

# DON'T ASK FAVORS

By Mila Caris

Sharon Plumb looked at the crumpled paper in her hands and felt stressed.

She walked over to the window and reflected on her almost perfect surroundings. She had always loved the snow, and the woods, and the private feeling you get from a secluded cabin.

Then she saw something in the distance, or rather *someone*. It was the figure of James Meadows. James was a sympathetic monster with unusually long fingernails, but an even longer memory.

Sharon gulped. She glanced at her own reflection in the wall mirror. She was a tight-fisted, clever, beer drinker with grubby fingernails and calloused fingers. Her friends saw her as a wonderful ally but a dangerous adversary. But not even a tight-fisted person who cared enough about all life to have once jumped into a river and to save a drowning chicken, was prepared for what James had in store today.

The snow flurried like blinding white curtain, making Sharon uncertain of the vision she saw. Was it truly James? Was he back so soon?

As Sharon stepped outside, James came closer, and she could see the warm glint in his almost glowing green eyes.

"Look, Sharon," James drawled, with a brutal glare that reminded Sharon of those horrible vultures that circled her Arizona home when she was young. "It's not that I don't love you, but it's time I collected my debt. You owe me for letting you stay here."

Sharon looked back, still fingering the crumpled paper. "James, eat my shorts," she quipped. Her use of the phrase amused her. She hadn't said anything like that since the 80s – when she'd last seen him. And she knew he hated that phrase, just the absurdity of it. It made her nostalgic for the time they had been together.

They looked at each other with forlorn spirits, like two long-lost lovers, remembering that time on the beach, which had jazz music faintly playing in the background from the concert on the pier, and two children who had stumbled upon their passion in the dunes, interrupting their love not just then, but forever.

Sharon regarded James's abnormally long fingernails, realizing his hair had grayed with the years. "I... don't have the funds ..." she lied.

James glared. "Do you want me to shove those crumpled papers where the sun don't shine? I know about your publishing deal. I know they gave you everything you wanted.

"Now, just because you wrote a story that someone wants to send around the world, don't mean that you better than me. I let you stay here. I let you have all the privacy you wanted. Even

supplied you with everything you asked for, including the food. Hell, I paid your bills! You owe me."

Sharon nodded. While she remembered her tight-fisted and clever values, she was sympathetic to his plight. "Actually, I... I do have the funds," she admitted. James looked confident. It reminded her of when they had met.

She hadn't known his history, nor even heard of him before. They were introduced to each other by Jennifer. Ah, Jennifer. She hadn't thought about her in years. Whatever happened to her? She hadn't seen her since... since that night she was introduced to James!

"You know it's not money I'm after," he said, drawing her back into the present. His emerald eyes burned with a passion she hadn't seen from him since they were together as a couple. It was those eyes that brought her back to him in the first place.

She'd been an aspiring writer for years but never had the time or means to complete her one big story. The story she'd had in her head for as long as she could remember. The story that would change her life. Get her published. Get her the money she'd need to finally find out what it was like to be, if not rich, then at least out of debt.

She knew he'd be able to help. But that he'd collect so soon after the deal was done. To not be able to enjoy the fruits of her labor. That's when she remembered that one niggling detail about her former lover.

He was meticulous. He'd always been so. From his wardrobe to his perfectly manicured fingernails. Everything had its place and he was insistent that everything be just so. When she came to him with her plan to sequester herself away and finally write that story, the deal she made included the house away from most of civilization and the means to support herself without having to leave to resupply her food stocks or worry about bill collectors.

He said he'd be happy to take care of everything. He even said he was surprised it took so long for her to ask him for something. It was then she realized that in all the time they were together, she'd never asked him for anything. He took things from her, of course. Her time. Her affection. Her first kiss. Almost her virginity if it weren't for those children hadn't been playing in the dunes.

Perhaps that's what Jennifer had meant when she introduced them. "Don't ask," she'd said. "You'll be sorry." The phrase had seemed out of place in the rest of the conversation. She was only now beginning to understand the full consequence of her deal with James. It was likely that was why she hadn't seen Jennifer in so long. She'd asked for something and James had collected.

Now it was her turn. He supplied everything she asked – only now she wished she'd said something about being able to enjoy her new-found success as a writer. But it was all so strange. He hadn't even said anything about how she'd found him.

Come to think of it, how had she found him? She hadn't thought about him in almost two decades. But the instant she did, she knew exactly where to find him. And how had he managed to get a place exactly like what she needed so quickly?

"It's time to pay, my dear," he said endearingly. His hand gently cupping her face; his long nails not quite scratching her cheeks. Long nails? Why did he have long nails? He was always so detailed in his appearance. She looked into his absurdly intense green eyes. Unaware of the snow fall, she, nevertheless, felt a chill – and it came from him.

She tried one last desperate plea, "don't you want me to find someone new for you? Like Jennifer did when she introduced us?"

James smiled. "My dear, I was only looking for a fix at the time. A short-term deal. I had no idea you'd turn into such a long-term investment. Those are always so much more satisfying. Why, with the length of time we've known each other, our bond has only strengthened my thirst, and your soul has fermented like a fine wine. One I'm quite eager to taste. My thirst needs to be quenched. And now that I've fulfilled my part of our bargain, it can be."

She looked one last time into his eyes. Damn those eyes. She could never say no to them. Even now, as she felt him drink her soul.



Three months later, a new best-seller hit the market: by Sharon Plumb, igniting one of the most bizarre mysteries of all-time. A married woman leaves her husband of fifteen years and her children, disappears for two months only to reappear for one online meeting to sell a novel before disappearing again. Her body was found another year later in a cabin in Vermont. The emaciated body lying on the ground next to three words clawed into the wood floor:

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