At first I told this Stegal guy, *no way, man, forget it, not gonna happen.*

Acting like I barely remembered her, which, of course, was a lie. A long time ago and plenty of water under that particular bridge. Another falsehood, but at that point who was he to me? Some West Coast twerp with sun-tanned vocal cords and a swimming pool in his back yard.

But, give him credit, he wouldn’t take “no” for an answer. “I hear what you’re saying, now hear *me* out. Emily—she reverted back to her maiden name, by the way, she’s recently divorced—still regrets what happened. The woman wants to make it right, Dean, and it seems kind of selfish not giving her a chance.” Switching gears: “You’ve seen the show, right?”

“Well, I—”

“But you understand the concept, at least.”

“Sure, I guess, but—”

“Then you might want to add this to the equation: free flight to L.A., limo service, two complimentary nights at a fantastic hotel, meals…” My hesitation was all he needed. “Good, you’re thinking about it. Because from where I sit, Dean, ol’ buddy, this is a win-win scenario for you. Not many guys get to have their ex grovel for forgiveness in front of God knows how many people.”
“She…”

“What?”

“She doesn’t have to do that,” I finally managed. “I’d just like to find out why, uh, what happened happened.”

“And that’s what we’re offering,” he insisted. “Our program is all about closure. Can I fax or e-mail you some things? Just technical, legal mumbo-jumbo…”

“I’m not sure—”

“C’mon,” he urged, sounding impatient for the first time, “you’ve already agreed in your mind. Why not just come out and say it?”

“I guess… I’ll do it.”

“Awesome. I’ll get things underway on this end and then I’ll be in touch.” Pausing. “Hey, Dean, be cool, man, you made the right choice. Sit back and enjoy the ride.”

“Yeah, right.” I didn’t sound very convincing but by that point he didn’t care; he practically had my name on the dotted line.

What did it matter to him that I’d never stopped loving Emily Wheeler?

My friends couldn’t believe it. Gerry and Liz, who’d socialized with Em and I, weren’t certain I was doing the right thing.

“Emily was a great gal, great gal,” Gerry kept repeating.

“But sometimes it’s better to leave the past alone,” Liz chimed in.

“But we were friends, the four of us. You were as surprised as I was when she left…” They glanced at each other. “Weren’t you?”

Neither of them would meet my eye.
And I thought: *what have I gotten myself into?*

The flight seemed to take no time at all and when I arrived in Los Angeles a short, stout fellow holding a sign with my name in black marker was waiting to convey me to the hotel. It was a swanky place, way out of my price range. I felt like a badly dressed hick as I queued to check in.

Once I made it to my room, a combination of nervous fatigue and just plain nerves soon had me kneeling at the porcelain altar, heaving and groaning. When I finished, I sat back, bracing myself against the bathtub, cursing my stupidity.

I’d finally worked up the courage to watch some episodes of “Restitution” and hadn’t liked what I’d seen. The show was much more raw and emotional than I realized and sometimes there wasn’t catharsis and closure, sometimes it amounted to mayhem and blind, uncontrolled fury. The tears flowed copiously and since this was cable there was no need to censor anything or water down the drama.

One episode featured an almost unbearable confrontation between a man and the bully who’d made his teen years a living hell. There were no happy endings this time around, no sense of old wounds healed. The grownup victim swore and spat at his tormentor, refusing to be mollified by the show’s host, Lyle O’Shea. O’Shea cultivated a soothing, sympathetic persona but his pop psychology and smarmy appeals for reconciliation fell on deaf ears. The embittered guest stormed off the set, leaving the bully, abject and deflated, still waiting for the forgiveness that would never come.

The intriguing part of the show’s premise was that it was up to the *malefactor* to contact the program—they had to demonstrate true repentance and accept whatever
reaction or vituperation the injured party directed at them. Their humiliation was recorded, broadcast, exhibited for the entire world to see.

What made them want to do it?
What made her want to do it?
Why did she feel the need to make amends more than five years after she’d left?
And how, exactly, did I feel about that?

A cute little production assistant steered me through the backstage warren to makeup. Not just a little touchup, either, I got the full treatment. I thought I looked ludicrous but they assured me that under the studio lights I’d appear “more natural than natural”. Whatever that meant.

Next I was escorted to the “green” room, just a short skip away from the main set and studio audience. I could hear people murmuring on the other side of a curtained doorway and my stomach did a little doo-wop as I pictured what awaited me out there.

They stuck to their guns and never let Emily and I lay eyes on each other until the cameras rolled. I waited about forty-five minutes while they wrapped up one show and prepped for my segment (they shot two episodes back-to-back to save money). There was a fridge for cold drinks and snacks, even a small bar. The P.A. fixed me a weak Tom Collins, at my request, and made small talk to help dispel some of my nervousness. At one point she caught my eye:

“I don’t want to pressure you or anything but have you given any thought to how you’re going to react, y’know, when you see her, like, after all these years?”
I wondered if this chitchat was part of the pre-screening process, trying to anticipate potential ugliness and, if possible, nip it in the bud. Afraid I’d go “Jerry Springer” on them.

I told this Tamara gal I wasn’t sure what would be going through my mind, that it had been a long time and much of the pain had dissipated.

“But not all of it?”

“No,” I admitted, “not all.”

“Because she walked out on you, right? Left everything and—”

“Right, right,” I broke in, knowing I’d be describing the whole sorry affair in a few minutes anyway, “didn’t even pack a bag.”

“Wow…” She was thinking about it, playing out the scenario in her head. “And now you’ll find out why.”

“I guess so.” I took a big bite out of the Tom Collins, nearly finishing it off.

“Let me top you up,” reaching for my glass. “One more for the road and that’s it. We want you loose, but not hammered.”

“Right,” I agreed, “don’t want me going psycho on her or anything, do we?”

It was meant as a joke but I could tell it didn’t go over well…

Lyle O’Shea shook my hand, looking me right in my eye, giving my elbow a reassuring squeeze before guiding me to my seat. Doing his best to make me feel at home in front of a small crew, a studio audience numbering perhaps seventy-five and a couple million cable subscribers watching from the comfort of their living rooms.
The drinks helped but I was definitely spooked. Giving clipped, short answers, relying on Lyle to transmit my tale of woe. I felt wavelets of sympathy from the audience as the story unfolded and by the time he reached its conclusion they seemed genuinely outraged on my behalf.

Then came the moment everyone was waiting for, Lyle and I standing and turning toward the curtained entrance, the heavy material drawn back and my old flame, Emily Patricia Wheeler, stepping through, momentarily taken aback by the catcalls and boos that greeted her appearance.

To be honest, I barely heard them.

Her hair was different and the heels she wore made her seem taller. They’d done their thing with makeup but, they were right, under the brilliant lights she shone like Ingrid Bergman in “Casablanca” (a film we both adored).

She was squinting as she walked toward us, holding out her hand, tentative, face an anguished mask. We were close, our fingers nearly brushing. She started to say something, words that would be captured for posterity by a lurking boom microphone. But I surprised everyone and beat her to it.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “You did the right thing. I deserved it.”

There were gasps, a few wolf whistles. Emily glanced at Lyle, then came back to me. Confused, flustered…

Looking as beautiful and lost as the day she left.