

The Wrong Crowd

Gayle Darwin gripped the elevator handhold and leaned against the wall for support, putting her other hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn. She had briefly wondered why the cargo station to Earth transport scheduled their trip for three o'clock in the morning, but then she had realized that they had abandoned real time on the *Gossamer* and were now off severely as a result. It was going to be ten o'clock in the morning in Equador when they arrived.

Standing beside her without the tiniest indication of weariness was Cooper Gray. She had the worst feeling that he was about to step out of her life forever, and something inside told her that she couldn't let that happen. The two of them had been confined to a small ship together for almost two months, and she couldn't help but wonder if her attachment to him would fade when time and distance separated them. Their compatible personalities had made them friends, but there was no reason to believe her feelings meant anything more, or that they would last. Deep in her heart, she couldn't deny the feeling of loss.

The stubborn man still had not told her where he was going or what he was doing after his departure from the ship. Gayle thought it would make her feel better if she could at least know where to contact him if she wanted to. She tried to tell herself that after a few days, he would be a gray scale memory blended in with many other forgotten friends. The current thought of his prospective disappearance, a black hole sucking the light from her mind, frightened her so that she did not think she could settle for that fate. The intensity surprised her even more.

The elevator shuttered, probably hitting a patch of turbulence, and the crewman standing on her other side almost fell. Most of the crew, including her command staff, had chosen to make the short ride to Earth sprawled in the seating section of the car, seat belts firmly in place. Their cargo took up the remaining floor of the area, boxes upon boxes of goods the government and a few private companies had sent back with them from Mars and *Genesis Station*. The energy fields holding the cargo in place allowed all of the crew cat naps as needed for the short journey back to the surface of Earth.

Gayle felt warm breath on her ear and realized she'd drifted to sleep. For a moment she had to wonder where they were. "I guess this is goodbye, again," Cooper said. He leaned so that they were shoulder to shoulder, barely touching.

The business woman looked at her slim, black digital watch. They were about ten minutes from touchdown. "Yeah, I guess so," she said, trying to regain her wits, a fog over her.

"I'll look you up when I can," he said, staring down at the floor. One of his thick hands held onto the handhold welded into the wall, and the other disappeared into the pocket of his faded blue jeans.

Gayle straightened when reality hit her and she understood what he was saying. "What a minute. Don't be so fast. I want to talk to you about something," she said. Her eyes scanned the closed in area and the nearby crew members. "But not here."

Cooper looked around, his caramel eyes troubled. "What do you want to talk to me about?" he asked.

Gayle turned slightly, her face only inches from his. "Not here. Meet me at my hotel later." He looked as though he wanted to refuse. "It's important."

The big man thought for a moment, then shrugged. His free hand moved up and touched her waist. "Okay. I'm not the kind of man who's gonna turn down a pretty lady who wants to meet at a hotel," he said, smiling.



Running from the front entrance where he had been chewing on a toy, Fifty made a greyhound like leap, landing almost all of his body on the bed, his thick back legs suspended over the edge. He'd been playing and investigating since arriving in the hotel room, happy to be out of the crate he'd been forced into for the trip down to the surface. He pulled one short hind leg, then the other, onto the bed with practiced balance. Gayle smiled and patted the bed beside her. The long eared dog bounded over and flopped into the covers, turning on his side and opening his arms for easy access to his undercarriage. Having been fully trained in this procedure from the beginning, Gayle began scratching his chest.

She'd been relaxing at the hotel after a short walk through the downtown streets. It felt nice to be on solid land again, even though her muscles felt somewhat weak. The exercise she did on the ship and the medicine designed to retard the effects of partial weightlessness helped, but there

was no substitute for the gravity of Earth. It pulled on her, exhausted her, in a way that said *home*.

Gayle looked at her watch. Cooper had agreed to call her by noon so that they could meet for lunch to talk. She still didn't know exactly what she was going to say to him, but she knew that she had to say something. Unfortunately, it was already half past twelve, and she was hungry and sleepy. If he didn't call soon, she'd have to eat without him, then waste the rest of her first day sleeping.

Fifty perked his head to look at the small rectangular box on the bedside night stand when it rang, its metallic tune a comforting noise. Gayle reached across the bed and hit the receive button, looking toward the camera. When the connection went through, she knew the person on the other end had no image screen, since no picture popped up on hers.

She greeted the unknown caller with her most sterile voice. "Gayle Darwin," she said.

"Gayle, it's me," a soft, static covered voice said.

Frowning, the business woman scooted across the bed toward the phone. "Cooper? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Gonna be late," he said in his normally abbreviated manner, but there was almost a panic in his tone.

"What's going on? Where the hell are you?" she asked.

A loud crash on the other end of the phone sounded like a door slamming. "Can't talk," he said, and the phone base beeped, signaling the loss of connection.

Well, shit, Gayle thought, leaning back into her pillows. Fifty rolled over to press his coarse fur against her again. "He didn't want to talk to me, Baby," she said, allowing her body to lean into the dog. Her voice was light, but she didn't like the strangeness in Cooper's words on the phone. It clearly wasn't what he said, but what he didn't say, that meant he was in trouble.

We've only been off the ship for a few hours. He can't be in that much trouble, she told herself. But from what she knew of Cooper's past, the criminal dealings and the like, she didn't know if she could truly be confident about his ability to stay straight. He admitted to her that he

would probably go back to smuggling after they returned. Perhaps he had already begun his foray into that life, bored with the rigor of being on her struggling transport ship. She hadn't imagined that he would reenter that world so fast.

Gayle knew the draw of action. She'd been in the Mecca of political intrigue and treachery for more years than she liked to remember. Though Washington did not pose a risk of frequent gunplay or lurking pirates, every day she worked among all of those backstabbing politicians and wannabes, she risked figurative, and sometimes literal, death. Rick had related several instances in which a hit had actually been put out on him. Somehow, the slick Congressman had been able to get his name off the list. If she had stayed, Gayle knew her name would have eventually been on the top.

She had found that the constant fighting and posturing did nothing to boost her career or spirits. She simply didn't want the rewards enough to continue taking the risks and the stress. The quiet solitude of the *Gossamer* suited her very well, she had learned. She only hoped she'd be able to make a go of it as a profitable business so that she could continue. Not everyone would be amenable to that life, though, and she supposed Cooper might be one of those people.

The phone buzzed again and Gayle answered. Silence greeted her for several moments before Cooper's ragged voice came through.

"Gayle, me again," he said.

She sat up again, crossing her legs Indian style. "Are you okay?"

His breath brushed heavily against the receiver and reverberated in the business woman's ear. She knew Cooper was on the line, but he said nothing.

"Cooper, what's happening?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't have anyone else to call," he said, his voice tense with frustration. "I've run into some trouble."

Gayle sighed and shook her head. "I guessed that much."

"My business associates don't think I'm very useful if I don't have a ship."

"Do you need me to come pick you up somewhere?" she asked.

Cooper laughed nervously. "It's more serious than that. They're going to kill me. Left me locked in a room while they try to clean out my bank account."

Gayle felt her jaw drop open. She thought she'd reconciled herself to the fact that Cooper was involved in criminal activity. It didn't truly sink in until now. "Did you offer to give them what they want?"

"They'll kill me either way. I'm only still alive because they may need me if they can't get the money. And they won't because I sent them on a chicken run. They'll be back here soon, and they won't be happy," he said, his voice now at normal volume.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"You can't come here," he said, reading her mind.

Gayle stood and went to the closet, pulling out her shoes. "Then why did you call me?" she asked, already knowing that she was going to help him whether he liked it or not.

He didn't say anything for a minute. "Don't know, but it's not safe."

She finished dressing and walked to the phone. "Just tell me where you are, because I'm coming to get you and I'm bringing the police," she said.

"No, no, no. You're not coming, and you're not calling the police. I'd rather take my chances with these guys than go to jail."

Gayle knew that he would go to jail if what he was saying was true. Any association with criminals was enough for the government to lock people up for years. Still, it would be better than being dead. "You can't just wait for them to come back."

"No police," Cooper said.

"Okay, no police. Where are you?"



Slamming the door to the cab, Gayle sprinted up the steps to the apartment building, not noticing the perfect sun overhead or the bright, clear Ecuadorian air. The fifty story, sleek black structure looked like an old office complex, and may have been at some point. Though it looked primarily clean and quiet, Cooper had described it as a slum. She supposed that the people who lived there, at least the criminal element, filled out the definition, so he was probably right.

Once inside the building, she ran into the nearest open elevator and hit the button. She looked at her watch as the car began moving. A low hum surrounded her with what she suspected was once a track of mood music. Now it was muted noise. She'd made good time from her hotel, six minutes. The ride in the enclosed car seemed that long. Stepping out on the thirty-first floor, she dialed Cooper's phone and began looking at apartment numbers. As she came to the right one, he answered.

"I'm here. Are you still alone?" she asked.

"Yeah, think so," he said.

She tried the door, not surprised to find it locked. She pushed against it and noted its solid construction. "The door is locked and won't budge. I've got to try to break it down," she said.

"Probably won't be able to. These guys have need of a sturdy door," Cooper said.

Gayle knew he was right, but she lowered her phone and rammed her shoulder into the steel door anyway. It didn't as much as shiver, but her skeleton rattled with the impact and prickles of pain radiated through her arm and shoulder. She took two steps away and tried the same approach with her foot, kicking the door with all her strength near the door handle. She pushed on the door again to find it just as sturdy as before.

She began walking back to the elevator with an idea in mind. "That's not working," she said to Cooper. "I'm going to try something else. Don't go anywhere."

Cooper laughed as he acknowledged her plan, a sound she hoped to hear in person again soon. Gayle disconnected the call as the elevator zipped through its shaft back to the first floor. Her brain was buzzing on adrenaline, making time liquid. When she stepped out, she sighed in relief

to see the door marked manager ajar and a light on inside. She only hoped the man was dumber than he should be.

Gayle knocked on the doorframe and called out. An older black man with white hair splattered with dark patches emerged from the inner hallway. He was wearing khakis and a simple blue button up shirt. Gayle tried to push away her current stress and act as ditzy and cute as possible.

"Excuse me. I need your help," she said, her voice lighter than she felt.

"What can I do for ya?" he asked.

Twirling her hair, Gayle smiled as big as she could. "I got locked out of my boyfriend's apartment and he won't be back for a while. Could you let me back in? I don't want him to think I'm stupid or something," she said with a high pitched laugh.

The caretaker laughed with her. "Sounds like you're in a spot. Which apartment is it?"

"He lives in 3131. I feel like such a dork," she said.

The man walked to the door and motioned for her to follow. As they moved on to the elevator, Gayle couldn't believe her plan had worked so well. She supposed she was better than she thought at being a brainless tart. In the alternative, she had secured a small fortune in cash money to bribe the man to let her into the room. She smiled at the older man and hoped he wouldn't talk to her any more than necessary. To her relief, he stared ahead, only occasional wizened smile.

When they stepped out onto the thirty-first floor, she followed the caretaker to the room. "I'll have to tell Marcus that I let you in here," he said, pulling his master keycard out of his pocket.

"I know. But at least I'll be back inside, so I won't look like too much of an idiot," she said.

The man kept the key in his pockets, but he moved his hands to his hips. "The man that lives here isn't named Marcus," he said.

Her lips pursed in frustration and she had to think fast about what to do. The apartment manager had probably suspected her of being untruthful from the start, but he'd brought her all the way up here to the apartment, so that had to mean something. "Oh, well, I never said I knew his name."

He sized her up with a knowing smirk on his face. "Listen, it could be that you're sleeping with the guy that owns this place, or it could be that there's something in there that you want. I don't really care either way. I just know that I'm in trouble if I open that door for you and it turns out you're not supposed to be in there."

"I could make it worth your risk," she said. Reaching into the inside pocket of her light jacket, she pulled out about \$1,000 in bills and held the wad of cash between them.

The man snatched the money from her hands and quickly counted it. Gayle could see that appealing to his greedy side was much more effective than playing on his sympathies. Whatever worked, she didn't care.

"It's going to take more than this," he said.

Gayle pulled out an equal stack. "I can double it, but that's all I've got," she lied. "I'm not taking any property from inside. They've got a friend of mine locked up and they are probably going to kill him. I just want to take him away," she said.

"They'll probably end up killing him anyway," the man said, knowledge in his eyes.

Pursing her lips, Gayle touched the man's arm. "Please help me."

The caretaker took the money from her and pulled his keycard from his pocket, swiping it quickly through the reader on the door. The indicator light switched from red to green, and the latch inside popped softly.

"Thank you," she said, putting her hand on the door handle. The man was already on his way back to the elevator, no doubt wanting to be found nowhere near the apartment in case its tenants came back. She wondered briefly why he had helped her, and how he knew he wouldn't get caught, but she couldn't dwell on the thought. Cooper had said the men would be back at any time.

As the door clicked shut behind her, she surveyed the one bedroom apartment. There was a table stacked with trash and dishes by the outer glass wall, and all manner of clothing articles strewn across the floor. The small kitchen in the corner appeared unused, though not particularly

clean. She stepped over objects she did not take the time to identify to look into the bedroom. No one was there.

“Cooper,” she called, walking to the bathroom.

No one was in there, either, but she heard a muffled voice from the main room. For a moment, a streak of panic rose within her at the idea that Cooper's captors might be returning, guns and God knew what else in hand. Then the voice sounded again, and she recognized it as Cooper's. Looking in the direction from which his voice had come, Gayle saw nothing different from when she'd walked past at first. As she examined the room, she saw a closed door in the little kitchen that she had initially dismissed as a pantry. Now she noticed that it had three locks lining its right side, and it was made of metal.

She sprinted to the door, leaping the obstacles in her way, and began turning the deadbolts, calling Cooper's name. When the door burst open, he stood calmly on the other side, smiling, dimples creasing his stubbled face. Looking into his soft eyes, Gayle let a wave of relief wash over her.

Cooper stepped forward and she threw her arms around him, her fingers gripping the tense muscles in his shoulders. His arms deliberately closed around her and he squeezed her gently.

“Gotta go,” he said quietly, his lips almost touching her ear.

She pulled away, surprised at her own reaction, and nodded.

They left the room, shutting the door behind them, and walked toward the elevator. Before they could see the doors, the bell over them rang with a dull thud. The arrows at top failed to light, and probably hadn't in years. Gayle looked at Cooper, knowing he was thinking the same as she. He put out his hand and they stopped, listening to try and discern information about who might be arriving on the floor. The shuffle of multiple feet and raucous male voices told them all they needed to know.

Cooper grabbed her hand, pulling her backwards down the hall. Before the men made it to their corridor, the pair dove into the stairwell and began their sprinting descent from Cooper's near death. Gayle barely breathed as they careened down the stairs, a seemingly never ending spiral. By the time they were fifteen floors down, halfway, she could feel the jarring effects on her back and knees, as well as wear on her muscles, despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. They had no indication

that the men were in pursuit, but that didn't mean they wouldn't be waiting for the couple when they emerged on the bottom floor. Gayle kept imagining that a gang of long haired, dirty, maniacal drug dealers would chase them back up the stairs, finally catching them and putting laser pistols at their heads. The closer they came to the bottom landing, the more she wanted to turn around and go back up.

Apparently oblivious to her fears, Cooper trudged on with no hesitation. As Gayle took her last step from the staircase, her companion opened the door to the first floor lobby and burst through it. Gayle had no choice but to follow.

To Cooper's credit, no murdering group waited on the other side. In fact, there was no one. They moved unabated to the street. Cars and motorcycles filled all six lanes, their motors running with quiet solar precision. A small group of pedestrians walked along the other side of the traffic, but no one populated Gayle's side of the street. She followed Cooper North, walking at her most brisk pace to keep up. He wound them through several buildings until they were no longer in site of his friends' apartment complex.

The dark skinned man stopped on the sidewalk and looked at the row of cabs beside them. He moved to the bright blue one and opened the door, inviting her inside. She gave him a playful smile and scooted into the backseat of the small car. Cooper nuzzled beside her, their shoulders and arms touching along their lengths, and directed the driver to the hotel.

Cooper put his arm along the back of the seat and turned to face her. "Thanks for saving my ass," he said.

She shifted a bit to face him more fully, still panting from their run. "I didn't do anything you wouldn't do for me," she said.

A crease shifted into Cooper's brow. "Are you sure?" He moved his hand from the seatback to rest on her shoulder.

"I think so. You try to let on that you're a loner, but you would have helped me if asked," she said. Gayle had wanted to wait to ask him her question, but the time felt right, sitting so close to him and talking so plainly. "I should kick your ass anyway, though, for getting in this mess."

"Why don't you?"

Gayle shook her head and leaned against his arm. "I don't know. There's just something about you that I can't turn away from," she said.

A small smile played at his lips. "Kind of like watching a plane crash."

"No," she said, slapping his leg. "I think you have a lot of potential. I may regret this someday, but I'm about to ask you something important." She waited for him to make a joke, but he remained silent. "Promise me that you are done committing crimes," she said.

"Why?" he asked, a skeptical look on his chiseled features.

"Because you have to tell me that you are done before you can give me the answer that I want to my next question," she said.

His hand shifted on her shoulder and Gayle tried to ignore the warmth there. "Don't know if I can do that. Don't want to lie to you," he said, pulling his eyes away and to the scenery passing by the cab's windows.

"Okay, look at it this way. I'm going to give you an opportunity so that you won't have to do illegal activities to get by. Now tell me you're done with that life," she said.

Cooper shrugged his shoulders and smiled, as if telling himself that it couldn't hurt to give Gayle what she wanted. "Alright. My life of crime is over."

The businesswoman brightened with a smile and squeezed his arm. She knew the promise didn't necessarily mean anything, but she thought that Cooper wouldn't turn to that sort of life unless he had to. "Cooper, I'd like to hire you to join my crew as head of security," she said.

The man's face went slack and his eyebrows rose. "I—that's a very attractive offer. Thank you," he said.

He looked completely surprised. "Does that mean that you accept?"

"Yes," he said, without further delay. "I'd love to work on your ship," he said. His smile returned, more confident than before. "Have you talked to the Captain about this?"

Gayle laughed. "Well, I told him I was creating the position, but not who was going to fill it. He may not be happy, but he'll get over it. He's learning the same thing that you'll come to know." She leaned forward

with a playful smirk. "He's high up on the chain of command, but I'm the top dog."

Cooper licked his lips and swallowed. "I'll keep that in mind."