that someone besides me is making noise.

“Alright, fine, don’t go screaming at me.” I get up from the couch and support myself with the table, the shots finally settling in to give me a pleasurable, but manageable buzz. I make my way over to the door and take a peek through the peep-hole to find a usual visitor. I open the door and greet the man.

“Mister Carson, how are you?” I shake his hand and speak with an extra flair of politeness. “Sorry it took so long to get to the door, I’m dealing with a drunkard right now.” I stop and flinch as said drunkard assaults my head with a series of half-formed complaints and insults. I turn back to her and wave my hand to shoo her mental assault. “Would you cut that out? It’s Carson!”

At the mention of who is visiting, Karen attempts to stand up, and somehow manages a wobbly posture, waving at him, or at least a little to the right of him. “Hello, Jack.” She greets him with that usual drunk, happy tone, drawing out his name about half a second longer than she really needed to. “You want some Jaeger?” She waves the bottle around wildly over her head, not noticing the cap is missing. A dollop of the liquor splatters on her head and face, which she uses a finger to collect and consume immediately.

I sigh in embarrassment. “Just sit down, you dolt.” Taking my order, she picks up the bottle of Captain Morgan, poses with one foot on the table, takes a swig, and then flops down onto the couch with a salute. I turn back to Jack Carson, who is trying really, really hard to not break a smile. “Sorry about that, Jack. What’s going on?”

“Oh, nothing much, just stopping by to get my monthly report. Sorry for showing up so late, but the guys at the department had me running errands for something or other.” He takes up his clipboard that was at his side and unsheathes the pen under the clip. He almost starts to write, but stops short of the paper. “Just checking, you two are…in the right order, right?” He flicks the pen between me and the direction of Karen, who is probably nursing a bottle of rum.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, yeah, we’re not out of place.” I guess he means if we’re both in our original bodies. A couple of times, he’d show up while we were busy handling housework. We swap bodies, and shifts, every hour. Only one of our bodies is tired by the end of the day that way. When he’s shown up at those moments, both times, Karen answered the door in my body and proceeded to toy with poor Jack. I never got the details of their conversations, but Jack told me it involved us being busy ‘physically familiarizing ourselves with each other’s bodies’. I can guess what Karen meant. I gave her a verbal beating that would make John Galt blush, afterwards.

Jack laughs to himself. “Ah, hell, I’ve been checking on you two for the last ten years. I should know by now that you’d never get that drunk, and Karen would never let you swap while she was that drunk.” He scribbles on the clipboard.

“Funny enough, she did have to swap with me tonight to take care of a couple of hooligans at a gas station.” I give him a quick recount of the events.

“Ah, yeah, I got the tip from the police about you beating those two meth-heads into submission.” He looks over my shoulder. “Well, Karen beating them, I mean.” He scribbles some more on the form on his clipboard. “In that case, just for the sake of detail in my report, you should know how boozed Karen is. Care to elaborate?”

I chuckle a bit. “Hasselhoff, except he wouldn’t even be able to pick up the cheeseburger. It was like being in a vat of honey, except all the honey was in my eyes and brain.” I lean forward and try to take a peek at the clipboard. Jack expertly tilts it up and alters his posture, keeping it from me. “Does that have any real bearing on your report?”

“Eh.” He shrugs like he’s not sure. “The boys back at the department like the details. I’d say this detail will just end up in the monthly report as an aside. They don’t really care about what you two do with yourselves. They just like to watch.” He sighs and looks over my shoulder again. “Personally, though, Robert, I think you need to wean her off the poison.” He taps his pen a couple of times against the clipboard and frowns a little. “She doesn’t need to be that drunk; nobody does. Not only are you two special, but no person has a right or need to be that wasted so often.”

I sigh in understanding. “It’s gotten a bit less frequent. I only let her have hard liquor on the weekends. I think she’s really getting sick of it on her own.” I take a worried look back at her. I get a questioning prod in my head, Karen becoming a little self-conscious. “Yes, you really are that drunk. I try to be flexible about this, but you really need to do something else with yourself. Our brains are special, so we can’t go rotting them out like this.” The extra booze has settled in, so she’s having difficulty doing anything but conveying concepts. I get the abstract form of an apology from her. There’s a hint of sadness behind it.

I turn back to Jack, blocking my mind out from Karen. I whisper quietly. “Look, she’s getting a bit upset. You got everything you need?”

Jack looks over his clipboard, makes a few more marks, and then slips the pen back through its sheath. “I think that’ll be everything. Sorry for the hassle.” He backs away and takes a sharp turn to the right. “See you later, champ.” With that, I shut the door on the aging man and turn my attention back to Karen.

“Hey, Karen, you okay over there?” I get no response. Making my way back over to the couch, Karen has sat up, covering with the throw blanket, and is quietly staring, vacantly, in front of her. I get closer, and I can see some tear streaks on her face. Her eyes drift to me momentarily, and then fall to the ground in front of her.

“S-sorry.” She’s having trouble speaking clearly. “I-I’m such a mess right now.” She wipes her face with the blanket, fresh tears spilling out, making new streaks on her face.

“It’s not that big of a deal, Karen. You just drink a bit too much.” I hesitantly pat her head. “You just need to cut back a little at a time.” I try to keep my mind focused on comfort and relaxation so that she can feed off of it to keep herself stable.

She shakes her head violently. “It is a big deal!” She sobs again. “I’m always c-causing you so m-much trouble because all I do is drink booze and make you get more booze for me and not help you when you need me and be so selfish I—“

I forcefully grab the top of her head to shut her up, tensing my jaw in irritation. “You are blowing this way, way out of proportion. Quit being so dramatic.” I get intermittent small floods of emotions from her as I listen to her. They’re different than normal, feeling more like they’re spilling all over the place rather than being projected at me. It’s the usual signal that the drink is talking, or at least making her talk too much. “Look, you’re not in a state to talk seriously about this. Let’s get you to bed and we can talk about it in the morning.” I casually squeeze the back of her neck, trying to relax her. She starts to slump a bit from the pressure, falling half-way into sleep again.

She groans a little and slumps harder. “Okay. I’ll go to sleep.”

I sigh in relief. “Good girl. Now, come on, up we go.” I pick her up under the shoulder and behind the knees, still wrapped in the throw blanket, and carry her to her room. Even though she’s all muscle from her martial arts, she’s also incredibly lean, and almost freakishly light. She’s almost as tall as me at a little over six feet, but she’s in a hell of a better shape of fitness than I am.

By the time I sidestep through the door to her room, she’s already dead asleep. I set her on the far side of the bed, pull the covers of the near side, and then tuck her into them as gently as possible. I know how she likes to sleep, so I pull off her dress clothes and slip her into some night shorts and a t-shirt. As usual, her body is unfairly stunning. I catch myself staring a little too hard and pull the shorts up the rest of the way, chastising myself.

It’s strange, in a way. Seeing her body doesn’t faze me all that much. I’m so used to seeing it from swapping bodies that it feels more like I’m taking care of my other body than the body of a woman I live with. Karen’s said it as well; she feels the same way about handling my body. We’ve been in this strange, unbelievable setup for so long that having a panic over each other like that would be immature. We give each other the normal amount of space, and we don’t go around groping each other, but there’s nothing there that either of us haven’t seen before.

I think that if anyone saw the inside of this apartment, they would think we’re more than close friends. They’d be sorely disappointed to hear the truth. There isn’t a single spark of that kind of stuff between us. It’s more like something between childhood friends and being brother and sister, even if we aren’t related. Karen’s complained any time someone makes that assumption, saying that she thinks it’s ‘just weird’ thinking about having that kind of relationship with me.

After everything is squared away, I take one last look around the room, and then quietly whisper over the quiet hum of the air conditioner. “Karen.” She stirs in her sleep just a little, and I give her a projection of relaxation, while she sleeps. She twitches a little, and a small smile comes over her as she rolls over onto her side and starts snoring a little. I laugh to myself and exit the room, shutting the door quietly.