



LIGHTS

Out!

AMBER GREEN

Loose Id

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LoSeId®

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Chapter One

New York City, November 6, 1942

Six stories below Jack French's hotel window, blacked-out headlights created eerie, floating patches of dim light in the streets of New York City. He leaned out into the icy wind, listening. Traffic noises. Wind noises. Nothing more. Yet hydes prowled those streets: bold, hungry flesh-eaters this city hadn't known since the gaslit nights of the past century. Granddaddy's nights.

Now they're my nights. Mine and Tommy's.

A moment ago, someone had splashed intense light off to his left, up high, revealing two air raid wardens perched whimsically on the gargoyles of the opposite building. The wardens had yelled themselves hoarse. "Lights *out!* Lights out *everyone!*"

Now, except at street level, darkness reigned. The overcast skies reflected only a pair of dragon's-breath smokestacks. Every other light was covered to darken the horizons, to reduce the city-glow that could silhouette Liberty ships running the U-boat gauntlet.

His fingers traced the squat shape of the desk telephone, the most modern feature of this room. He'd called the switchboard twice since checking in. The contraption worked. The Guardian simply hadn't called.

Tommy should be back by now. The two of them didn't need to be far apart after dark here. The blackout that let Liberty ships sneak out of the harbor also made the streets safe harbor for any skulking hyde.

At the other end of the room, someone hesitantly tried the doorknob. *Not Tommy.* If Tommy made any noise, he would throw open the door and announce either his disgust with

the Friday night taxi dance, or the name of the swell party girl -- or girls -- he'd brought back.

Jack closed the heavy drapes, slid one hand into the brass knuckles in his pocket, and waited.

A draft from the unlit corridor brought a woman's scent: a sweet, but richly spicy, perfume foaming about a cloud of nose-stinging fear. She wheezed, as if the darkness were too thick to breathe.

His hunger surged. He sucked it back. He was no adolescent, to be ruled by hunger on an ordinary night. He hadn't been laid in far too long, that's all, hadn't purged his fear and his frustrations in a woman's hot embrace, and certainly hadn't fed on the pulsing rush of a woman's orgasm

"Oh golly," the woman whispered, and set the deadbolt with a muffled clunk. Only then did she scratch along the wall to the coat-rack and rustle his overcoat. Pawing, no doubt, for a billfold -- or a ration book.

She wasn't going to find anything useful in those pockets. He shook off the brass knuckles and settled back to let her find that out for herself. If he interrupted, her fear would spike again -- and as hungry as he was, he might inhale it despite his best intentions.

Serves me right for assuming the Guardian would provide.

The woman wasn't rifling his coat. She was putting on his coat.

She meant to head out into the night? In a purloined coat? But if she were headed out, why lock herself in?

He had to know.

You're looking for an excuse, Jack. Maybe so, but then again maybe she's the one lucky break we've had in this town.

He reached for the rum bottle and caught the dangling light switch. Shutting his eyes, he flooded the room with enough light to blind about anybody.

She made a mouse-like *eep!* of a noise, not at all the shriek he'd expected. He squinted, and stood dumbfounded. A richly curved, dark-haired young woman, her makeup heavily and inexpertly applied, stood in a short lace nightie and wrapper, swallowed in the bulk of his overcoat.

She belatedly put up both hands like a hat-brim to shield her eyes. "Please!" she hissed. "Turn it off!"

Not a Yankee voice. Not Virginian, either.

She took a step toward him, wobbling on the highest spike heels he'd ever seen off a stage. Her harsh panting heaved her breasts under the lace.

If she had any notion how entrancing a sight she made, she would either hide or exaggerate the display. But she was too caught up in her panic.

She's beautiful.

He slugged down enough rum to sear his throat and sting his eyes. *No -- beautiful is Lauren Bacall. This one is...enticing.*

She had dark hair up-swept in a Betty Grable style, dark eyes too large for her face, and plump lips he wanted to lick the candy-apple coating from.

His mouth was open. He closed it and took an involuntary step forward.

She recoiled, again wobbling on those heels, and slapped a hand against the wall to steady herself. Only half-shaded now, her stark, frightened eyes remained fixed on him.

She hadn't turned and run. If she hadn't run yet, with or without his coat, she'd stay at least until she knew the price.

She was, effectively, his gift from whomever or whatever she'd locked the door against. Given an excuse, she would stay.

She had to stay. He had to --

He had to get a grip on himself.

He waved the rum bottle in a loose, sloppy gesture. "You the private dancer? You're late! Gave up on you an hour ago."

C'mon, missy. Pick up the line.

She looked at him like a trapped mouse watching the cat. She opened her carmine-waxed mouth, closed it, swallowed, and spoke in the throaty voice of a torch singer. "I'm so sorry! My cab driver got lost in the blackout."

Mah cayab d'rivah. She'd learned to speak in the hill country of the upper South.

She smiled, the effect ghastly in her pale face. Swallowing, she took a deep breath, this time openly displaying the rise of her breasts. The overcoat slid off one shoulder and took her peignoir with it, leaving her left side covered only by lace and a fascinating blush. "I'm here now."

He drank in the curves of her nearly bare breast and flank until she shivered, breaking the spell.

He jerked the chain to kill the overhead light, and set the rum aside. If he worked this right, and if she was as willing as her get-up advertised, Tommy's luck at the dance wouldn't matter.

In the dark, she rattled the chain-lock. *Something out there too scary for a deadbolt alone?*

The hunger roared through him, protective and possessive. He choked it down, and knew the price: he had to have her. Had to add the hazelnut taste of desire to her intoxicating scent. Had to fill those frightened, innocent eyes with a confident awareness of her own allure. And had to know he was the man who'd done it.

“Chain-lock doesn’t work,” he growled, moving in on her. He’d gone through three rooms to find a good deadbolt. The Hotel Grammaree was not the showplace Uncle Michael -- the Guardian -- had maintained before the Depression. This was the highest inhabitable floor. Even here, one wing had been stripped of copper wiring and copper pipes.

The woman backed away from him, and tripped. He caught her by the shoulders.

She gasped.

“Are you okay?” His voice sounded deeper than usual.

She made a small noise, then took a deep breath and spoke very softly. “Not falling, if that counts as okay. Thank you.”

“What’s after you?”

She shook, as if laughing. “Monsters, a’ course.”

For a human, “monster” didn’t necessarily mean someone with the genetic kink to show his soul on his mug.

“They won’t come here. You might as well give me the coat and settle in.” He lifted the bulk off her, and groped out a coat-hook.

She flinched as his hands returned to her shoulders and slid over the soft Belgian lace. Her aroma combined vanilla, sandalwood, cardamom, hints of ambergris and talc, and something smelling exactly like female skin ought to taste.

For a moment, he just held her, inhaling her promise. Fine, loose hairs along her nape silkily caressed his knuckles. He drew a curl between his fingers. So soft.

Her fear surged again, breaking a fine mist of perspiration that roiled her perfume to an even headier blend. His hunger surged too, and he fought it down again. The taste of fear was seductive and poisonous; too much of it and he would roam the night with the other hydes.

How could he most quickly ease her fear? “Come -- sit down and take a belt of Jean Lafitte’s finest.”

“I’ve never had hard liquor,” she said faintly.

“Now why have I no trouble at all believing you?”

He guided her to the armchair by the window. She stumbled beside him in the dark.

Patience, Jack. She doesn’t know where everything is. “Sit. I’ll pour you a glass.”

“I shouldn’t.”

Too late for qualms. “What’s your name?”

“Lorelei.”

This girl a siren? Not likely. “I’ll call you Shy,” he decided, and traced the back edge of the dresser until he found the glass. Using his finger to gauge the depth, he poured two splashes. *That should do it.*

Her teeth chattered like a telegraphic burst.

He smiled in the darkness. *Come to bed, Shy. We'll be as warm as you like, quicker than you could believe.*

Meanwhile, though, both of them would feel more secure with the night sealed out. "Take this glass."

She reached too quickly, knocking his hand so the chill liquid splashed over his thumb. He wrapped her trembling hands around the glass like a chalice, and clasped his hands around hers.

She had a farmgirl's knobby-knuckled hands, but the lacquer on her short nails had been a whore's blood-red.

She shivered again.

The window. He let go of her long enough to shut it.

Turning back to her, he stroked her shoulder, feeling the roughness of chill bumps clenching under his hand. His hard cock throbbed with anticipation. "Drink up, Shy. Then we can talk."

"Ta-a-al-lk?" She drew the word out, so he couldn't avoid the image of her mouth opening for him, her tongue reaching up to caress that l-sound, the way it might caress his cock-head. Teasing? Still trying to sound like a torch singer?

Slow down, Jack. Count it up to ten and back. "What perfume is that?"

"Something exotic. Made special for tonight."

"Why?"

She made an incoherent noise, then straightened her spine and cleared her throat. "Aren't you the curious fellow? Here I am barely dressed and alone with you. Do you really want to talk?"

"Shy, I'd have to be awfully drunk to think you're ready for any other kind of intercourse."

She gulped down the rum and convulsed, choking. As she bent forward over her knees, he patted her back.

The pressure ached in his cock. He stepped closer to her side and stroked down to the sweet flare of her generously curved hip. *Built for comfort, not for speed.*

She went rigid under his hand; he was pushing too fast.

"Next time," he whispered into her hair, "sip."

He found her ear and nipped, provoking a smothered squeak, and moved away. By now he could pick out her silhouette against the pale floral wallpaper. His night vision should improve rapidly from this point.

"Talk?" she repeated.

He nodded, and reminded himself she couldn't see him in the dark. "Yes," he said out loud. "Last time I came to town, the private dancer they sent me was worn out like a washerwoman. I got bruises from those hip-bones of hers."

Not to mention the bruising she must've had. Despite the enormous tip, he was still kicking himself. He couldn't wait so long again. He couldn't lose control.

Shy-girl's blush heated the air around and above her, shimmering like a blacktop on a summer day. He weighed the chances she might be part of some elaborate trap, but the hydes' traps relied on fists and clubs and dark alleyways, not on hiring actresses accomplished enough to blush in a dark room.

"Considering," he said gently, spinning out the fiction, "you are her antithesis in every way, I assume my complaint reached the right ears."

"Antithesis means opposite," he added after a moment.

"I figured."

He set one hand on her shoulder, despite her quick shrug. She couldn't possibly be a prostitute, but she seemed willing to act as one, if that's what it took to keep the door locked.

If she stayed much longer, willingness wouldn't matter a whole lot. Her scent, her nearness, would drive him to frenzy unless Tommy brought a substitute damned soon. Surely a human whose protection she sought would react the same way, even if not to the same degree. She radiated an intensely alive shimmer that breathed across his skin.

He slid his hand down to cup her breast under the lace. She flinched, as expected, but then settled back into his hand. He rubbed his thumb back and forth over her nipple. She could not possibly mistake his intent.

"You haven't run screaming, Shy-girl. What haven't I said, that a responsible fellow ought to say?"

She raised the empty glass, tinked it against her teeth, and lowered it. More shivers ran over her skin. "You have said you are a visitor to town; this is not your first trip, and you are accustomed to private entertainment of the feminine variety. You made all that right clear. What you haven't said, I couldn't guess."

Both observant and quick on the uptake.

"Then tell me what you haven't said, Shy. Why are you here, with face paint that weighs more than your nightie, in a stranger's hotel room?"

"I'm drinking hard liquor and learning how to privately entertain a gentleman."

Her wry tone said as much as the words. If she lived long enough, she would be a tough bird. If she lived. Her combination of strong fear and radiant vitality would lure hydes like carrion draws flies.

A lure...Why not? With her, he and Tommy could hunt despite the Guardian's inexplicable silence. They could troll the night, lingering in dark places, perhaps faking

arguments and pretending to break up. He would stomp away, then circle back to nail whatever came after her.

Even better...once tuned to his will, she would be an extraordinary feeder. Perhaps enough to keep him human.

What part of his mind had already decided on a liaison instead of one night? The idea held enormous appeal now, with the hunger gnawing at him, ready to seize upon any rationalization to get her fully naked and slicked up.

She cleared her throat again. "If I'm to dance, don't you need light to see me by?"

"To see with my eyes, yes. But I had something far more entertaining in mind." His voice deepened as he backed toward the bed. "Come here."

She hesitated.

"Come, Shy. I don't bite all that hard."

"I need music," she said. "To dance."

A radio would also help hide her voice from a sharp-eared pursuer. He turned on a sputter of static, hastily dialing past Pacific-theater news and some William Conrad melodrama and an entirely too jazzy cakewalk. On the next wavelength, a saxophone crooned sadly, hopefully. Glenn Miller's "Serenade in Blue".

Perfect. "Come here, Shy."

She tottered in those shoes and fell into his arms.

"Ah, there's the hard liquor working. Two ounces and you throw yourself at me. What would half a bottle do?"

He tasted her skin, sorting out layers of fear and cosmetics and finding, richer than he'd hoped, a welling reservoir of desire. Well, well. No man prays harder than the one in the crosshairs, and no man is hornier than one who's cheated the Reaper. At least one of those rules also works for women.

Chapter Two

She felt safe, for the first time in days. Since coming home from her last shift at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Since finding Strega Road blocked by those police cars with all but a slit of each headlight painted over, and her doorstep blocked by shouting Irishmen in copper-buttoned uniforms.

“Monsters,” the orphan boy from under the stairs had said. “Monsters got your ma, Miss Lorie, same as they got the Berman sisters over by the movie house last week.”

One of the coppers had backhanded him then. Before the funeral, though, she’d seen Gimpy Bookman, cub reporter, trying the lid of Ma’s nailed-shut coffin. He’d listened. He’d taken her to meet a real reporter, Mr. Hillyer, who’d had friends -- and a plan.

Tonight she was supposed to have lured the monsters to room 806 in this ruin of a hotel and distracted them while Gimpy and Mr. Hillyer opened fire -- hopefully not plugging her along with the monsters.

But she’d opened the room door to a butchered-pig smell, and the heads of her would-be heroes lined up like lopsided bowling balls. They would never photograph the monsters, never force their editor to admit the truth.

The monsters had laughed at her. The face-man’s driver had melted out of his human form to paw the torn bodies with long, hairy, clawed hands. They’d offered her handfuls of dripping meat.

She’d wanted to throw up. She’d wanted to faint. Instead she’d staggered over to the light chain, and yanked it hard enough to trigger the last ditch weapon: the arc-light.

The explosion of light might as well have been a hand-grenade for the monsters. The one thing what worked as planned. Well, the second thing -- this perfume she wore as a tolling spell for the monsters had pulled them to her all too well.

She'd fled to the stairs, and had thrown herself out of the stairwell when she heard a door open above her.

She'd only made two floors down. Maybe this was far enough. If she could stay here until daylight -- just until daylight.

Whatever she had to do to pay for this sanctuary would be worth it.

Maybe the deadlock on this door would keep monsters out.

Had 806 been locked when the monsters had gone there?

How had the monsters known about the ambush -- much less what room it would be in?

She shuddered, and arms tightened around her. He felt so right. She could stay her whole life in these arms and not regret a minute of it.

Now that there's a fool-headed notion!

She pulled herself upright, to stand on her own feet, but he eased her back to lean on him. His arms were strong, though his suit was flannel, like a banker's. Large hands spread across her back, rubbing soothing circles that left trails of warmth on her skin. She wanted to relax into his strength.

His Gone With the Wind accent said he was a long way from home, just like her. *Ma and I came here to find work. What did you come here for?*

He might be one of the German spies the radio warned about, clever enough to practice English from the movies. No, he couldn't be.

But between the purple smear the arc-light had left on her eyes and the blinding light he'd flashed at her, she hadn't the foggiest notion what he looked like.

Whoever he was, he didn't deserve being lied to.

"I need to tell you something what's hard to believe, mister. I hope you don't throw me out when you hear it."

"Tell me what, Shy? Should I be afraid of you?" His mocking tone said he was not afraid, not of anything. He needed to be.

She'd already said she had monsters after her and he'd ignored her. If she insisted, he'd think she was screwy.

How bad would that be? She had to warn him. "I ain't the dancer you ordered."

"That explains everything."

Don't laugh at me! She bit her lip, ready to leave him in ignorant bliss. Then she asked, in a rush, "Do you believe in monsters?"

His grip tightened. "What do you mean by monsters?"

She saw the broken bodies and lined-up heads, and the memory of that raw-meat smell hit her. The wine she'd drunk for courage at the beginning of the evening twisted in her stomach and gushed out her mouth.

The man snarled a word Clark Gable would *never* say.

Oh, Golly *Moses* -- she'd thrown up on his flannel suit. "Sorry, sorry! I'm so sorry -- I should -- oh, golly! I'm *sorry!*"

The man lifted her without a word, his silence cutting off her babble, and carried her to the bathroom. Setting her on the stool, he turned on the shower. He didn't turn on the light.

"How can you see in the dark?"

"I don't. Not in the way you mean. People who rely on their eyes lose too much when the eyesight is obtunded."

Obtunded. She could get a college education, listening to him long enough. Not that any such thing was likely to happen.

He shucked his clothes. She sure didn't need her eyes to know what was going on there. Something made a hard, solid thunk on the floor. What on earth would be heavy enough for that sound? A full hip-flask, maybe? At least the smell of sickness was gone.

She huddled in her lacy next-to-nothing "honeymoon fantasy" and waited for the drifts of cold mist from the shower to warm. The waterfall noise filled the room. The hallway could be full of shuffling, snuffling monsters, and she couldn't hear it from here. Unless they busted down the door, or were seen by a screamer, or --

A hand closed on her arm.

She jumped, a scream choking her because she didn't dare let it out. Didn't dare tell the monsters where she was. The hand tightened, but abruptly loosened. He stroked her skin as if to erase any bruise-mark.

"Easy," he murmured. "Get in the shower just as you are. Your lingerie will dry by morning, if you want it then."

He said *lawn-zha-ray*, like the lady at the store did. A'course a man who hired private dancers would know better than to say *linger-ree* and get laughed at. *You mean to get me naked well before morning, so why not get naked this instant?*

Oh, right. She was supposed to take her clothes off as slowly as possible. Guys liked that.

Jean Harlow, she said under her breath. They'd told her to picture herself a brunette Jean Harlow, to say and do what Jean would've. Never mind Jean Harlow died when I was in junior high. Get the guy to "think with his little head" and make him want to follow wherever she led.

Or, in this case, make him want her to stay right here behind this closed door.

But deciding exactly what to do, what to say and how to say it, was too complicated a puzzle to solve with practically no clothes on. And with a man who didn't act like anything she expected.

Not that she knew for real what to expect of a man in his shoes. The shoes he wasn't wearing.

Nothing was as clear as it'd been when she was a little girl with her toy pistol, swearing she'd grow up to be Bonnie Parker.

She bent down and unbuckled her showgirl-shoes. The lace she could wear like a swimsuit, for as long as he let her.

Her arm brushed a hairy leg. Her flinch might have thrown her off the stool, but the man caught her.

The naked man.

He lifted her, and stepped carefully into the tub with her. The tub didn't wobble under their combined weight, which was something. People said the Hotel Grammaree had once been a palace. Now it was a horror movie's version of a castle, sturdy here and crumbling there.

"Can you stand?" he murmured. "Lean on me, Shy-girl, but put your weight on your feet. I can defend you better if my first move doesn't have to be putting you down."

Defend me? She reached with her feet for the floor of the tub, and fell with a splash. Flailing for a handhold, she closed her hand on a warm handle nestled in hair.

He grunted, and his knees bent.

She strangled a shocked scream. *Stop that! Lorie can't be the kind of girl who screams. Not anymore.*

He straightened, cupped the back of her head in one big hand, and pressed her cheek against his thigh.

She still had her hand clutched on his rod. *Oh, Dear Father in Heaven!*

He caught her hand and pressed her palm flat against the coarse line of hair on his belly. She couldn't move. Couldn't think. Couldn't feel anything beyond the summer-storm of pelting water and the man pressed so intimately to her hand and her face.

He took a deep breath, his hard muscles bunching and shifting against her. "First things first," he muttered. "Stand up."

She stood, one hand finding the wall on the other side of the shower curtain.

He maneuvered her into the warm rain of water and held her there, his hands resting like a belt on her waist, until she stopped shivering. He pulled the pins from her hair, and dropped them with little silvery sounds and puffs of shivery air from outside the curtain. Wet curls fell heavily onto her shoulders, and on down to tickle her nipples. "Are your clothes in your own room?"

"I haven't a room."

"Clothes?"

"They took my coat, and I didn't bring any other clothes."

“Who dressed you like this? The monsters you ran from?”

“No. These clothes was part of a plan.” *What ruined such a swell plan? Did I flummox it, or what?* “The plan was to – “ *Those poor men -- was something I did wrong what got them killed?* ”-- it didn’t work.” *I’m gon’ cry, if I think any more.* “Please don’t ask about it.”

He reached out of the curtain, bringing a cold draft until he yanked the curtain shut again, isolating them in this tropical island of a world. “Step out of the spray and hold this, Shy. Keep the water out of it.”

She stepped toward him and he handed her a cold, heavy, squat jar, like the bottom third of a quart-sized Mason jar.

His hands dipped into the jar, then glided over her shoulders and down her back, trailing a cold, creamy lotion what smelled of cedar, and sage, and something sharply resinous. *Cedar, sage, and sweetgrass clean/Shield this child from evil’s keen.*

That was the aunts’ recipe for Sunday soap, the stuff they made to wash away nightmares and the evil eye. This was close, but not the same. Geranium?

His hands slid up and down her back, up her sides, then paused on the tiny scraps at her bosom. “How old are you?”

“Almost twenty-one.” The *almost* made it not a lie.

“Why aren’t you married?”

“How do you know I’m not?”

“If you are, he deserves to lose you.” He soaped up a lather right through the lace.

Was all this blushing what made her so dizzy?

He used the same green-smelling soap in her hair, working it through her curls and into her scalp. The lotion lathered up like whipped cream, but had the same cleansing, calming feel as the aunts’ special soap.

When she was all warm and foamy, he took the jar from her, swapping it for a chilling draft. Stepping back, he turned her to face the full spray of water and peeled the lace off her skin, all but her underpants.

She moved obediently in his hands, and wondered why. Did he have the Power to Cloud Men’s Minds?

Her mother called those shows a waste of electricity, and shut off the radio at the first hair-raising laugh. That laugh had gone all the way inside Lorie, though, echoing through her dreams and daydreams.

Ma had scolded her for filling her head with monsters and heroes. But she’d grown out of wanting to be Bonnie Parker in one gunshot instant, and even Ma said a girl needed herself a dream.

Oh, Ma! Her funeral had taken all their savings, and even then the sniffling, red-nosed city-boy preacher had given a sorry excuse for a service.

A clean-shaven cheek pressed briefly against her shoulder. This guy had shaved for the dancer he was expecting. The man had class.

He inhaled deeply. "Your perfume was heavenly."

She remembered the monsters' face-man and his driver sniffing her neck and shoulders all the time she'd thought she was luring them into the trap.

Sniffing -- like dogs.

"They're like animals," she whispered rapidly. "The monsters. They might track me like dogs would."

He pulled her closer, turning her just so, while the warm water sluiced between them and spattered over their feet. "You were smart to wear perfume and new shoes, then."

Didn't anything scare him? "Don't get me wrong, mister. I'm not objecting. But you seem to take all this in stride, like it was normal. How come?"

He chuckled. "Call me Jack. I'm not just humoring you because I intend to wear out the bedsprings with you, Shy-my-girl. Nor am I unarmed, even in the can with my pants down."

He paused, two fingers over her lips, as if listening.

She strained her ears, but heard only the radio playing Glenn Miller, the applause of the hot spraying water, and some drunks arguing in the hall. Jack clearly heard more. His muscles clenched, like his body was one huge fist. He felt so full of energy -- the water should sizzle as it touched his skin.

When the drunks moved on, he relaxed. His rough fingertips made circles with her bottom lip. "Sometimes it's luck that brings you where you need to be, Shy, and sometimes it's planning, or hard work. Sometimes it's somethin' else. Whatever brought you to me, you're in the right place. Jack will take care of you."

Chapter Three

Jack cut off the water and spread more cool cream down her back. "I made this soap myself. Old family recipe. This will cancel your scent, and then I will put my scent on you."

She shuddered. Somehow, it might be easier if he just hurried up. She'd put on lace and face-paint fully expecting to know by the end of the night why girl-dogs stood still for boy-dog nastiness.

Mr. Hillyer and the others had advised her to choose one of them to take care of her, so if things went bad her first time wouldn't be with a monster -- or, more likely -- some drunk sailor who grabbed her in the alley before she attracted the monsters. But the colored man who made the guns had raised his hammer and prayed the Lord to strike with eternal softness any man who touched her with impure intentions. Everyone had backed away then.

So she'd gone untouched to the monsters' face-man. *I need heavy sugar*, she'd said, hoping she had the right words. *I need lots of it and I need it now, and I got only one thing to sell. You look like a man who can pay.*

Well, she was still selling the same thing, but in a nicer market. Not that she expected to enjoy it. She wasn't married, after all, and --

After this, I won't be fit to marry.

But she'd be alive.

Maybe.

Were the guns still taped up under the chairs in 806, or had the monsters taken them?

She stood, her hand against the wall through the shower curtain. She only had one scrap of cloth sticking to her, and she had never expected to bare that part of her to any man but her husband.

Big, solid, callused hands rested on her waist, kneading gently. When they moved lower, sliding down her flanks, the last scrap of cloth slid down with them.

At shin level he paused, and she stepped out of the underpants. Entirely naked.

He nipped just below her belly button. A startled shock zinged to her teeter, leaving it hot and throbbing. She tried to step back, but he held her. She turned away from him, blushing again at his chuckle.

“Here,” he said. “Let me wash your face.”

She took the washcloth from him instead, and scrubbed her face. His strong fingers massaged more of the suds into her scalp and shoulders, feeling sinfully good. She tried not to pay attention, but finally she braced both hands against the wall and lolled in the wonderful luxury of letting his hands work.

She stayed warm, whether from steam or blushes or both, as his kneading hands worked on down her back. She involuntarily pressed against them, like a purring cat wanting a little more *there* and *there*.

Sinful was right. Lust throbbed in her nipples and all her secret female places.

One slick fingertip pressed into her bottom.

Waitaminnit! She recoiled, but he followed with her, pushing his middle finger on in. She remembered the lack of water to cover her voice, and hissed in frustration.

Turning sideways didn't help; his feet boxed hers and he held her close with his body. Wriggling around did her no more good than it would a dog getting a bath.

She couldn't hold quiet. “Jack! I thought you knew what you was doing!”

“Hush,” he murmured. “I do.”

“That there's not the right place!”

He chuckled and withdrew the finger, but slid the tip of it right back in and drew a little circle before he pulled out. He slid that finger -- with more slickum -- in a third time, as if buttering her.

Buttered butt! I stepped out of my step-ins and now he's buttering my butt. I should butt him! She bit her tongue to stop from laughing. If she laughed right now, it would be a crazy-lady hysterical laugh, and the only way to stop that was a good hard slap.

“Shy-girl, if you were to tell me all you knew about the mechanics of sex, would it take very long?”

Her laugh died. Her face should glow, with this much heat.

“I didn't think so,” he murmured. “Hold still, and let me play.”

“You're in the wrong playground.”

“We'll need extra preparation this time.” He released her and turned the water back on. Still hot, it pounded against the two of them.

She grabbed his wrists. “Am I speaking English?”

“Yes, but you’re also wasting your breath. You get to decide whether. If you say yes, I get to decide how. Am I clear?”

How can I answer if I don’t know?

His hands slid through the lather at her ribs, and hers slid up to his elbows, and above. He had arms like a blacksmith. *No* didn’t have to mean anything to a man with arms like his, unless he wanted it to.

“Are you a virgin, Shy?”

She nodded, for all the good nodding would do here in the dark.

Jack cupped her breasts, lifting their weight and rubbing his rough thumbs over her tightened nipples.

Felt like he had string there, and was tying knots.

“Do you wish to remain a virgin?”

She took a shaky breath, gripping his arms. Here was her chance to say no. But what then? How long would it take to find -- or put together -- another team of monster-hunters? And if she found a man who could out-hero Jack, how would she ever catch his attention? “There’s other things I want more.”

“Good.” He turned her to face the wall again. When she took a breath, he nipped between her shoulder and neck, pouring weakness though her like molasses. Her knees tried to fold. But she caught herself, and set her hands on the wall. He had to know what he was doing. Had to.

He applied more of the cream soap, working it patiently to a truly deluxe lather, and turned off the water.

Planting his feet to frame hers, holding her in place, he brushed his body over her back. His wiry body hair scrubbed at her, and his thick rod slid along her cream-slick butt crack.

His fingers pinched her nipples, but she felt the pinch down *there*, and her womb moved. *Ooh!*

Hands slid down her back and massaged her bottom. A fingertip probed inside, deeper, invading her most private space. A second finger slid in alongside the first; they turned and twisted, moving like she did to cocoon the blankets around her on a cold night.

Why isn’t this awful? But deep inside her, something purred. Something tried to press closer to him. A moan sounded, hers. She took a breath of thick, steamy air and tried to collect her wits. The monsters. “What about the monsters?”

“They can wait. We have a guard dog on duty now.”

“We have what?” Her head spun.

“We have protection against the monsters. Put them out of your mind. What must I do to hold your attention?” Both fingers withdrew, wiggled at the doorway, and thrust deep.

She yipped and went up on her toes, clenching her whole body in an instinctive effort to resist.

His other hand went around front, his palm pressing hard and his fingers interlocking under her. "I'll still be here when you're too tired for that. You're in Jack's hands now."

Yes, she was, and her legs shook with the effort to stay so high on her toes. She should have stayed with the ballet lessons, like her ma had wanted, instead of joining the marching band. *I'm sorry, Ma.*

"Come down. Doowwnn."

She lowered herself onto his stiff, hard fingers, intimately conscious of his blocky middle knuckles, until her weight rested in his big hands.

He pulled her close. "That's my girl."

He found The Bump, and dragged his hand deliberately over it. She gasped. He chuckled, and rocked his hand back and forth there, insistently rhythmic. He played her body, kissing and nibbling, massaging and pinching and lightly tugging, provoking responses she didn't know she had, building a rhythm of shocks and surprises and singing pleasure until she writhed against him.

A noise came from her, something she would never have recognized as her own. But neither would she have recognized herself as this wanton creature rocking and twisting in this strange man's rude grip, every move sloshing hot water around her ankles.

"Have mercy! I cain't stand up to this."

"You can," he said, his voice dark and thick. "You can stand so much more than the person who hasn't been tested would ever believe."

Moaning, she thrust harder from one hand to the other, demanding more, and his working hands gave her more. Gentle and rough, he found what made her jerk in his hands and he tuned in on that, cranking the pressure up and up.

The soles of her feet stung and electric energy slammed through her in a dam-bursting flood of dark joy. She bit his arm, desperately smothering her outcry in the darkness.

He held her tight against his chest, bracing her, and all the strength ran out of her at once. She sagged against him, as weak as if she'd nearly drowned.

She'd bit him. Bit him like an animal. He hadn't made a noise. She'd have howled if anybody bit her so hard. *Guys are different. Or this guy is.*

He wrapped all around her with his heat and his hard muscles. "I have you," he murmured. "I have you."

He did. He held her up when her own legs wouldn't.

Come morning, would he still wear the imprint of her teeth? She kissed the bite-mark. For now, he wore her brand.

His rod pulsed against her, insistent, like a bull at the gate. She touched it with her fingertips, trying to gauge its size and shape. His skin was soft, but thin, and under that thin skin was something clenched and rigid.

“Can you stand?” he asked, his voice a growl.

She could, however shakily. He turned her to the wall and leaned his chest against her back.

“Spread your feet, Shy. Grab the back rim of the tub. Hold it tight.”

His chest pressed against her back, but an arm crooked in front of her hips kept her close. She bent forward and gripped the hard, cold edge of the tub. He moved the shower curtain to the outside. A draft raised gooseflesh as she adjusted her grip.

Jack reached outside the shower, and the jar scraped open. His hands returned to her, palms stroking while one long finger slid along her butt crack, trailing another chilling load of the thick lotion. She shuddered.

He kissed her neck lingeringly. “Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m cold!”

“Not for long.”

Two long fingers pressed inside her again, more easily than before. She held on. The curving rim of the tub was solid, when the corkscrewing fingers up her bottom could not possibly be any part of her real life. This would be one of those rare and mesmerizing dreams she could never talk about.

One hand, large and capable, grasped her hip. “Exhale. Move every tiny mouthful of air out of your lungs. Empty yourself. Good. Now take the deepest breath you can. All the way in. As I push in, you push out.”

As her ribs expanded, his rod -- cock, she reminded herself -- pressed against her, into her, stretching and burning as he worked his way through the tight opening. *Owwww!*

She clenched her teeth, trying to suck in some more air.

No good. It hurt.

He paused. “Again. Inhale deeply, and *push*.”

She shook her head, panting now, fighting her instincts to jerk away. He flexed behind her, nudging deeper. She swallowed a whimper. *Is this a baseball bat?*

She shifted her weight, and he intruded another inch.

“Inhale! Now!”

It’s too much! She lunged away, putting one knee on the rim of the tub to scramble out, but he caught her.

One forearm covered her mouth and one locked about her hips. He bent over her, ramming his slicked-up rod all the way in. *Owwww!*

She bit down hard, and pried her fingers under his arm. She couldn't budge him. Opening her mouth wider just got her too big a mouthful to chew. She raked a wet heel down his wet shin.

The impaling rod wrenched inside her. He grunted, but he still held her, controlling her struggles like she was a three-year-old pitching a hissy fit.

"Bite if you must, but don't scream and don't fight."

His voice, cold and calm, froze the fight out of her.

If this is sodomy, why would anyone have to pass laws against it? Only a lunatic would submit to this more than once.

He tightened his grip, half lifting her. His heart beat fast and hard between her shoulder blades. Either the calm in his voice or his galloping heartbeat was a lie.

When she had stood quietly in his arms for a moment, accepting him, he let her feet touch down again. She put a hand to the wall.

Behind her, he swiveled his hips, moving the whole length of his rod inside her. "Don't fight me, Shy," he said more gently. "You'll hurt yourself."

She tapped his arm, one-two, and he uncovered her mouth. She worked her jaw and took a few breaths, each one lessening the burning ache by a measurable degree but doing absolutely nothing for her seething anger. "Don't tell me I'll hurt myself when you're the one hurting me!"

"Point taken. What I should have said is, 'if you fight, you might injure both of us.' Speaking of injury, remind me later to show you how to fight. This flopping about and nipping hasn't done you a bit of good, has it? Now, bend forward."

She did, feeling instant relief as his rod took a more natural angle. *This isn't natural.*

"I'll move slowly for a while. Tell me when it starts feeling good."

Good? Bull!

He partly withdrew, to her relief. She inhaled on command and he pressed in, filling her unbearably full. *Not unbearably. Just very. Very full.*

Hot skin pressed against the backs of her thighs, and wiry hair prickled her skin. He pumped smoothly, in and out, as if he had plenty of time to get what he wanted.

After a moment, he moved left to right as well as in and out. She thought, absurdly, of the Two-Step. A laugh bubbled up, but it sounded more like a whimper.

"Still hurts?" He sounded like he cared. What a liar he had to be.

"Yesss." Although it didn't. Not really.

"Let's do something about that." His hands moved to her front, again conducting the symphony across her skin. Her insides seemed to know how to react this time, and reached eagerly for the promised burst of pleasure.

All she had to do was ignore the baseball bat up her butt.

A dancing baseball bat? She smothered another laugh as he smoothly withdrew. And as smoothly slid all the way in again. And out. *Oh!* That there felt -- nice? In. That burned. Out. Better.

No, couldn't call that nice. But it felt oddly good. His hands played her, teasing her nerves, and pulled another cry from her.

"Not so loud, Shy. You'll make the neighbors jealous."

Oh, no! Her face burned. She tried not to react, but holding still was impossible while he pressed and stroked and kneaded. Played her. Her conductor.

He raised the tempo, high pitches riding the low pitches and the heavy bass tum-tump tum-tump tum-tump! of her heart. *Harder. Faster. Harder!*

Crescendo! She exploded -- blind, deaf, and spinning in the dark.

He grasped her hips, his fingers digging in. "Yes!"

After a long moment, he sank down and turned her to sit across his lap. His heart thumped slow and hard against her face, robbing her of any will to move or to think.

It's like the world just ended, and I don't know what happens next.

He whispered one more word. "Mine."

Chapter Four

About the sweetest armload a man could have, and she was fixing to fall asleep in his arms. He rested his cheek on the top of her head. *Shy, Shy, my Lorelei. A siren after all.*

He ran the water until it warmed, and then he washed her clean, his hands memorizing every swell and dip of her lovely body. He stepped out of the tub and dried off.

The tub squeaked as she tried awkwardly to stand. He stopped her, looping the threadbare towel around her. "Don't stand up yet, Shy. I'll dry you."

"I can dry myself," she protested sleepily, catching a handful of the thin cloth.

"But I want to dry you," and that settled that.

He carried her to the bed, finding his way by memory and just enough sight to pick out Tommy's dark head on the far pillow. Thinking of Tommy stirred something like the hunger in him. Jealousy. Covetousness. A desire to keep this treasure his alone.

But he and Tommy had been raised as two echoes of the same voice. Tommy had stood at his side or his back all through school and all through the long Virginia summers. They'd learned to fight together and learned to feed together. He couldn't feast if Tommy starved.

Near-panicky objections screeched through him. He choked them back and spoke into her wet hair. "Tell, me, Shy -- and think a minute before you answer. Have you ever, in your darkest and most secret dreams, wanted to be held and loved by two men?"

She paused obediently. "No."

Jack smiled, hearing the sleepiness of a sated woman in her voice. Tommy must have heard it too, but he held quiet. "That's too bad."

"No it's not. It just is. What happened to the radio?"

"Never mind the radio. Remember I said we had a watch-dog? Don't scream."

She would anyway. She was already inhaling for a question.

He tucked her face against his shoulder and pinned it with his jaw. Then, bracing one knee on the edge of the bed, he lowered her to Tommy.

She sprang upward, against him. He smothered her cry. "Lorelei, meet my brother Tommy, who's been our guard dog. Tommy, meet my shy-girl, Lorelei."

Her fuming silence spoke volumes. She couldn't just get up and leave, though. Not stark naked in the middle of the night. Nor could she scream, when what might come in response was worse than anything she might face here. She had no options at all. She had to know that. He cautiously let her pull away from his shoulder.

"I won't be passed around like a bottle of cheap booze!"

"Heaven forbid." He rested a hand on her waist. "Lie down with us, Shy. We can't get you clothes until morning, when the shops open. Say hello to Tommy, now."

She capitulated abruptly. "How do, Tom-*eep!*"

Jealous rage snatched all his muscles tight. He unclenched his teeth and cleared his throat so he could speak lightly. "Lorelei came to us because the hydes are after her, Tom. Don't make her afraid to sleep within arm's reach of you."

"Ain't his arm I worry on," Shy muttered.

"Want to inspect my short arm? You'd need to -- "

"Tommy," he reproved, and felt his brother's silent chuckle even with Shy between them.

She shivered, and reached for him. His girl, even in Tommy's arms. Jack eased down beside her.

"Such smooth, soft skin," Tommy murmured.

Shy erupted in goose bumps.

Jack reached for the blanket, and found Tommy's hand already drawing it up over them all. "She's not a street girl, Tommy."

"Of course not," his brother said mildly. "Snuggle in, Lorelei, and don't be afraid of me."

Tommy's skin oozed the floral scent of some other woman's perfume, and the musk of hurried sex. Jack relaxed. Shy's nearness would not madden him, then. Nor would they need to force her between them.

Not tonight, at least.

* * * * *

Lorie lay in the dark between the men, restless as she hadn't been since her first week at the Yard. Those ten-hour shifts had made her fall asleep with quickness. But now sleep just teased at her.

Time passed. She closed her eyes resolutely. More time passed, but she stayed awake.

Golly Moses, Lorelei, you don't think having carnal relations with a perfect stranger might have something to do with that? Maybe laying down buck naked with two men -- both of them buck naked -- could have a little to do with that? Just a little bit?

She fidgeted, turning one way and another, getting grumpy mutters from the guys but no real protest. On the other side of the wall, someone snored like a bandsaw.

A whimper sounded at her back. Tommy. She turned over and laid a hand on his burning face. Hot tears ran over her fingers. *Crying? A full-grown man? Pa didn't cry with two bullets in him.*

"No more," Tommy choked. "She'll die. Please stop. Please, please."

Lorie gripped his sweating shoulder. "Wake up!" she said, not loud enough to wake the snorer in the next room. Muscles bulged and quivered under her hand. "Hey, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

"Wake up, Tommy," Jack ordered calmly, soothing her anxiety before she knew she was anxious. "It's over, Tom. Wake up."

Tommy lunged at him. She dove out of the way. The bed groaned and bounced the cold headboard -- and her -- against the wall.

A hard slap sounded. "Tommy!"

She couldn't move. She was too close, and she couldn't get away without getting between them.

"Oh, my Lord." Tommy meant that as a prayer, not a profanity.

Her muscles unlocked. He wasn't a danger anymore. She touched his quivering, naked back. Fever-hot. He'd catch his death if he didn't cover up.

"Cover up and stay warm, Shy," Jack said. The men climbed out of the bed. Headed for the bath, had to be. How could they navigate when she couldn't see her hand in front of her face? She wriggled into the warmth of the bedding.

Water ran.

Without warning, Jack touched her shoulder, then caught her as she sat up. "Easy, Shy. Once he's cleaned up, do you want the wall position or the middle?"

Wall, or middle?

Don't be dense, Lorie. Brother Tommy wants more than kiss-it-better. "So you plan to pass me around after all. You gonna watch, like you got your own private dirty movie?"

She heard his teeth grind, but he didn't speak. Not for a moment. Then he whispered. "I won't let you out of my hands. Not to Tommy, not to anybody. But he's hurting, and it's a hurt you can heal. Will you leave him to hurt?"

Staying in this condition is very painful to a man, Lorie. You did this to me. If you were any kind of woman -- Just give me your hand, Lorie. Help me out. I'm begging you. Refusing that carpetbagger had cost her a job. What would refusing Tommy cost?

Refuse? One girl in a hotel room with two men? Whatever she said, they'd hear *Sure! Let's try it!*

Jack swore. "If you're saying no, say it out loud, in one word."

"What would y'all do if I said no?"

"I'd call him out of the bathroom and suggest you go sit in there by your lonesome for a little while."

She frowned. He couldn't possibly mean... "You'd really take no for an answer?"

"Yes, Shy. I would. So would he."

She had a choice. She opened her mouth and nothing came out. She swallowed hard and tried again. "This is all so new."

His voice softened. "I know. Are you game?"

"You said 'mine' before. Will that stay true?" *As true as it was then, at least?*

"Are you asking for a signed contract?"

No...yes...no. No, because it would be worthless. That thought seemed to turn on the light. *You can be right or wrong without being stupid. The stupidity shows when you're fooling yourself.* The water stopped running. "I'm game."

Tommy approached, a whisper of bare feet on the floor. He'd moved silently before. Was he scuffing his heels just so she could track his movement?

She leaned hard against Jack. His arm pulled her close and his heart beat against her cheek. "Shy-girl, this is Thomas French," he said formally, as if he hadn't introduced them before. And really, he hadn't. His voice rumbled against her cheek. "Tommy, meet Lorelei."

"Lorie," she managed to say, lifting her hand in Tommy's general direction. He clasped it in both of his. His hands were fever-hot and shaking. He pressed her hand to his hairy chest, also fever-hot; his galloping heartbeat thudded through her.

Jack lifted her with one arm and arranged her across his muscled thighs. Tommy released her hand and climbed into bed with faint, rusty, *sroing-sroing* sounds.

She hesitated, and Jack nuzzled her head. "Retreat or advance, Shy-girl, but move now."

Move now. She buried her face in Jack's neck. "I don't know how."

He sat silent. She'd displeased him. Reluctantly, she crawled off his lap. Following the bed's sag to find Tommy was easier than avoiding him would have been.

Jack stood, and she bit her lip. Not having him in touching distance made the world a colder, more lonesome place.

Tommy. He'd left her to Tommy. She hesitantly touched the man in the bed. He flinched. She ran fingertips across his chest-hairs, knowing it would tickle. He held quiet. She followed the line of hair to his navel.

He shivered at her touch, as she had shivered under Jack's. His big, hot hands abruptly closed over her arms. He threw her to the side and rolled over top of her, shoving her deep into the mattress.

"Let me up," she hissed, clamping her legs together.

His hard rod pressed against her hip. Shaking, he pried her legs apart with one knee. *Owww!*

"Tom, she isn't yours to hurt."

"I can't wait."

"You can," Jack said.

Tommy made a strangled noise and lifted his weight.

Lorie wriggled from under him and backed to the corner of the bed.

Tommy whispered a word she couldn't make out.

"Lick him," Jack said.

What? She turned to look at Jack, never mind it was dark, and again felt his silent disapproval. Turning back toward Tommy, she bumped his shoulder. Hesitantly, she licked the feverish skin stretched tightly over knobs of shoulder-bone.

He tasted like nothing she'd expected. Salty. Spicy. Like her perfume. He tasted like her perfume smelt, but with burnt matches in the mix.

Jack's arm came around her in a quick hug. "There's a start. Move down slowly, Shy-girl, licking as you go."

Tommy groaned and collapsed on the bed beside her.

She licked from his shoulder to elbow in one long stroke -- at the end of it, her tongue stuck to him. She swallowed, wishing for a drink. As if hearing her wish, Jack guided her head to Tommy's ribs, where she found the scent of rum.

The first lick of rum filled her mouth. Not scalding like her first gulp of rum. More like the pleasant glow of really good eggnog. The aromatic trail led her across ribs and muscled belly, drop by drop; she lapped the potent liquid from the unseen man's taut skin and sucked it from the coarse hairs while Tommy writhed silently under her.

Her cheek bumped his rum-wet cock. She hesitated. Tommy held his breath. She was holding hers too.

Jack stroked her hair, his breath harder and harsher in the stillness.

She recoiled from Tommy and threw her arms around Jack. His hand on her hair stilled. Neither man moved. Neither spoke.

Slowly, she turned back to Tommy, following the scent of rum.

Jack spoke gently. "Take the tip of his cock in your mouth. Roll your tongue around it."

She gagged, and licked a drop of rum to hide the movement. *Cock*. That there was the word Jean Harlow would've used. Not the shipyard word *rod*. Certainly not *peter*. Jean Harlow probably wouldn't have said *teeter* either.

"Do it, Shy-girl, or don't do it. Waiting is torture."

"Then you do it!"

Fever-hot hands cupped her face. "I need a woman."

No difference between a man's mouth and a woman's, except mine's smaller.

Tommy pulled her to him. The tip of his rod met her mouth, and she turned away, as she would from a staircase kiss. A thick droplet smeared her lip. She wiped it off with the side of her hand.

"Slow down, Tommy." Jack advised.

With another strangled sound, Tommy released her.

She brushed her lips over the tip of his rod. His cock. Another droplet. The strong male taste filled her mouth from the one tiny droplet, just as the rum had, and Tommy moaned under her.

Warm arms reached around from behind her, balancing her when she bent over Tommy. Jack's hands unerringly found her breasts. Her nipples stung, the jolt of pleasure zinging together to her belly button and straight down. *Ooh!*

Tommy's purring hum brought an echo from Jack, and Jack's clever hands made her hum, too.

Sensing the rules, she sucked the knob into her mouth. Tommy gasped. Jack's hand danced, while she played the pipe, and Tommy sang a breathless, gasping song.

"Now!" Tommy hissed. Jack pinched, spearing shocks of pleasure through her. As she moaned, Tommy spurted hot, acrid liquid in her mouth.

She reared back against Jack, swallowing. Wishing she'd spit it out. Someplace. *Any* place. *Ugh!*

Jack held her tight with one arm and brought a glass to her lips. The taste of rum scalded out the taste of Tommy.

She leaned against Jack's solid chest. Her heartbeat pounded against the inside of her face, against her lips. And against her nipples, and down there. All the unmentionable parts of her pulsed with a demand she didn't know how to answer.

Jack settled her in the hollow Tommy had warmed. She still couldn't catch her breath. Large hands stopped her squirming, and again a hard palm pressed on her down there.

"Open it, Shy-girl. You're gon' get what good girls get."

He's going to do it the normal way? With his brother right here?

The pressure increased until she opened her legs. Jack's mouth found hers, biting lightly, but insistently, at her lips until she opened her mouth to protest, and then his rum-flavored tongue stroked over hers. *Oh, golly.*

She licked along his tongue, and won a deep-chested chuckle.

Another mouth pressed into her teeter. Jack swallowed her stunned yelp, but she kicked loose of Tommy, rocking the bed against the wall as she did. "How dare you!"

Tommy rolled over, hooting with laughter. The bed protested.

A heavy fist pounded the other side of the wall. "For crying out loud!" came a muffled Noo Yawk voice. "Some people paid good money to sleep here!"

Both men fell over her, convulsing with silent laughter. She smacked them each on the head, found an ear, and pinched it. One of them pinched her hand until she let go the ear, then kissed the hand and dropped it. The bed bumped the wall again.

"For crying out loud!" Another thump, right above Lorie's head, sifted dust in the air. She sneezed and yanked the blanket over her head.

Shaking and gasping, the men slid under the blanket on either side of her.

Jack twitched the blanket out of her grip and tucked it tenderly under her chin. After some maneuvering, she found herself facing his back, her arm draped over his waist. He caught her hand and kissed it, and pressed it against his heart.

Tommy faced her back, one hand patting her hip in a too-familiar way she pointedly ignored. *I'll never get to sleep like this.*

What about the female trouble?

These guys were human, not monsters. Doing it with them could get her a baby.

Don't panic. Don't panic. Think!

She didn't have to worry about what she'd done with Jack. The girls at the Yard had plenty to say about avoiding the female trouble, and doing it while standing up was agreed to be the most reliable method. Plus, a girl couldn't get a baby her first time; anyone who said otherwise was lying trash.

But Tommy had shot off as well, and that there hadn't been her first time. Or standing up. Could his ammunition travel around inside her, find where it needed to be, and do the old Hello-Mommy?

Chapter Five

She woke to the sounds of traffic, people bustling about the room next door, a distant radio tuned to the news from North Africa, and another to Glenn Miller. Daylight edged the blackout curtains, lining them like boxy storm-clouds. Jack and Tommy sandwiched her with naked, hot skin.

She had to wriggle out from under two arms and a leg -- none of which wanted her to move -- to get to the edge of the bed.

Feeling her way to the bathroom, she shut the door before pulling the light, and then flinched from the brilliant flare.

“Shy?” The sleep-thick voice could be either of them.

“I’m in here,” she muttered, eyes still closed against the glare. After a moment, she looked at herself in the cracked mirror.

This is what the morning after looks like. Not too appetizing. Her hair frizzed up around her head, shadows underlined her eyes, and her puffy skin had formed lines on her forehead and around her mouth. But she was still looking in a mirror, not having some undertaker decide whether her corpse was worth prettying up.

Then again, why would anyone bother holding a funeral for her? Not like she had anyone left to mourn if she got killed.

She frowned, remembering her attempts to cover up the same flaws with makeup yesterday evening. *How long have I looked like this? Is this just what I look like now?*

She made a face. Most of the girls on the night shift got a look like this pretty fast; burning the candle on both ends, they called it. The lack of sleep.

Or maybe she was fooling herself and this was the look of what Ma called a used woman.

It's better than being a dead woman, Ma.

She ran water just to feel it pouring over her hands. Clean water. *Water won't clean a dirty soul.* Hadn't worked for Pontius Pilate and wouldn't work for her. She splashed her face anyway, using double handful after double handful of bright, cold water.

What now? She gripped the sides of the sink and leaned on her arms, not looking up at the mirror.

Her right-hand fingertips brushed something under the sink. Something hard, steel-cold and lumpy. Something what didn't belong.

Not my business.

None of this is my business. She had to know anyway. She squatted to look. Taped to the underside of the sink was the meanest-looking knife she'd ever seen, heavy-bladed and with what looked like a set of brass knuckles built into the handle.

A murderer's knife. She tried to swallow, but her mouth stuck to itself.

Curiosity killed the cat. Maybe by a heart attack. She sat on the stool and waited for her heartbeat to slow down some. He'd said he wasn't unarmed, even with his pants down. He'd told the truth. That there was a good thing.

That there was a murderer's knife. With it, he could butcher her like a hog, with or without his brother to help.

Think of something else, Lorie. Something else.

Had the guys taken the room for the night, for the week? Back in high school, Betty Taylor had gone to a hotel after a hop and woke up with her clothes and her guy long gone. Or so they said.

Jack's clothes were in the sack in the corner. They'd be nasty, but they were clothes. *I won't have to call room service and explain why I'm alone, broke, and stark naked.*

Her bits of lace clung to the bottom of the tub. She rinsed them, wrung them, and hung them on the towel rack. Not much better than nothing, but still.

A tap sounded. She jumped hard enough to startle herself. *Just a tap on the door. I got to stop jumping over everything and nothing.*

"Lorie? Jack said you need something to put on."

What were the odds they had anything she could wear? But a shirt what could wrap around her twice beat Eve's Best. And dry man-clothes beat wet lace.

She touched the doorknob and couldn't make herself turn it. She touched it again, hesitated, told herself not to be such a sap, and turned the knob. Tommy's hand came through the crack with a sleeveless undershirt and a pair of faded blue undershorts. He had neatly trimmed fingernails.

“We don’t have any boxers with the new tie-sides, but this pair has French buttons in the waistband. If you can’t get the waist small enough with those, we have a needle and thread.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

With the waistband buttoned to its smallest size, the boxers almost fit. They still looked ridiculous.

On the other hand, if this undershirt was red silk instead of white cotton, it would look a lot like something Bonnie Parker would’ve worn to a party. *Twenty-three skidoo!* Or something like that.

Were they really going to buy her some clothes? Something to wear back to her empty apartment on Strega Road?

She opened the door reluctantly, took a deep breath, and turned the corner into the main part of the room.

Two identical images of Tyrone Power crouched by a suitcase. Both turned to her, and both smiled identical, predatory smiles. *Not Tyrone Power*, she thought, stunned. *Tyrone isn’t twins and he has that chin thing.*

She abruptly wanted to be wearing the lacy lingerie, and feeling their dark eyes burn through it. She made fists, digging her red nails into her palms. *What kind of Jezebel is inside me, thinking these thoughts and wanting these wants?*

“Should we tell you precisely what you are thinking?” Jack asked.

“No,” she said. “You can just tell me when you -- or Tommy -- is going to go get me something I can wear on the street. Should I make a list, or do you have one of those quiz-show memories?”

They looked at each other, and back at her. Without the smiles. “It’s your voice,” Tommy said, speaking to his brother, while looking at her. “She’s caught something in your voice to tell us apart.”

She struck leg makeup from her mental list and put silk stockings on it.

Jack smiled again. “Get her a pencil and paper.”

She made herself small in the armchair and chewed the pencil, pretending not to watch the men dress. They pretended not to notice her watching, but when Tommy ducked into the bathroom, Jack handed her a new pencil. “List.”

She flushed, and scribbled on the back of a hotel envelope while he splashed on aftershave what smelled more like booze than a man’s scent. He glanced over the list and back at her. “You forgot makeup and perfume.”

“I don’t normally wear either.”

He crouched in front of her, one hand on her bare knee. “Shy, think. You came to us for a reason. Daytime is safe, but daylight doesn’t last. What happens when the darkness comes?”

When darkness comes, the monsters come. He knew. And still, he wasn’t afraid.

Under his fading aftershave, she smelled the clean, faintly bitter scent of the bicarbonate he’d brushed with. He waited patiently, like he could hold that there position all day. Like a perfect hunter. In his brown eyes, her tiny image looked back at her. “You want me for bait.”

His lips thinned, but he nodded. “I want information and I want options. To obtain them, I might need you to look and smell exactly as you did last night. You were brave enough to walk out as bait then, weren’t you?”

“I don’t know why you bother to ask questions, since you seem to know the answers already.”

He watched her.

“Yes, I was the bait.”

“For hides?”

“Beg pardon?”

“H-y-d-e-s. They only come out in the dark. Some can look like men -- or boys -- when they have to, but more like a scarred-up cross between a man and an orangutan when they get excited. They feed on fear, sex, and fresh warm meat.”

Handfuls of dripping meat. She waited for her stomach to wrench sideways, but it didn’t. The horror might as well belong to some other Lorie. Jack stood like a granite block between her and the scene upstairs.

She was too close to feel as safe as she did, but feeling safe was better than going crazy-scared. “Sounds about right. Are they immune to silver bullets and wooden bullets? The men had both.”

“What men?”

She shook her head. She didn’t even know everyone’s name. If she did, she wasn’t fool enough to name the violently dead before their souls had time to move on.

Jack sighed. “The men who brought you here?”

“Yes.”

He waited a minute, then nodded, as if accepting her reluctance to talk. “A well-placed bullet doesn’t have to be either.”

“Oh.” She felt foolish for all the arguing. And sorry for poor, gimpy Joey Bookman, who’d never even seen a handgun -- except in the movies -- before two days ago. She touched Jack’s brow, smoothing an errant lock of hair.

Her eyes stung. Was there a Mrs. Hillyer? Hillyer orphans as bereft as she'd been? "Jack, can you shoot? Well?"

He turned her hand, and kissed the palm. "Yes, Shy. I can shoot." He leaned closer and licked her cheek, catching a tear just as it spilled. "I shoot very well."

Time can stand still right now.

But it didn't.

"The perfume -- do you know what was in it?"

"Civic and amber-grease and bakery stuff. One of our people -- he's a reporter for the *Times* -- found the recipe on the back of an old song-ballot. He said he spent months looking for the ingredients, and then yesterday morning he found a cobwebby little Chinese shop what had every single thing."

Jack's brows went up. "How much of the recipe can you remember?"

It was a recipe, wasn't it? She'd stirred up the stuff once, hadn't she? And it had been written for easy remembering -- one lump the size of an appleseed and one drop; one lump the size of a black pullet's eye and two drops; one silver thimbleful and three drops; one bat-skull scoop full (which turned out to be exactly a salt-spoonful) and four drops. All she needed to work at remembering was how to line up the ingredients.

She opened out the envelope -- flimsy thin paper, as it was these days -- so she could have the inside to list the perfume ingredients and how to find the shop.

She looked up to hand the envelope to Jack, and then had to look down. He had been sitting at her feet as she wrote.

"Can you please sit someplace where I don't wonder if you're trying to look up my skirt?" She snapped the paper at his nose.

He ducked, grinning. "You aren't wearing a skirt, and I can see just fine."

She crossed her legs, face again burning. He handed the list to Tommy. She hadn't noticed Tommy coming out of the bathroom. Both these guys moved like shadows.

"I'm off!" Tommy chirped. "Lorie, you didn't bring a ration book, did you?"

She blushed. *Hadn't been any pockets in that lacy get-up.*

Jack spoke for her. "No, she didn't. Use mine. I have a pair of shoes available. Get some Dorseys with a sensible heel, so she can run if she needs to. Make sure her dress has a tight waist and puffy sleeves. Don't forget to send up some breakfast. Real coffee, if you can get it. But drop off the laundry before you order the food. I want her to come at least once before breakfast does."

What?

Tommy laughed and went to the door. Jack swung to his feet and followed. They muttered something about *the duration*.

"You don't have to make such a point about keeping secrets," she said crossly.

Jack made a production of locking the door. "I was just telling him you'd be with us for the duration."

I will? She studied his wavy hair, his glossy black eyebrows, his steady brown eyes. *The duration of what?*

He smiled at her and unbuttoned his crisp white shirt what hadn't been buttoned for a whole ten minutes. Her insides shimmied as she watched.

She'd be here for the duration of the morning, at least. She couldn't get any more compromised than she already was, and his smile, his smoky eyes, promised the duration would be anything but boring.

It doesn't hurt after the first time. Everyone knew that.

He approached her slowly, like a wolf stalking a lamb. But this lamb was waiting with her own rising hunger. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his slacks, and casually spread his fingers on the flannel, outlining the thick ridge of his cock.

What was I thinking, to let him put something that big up inside me?

The hands clenched. She looked up quickly, and saw something move in those dark eyes. She reared back instinctively, and he leaped at her.

Laughing. He was *laughing*.

She twisted aside and let him fly past. One long arm reached out and caught her even as he landed on the bed. They bounced together, thumping the bed against the wall, and he pulled her in close.

She crushed a fistful of his starched collar. "You -- *jerk!*"

"You were thinking too hard. Fixing to scare yourself. I just beat you to it." He nuzzled her hair. "Tell me, Shy-girl. Does a little scare make you more alive? Does it heat your blood and focus your attention on right now, on me and you, and on what we could be doing together here in this bed?"

"You are crazy!" But the slip between her legs said *yee-hah!*

"I intend to make you crazy." He opened his pants with a quick move and flipped, stripping both legs together. He landed on his hands and bare knees beside her. "You're still dressed!" He gaped in mock amazement. "Why?"

"It's daylight." *And your shirt's still on, Jack French!*

"So I see. But what I *want* to see is covered up. C'mon, uncover."

"Don't you want to likker me up?" She wet her lips, but they dried in the next breath.

"Before breakfast? I'm shocked!" He leaned in so close all she could see was one big eye. Nothing could shock Jack. Nothing. "Liar."

"Joker. A Virginian doesn't like to be called a liar." He breathed the last word into her mouth, and touched her lips with his tongue.

Her lips parted for him, and he cradled her head in both hands. He settled into the kiss as if kissing her was the most important thing a man could do in this war. With his mouth, without a word, he made her feel beautiful -- and warm -- and badly, badly wanted.

He pulled back a few inches, exactly far enough her eyes could focus on him. He looked as if he wanted to ask something but didn't know how. Instead, he kissed her again.

She closed her eyes. *Ask me no questions; I'll tell you no lies.*

One knee worked in between hers, opening her to him. He drew his thigh up slowly, reminding her how much thigh he had, and how much of what else. Despite the soreness in her back-end, her treacherous leg-muscles softened as if welcoming the threat. She felt his breath on her cheek, but didn't open her eyes.

"You're wet," he murmured.

Down there, *wet is dirty*. Her face burned, but as she tried to pull back, he laughed and pinned her to the bed.

"I want you wet, Shy. I love knowing you can react so quickly, so strongly to me. That there makes a fellow feel like one hell of a man."

She opened her eyes. He wasn't laughing at her. He smiled like a hungry man carving the Sunday roast.

"You look like you want to eat me up this minute."

"I do." He swooped to pinch her neck lightly with his teeth.

Zing! The shock went straight through her, knocking the breath out of her.

He nipped harder, but let go before she could decide if it hurt. He kissed where he'd bit, licking and working his lips. He reared up and pulled off his shirt and undershirt, and tossed them against the wall. "Close your eyes again, Shy."

She closed them, cutting off the breathtaking view of his haired chest. "Why?"

"Because I said so. You have lovely lashes. Keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them."

He pushed her toward the headboard until a pillow pushed against her ear. Her borrowed clothing bunched awkwardly. He caught her hands as she tried to straighten the shirt. "Ignore that. Reach up over your head and push on the headboard with both hands."

Why? Before she could ask, the steam radiator whistled to life, rattling and knocking. She flinched and spit out a shipyard word. *Oh, no!*

He laughed again. This time *at* her for sure. She made a mouth at him but kept her eyes firmly shut.

"Verry good," he said softly, closer than she'd known he was. He nuzzled under her undershirt and kissed her belly with his tongue, as if she had a mouth there to explore. Her hips moved involuntarily against his knee. She wrapped both legs against his. "The headboard."

She groped for the headboard but found nothing to grab. Why couldn't it be bars, instead of a smooth thick slab? She made fists and pushed them against the cool wood.

“Don't let go, Shy. And one more thing. Don't speak.”

If she spoke, she might say something neither of them wanted to hear. Might have to, because -- *Oooh!*

Chapter Six

If he ever got rich, he would buy a handheld camera to immortalize moments like this. A posed photograph would never capture the war between uncertainty and anticipation on Shy-girl's face.

He spent a while suckling her left breast through the ribbed cloth of the undershirt. When he blew on the wet cloth, she shivered delightfully. He wet the other nipple and cupped her breasts in his hands, flicking both little tented nubs with his thumbs.

Her red nails scraped the headboard, but her hands stayed in place and her eyes remained closed. She would look delectable with her hands tied to the headboard, helpless to resist a good, all-over body nibble.

Not that a good nibble required her to be tied down, any more than it required her to be naked. He would leave her in those undies, his girl in his clothes. How would she react as he ate at her through and around the cloth?

She was unlikely to have the self-discipline to hold the board, but the thought of her writhing in his arms roused the hunger just as effectively.

Was she ticklish? Had to be. How ticklish, though? He licked one pale ankle. Her toenails were red too. She snatched her feet back, bouncing the bed against the wall. Before the bed settled, he grabbed that foot and blew along the wet stripe --

* * * * *

"Jack?"

He frowned. He lay on his back, his head in Shy's warm lap, but cold water trickled over his throat. She held a cold, wet cloth against his jaw.

"Oh, Jack, you scared me! I'm so sorry!"

His jaw hurt, front-square and at the hinges. He used a word that brought lye-soap memories to his tongue.

“Jack?”

“You kicked me, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry!”

“*Damned* fast kick! I didn’t see it coming.”

“Must you use such language?”

“Take your compliments where you can get them, Lorelei.” He moved his jaw experimentally. *Yeow!* “Da-arn! that was a solid kick.”

“Well, you surprised me!”

“The surprise was mutual.” He tried a smile. It hurt. *Damn.* “So...are we even-steven?”

“Beg pardon?”

“For last night. Do you feel avenged, now that you popped me a good one?”

She grinned. “You know where I’d have to put my foot to make us even, mister steven?”

He grabbed both her feet and pulled them around him, so her legs ringed his ribs. If they were standing, she’d be riding him piggyback. She squirmed under his shoulders, but he held her feet firm. “These feet stay where I can see them.”

She stopped moving. “Don’t that limit your options?”

Heat centered on his spine, and the hazelnut-touched scent of fresh musk rose about him. *Yes!*

He released her feet and flipped over to face her before she could move. His chest held her thighs apart and he looked up to see her grin centered between her breasts.

“You’re right. I don’t need to see the feet to feel safe from them. Besides, I like this view much better.”

He used his teeth to pull her shirt completely free of the boxers and nosed it up out of his way. She had a nice torso. Holding her knees out to the sides, he licked a line from the boxers up to her navel as she giggled and twisted under him.

Question answered. “You’re ticklish.”

“Am not!”

“Liar, liar! Pants on fire!” He had his head up under her shirt now, and the cloth held his head pleasantly tight against her breasts. He ran his fingers along her ribs.

Her heels thumped his back as she laughed herself near breathless. “They’re your pants! If they catch fire, it’s more likely your fault than mine!”

“My pants! That’s right! I think I’ll repossess them right now!” He peeled them a little way down her hips before she fought him off.

“You welsher!”

“As a matter of fact, I am Welsh -- my great grandparents were from Wales. Call me an Indian-giver instead.”

“I can’t say that! My Okie aunts would pray over me until I cried!” She yanked the waistband up under her breasts, and pinned it in place with her elbows. Which effectively immobilized her arms.

He ran a hand up one leg and tickled. “I won’t tell your aunts, Shy.”

“Please stop.”

The serious tone stopped him before the words soaked in. “What’s wrong?”

“If I get a baby...”

He took a breath, inhaling her to the soul. “You won’t if I can help it. I don’t aim for the ass just because I like a good squeeze. But if you do get a baby, you won’t ever be alone. I’ll take you home, to my family.” He studied her worried face. Shy-girl hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in a while. “You know you can’t turn up pregnant from what we’ve done. You have to know that.”

She blushed. “Things happen.”

“Yes. Things do happen. But even if I don’t make it to take care of you personally, you won’t be alone.”

She looked steadily at him, saying nothing.

And that there, ladies and gentlemen, is the sound of a bitten tongue. Rolling to the bedside table, he found his wallet. He pulled his best fake driver’s license and the matching draft card, and tossed both to her. One card landed on her thigh, and slid down to lean on the bed next to the other.

“Read them, Shy. That’s my real name. If you went there, you’d meet my aunt, and my grandparents.” Everything else on the cards was fake, including the address, but if a girl showed up there asking for him, his people would find her.

She examined the cards, front and back, and set them on the bedside table. “If you’re really John Rhys Anderson French, junior, you aren’t very good at keeping secrets. Don’t tell me you aren’t keeping secrets, because I can swallow a secret better than a lie. Why shouldn’t I worry about being a loose end for you, and you cutting my throat some night when you’re ready to move on?”

He leaned his bare butt against the low-set, feminine dresser. Felt odd to be entirely naked and under the examination of a nearly clothed woman. “You have your own secrets, Lorelei. I guess we’re stuck with no option but to trust one another.”

She frowned. “Wrong answer.”

“Whatever happened to a woman trusting her man?”

“A chicken in every pot is also a nice idea, but only a Bolshevik believes the chickens keep coming, week after week.”

“Not even the Bolshies,” he admitted.

She still lay on top of the rumpled sheets, though, when she could have moved further away, or under the cover. She looked alone.

He went to the window and looked at the sunlit street below. “How many times a day do you see a *Because Someone Talked* sign?”

“Are you saying *your* secrets are *war* secrets, Jack French?”

“You don’t need to know.”

A knock rattled the door. “Room Service!”

“Hold on!” Jack bellowed, his voice ringing in her ears. “I’m just out of the shower!”

She took the cue and scuttled to the bathroom, thrusting a damp towel out at him before she shut the door.

After a moment of muttering, a door shut. Then Jack opened the bathroom door. He bowed deeply. “Brikfusst, modom, is suhved.”

She shook her head. With such an awful imitation accent, he didn’t ever need to pin his hopes on a stage career. No matter how heartbreakingly fine he looked. No matter what a broad, muscled chest and shoulders he wore above that towel.

Coffee, toast, jam -- and pork chops? For breakfast? On a weekday? Did hotel food cost ration points? And grits! “However did you manage grits?”

“Made friends with the staff,” he gestured vaguely.

If he dropped any of that there forkful of grits onto his chest, she would be tempted to eat it off him. Her face burned. He quirked a smile at her. “Eat, Shy. We’re at war, and in wartime you never know when you’ll see your next meal.”

She cut a large slice of pork, dabbed it in the grits, and fed it to him. He looked surprised, and not at all unhappy. She cut herself a sliver of pork and buttered one edge with grits.

He cut a hearty bite of his own. “So how did y’all come to use a mix of silver bullets and wooden ones?”

She tasted the pork. Saltier than she liked, but crisp and rusty-colored on the outside, like pork was meant to be.

“My opinion wasn’t asked. Like I said, I was the lure. The girl. All I had to do was smell good, look good, and walk the bad guys up to the right room.”

And maybe have carnal relations with them.

“Did you?”

The pork lost its taste. She would have spit it out, but wasting food would make her burn as hot as any other sin. *Starving children in China would fight for that there mouthful*, her ma always said. She chewed twice more and swallowed.

He touched her hand. "You are stronger than you think. Where did you get the bullets?"

"The old guy who made the guns made them. I didn't get his name or anything. He was colored."

"Light discipline, noise discipline, and knowledge discipline. Each has its costs." He cut another chunk of meat and waved it on the end of his fork. He'd pretty much finished his plate.

Starving children in China. She took a bite of grits.

"Could you find the place again, if you had to?"

She shrugged. "Not likely. I barely know my way around parts of Astoria and Brooklyn, and either one of them probably has more shops than all of Arkansas put together. I don't know what borough the shop was in or which bus we took. I'd probably recognize the area if I saw it, though."

She stirred a little of the salty, rusty pork into her grits. "We walked a long way, then at the end, went under some tracks and past a half-torn-down building. On the other side was a beauty parlor, a church, and a funeral parlor all in the same building, one next to the other, and the gunsmith was upstairs. A church really needs its own building, its own roof, don't you think?"

"What's the name on the front window?"

"I was there at night. In the blackout. It could have been dirty words there and I wouldn't have known." The grits were good, even though they were half-cool. She'd missed grits and fried pork for breakfast. At eight ration points a pound, plus derved near a dollar a pound, meat was too dear for every day, much less for breakfast.

"But you knew what was behind the windows?"

"I knew what they told me. You reckon they lied?"

The radiator whistled, making them both jump. Jack reached over and turned it off. "Which tracks? What's the nearest cross street?"

She didn't know. *You can't blab what you don't know.*

He scraped up his last forkful of grits. How on earth did men manage to eat so fast? Did they chew at all?

He scooped her up and tossed her onto the bed. Her clutching hands closed on his hair, but it squeaked through her fingers.

He crawled slowly onto the foot of the bed. "Where were we?"

Would you look at that, there?

He grinned, and cocked his head. What? Oh -- he'd asked a question. "Well, before I kicked you, we seemed to be playing Sheik and Sheba. After, we were mostly tussling." You were trying to get these boxers off me. "Until we started arguing. Then the food came."

He sighed and backed off the bed, then went to the window, looking down at the street. Who, or what, was he always watching for? "Yes, we were arguing. In wartime, you have to trust people when you don't -- can't -- have enough information about them or the forces pushing them. Stay with me, Shy. Believe in me until I give you reason not to. Will you do that?"

"Okay."

He turned. His cock stirred, a living thing under the towel. He un-tucked the towel, and tossed it on the chair.

Golly!

"You like what you see, Shy?"

She couldn't lie. But she couldn't answer his question without actually being the brazen hussy he probably thought her, for all his teasing.

He was on her before she knew it. The bed groaned, and bumped the wall. She'd thrown her arms over her face instinctively. She kept them there to conceal a snicker as he swore.

"Dammit, I need to put a rolled towel behind there to keep it from bumping."

She peeked from between her arms. Laughter sparkled in Jack's dark eyes. He kissed her arms, one and then the other. They parted involuntarily, and he pressed in to kiss the tip of her nose.

He kissed her chin, then her throat. She laughed. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of the boxers, tugging.

"Hey!"

He adjusted his weight and kissed her navel. She pretended to kick at him. He hurriedly pinned her and then waggled his eyebrows. "You haff no secretsss, fraulein! You haff nozzink to hide."

"Even I can do a better German than that!"

"Do it! I dare you!"

She laughed again, pushing at his shoulders.

"Shy-girl, you need some real training -- you'd be helpless on the street."

Except to any blockhead who sticks his chin in the way of my heel.

She inhaled to speak, but he cut her off. "I double-dog-dare you!"

"You're making me laugh on purpose! Nobody can do a good German accent while laughing!"

"Give it up, then. Laughing's good for you." He put his weight on her.

She yanked a fistful of his hair and tried to get one knee under his chest.

“Stop that!” he said, a mockery of a growl tangling with his laugh. “You have hair too, and I haven’t pulled it... yet.”

He wriggled into position, prying her knees apart and dropping his chest into the space he’d opened. “You need something to do with your hands. Here, grab your ankles and hold them up in the air.”

“*What do you think I am?*” Spreading out and displaying herself like a French Postcard Girl? These oversized boxers covered a little, for now. But she likely wouldn’t be wearing them in a minute.

“Loud. Pretty, but loud. Ankles.”

“I will *not* hold my ankles up in the air. That would be -- *lewd.*”

“Okay.” He nosed open the fly of her boxers.

Her face burned, and she struggled for real. No good. He was too strong. “Jack! Don’t you allow a girl any privacy?”

“Not when she’s as beautiful as you. Wait until I put you on display under a spotlight. Lorelei’s Genitalia!”

She smacked his head. “That’s not funny.”

“Whoa!” He rubbed the side of his head. “Can’t you tell when I’m teasing?”

“If I ain’t laughing, it ain’t funny!”

“That’s no reason for violence!”

“You want to shove a baseball bat up my butt and call it *peaceful?*”

“Baseba -- ? Jeez Louise! I don’t know whether to be flattered or what -- but I haven’t touched your butt this morning! Nor do I intend to!”

“Oh.” Then what was he up to? *Did I really say ‘butt’ out loud?* “Well, you were violent last night.”

“Let me show you how a Virginian apologizes, then.”

He put his mouth *there*. She tried to protest, but couldn’t find her voice. His breath drifted over her, warm and intimate. The urge to kick him flowed out of her.

“That’s good. Relax.” His hands slid up the loose legs of her boxers, over her hips and around her waist, then down again, leaving warm trails.

He nosed at the front opening of the boxers, and with a start she realized he had bitten off the button there. And the other button.

Never mind -- I’ll mend them later.

He breathed on her again. Warm. Her knees tried to close anyway, but his shoulders were in the way. She didn’t know what to do with her hands; she couldn’t reach the headboard.

Jack licked slowly, thoroughly, like he had an ice cream bar melting. One side, then the other. Through the cloth, and then nuzzling the cloth aside. Her hands knotted in his silky hair. He loosened them and tucked them up under the small of her back. "Hold the bed down, Shy."

"You don't -- have to -- m-make fun of me."

"In a minute, 'hold the bed down' will make sense."

Hot breath drifted over her again, and this time her own heat flushed through to match. *Oh, golly.*

His hands slid under her hips and curved back around as if he needed to hold her in place. His tongue built a rhythm, lick-lick-lick, followed by a longer, slower lick or suck or a play-bite or a kiss... Here and there he hummed, a peculiar resonating noise which stole her breath. When, at last, his tongue probed The Bump, he did need to hold her in place. All her nerves coiled tight, ready for the explosion.

"Slow down," he whispered.

His breath touched her. Only his breath. Her tension eased. *Noo! "Don't stop!"*

Two fingers pushed inside her, just barely. He stroked, itching and tickling in the same motion. "You have the magic spot inside, Lorelei. I can feel it swelling right here. Do you know how lucky you are to have one? If I pushed this button just right, at just the right time, you'd come hard enough to break my nose."

"Shut up!" she snarled, grinding her once-secret places against him. Talking was the wrong use for his too-talented mouth, and the explosion had been so close.

"Oh, dear. The Shy Girl isn't so shy."

He grinned, and dropped his head before she could smack him. He nosed a layer of thin cloth over The Bump, wet it thoroughly, and suckled hard and fast. The explosion built harder and hotter than before.

At the brink, he stopped. "Slow down, Shy."

"No!"

But he slowed her down, mouthing the cloth plastered to her, his deliberately paced movements banking her fire.

He knew too much. She wanted to cry with frustration.

He built the pressure again. Her hands clawed at the bed under her back, wanting to claw at him. He nosed aside the cloth and tongued bare flesh, humming. Some internal finger tightened on the trigger, readying her again. *Don't let him know this time.* A quiver ran through her thighs, but she held back her rocking-chair hips. *Don't let him know how close. . . how close. . . don't . . .*

"Now, Shy! Come for me!"

The explosion tore through her. White. Roaring. Flying. Floating. She was blind, flying, then drifting. Not blind, but the next thing to it. *I'm dying.*

He stretched out beside her and cuddled her against his body heat. She buried her face in his chest. *Is it a sin because it feels so much like Heaven ought to?*

Chapter Seven

Jack's voice woke her from a light doze. She opened her eyes just as he set down the telephone receiver. His grin made her grin, though she blushed too.

"Why are you so happy?" she asked.

"That was Tommy calling. He got us a perfect job, a split shift at the Brooklyn Navy Yard."

"Split shift!" *Ugh!*

He laughed. "I need a mirror to show you what your face looks like."

"I know -- Ma always said my face would freeze someday and then I'd have to join a carnival. Why are you happy about a split shift? Don't you know a man with all his marbles and all his fingers can get a decent job anywhere these days?"

"Yes, but those are full jobs. A split shift is half a job for Tommy and half a job for me -- neither of us will be too busy to go out during the day or too tired to go out during the night. Besides, the shift is only split enough to overlap an hour of third shift in the morning plus an hour of second in the evening. And the pay is fifteen dollars a week!"

Half again what I get. But you got to travel both ways in the dark, or close to dark. And that don't scare you?

He Egypt-walked across the room, and she had to laugh. *Nothing scares Jack.* "You are *such* a little boy!"

"Bite your tongue!" He grinned again, and leaped on the bed beside her. "Better yet, let me bite it!"

She growled and cocked her foot warningly, brandishing her heel like a weapon.

He cringed, groveling in the mussed covers. "Ooooooh, noooooo! Don't hurrrrrt me, Miss Shy!"

The bed didn't bounce! She looked up; sure enough, he had put a washcloth behind the top bar of the headboard, with a knot to hold it up. "That's a right clever idea."

"Nah -- clever would be fixing that the first time. Or preventing it." He crawled to her and dropped a quick kiss on her chin. "Didn't you say you worked in that shipyard? Can we get you assigned as my assistant?"

"I'm there. I can rivet and I'm pretty good as a welder's helper, painting the flux and all. Is that what you'd need? What do you do, to rate a helper?"

"That's close enough. I'm a journeyman machinist, soon to be master machinist. How do you think I stayed out of the draft?"

"I thought you was Joe College."

He laughed. "No college, although Tommy and I attended a very exclusive boarding school. We might have grown up on a farm, but we got a reasonably good education."

Better'n mine. She frowned. "The war board drafts journeyman machinists every day. That's how I got my job."

"I'll burn that bridge when I come to it."

That flip tone ain't gonna earn you any points at the 'Yard! "Speaking of jobs, I do need to get back. I spent all my savings and there's the rent to pay. How much is this hotel running you?"

"The room isn't running us anything, except tips and meals. My daddy was in the Great War with the sons of the guy who owns this place. Tommy and I have stayed here off and on since we were kids. Tommy and I get free rooms whenever we need them, although when the lower floors are full, we have to stay in the top two floors, where all the electric wires and the plumbing have been stolen and where the baths are at the end of the hall instead of in every room."

"Not all the wire was stolen. Some of those rooms have electricity."

"A couple maybe, but only a couple." His eyes narrowed. "How did you know? Which room did you try the juice in?"

If she told him, he might go look. Just to see, in the way guys do. If the monsters -- or their face-man -- could be smart enough to see traps, they could be smart enough to set traps. "Do you get a lot of attention, being so good-looking and twins to boot?"

He looked at her a moment, then gave a small nod. "The night manager, who was here long before we were born, knows there's two of us. But we try not to let anyone else know. As mirror twins, we would get too much attention, even without the current shortage of young men on the street."

He crawled over top of her, his eyes fixed on hers with wolfish intensity, and eased the weight of his body down onto her. Her breath came short. This was a threat, the more dangerous for his matter-of-fact expression. He propped himself on his elbows. And waited.

You can wait all day, if that there's your game. Loose lips sink ships. You for sure haven't told me the truth, the whole truth and nothin' but the truth yourself, Jack French. If that's your real name.

He rolled off her abruptly. "Tommy already has your clothes and all. How long does it take to get here from Brooklyn, the shipyard?"

"At this time of day? I haven't the foggiest idea." What time was it? She stretched and got up and went to the window. The intersection she could see had lunch carts on every corner, but only one of those had customers. Too early to call it lunchtime, but getting close.

Jack stood behind her. She felt his warmth, the electricity that surrounded him, even before he touched her ear. "Sea shells. I've read 'the shell of her ear,' but yours are the first to make me see why."

She shook him off. People who talk about jobs aren't talking about spending time with a girl who just dropped in for the night. "If you plan to start work this afternoon, don't you need to be getting dressed?"

"Hm...we may have barely time to switch clothes before my shift starts. Can you have the perfume ready by the time I get back tonight?"

She felt the thick fabric of the blackout curtain. So he did want her to stay, at least one more night. She weighed getting dressed and going home, or showing up at work to beg for her job back, or staying in bed all day and all night with these guys. "If I don't show up for at least the second half of my shift today, I might be canned. I might already be canned."

"You need to return with me, then. I'll tell them we knew each other back home -- these Yankees don't know South from West anyway. You can show me where to go and who Tommy would have met."

"Not necessarily! It's a big shipyard. I don't hardly know everybody in my bay, much less the foremen and all in other areas."

His arm came around her and pulled her close to his heated skin. "We'll make it work, Shy."

Tommy showed up with, not only the dress Jack had described, and all its accessories, but a pair of dungarees and two warm flannel shirts for her to wear to work that afternoon. The shirts and dungarees were used, and more than a tad too big, but clean and expertly mended. While she held them up to her, he pulled out a box and grinned shyly.

For me? What else could he have thought of? Maybe a coat? But that kind of thinking was ungrateful. Penny Perleman had a decent wool coat for sale, and a good chunk of next week's paycheck had already been earmarked for it.

She untied the string and opened the box. Navy-blue. A trenchcoat, long and graceful, princess-seamed but with a long belt. Like something Ingrid Bergman would wear. A brand new coat.

Her eyes stung. She'd never had a brand new coat before. The Sears Catalogue was always sold out these days, and on the black market it might cost more than a week's pay.

Both men's eyes were on her. Not amused. Thoughtful.

"Thank you," she whispered. "How can I tell you how much I wanted one just like this? How can I thank you?" Heat flushed through her face and neck. *I mean with your britches on.*

Tommy grinned like a cartoon and shucked his pea coat. "You could scratch my back." He turned to present his broad, muscled back. I can never get enough of a good back-scratching. I scratch Jack's, but he never seems to get around to returning the favor."

She laughed and helped him pull his shirttail out. The heat trapped between his shirt and undershirt eased an ache in her hands. She'd been so used to the pain, she didn't even remember hands could have some condition other than aching.

"Higher! Ooh, to the right! Yes! Right more! Yes! Harder! Not so hard! Perfect, now down! Up! Up! Toward the spine! Now the other side, just under the shoulderblade. Yes! Chase that thing down! Down! Further! Yes! Ooh! Up again! Yes, baby, yes! Yes! Oh, Lorie, say you'll marry me!"

"Enough," Jack said quietly. "You'll have to run for the bus if you don't get dressed right now."

Spoilsport. But she was grateful too. Tommy's enthusiasm was right on the edge of being embarrassing. A gal could have two beaux, but once the courtship got to a certain stage, all but one of the guys needed to cry off. And if he didn't cry off on his own, a lady let him know it was time.

But this wasn't courtship. *So which rules apply here?*

As she dressed and put her hair up, using a faded calico kerchief from the guys' suitcase, Tommy gave a remarkably complete layout of the part of the yard right next to her usual station and a rundown of who ran what and who sold the black market Luckies.

Returning to work, she felt like a Martian. Whispers tickled her ears and her back, and pointing fingers seemed to catch at the corners of her eyes. Her foreman and the shift-mother both chewed her out good, then the shift-mother hugged her and told her to take a break when she needed it.

Three hours later, she was summoned to the office. She limped warily down the waxed corridor -- these new Dorseys looked good but pinched something awful -- and pulled the cotton from her ears as she went.

"Look, Bossman," she said as the receptionist waved her in. "I'm really sorry to miss so much work. I can't say what come over me."

"Miss Gale, I didn't call you in to scold you." Dumpling Foster, who looked a lot like a bread-dough sculpture of Heinrich Himmler, took off his little round glasses and laid them on his ink blotter. "I want to offer you a promotion."

Play dumb. When in doubt, play dumb. “A promotion, sir?”

He smiled the pained smile that made the girls lay bets on whether he was constipated or had the toothache. He picked up his glasses, polished them with his tie, and looked past her. “Is that sufficiently South-in-the-mouth, Mr. French?”

“That there will do nicely” He said it *nahssly*, almost like *nasty*. “But is she steady?”

She let her gaze drift across the desk, to the door where she’d come in, and to Jack standing against the wall there. He’d undone his top shirt button, and rolled his sleeves up to bare heavily-muscled forearms. *He belongs on the cover of a dime novel.* “Beg pardon?”

“Miss Gale, Mr. French here is our new machinist. He needs a Southerner as an assistant, because the Brooklynners say they don’t understand his accent. I offered to assign him one of the Polacks from Astoria, but he wants a Southerner.”

“I don’ take kindly to being mocked, is all.” Jack pushed himself off the wall and reached for her hand. She let him take it, and was mortified to see a line of red she’d missed while filing off the polish. He turned her hand over and studied her calluses “Can you keep a civil tongue in your head, miss?”

She jerked her hand back. “I never had a complaint about where my tongue was, sir. Can you say the same?”

“Miss Gale!”

“She’ll do fine, Mr. Foster.” Jack opened the door. “We’re far enough behind as it is. Miss Gale, do you want to learn some machining?”

“If it helps the war effort, I’ll study anything. Call me Lorie, would you?” *When do we decide we know each other? When we start comparing third cousins twice removed?* Or maybe he had decided against that part of the plan?

Chapter Eight

At quitting time, they got on the subway separately, but they sat together on the bus that took them the last few blocks back to the hotel. As soon as she had her seat, Lorie pried off the Amazing Shrinking Dorseys and groaned.

Jack swore and grabbed her left foot. "Why didn't you say the shoes didn't fit?"

"They fit like any new shoes. They just need breaking in is all." She looked under her lashes at the other people on the bus, but apart from a big-eyed pair of little girls, every one seemed immersed in his or her own private misery.

Jack wrapped his big hands around her foot and squeezed hard. That there should hurt, but instead, it thawed the ice-chunks of pain what had been gouging the insides of her feet. *Oh, golly! You can do that again.*

She might as well have said it out loud. He did the other foot, and she moaned, closing her eyes.

Snickers snapped her eyes open. She was the center of attention -- or, rather, too close to the center. Not too many men as good-looking as Jack French rode the bus in normal times, and in these days of strict rationing, he had to be a rare delight. She felt like holding up a newspaper in front of him, to hide him from those hungry eyes. But she didn't have a newspaper.

Jack squeezed her foot again, this time with a wringing motion. *Ooh*, that was good, but she couldn't enjoy it with several pairs of eyes glaring at her. Her face burned.

"Jack, stop. We're in public."

A shop girl in an old-fashioned blue-checked pinafore stuck her tidy, blue-socked foot right on Jack's knee. "I wouldn't mind getting me a little of that, Mister."

Lorie snatched a Hollywood magazine from the old lady next to the girl, swatted the girl with it, and thrust it back into the old lady's hands. She sat again, her back against Jack's side, refusing to look at him, when she could feel his ribs quake with silent laughter.

She waited for the girl to counterattack, but the girl just stared at her, eyes and mouth wide open. *You'll catch flies!* The girl finally swallowed, and hunched down in her seat. The other passengers, except for the big-eyed little ones, settled back to their catalogues, their magazines, their knitting, or just tired stares at the dirty floor of the bus.

Jack helped her put her shoes back on just in time for their stop. He breezed her past the old lady at the concierge desk, who stared at her and sang under her voice, *"My momma done told me..."*

Lorie felt her face tighten. That song was either a warning or an insult. *Golly, am I smart enough to take a warning?*

Nope.

Jack opened the outer doors of the elevator with a flourish she was too tired to appreciate. As he reached in for the safety gate, she caught his wrist. "Waitaminnit! We forgot to stop and get something to eat."

"If we're lucky, Tommy will have supper ready." He gently pushed her into the elevator. "I'll rig us up an ice box tomorrow, unless he already has."

She slumped against him. "I'm so tired I don't even want food."

"You didn't sleep well last night, did you?"

"How could I?" Last night seemed like part of a different lifetime, or maybe a movie. Whatever movie a man like Jack would step out of. And -- She stood up straight. "It's dark. They'll be out and about."

He cupped her face in his hands. "You're safe."

"Why?" She fought to keep her voice as low as his. "Because you're here?"

"Well, I'm not useless. But what I mean is you don't smell like the female from last night. You don't smell like any kind of a lure. They're like dogs, remember? They see with their noses. I don't think they pay any attention to most people. They seek out people who smell of blood, sex, or strong emotion. People who smell like victims. Prey."

The elevator squeaked and shuddered to a halt on the fifth floor, which was as high as it went. Jack pulled open the inner door, paused with his hand to the outer door, and opened it too. They would have to take the stairs from here. He pressed her close to his side. "Calm down. Fear is salt and pepper to them."

"How do you know?"

"I know. Hush, now. Least we don't have lunch pails to carry today." She watched, fascinated, as he pulled two sets of brass knuckles from his britches pocket and fitted them on his hands. He touched them to her cheeks. She looked past them to his thin smile and the knot between his brows. The sharp smell of the brass must be what stung her eyes.

She quietly followed him to the stairwell door. A gentleman followed a lady up the stairs, in case she fell, but Jack approached the stairs like a GI Joe, his big hands already in armored fists and his gal in his shadow.

The stairwell was empty, and dusty, and cold. And dark.

Jack groped in the darkness, producing a faint rusty squeak from directly overhead. Glaring light flooded the area.

Lorie gasped and covered her eyes with one arm. "Warn a girl, Jack!"

He kissed her temple and spoke into her hair. "Don't call my name when you don't know who's around, okay? Not after sunset."

His mutter echoed in the stairwell, but in a word-shrouding mumble. Her own voice must have been clear much farther. She nodded. The sound of him screwing in the overhead light bulb had been as much warning as an alert person should need.

They didn't speak again until they left the stairwell. Then she asked, "Shouldn't we turn out the light down yonder?"

"How?"

Every way that immediately occurred would either break the light bulb or leave one of them to climb stairs in the dark. "But there's a war on!"

"Stairwells need lights," he said firmly. "The most common killers and crippers in this world don't have teeth and claws, or even guns. Think about it. Besides, the skylight is at least thirty feet on up. That's an effective blackout range."

At their room, he didn't bother knocking at the door; just slid the key soundlessly into the lock and opened it. The curtains were open to the last weak light of evening. The bed was empty, but she heard Tommy snoring. The snoring stopped.

"Us," said Jack.

Tommy's tousled head rose from behind the bed. "Good. I can stand a hard floor, but this one hasn't been swept in months."

He brushed his -- oh Golly! naked skin -- with his hands and crawled onto the bed. And stretched. Naked. Shy gulped. The girls at the yard talked about a man's rod standing up tall as a Co-Cola bottle, and twice as thick as the man's thumb. Tommy had big thumbs, but...

He grinned, and his...cock...swelled like a balloon. Easily three times as thick as his thumbs. Easily as tall as a Co-Cola bottle. He winked at her. "And then again, there's better ways to use a bed."

"At ease!" Jack snapped, stepping between him and Lorie. "You make any contacts this afternoon?"

"Mostly I slept."

"Any calls?"

"I'd have told you first off, wouldn't I?"

This could go on a while. Lorie kept her ears tuned anyway as she slipped into the bathroom for a quick cleanup.

When she came out, scrubbed and feeling more human, dressed in a worn bathrobe, Jack taped the blistered places on her feet. Tommy lay across the bed, wrapped in the blanket and spread, watching. She saw movement at lap level, even under all the cloth.

How often does a guy want to do that? Her face heated at the thought. Tommy grinned and jerked his hips at her.

“Pinch that thing down or pinch it off.” Jack said, without looking at him.

Tommy scowled. “What, only you get to play with her?”

“That’s right.”

“How is it fair you get her, while I have to go find the first rag-and-mop who’ll hold still for a two-spot and a cigarette?”

Jack’s hands tightened on her foot. “Shut up, Tommy.”

“Why are you so possessive of this one? Just because she’s fresh?”

This train ride ain’t going nowhere I want to see. She shook off Jack’s hands. “Ya’ll can bicker all you want, but don’t do it with me in the room, okay? I feel like a heifer between two cowboys. Did you get all the stuff for the perfume, Tommy? Jack, you want to take a shower while I get started?”

He growled, a sound she more felt than heard, but he obeyed without a word.

Tommy handed her a soap-box full of little brown-glass bottles and tin canisters and twists of paper. She nodded her thanks and spent a while lining them up. Once lined up, the ingredients practically mixed themselves.

Tommy hovered at her elbow. He said nothing, but just by being so close he distracted her. She grew increasingly aware of his silent presence. When she capped the last bottle and set it aside, he stepped closer.

She froze, feeling the heat of his skin and the firm ridge of his cock against her back, wondering how to push him away without making a scene.

“You smell so good just on your own, Lorie,” he murmured. “I don’t know how I can be expected to keep from tasting you when you’re wearing this stuff.”

“You’ll have to,” she said in her crispest voice. “Or Jack will bust your chops for sure.”

“Might be worth it.”

Jack snarled, and she jumped. *Warn a girl, Jack!*

But his snarl was a warning. She’d have to learn to take her warnings in the form they came in, not wait for a big yellow street sign.

“Then again,” Tommy murmured, stepping away, “Might not be worth it.”

Lorie considered suggesting a nap, but as tired as she was, she didn’t think she would get to sleep before time to get up again. Instead, they decided to grab dinner and more or less

map out the darker corners of the neighborhood. Wouldn't be any moon tonight, so they'd all be dark, but that's how the guys put it. Tommy slipped down the back stairs, while Lorie and Jack took the front stairs and the elevator.

The corners were dark indeed, and the first one the guys stopped in was the recessed doorway of the former speakeasy where Lorie had picked up the face-man. "Shy, you go in first. It's a long, narrow room, so just promenade to the other end, pick up the phone and jangle it, then turn and come back. Anyone who bothers you will find out I'm right behind you. Okay?"

No. But she nodded.

She wound her way through the fog-bank of tobacco smoke, but saw no familiar face. A hand brushed up the back of her leg, but Jack appeared from nowhere just as she spun and slapped the nearest sailor. The sailor fell back against the bar, laughing. *Good -- the laugh probably means he's the guy who deserves a slap.*

They skipped the next two bars and stopped at the third. This place looked like the others -- maybe a little noisier, smokier, and more crowded. The radio played Tommy Dorsey. *"...I'm so hungry for love..."*

Love, my Aunt Fanny! Carnal relations, that's all. A chance to hear the angels sing. A'course, she'd never understood that line until Jack.

She wove a crooked trail among the little tables without attracting any mashers. As she passed, one marine who didn't look a whole fifteen years old toppled like a pole-axed steer and fell limp at her feet. No one seemed to notice, and the radio played on.

She debated stepping over the boy, but he might be faking it to sneak a peek up her skirt, so she went back the way she came.

Halfway back to the door, she found Jack and a wiry red-headed guy. "...hungry!" the redhead said. "-- purged, yes, but I have to *feed! Soon!*"

Jack's intent gaze left the redhead and went to her. She would lose track of everything if she looked in those eyes, so she looked at the redhead. His nostrils flared, and his lips curled like some hooting monkey in a jungle movie.

Before she could prompt Jack for an introduction, the redhead lunged at her. She stumbled back. Then all she could see was a blue-wool wall. The back of Jack's coat. In the time she'd spent taking one step, Jack had moved between her and the redhead.

"O'Brien! Hold on!" He said something else, too softly to hear over the general chatter behind her.

The redhead's voice rose. "For the *love of God*, French! A man can only exhale so many times before he has to inhale!"

Jack's low voice carried, each word bit off separately. "Not! From! Her!"

"I'll make her come like a freight train!" O'Brien's shriek silenced the bar, which even the fainting marine hadn't accomplished.

Jack moved forward, crowding the redhead, while getting out of the direct line between her and the door. *This looks like an invitation to leave.*

Outside, Tommy met her. "What? Did Jack find himself a fight?"

The wind bit into the nearly-bare skin of her legs. She edged around Tommy, moving downwind to use him for shelter. "He's talking with some hungry guy name of O'Brien."

"Hung -- Holy Moly -- Davey or Danny?"

She tucked her hands under her arms for warmth. "I don't know, but I don't need that there language, Mr. French."

He hugged her, a surprise what ended as abruptly as it began. "My apologies, Miss Gale. Please don't tell my folks I said such a thing. Now -- If I whistled at him from the door, you think he could hear me?"

"No."

"If he sent you out, I don't want to send you back."

"Either you need to go in to talk to him, or you need me to take a message. Make your choice, Captain Hero Whatever!" The November wind howled about her, coming straight down these darkened streets like water rushing through a pipe, cutting her like ice shards. People talked about the prairie wind, but this was colder and sharper.

"Let's go to the ice cream parlor up the block; I'll drop you there and come back alone. You'll be safe waiting there for us, won't you?"

She laughed. *Here I am shaking with cold, and he offers me ice cream!* "Sure."

Half an hour later, Jack came in, disheveled and grim; he plainly didn't want to talk about it. He sat with her over a cocoa, gradually thawing, until the waitress sang out, "Closing time!"

Jack threw down two bits and shrugged into his coat. "Time to start over. Ready?"

She gave him a grin she didn't feel, and put enthusiasm in her voice. "Ready Freddy!"

Chapter Nine

In the alley behind the bar, Jack's head went up like a dog testing the wind. "Trouble. Follow -- but give me fifty feet!"

He whistled *bob-white!* and broke a trot. She followed, pussy-footing as best she could in her new shoes but falling behind his casual-looking and entirely silent lope. Golly -- if he ran, she'd have to take off her shoes to even keep him in sight!

She heard a whimper. She stopped, catching her breath, and remembered not to call Jack's name. A muffled grunt rode another whimper. To the left, in an alleyway.

She whistled, *whip-poor-will!* Jack whirled, lit by slits of headlights in the middle of the street a short-block ahead. She pointed to the shadowed alley. *Stupid!* The light she saw him by would blind him to her. But he nodded.

Without stopping to watch him, she crept toward the noise.

A momentary flicker of light from between the rooftops showed the alley floored with bricks, which just ahead of her abruptly turned sideways. *Used to be a crossing alley here?* But people had built over it, leaving two stubby dead ends. In the Hard Times, people probably made scrap-wood little shanties to live in there. From the blackness, where the reek of old pee hung like stale cigarette smoke, she heard a shuffle, or a scuffle.

Jack's hand fell lightly over her mouth, and he silently pressed her toward the shadow of a doorway. She nodded, and backed as close to the door as she could without touching the filthy surface.

A faint whistle reached her ears, some kind of birdcall she didn't know. *But night birds never sound so happy.*

Jack coughed.

From the other side of the darkness, Tommy's voice rang out. "Hey, youse! MP! Come out and show your ID!"

Two sailors burst out of the darkness, running toward Lorie, their pea-coats flapping open despite the cold. The men held up their bell-bottom britches with both hands. A female cry, broken and lost, rose behind them.

The faster one brushed by Lorie, never giving a sign he even saw her. She bit her lip and watched the direction he took. A strangled noise behind her whipped her attention back to Jack. The second sailor bowed over Jack's fist. Jack thudded another fist into his back, and he went down.

"Rape," Tommy said from yonder in the darkness. "She won't die, though."

Jack kicked the downed sailor viciously. Lorie looked resolutely away, sifting the shadows and the moonlight for any sign of the fast sailor's return, or for any other unwelcome attention. Someone, hopefully the sailor, moaned and gagged. She stole a peek, and saw Jack pulling at the sailor's pea coat.

"I'm Johnson," Tommy murmured at the edge of her hearing, and the woman whimpered. "I'm not going to hurt you, miss. Do you know who either of those men was?... Yes, miss, I know... what ship? ... civilian authorities?" His voice dropped out of range again.

Lorie saw a movement, the glitter of metal buttons, and hissed. Everything stopped, like in a movie. Then Jack soundlessly crossed the distance to her, grasped her under about the waist, and lifted her. Hands grabbed her from above. Tommy grunted, but lifted her to a narrow ledge.

Too narrow. She didn't need callused fingers on her lips to remain silent on this little bit of a perch.

Jack faded into the dark below. Footsteps, relaxed and slow, approached. Somewhere down the alley, a cat yowled and a curtain parted. The light drew her eyes, but she closed them in time to keep most of her night vision.

The footsteps sped up. She looked directly down at a policeman, his buttons glimmering faintly. His steps sped up, striding with a purpose now. "Lights out!" he bellowed. "Hey! Youse up dere! Close yer curtains! Dere's a war on, don't you know? *Lights out!*"

He strode right past the alcove where the female hid, quiet now, like a hurt bird what didn't dare call attention to herself.

The curtain closed and the policeman strolled on, singing to himself. "Devil a man can say a word agin' me. H-A-double-R-I-G-A-N, you see..."

When the show tune came only as echoes, the woman made rustling noises, then limped into sight, heading opposite from the policeman.

Sex, blood, and strong emotion. That poor woman would smell of all three. Had she become the lure of the night? Not for long. She fumbled with a door at the very end of the alley. Lorie couldn't see if she had a key or a doorbell, but the door opened, and she went in. The door slammed shut behind her.

“Rats!” Tommy muttered.

“Rats? Because she didn’t call down the monsters on her head before she reached safety?”

He sighed. “She would have been perfect.”

Jack whistled again, from a distance.

“Speaking of safety,” Tommy said, and abruptly vanished from her side.

Lorie bit her lip. Had he fallen? Was he hurt?

“Drop,” he whispered from below.

She hesitated. How could he catch her? He couldn’t possibly even see her.

He hissed. “Drop, Lorie! The Mad Hatter’s men are loose. We need out of here.”

She closed her eyes in the dark, put her hands on the cold brick behind her, and pushed. The wind slapped at her, and for an instant she felt the fall was endless. But an instant later he had her, grabbing her from the air and collapsing under her.

Another presence lifted her to her feet and ran with her. Tommy scrambled up and found her other side. The three of them ran together. Only the tap-tap, tap-tap! of her footfalls echoed off the walls of the alley.

A moment later they emerged at a street, or she and Jack did.

Jack dropped his pace to a casual stroll. She stumbled. He steadied her. He was, she noticed, carrying the sailor’s pea coat.

“You think that will fit, Jack?”

He grinned and bundled it to make an anonymous lump. “Maybe. If not, it’ll sell easy enough. Surprised, Shy? Not every monster you meet has fangs and claws, and it’s a poor huntsman who doesn’t get at least one meal off his prey.”

“I hope you crippled him for life. Wait, I hope you put him in pain for life, but it don’t show. I want him in pain *and* in the navy!”

To her left, a door opened. Light, and a giggling pair of women spilled onto the sidewalk. A cloud of cigarette smoke and drum-laced jazz came with them, and they squealed in unison, “*Beat me, daddy! Eight to the bah!*”

What?

The girls stopped to stare at Jack. He stared back, his expression unreadable, his face movie-star handsome. Lorie put a possessive arm around him.

The door shut, leaving them all in a too-intimate darkness there on the sidewalk. A soft hand touched Lorie’s wrist. She flinched, but resisted the urge to ball up her fist and punch.

“Any chance you’d share, sweets?” The woman’s breath smelt of gin and bad teeth, but she wore an expensive scent, and the soft brush of real fur followed her hand.

“Sorry, honey,” she replied coolly, and urged Jack on, away from those perfumed, soft-handed, fur-wearing city girls. *I got fur too! It ain't mink and it don't show, but Jack seems to like it just fine!*

“Time to head back,” he murmured.

She looked up, trying to pick out the outline of some familiar roof against the sky. Near Strega Road, she could orient herself anywhere between the bus stop and the brownstone, or between the brownstone and the movie house, just by identifying which dogs were barking, and whether the wind smelled of Swaravski's manure heap.

Only once, after watching *Mrs. Miniver*, had she left the movies in the wrong direction. She'd been lost in thought, trying to memorize the score. Even then she hadn't gone far before the steam tunnel on the other side had whooshed her skirt and awakened her to her surroundings.

Here she just couldn't make sense of anything she saw. “Meaning which way?”

“North, of course.”

In the country, you find north by the big bear or the little bear. But even with the blackout, precious few stars showed in these skies. The cold of the night made her legs ache. She shivered hard. “I don't feel well.”

His arm came around her, pulling her into the warmth he radiated. “Let's stop for a malted, then, or an egg cream.”

“What place would be open at this hour? And won't Tommy lose track of us?”

“Tommy has us in sight. Egg cream it is.”

“A malted. Chocolate.”

The ice cream parlor he found was out of chocolate. She sipped halfheartedly at a vanilla malted, dipping the spoon in it and licking it off, and feeling Jack watch her. She finally just pushed the tall glass at him. “Here. It's too good to waste.”

He tasted it, not speaking, not smiling, and skimmed another frothy spoonful. He offered her the third spoonful. She smiled and shook her head.

He tipped up the glass and drank, thick muscles dancing hypnotically in his throat. Oh, golly. Those muscles. Every part of him was both powerful and graceful.

When he set down the glass, he had a white mustache. She laughed, breathlessly -- she'd been too caught up in watching him to bother with a little thing like breathing.

“What is it, Shy?”

“You.” She reached over the little table with her napkin and blotted his mouth tenderly.

When they got back to the hotel room, Tommy was rinsing his cardigan with hydrogen peroxide.

Jack made a face at the pink foam on the sweater. “How bad off was she?”

“Busted lip and some bruises. Shell shock, probably.”

“Didn’t smell like they’d got too far. Leave some of the bottle for me. I got some blood on my sleeve.”

She looked quickly. A thin line of red-brown edged his cuff. How hadn’t she noticed that? But it wasn’t his blood. She eyed the rest of him critically as he took off his coat. Another dark line edged his britches cuff, and... “What’s in your pocket, to make it so full?”

“Don’t know,” he said cheerfully. He dug out a wallet, some keys, a half-full box of Luckies, a rabbit’s foot, and a change purse. He tossed them onto the lowboy.

The wallet had two V-mails from someone who apparently thought XOXOXOX was an appropriate way to close a letter, a sheaf of ration coupons -- the red ones for meat -- and twenty bucks in one-dollar and two-dollar bills. The change purse had some tokens and another two dollars in jingle.

Something’s missing. She unfolded the letters and flipped through the coupons. “Don’t sailors carry ID?”

“S’posed to.” Jack spread the pea-coat over the bed and searched it. “Nothing else here but a rubber. Now that’s peculiar.”

“A rubber what?”

He grinned at her. “A raincoat. A sock.”

“You’re joshing me.” That little foil packet couldn’t possibly have a sock in it, much less a raincoat.

“A rubber?” Tommy moved cat-silent to stand beside her. “Flip you for it.”

“Take it,” Jack said, tossing it in the air.

Tommy reached up and pinched it out of its arc with two fingers.

How long did ya’ll practice that move?

“Well, I swan.” Tommy turned the packet over. “A GI rubber. Makes sense, though.” He grinned at her. “Want to help me check the fit and quality?”

“No,” Jack answered for her. “We’re both still flush and I don’t want her worn out.”

“You, oh, my most selfish of twin brothers, have decided not to share.”

“You, oh, my most greedy of twin brothers, have figured it out.” Jack stacked the coins. “Take the folding money. If you can’t talk your way into some little Yankee’s honey jar with money in your pocket, you’re a disgrace to the family.”

Tommy sat on the chair and pulled off his pants. He held them upside-down, pinching them by the seams, and hung them carefully.

She looked back at Jack, who was turning his dress pants inside out and critically examining the dark mark on one cuff. *I guess it’s bedtime.*

She sat on the corner of the bed and removed her shoes.

“Want me to braid your hair, Lorie?”

She looked up in surprise.

Jack shouldered Tommy aside. “No, she doesn’t.” He dropped to his knees and lifted her feet to his lap. “This is my job, Shy-girl.” His voice rumbled, soft and deep like a lion’s purr. “You take care of me, and I take care of you.”

He reached up her skirt, deftly unhooked her garters, and slid the stockings slowly down to pool at her ankles. In private, the whisper of silk down her legs would have been swell. Right now, she was too conscious of Tommy in the chair. “I didn’t undress you, Jack.”

Tommy laughed. “Don’t mind me, Lorie. Besides, he doesn’t have enough of a hard-on to be serious. Double-besides, it’s bedtime.”

“Do me a favor, Tom. Rinse my stuff too.”

Tommy grinned at her. “Listen to him. You’d think somebody died and made him king.”

But he took Jack’s clothes to the bathroom.

Jack hung her stockings on the hat-rack to air. Then he reached up her skirt and pulled down her panties. His hot eyes held hers, and the rest of the room faded from her attention.

Jack was the world around her. Jack, undoing her buttons and sliding cloth over her skin, and burning her eyes with his gaze every time he turned her to face him. Jack, who undressed her to the skin, and washed the makeup from her face with slow, sensuous strokes before he brushed her hair and braided a short ponytail down the back of her neck. Jack, who laid her in the bed, and practically melted out of his own underwear to join her.

The heat at her back was welcome, but Jack held her, and she dreamed of him.

Chapter Ten

She awoke to hands kneading her flanks, and a mouth at each breast, and heat curling through her womb. November winds howled outside, and rain drummed on the window, but she was doubly safe and doubly warm.

She took a breath, but Jack shushed her before she spoke. His mouth returned to her breast, suckling strongly.

Sighing, she cupped both heads to her, and drifted on the current of pleasure they built. Two men, both hard and clean and strong. A girl could go a long way and never find better.

One callused hand moved like a polishing cloth across her lower belly, then finger-combed the patch of curls. She thrust her hips toward the hand, seeking without thinking.

Jack nodded, and Tommy's head moved down, suckling every few inches as though any spot on her entire body might be what his hot, wet mouth sought. He took his own sweet time settling between her thighs. Then, finally, he nosed through her curls and latched onto the bump, like it was a lower nipple. *Yee hah!*

Jack wrapped his long legs about one of her legs, pressing his urgent cock against her skin, sucking her breast and squeezing her thigh in rhythm to Tommy's eager mouth. She came without warning, like a thunderclap.

Jack followed immediately, bucking and clutching at her right side. For a long moment, they lay gasping together, hearts thudding. His hot fluid ran down her leg. After a moment, he wiped it with a smooth, soft cloth.

What about Tommy? Tommy held her knees in his hands, kneading at her like a purring cat. He was neither limp nor panting. Without further thought, she hugged him with her legs. "C'mon up."

"I'll get the rubber," Tommy offered, his voice tense and hopeful together.

Jack shook his head, his thick hair tickling her collarbone. "Too -- chancy." His broad chest heaved. "Those things -- are -- never strong enough." He turned and latched his mouth to her breast again. Tommy lunged to take the other breast.

The men competed wordlessly, echoing their wakeup call with a redoubled intensity, sucking every coherent thought from her mind. Hands and mouths attacked her sensitized skin, and all she could do was clutch fistfuls of silky hair. This time the explosion rolled through her like heat-thunder, thick and powerful.

The men held her down and kept the thunder rumbling through her. From chest to knees, her body clenched and shuddered with the booming power of those explosions.

"S-stop," she gasped finally. "I -- I can't..."

They stopped. Both of them lay heavily against her sides. After a long moment, Jack lifted his head. "You smell too good. I can't think when you fill up my senses."

Tommy laughed, but not happily. "Ain't it the truth? How about some hand lotion and two warm tits just to finish me off? Lorie? Would you hold still for that?"

Two warm -- ?

"No," Jack said crisply. "She hasn't the energy or time to enjoy it. Y'all will be late for work if you dawdle any longer."

Tommy growled. "You haven't so much as flicked a flashlight at the clock."

Jack laughed shortly and swung his legs off the bed.

"Cripes." Tommy kissed her wetly between the breasts and then below her belly button. "He always does know. I could have a brother who swings from jungle vines, or who Clouds Men's Minds, or Runs Faster Than a Speeding Bullet, but no -- I have to have the Human Alarm Clock. And he's bossy, too. The world is not a fair place, Lorie."

"One more word," Jack said, "and I'll open the window. A taste of the wind ought to get you both moving."

Lorie groaned and rolled over. A stark naked man needed a more believable threat on such a raw morning. Wasn't even morning yet. "You open that there window, Jack French, and come tonight, I'll find a way to stay warm what don't need you anywhere close!"

Tommy noisily kissed her shoulder. "I volunteer!"

Jack opened the window. The icy storm came in, wet enough to feel colder than snow. Lorie dove under the covers. "I'll get you! Just you wait, Jack French! Just you wait!"

Nine minutes later, she and Tommy morosely nursed watery, burnt-tasting coffee and soggy cold doughnuts under the bus stop's skimpy shelter. The subway entrance was only a mile -- an easy walk on a summer morning -- but the day was just too nasty. Her hair had been scraped back hard to make the knot at the back of her neck. Too hard. *A headache is just the tee-totally perfect way to begin a day, isn't it?*

She put a wool scarf and a thick pair of gloves on her mental shopping list. "Reckon the sun ever will come up today?"

One of the other women waiting for the bus turned to look at her. "Hey, Tilly, this one's a Southerner! That Southern accent is a scream, isn't it? Hey, kid -- say yawl for us."

Lorie smiled sweetly. *Go kiss a dog with worms.* "I charge a nickel a word to talk to your kind." She took another sip of coffee. "But I'll calculate for free: That's two bits plus a nickel."

Tommy put an arm around her. "She's a card, isn't she? But calling her accent 'Southern' is like calling your accent 'New York' and expecting you to talk Brooklynese."

How can he be so chipper without a decent breakfast or decent coffee in him? She popped the last bite of donut into her mouth.

Jack was a natural-born bandleader, but Tommy had been shortchanged this morning, and he was man enough to do more than just resent it. Likely as not, he was already planning to find some dark nook at work, someplace they could be alone for ten minutes. Or was he planning to wait for tonight?

Serve Jack right, dern his hide, for laughing as he burrowed back into the bed. At least tomorrow was Sunday; she hadn't signed the list to work Sundays, and it would be her turn to sleep late again.

By the time his brother and Shy returned from the morning shift, Jack had rigged an icebox and ordered a dime's worth of ice, had bought basic groceries, built a small electric stove-eye, and fried enough ham and onions to make a pile of hot sandwiches.

Shy limped in, leaning into Tommy's side. Once inside, her nose crinkled and she looked about, wide-eyed, and her whole face lit up with delight as he pointed at the frying pork.

Tommy ignored the food; he concentrated on supporting Shy with the care of a man who knew full well where he'd get his next feeding.

Jealousy prickled at Jack's skin. He brushed it off. Neither Tommy nor Shy wore the smell of sex.

A blow-job at break-time wouldn't leave any scent he could detect anyway. Not after this morning. But Shy would look at Tommy differently, at him differently, if she had. She would never be the type who opened her body to a man as casually as a man opened his wallet. "Tommy, slice the bread, please."

Instead, Tommy nuzzled Shy's neck. She chuckled, and he nuzzled again, his eyes sliding to Jack from behind her calico headscarf.

Jack scowled. Shy ate up physical affection like a huntsman ate the blasting force of a woman's climax. He'd tried to remember the emotional nurturing, the little touches like the

ones she gave him, but Tommy did those things instinctively. *And, just as instinctively, rubs my nose in his successes.* “Tom.”

This time, Shy leaned away from Tommy and reached for Jack. Jack took her sweet weight against him, and inhaled deeply. Traces of metal and flux stung his nose, but her scent was worth a sting.

He settled her in the armchair and propped her feet on a suitcase. As she sagged in the threadbare upholstery, her vulnerability touched him.

She might look ten years younger than she had twenty-four hours ago, but she couldn't keep up with a pair of Huntsmen at night and a shipyard job by day. This morning at the Yard, following a light hunt last night, had practically ruined her.

With tonight being a new moon -- and a Saturday -- they might be at the hunt from ten 'til dawn. How could he ask her to keep up with a schedule that could exhaust her, numb her to the point she made a fatal error?

But leaving her here wasn't any safer -- the hydes didn't care if they hunted a stairway or an alleyway, so long as they could feed.

He piled the sandwiches, choosing thin slices of bread for Shy so she could taste the meat. He served hers on a chipped saucer, with a tall glass of ice tea. Shy's smile, her soft voice as she thanked him, warmed him through.

She ate with dainty, well-spaced bites, finishing one and pausing before she chose the next. She seemed to taste every crumb of the bread and every fried-brown speckle on the meat and onions, and she seemed to enjoy each of them separately. She still had half her sandwich when he licked the last stray smear of mustard from his fingers.

She was lush and soft, a woman built for peacetime, not for the endless war against the things that hide in dark places. If the hyde's rage took him, would she move as hesitantly as she had last night?

If she did, she would die under him, torn apart by a hyde's yellow claws and double-sized cock.

Her thick lashes fluttered, and her head nodded. She was asleep, with her food unfinished in front of her. Watching her, knowing she felt safe, gave a contented warmth to the air.

If she knew --

No need to think of that, not in this magically peaceful moment.

“No time for a nap,” Tommy said, ruining it. “The bus could come in less than ten minutes.”

She sat up and squared her shoulders, settling her saucer with knobby-knuckled farm-girl's hands. Strong hands. She had strength. Was it strength enough?

She yawned. "If I'm to keep up with ya'll, I need to find a way to nap. Maybe I ought to stay in Brooklyn, sleep through lunch, and you can bring me a bite when you come in for the afternoon?"

Jack ran his fingers through his hair. "A nap won't make enough difference. You just can't keep up with us."

The sleepiness drained out of her face. She watched him warily. "I'm not as strong as a guy or as quiet as ya'll, but am I enough of a burden you don't want to carry me any more?"

"I think Jack means you can't keep up if you are working two shifts for every shift one of us works. Is that it, Jack?"

"Part of it." He stood and paced. "Work is easy to find, right now, but if you give up this job, you could get blackballed." *Then when Tommy and I finish whatever job the Guardian called us here to do, you might not be able to support yourself in a decent manner. Or find a decent man to support you.*

"But you want me to quit anyway? Or what?"

"We can support her, Jack."

Make her a kept woman. Once in that status, how hard would she have to fight to better it? She shifted in the chair, her face coloring. If she had a free choice, how could she choose that? She was worth so much more than he could ever give her. She should be sitting in a rich mansion somewhere, with a maid bringing her tea.

He could take her home, keep her for good. He could tell her she'd never be rich, but she'd never have to wring her own laundry, either. But he couldn't give her enough information to make a real choice.

Nobody ever asks the girl, really. Families normally just raised orphan girls to be Huntsmen's wives and Huntsmen's mothers. His two "sisters" would be introduced to husbands as the need arose; he couldn't imagine their opinions being asked in the matter.

He sat on the corner of the bed and opened his hands on his knees. "If you had your choice of marrying one of us, probably becoming a widow before you're thirty, or going back to your life as you had it before you met us, what would you choose?"

She set her saucer on the lamp table. "If you think you just proposed to me, it has to be the least romantic I ever heard tell of."

"Forget romance. Be practical."

She laughed, harshly. Her hands clutched one another in her lap. "Practical Monster-Hunting. That there should be a book. An en-cy-clo-pedia."

"That's not an answer."

"That's a'cause you don't give me any choice to make, Jack French! Can you turn back time, keep my Ma safe? If you can't, I don't have a life to go back to."

"You have a beau? Other family?"

“The boy I used to be sweet on died in training three weeks after Pearl Harbor. I got a couple of aunts I ain’t seen in years. Nobody else.”

“So you’re free to come home with us?” Tommy asked.

Shut up, Tommy!

She twisted her fingers. “Let’s hunt some monsters and then talk about it.”

“Finish your sandwich, Shy.” So she wasn’t going to make the decision. Okay, he would make it for her. “You can work this afternoon if you want, or just head to bed. You are done with the Brooklyn Navy Yard.”

Without Shy at his elbow, Tommy could easily find a Yankee honeypot. The thought raised Jack’s spirits. Few unmarried girls came hard enough to feed a huntsman, and too few of those rented out their favors. Normally, the Guardian would provide a feeder. If Shy hadn’t appeared, he and Tommy could have been clawing the cement by now. But with Shy to feed from, all Tommy really needed was ability to purge his spirit. Speaking practically, he could get that from a six-bit whore.

“Wait a minute! I hadn’t said yes!”

“You hadn’t said no,” he pointed out. “Say it or don’t say it, Shy. Waiting is a decision, too. With you alert and rested, you are a little bit of a liability, which is quite outweighed by your value as a lure. When you are stumbling tired, you are a huge liability and I couldn’t really say you’d be worth bringing along.”

She stared at him, her full lips compressed and a single spot of color riding on each pale cheek. If she let all that emotion out...he backed up hastily, pushing Tommy with him.

The contrasts in her face faded, replaced by puzzlement. “You are a strange man, Jack French. Sometimes I think I’d be scared to death if I ever figured out exactly how strange you were.”

I hope so. Torn to death would be a lot worse.

Chapter Eleven

Lorie snuggled down in the bed, which sure was larger without two men. Colder too. She could turn up the radiator, but its whistling and rattling were more likely to keep her awake than the cold.

Tommy hadn't liked leaving with his list of old maintenance tunnels to check, but Jack insisted. "Come back before dark. She's safe until then."

Safety had nothing to do with the hot look Tommy had shot her from the door.

But sleep was nice. Stretching without worrying who she might disturb was nice, too.

The alarm-clock *brrring! brrring!* of the telephone woke her. Who had set the dern thing right by her head? A telephone belonged on the wall, in the kitchen, where it wouldn't disturb a sleeper.

Brrring! Brrring! She picked up the handle and put it to her ear. The thing was ugly-modern, all black plastic, and cold to the touch.

Static crackled in her ear. Long distance? Who would call long distance? Who would call at all? Someone who wanted some previous occupant of this room? Picking this thing up had been a stupid move.

"French residence," she said. *Ugh*. Her voice was all thick and sleepy. What kind of lazy-bones no-account slept in the middle of the afternoon?

"Long distance calling." A Queens whine -- the operator? "Is this your party, sir?"

"I do believe so, young lady. Thank you." Jack's accent. But from an old man. Or a man very far away over the lines.

Lorie almost said, *You're welcome*, but she didn't, and the operator disconnected.

"Hello, French Residence," the old man's voice hissed over the static. "Is French there right now?"

She sat up in bed, wrapping the blanket tight around her. The old man didn't know there were two Frenches. Or knew, and didn't want to say so on an open telephone line. Or knew, but wasn't sure she knew. She had to be careful. "No, sir."

"And with whom have I the pleasure of speaking?"

Thunder cracked, and she jumped. Before she could gather her wits, lightning flashed. An artillery roll of thunder followed. Where was the rain?

"Miss?"

"Puddentane!" she snapped, and bit her tongue. *That there was rude, rude, rude.*

The old man chuckled over the line static. "Well, Miss Tane, would you take down a message, please?"

"Hold on, please...I'll get the pencil."

"Certainly, my dear."

The rain spit at the window, like water in a pot of hot grease, and then settled into an incessant drumming. The room was dark, as dark as the evening where she'd met the face-man.

A pencil. Her shopping list. She turned it sideways for room to write. "Shoot."

"Is that an invitation to continue?"

Her face heated. "Yes, sir."

"First: Granny needs a call. Call collect, but don't make her stay up waiting. An old man doesn't like to see his wife sitting up, waiting for such a call."

She looked in dismay at the amount of room she had to write. Maybe she should have taken those shorthand classes. Abbreviate. She got it all down, minus the vowels, and turned the envelope over. "Next?"

"The Rosario boys, the Jenkses, all six of the Heaths, the O'Briens and the Pulaskis were recently called to the same place, but then left without orders. They were also left hungry."

"Would the O'Briens be Danny and Davie?"

Static crackled over the line. "Yes. Have you news?"

"Ja -- just we saw Danny last night."

"Alone?" Loss hollowed out the old man's voice.

"I'm afraid so, sir. Raving like a madman. Saying he was hungry."

"Oh, my Lord."

Tommy's voice. Tommy's words. Could this be Tommy, playing a trick? Or testing her in some way? He might use a radio to fake long-distance static. But what would be the point?

"I remember teaching that pair to swim." The old man's voice firmed. "The Heaths from Carolina are gone, too. Their mother is in a state. No one has heard from any of the others in at least two weeks."

That pair. Twins? What were the odds? Thunder pounded, rattling the window glass. It was dark. Not night-dark, but certainly late-dusk dark. Her insides squeezed together. "You're the grandpa, right? Can you tell me one thing? Do ... *those* ... come out in the rain?"

The line hummed and cracked, like ice on the skating pond just before someone drops through. "Every creature God made likes to take shelter when the rain beats down heavy and cold. But hunger can drive any creature out of shelter, when the rain has lasted too long. Please give the message."

"I will," she said, but the line had already gone dead. "Goodbye to you, too!"

The thunder rolled, like cannonballs down a set of stairs.

Not five minutes later, Tommy came in with a grim, set look. She read him the message as he shucked his wet hat and coat. He immediately picked up the telephone and spoke to the switchboard.

That wasn't the number Jack gave me! Not even close.

She stirred her Jezebel-red fingernail polish and painted carefully, trying not to show she was listening in.

"It's Tommy, Granny. ... No, I'm fine. Jack is too -- he's at work. We're sharing a shift and it's his turn. ... Me? No, Granny! I'm doing swell. ... Really! I am!"

The brush strayed onto her skin. She hissed and tried to scratch off the mark, but at first touch the whole layer of paint rippled. Dern! Penny could have started on her second hand by now! How did she make this easy? Was it because she used just clear shellac, while this red showed every brushstroke?

"Her name's Lorie. ... No, from Oklahoma, I think. Lorie! Are you from Oklahoma?"

"Arkansas." She blew on her two best-painted nails. Maybe when she finished all ten she could put another layer of color on these streaky places.

"Arkansas. One of those places. ... No, Granny, she's not a redleg. ... No, she's not skinny -- She's just right and she's keeping us both well-fed. ... We haven't talked to Uncle Michael yet. ... No ma'am, not a word. ... Yes, Danny O'Brien. We had to feed him and send him home. We don't know if he'll make it. You might want to warn his folks."

I should let this hand dry completely before I start the other hand. She held it to the weak blue light at the window. *Feed doesn't mean victuals with these people. Who is Uncle Michael?*

"Jeepers, Granny! All six of them? Lorie said so, but I hoped she had it wrong."

She blew again on her nails and shook them. *How wrong did you think I would be, Tommy? I'm not too stupid to take a message. How long before I can touch these and not smear them?*

"It's worse. You know Junior and Wally from up in Maine? I don't know their little brother's name -- yes, that'un. I met him and the boy he hunts with today. ... No, ma'am. He's sick. He's not gonna make it."

And having to say so makes Tommy sick. What did Junior and Wally's little brother have, lockjaw? pneumonia? that *clap* the girls whispered about?

She scratched the gummy red smear from her ring finger and repainted it. Tommy had been sent to look in tunnels. So was somebody's little brother coughing his lungs out in a tunnel, or chewing-his-toenails-crazy in a tunnel?

Does hunting monsters make a man crazy, or does it only make weak men crazy?

She shook her hand unhappily. *What kind of potion did you feed Danny O'Brien to try to keep him from going crazy? Are ya'll keeping plenty for yourselves?*

Tommy hung up the phone gently and stood in the window, peering down, his shoulders hunched like an old man's.

She scratched his back with her unpainted nails, reaching around and under his braces. One of the button-tabs in the back was fraying. She needed to darn it this evening, before it let go. Tommy didn't deserve to go around looking like no one loved him enough to keep his clothes in shape. He leaned into her hand a moment, then shook his head and stepped out of reach.

She let her hand fall. "Tommy... how can I help?"

"Lorie, I'm sorry I didn't think to tell you before you painted your nails, but we won't need you for the first run tonight. I found a mother lode of the monsters. At least a dozen of them."

"*A doz --*" She clenched her teeth to stop yelling. "How you plan to take down a *dozen* monsters, Tommy? With a tommy gun maybe? Where you gon' get a tommy gun?"

"I bet Uncle Michael could get me a police-issue tommy gun, if we could find him."

"And if frogs had wings they wouldn't keep slapping their butts in the mud! How can you even think of doing this without your high and mighty uncle?"

"I been thinking... They have sort of a nest, and the air is still enough to gather their stench like a graveyard after a flood. Made me think of my daddy's stories about the Great War, and the gas they used in the trenches. The only gas I know how to make is chlorine gas, but that ought to work real well."

She remembered newsreels of soldiers stumbling around in the stuff. "Gas ain't like a bullet. The ones the gas doesn't kill would come boiling out like yellow-jackets, right at you!"

"If Jack gets home early, we might exterminate them before they wake up good. Gassing the nest would be safer than hunting them down in the streets all night long."

"You got the makings of gas? You know of any stores open this late where you can buy the makings?"

He paced. "No."

"Tomorrow's Sunday. Dry goods stores will all be closed. Will the monsters go back to the same nest before dawn?"

He spun on his heel and stared at her. "You have an idea?"

No, just some notions based on your idea. "If they have a real nest, you can expect -- or at least hope -- they go back there at the end of every night. We can get the gas makings Monday. On Tuesday morning, you go off to work while Jack and I gas the nest. It being dawn, we can run out of there into the daylight, and they couldn't follow."

"Lorie, you're a genius!"

"Since when does one lick of sense make a genius?"

He laughed and caught her up in a hug, and spun her in tight circles until she laughed helplessly with him.

She stopped laughing, and looked into his brown eyes. The black in the middle swelled, and his breath went harsh. He held her as if she weighed no more than a little child, but those eyes were not seeing a little child.

"Oh, my Lord," he whispered.

Her insides went liquid. But -- *Jack! If Tommy and I -- Jack would never forgive either of us.*

"Lorie..." Lips brushed hers, her name a caress. Warm. Gentle.

"No, Tommy!" She pushed him sharply, and he set her down just as sharply. She backed away. "We can't play this game." The perfume was working too well -- well enough, but on the wrong person.

His shoulders hunched, as they had at the window. "Damn Jack."

Regret pulsed through her. But he wasn't Jack. She laid a hand on his sleeve. "I'm sorry."

"I am too. Listen, I have to go down to the newsstand. If I hurry, I can be back before full dark. Will you be okay?"

The stairwell... She kept her voice level. "Will I?"

He snarled. "If you have to know, I actually plan to duck into one of the empty rooms on this floor and choke my chicken until I can see straight again. Unless you really want to help -- which just might get out of hand -- I suggest you pretend I went to the newsstand. Get it?"

She nodded shakily. What he planned to wrap his hand around was a whole lot thicker than a chicken neck. Or a turkey neck. But the image was clear.

"Good!" He jammed his hat on his head and strode out. "Lock this door!"

She locked the door and went to the chair. She sat watching the rain, her hands folded in her lap. Eventually, she looked down. Five blood-colored nails and five clean ones. She slowly scratched off the nail paint. It left pink stains. *How do you make chlorine gas?*

* * * * *

She woke with a start, disoriented and stiff-necked in the chair. Fuzzily, and without grasping why it caught her attention, she noticed the guys abruptly stop talking.

Jack paced. He wore the bathrobe, and the light glinted like gold dust in his tousled dark hair.

The blanket covered her from chin to toes. She shrugged the frayed cloth down from her shoulders and rubbed her eyes. Jack passed close, pausing to touch his knuckles to her cheekbone. Like a caress. Almost.

“Good morning, sleepyhead.” Tommy sat on the lowboy, wearing his britches and braces and mis-matched socks. He scratched idly at a long, ragged scar across his ribs.

Morning? She glanced from the clock -- a quarter of nine -- to the window, but the curtain was pinned shut. She stretched out her stiffness, counting three cracks as she twisted her neck, and turned back to the guys. The room was awfully warm, but the radiator whistled at full blast. “I take it you got home okay, Jack.”

Jack grinned wolfishly. “I was so horny, neither man nor beast dared delay me.”

“Join the club,” Tommy muttered, which answered any question about what *horny* meant.

She pushed the blanket to her lap, and folded her hands primly over it. “Do you plan to let that little problem interfere with your hunting plans?”

Tommy laughed shortly.

Jack cut him off with a wave. “Sex is the best lure, Shy. If you don’t smell of sex, blood or extraordinary levels of emotion, you can’t draw the monsters we hunt.”

Tommy reached into his pockets and moved the ridge of his cock. She couldn’t help watching, though her face heated uncomfortably. He grinned, and hooked his thumbs in his braces.

She resolutely looked away. “The perfume tolls them.”

Tommy didn’t look like a man who expected to be thrown out of the room. *He wants to see -- what, how my fat jiggles?*

Theaters that show hoochy-coochy movies never go broke.

Jack cleared his throat. “To guarantee the effect, you need to radiate the glow -- and the aroma -- of a well-laid woman.”

“You need to stink of screwing,” Tommy translated, kicking his heels like a schoolboy.

“Close your head, Tom.”

Instead, he grinned recklessly. “You need a session of squirming, squalling, and sweating.”

“Sounds like you want a baby with heat rash!”

“Tom. Stop it.”

Lorie frowned. “Hey, back up. My ma and the Berman sisters -- what drew the monsters to them?”

Jack shrugged. “Sex, blood, or strong emotion. Most likely, they’d just had a real good--”

“My ma was a widow-woman! And the Bermans was spinsters!”

Tommy laughed unpleasantly. “Widows are prime meat for a man who knows how to treat them better than the mister did.”

She turned on him, her face painfully tight. Whether he was lying, teasing, or just ignorant --

Jack rose on his toes and sank. She looked back to him. His eyes burned into her. “I suggest,” he said gently, “we drop this discussion before it becomes acrimonious. The point is not what your mother did to draw them by mischance, but what we must do to draw them on purpose.”

She knotted her hands in the blanket. A droplet of sweat trickled down her spine, tickling all the way. *In front of Tommy? As ‘horny’ as he’s been all afternoon? How trashy would that be?*

Jack stepped in front of her, close, where all she could see was him. He pulled loose the knot of his sash, and the bathrobe fell open. *Oh, my.*

She couldn’t have looked aside, not for all the world.

Chapter Twelve

Jack watched her eyes go vague. He had her full attention; the trick would be to hold her full attention, while keeping Tommy close enough to feed when she erupted.

One hand came from under her blanket. Her fingertips, light as a butterfly walking, traced the crinkled skin along his foreskin.

He'd been hard from the first whiff of her perfume, from the moment he'd come in the door to see Tommy pacing like a caged tiger and Shy dozing in the chair. More than half-hard from the end of his shower, when he'd thoroughly lubricated the shaft under the ticklish foreskin.

Now he held position by an act of will, but a droplet oozed up to glitter in the light.

The light died. Shy flinched, blinking, but in the same instant Tommy scratched a match to life. In the flare of gold, she settled. Once lit, the candle sat deep in a coffee cup, its light limited to what the ceiling reflected.

Shy's skin shone like a golden pearl.

Her big eyes searched the dim room, her mouth opening to speak. Jack knelt beside her and caught her face in his hands. "Hush," he whispered. "I'm here. You don't need to think of anyone else."

She frowned. Before she could speak, he kissed her. She resisted for half a breath, then melted against him, her heavy lashes folding against her cheeks and her lips softening. He took possession of her mouth, rising over her and tilting his head for better access.

Her tongue stroked his, and her hands reached for him.

He pulled back, and pushed her hands down onto the arms of the chair. She looked at him, her expression curious but neither submissive or rebellious. Willing to see where he led. Willing to follow so long as it suited her.

He cupped her hands and kissed her palms. Warm -- plenty warm. He tasted her cheek. He drew the blanket off her legs and tossed it in the general direction of the bed. It could land on the floor or in hell for all he cared right this minute. He'd already opened the zipper at her hip. He nudged in between her knees, and leaned in for another kiss.

She broke the kiss. "Hey! You opened my zipper! While I was asleep!"

"Tight trousers are bad for your health," he murmured. "I have a strong and sincere interest in your health, especially in that area."

She blushed, even more heat against his face.

He tasted her bottom lip with the same sucking and nibbling action he would use lower down. She trembled against him. "I think they're still too tight, as a matter of fact." He planted a trio of tiny kisses along her jaw. "Let's get them off."

She put her weight on her hands, giving him full control over the trousers themselves. Yes, she was learning. He tugged the trousers down from the fullness of her hips, making sure the dainty nylon panties came with them.

Perfume. Her panties smelt of perfume.

Blood pounded under his skin. Deep within him, the hunger snarled for release.

He looked up into her laughing face. "Shy, my girl, you're playing a dangerous game."

She took the aromatic panties from his hand, snapped them in the air with a flick of the wrist, and wrapped them around his neck. "What you plan to do about that, Jackery Jack?"

He held still, fighting the hunger. It hurt, but he had to. Had to maintain control. The scents taunted him, her sweet puss and the potion mingled. His fingers dug into the chair arms until the aged fabric tore. Better the cloth than her soft skin.

"Slow down, Jack," Tommy whispered. "Count it up to ten and back."

Shut up, Tom. But the old words worked their magic. *One. Two. Three.*

Shy's laughter faded.

Four. Five. Six.

The insistent pulsing faded from his vision. *Seven. Eight. Nine.*

"Jack?" She touched his cheek.

Ten.

Nine.

A responsible man would back away, let Tommy do what must be done, and feed as best he could from proximity. He rose, only shaking a little, and kissed her full lips. *Shy, my Lorelei.* A responsible man would never have held her this long.

Eight. Seven.

I won't let you go.

Six. Relief at making the decision settled him. The scent was enticing now, not overpowering. Part of Lorelei. *Part of my Shy-girl.*

He abandoned the count to concentrate on unbuttoning her flannel shirt. Why were a woman's buttons so small? *Because a woman's hands are small.* Dainty. Everything about her was smaller, more delicate.

Including her ass.

If she were a man, he could yank her hips forward and bury his greased cock in this bared ass right now.

One plunge -- with Tommy to hold the guy down if he fought it.

Hard fucking was good for a man, for both men. Once he got a taste for a solid ass-reaming, a man didn't even need much grease. The Mobile Huntsmen swore a good slicking of sweat -- and sometimes blood -- was all a real man needed. And they swore the blood was worth it.

Tommy certainly reeled like a happy drunk after one of his guys reamed him, even when he carried a faint whiff of blood.

But Shy...no.

Lace cupped her breasts. He kissed each nipple through the lace, feeling them knot up against his tongue, and pulled her hips gently toward the front edge of the seat.

She was wet, her plump lips open a little in anticipation. He sat on his heels and drank in the aroma of her cream. Her own aroma, a gift to him, a reminder of her feminine delicacy.

Hooking his arms about her hips, he leaned in and explored, caressing with the tip and the edge and the rough flat of his tongue, gauging her responses to each kind of pressure and friction.

Shy dug her fingers into his shoulders. "Mmmm...Now that there's what I call a French kiss."

He laughed, and nipped the tender skin of her inner thigh. Then he zeroed in on the target. Leisurely loving was for after the hunt.

Right now, she needs to come hard and good.

He swirled his tongue between her folds and around her clit, slow and rhythmic. Shy was particularly sensitive to rhythm.

She moaned, rocking her hips to meet his gradually increasing pace.

His hunger rose again, fed by the passion in her moans.

Behind the chair, Tommy ground his teeth. Jack shot him a warning glare and focused his own desire on Shy's needs, on building the tempo for her..

Her pent energies gathered, shimmering around her in the candlelight. He freed one hand and wet his thumb in her cream. She rocked, panting, whipping her head back and forth. *Close. So close.*

Sealing his next kiss on her clit, he sucked. At the same moment, he pushed his thumb into her tight, hot ass. She gasped, pushing against his thumb eagerly and clutching his hair.

“Come,” he ordered roughly, and closed his mouth on her.

She came with a cry. *“Jack!”*

He held her tight, sucking in the glorious richness of her passion. Her thighs quivered in time to the fluttering inside her puss, and her ass squeezed his thumb as if milking it.

Half drunk in her pleasure, he fought for a shadow of clarity. Her ass was ready. A few seconds of her milking action and he’d go off too. He sat on the towel, his legs spread. “Slide forward, Shy, off the edge of the chair. Squat over my lap.”

She laughed weakly. “You’re crazy. I’d fall down.”

I won’t let you fall. Keeping his thumb in her throbbing ass, he tugged gently. She came forward, supporting her own weight. His cock strained toward her ass, the foreskin retracting in the liberal layer of cream. “Hold there, Shy.”

She paused. He positioned his cock, using his thumb as a guide. “Carefully now. Come down slowly and carefully. Stop if the angle is wrong.”

“How would I know?”

“The pain isn’t supposed to be sharp-edged.”

“Well, *go-o-olly!* So glad I asked.” But she laughed, breathlessly.

“You’re welcome,” he muttered. Profound heat and tightness swallowed the slick head of his cock.

“You can take the thumb out now. Ain’t room for both.”

You might be surprised. But he removed his thumb.

“Mmm.” She hummed, and rolled her hips experimentally. Her movement swallowed half his shaft. *“Oh!”*

Every muscle knotted with strain of not seating his cock fully. His balls ached, drawn tight against his body in anticipation of release.

Instead he waited, forcing his eyes to stay open and forcing his brain to make sense of what he saw. Her frown spoke of concentration, not pain. Lowering herself at her own speed, she settled onto his lap.

“Rock a little,” he whispered. Once or twice might do it, as tightly wound as he was.

Three times did it. The hunger burned through him, scouring every vein from toes and fingers inward, driving unbearable pressure into his balls. After an agonizing instant, it jetted out. *“Lorelei!”*

A second jet scalded his cock, and a third.

Lorelei! He clutched her for dear life. *Lorelei, Lorelei!*

His galloping heart stopped, then resumed in a slow, hard drumbeat. He couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed. He closed them, and opened them to a dim, amber-colored world.

Shy panted in his arms. Eventually, he realized she couldn't breathe much because of how tight he was holding her. He reluctantly loosened his grip. He was clean now, weak but scalded and scorched clean.

Shy giggled. "You won't believe what I just thought of. You was a bottle of soda, shaken hard and then cracked open to spurt a foot of foam."

He sighed, and leaned against her collarbone. *A factory-sized bottle, maybe.*

This must be how a factory whistle feels at noon.

Ideally, he should now bring her to pleasure again, but she fed too rich. Any more of her and he would be useless in the hunt tonight.

Tommy sighed in echo. "I guess we really do need to get dressed and go out tonight?"

"I got to shower," Shy mumbled.

He kissed her forehead, and gently disengaged from her. "No, Shy. We can each take quick spot-wash, but no more."

Twenty minutes later, on the bus, she huddled under Tommy's arm. Jack had taken the subway. Travelling separately after dark was a risk, but together the men just attracted too much notice.

The bus was cold, and when a pair of heavily bundled women with whimpering sleepy children got off, the bus was empty but for themselves in the back and the scowling driver in the front. The driver kept up a constant grumble about the friggin blackout keeping him off schedule, and how his friggin dispatcher had never tried to drive a friggin bus in the absolute friggin dark, and how this wasn't his friggin route anyway.

She was grateful to hear only snatches. "Absolute dark" was repeated pretty often, and while it wasn't absolutely true, it might as be. The slitted head-beams of the other traffic came and went with disorienting speed.

Under the level of the driver's voice, Tommy murmured into her hair. "So tell me, Lorie. How long have you known about the hydes?"

"I heard that as a name for them when Jack said it."

"How long have you known about the monsters, then?"

She frowned. "That there's a harder question than it sounds like. Depends on what you mean by monsters, I guess."

"The ones who chased you to us, lucky fellows that we are. When did you first hear of them?"

“Right at a month ago. Some ladies from up the road went to the movies and didn’t come home. The little boy who lives under the stairs said monsters got them -- tore them to pieces and ate the pieces. He says he seen it, but to hear him talk, he sees everything happens near Strega Road, so I paid no mind until they got my ma...”

His arm tightened. “That’s right, your mother. I’m so sorry, Lorie. Is it too much to talk about?”

Too soon! If Ma’s soul gets distracted on her way to the hereafter, it’s my fault.

But she’d already done the harm.

Tommy cuddled her closer. “Did you see the monsters, Lorie? Did they see you?”

“No -- and how do I know?”

“Take your time. I’ll be quiet.”

That was something about Tommy. He let a girl just talk, trusting what she had to say would be worth hearing.

“It were two weeks ago Tuesday. My ma worked on a typewriting machine, so she got off work two hours earlier than the riveters -- that’s me and my crew. I’d bet double-or-nothing with my butter ration, and won, so I had to go to three different places to find real butter to spend it on. My ma, she likes real butter.” A tear slid down her face. “Liked, I mean. I wanted to surprise her.”

He held her for a couple of blocks in silence.

She took a breath. “I come home and all these Irish coppers was everywhere, yelling and pushin’ people. I yelled at them some, and they handcuffed me to the light post. They told me my ma had a heart attack, but they wouldn’t let me see her.” She bent forward over her knees, her body curling up to hide itself in the poor shelter of the bus seat. Her words came as a harsh whisper. *“They carried my ma out in a trash can!”*

He unbuttoned his jacket and opened it to her. She uncurled to burrow under it, and sobbed against his chest.

She hadn’t cried that night. Hadn’t cried at the funeral. Hadn’t really let loose and cried until now. Like she had to be in her own house to cry, but their rooms in the house on Strega Road had been scrubbed by strangers -- by the law -- and she hadn’t been home anywhere until Jack’s arms framed a safe place for her. Jack’s arms and Tommy’s. But Jack had to turn every touch into something more, while Tommy could just hold her.

He smoothed a handkerchief across her face, patting instead of wiping, as if to preserve her makeup, and asked, “Who was it suggested you could do something to avenge her?”

She seized the hanky. “Joey -- a cub reporter I met.”

She’d told Jack some of this, but she couldn’t remember how much. “He introduced me to a real reporter, a fellow who knew some fellows. They wanted to prove it to the editor, who could prove it to the law, so we could get soldiers on the streets to protect people. They said we couldn’t talk. They said if we talked without proof, everybody would call us screwy.

Especially since some doctor said my ma had died of a heart attack. He said when I was told about it, I went crazy and babbled all kinds of crazy nonsense.”

She dabbed her running nose, wishing he wasn't there, so she could honk like a goose. “He lied, you know.”

“Of course.”

“I said we had to get proof, then, and tell everybody. They said no, a'cause everybody would light up the streets again to keep the monsters from being able to hide in the dark. When lights are on, a city glows way far out to sea. U-boats watch the glow, and when a Liberty ship passes between them and the city, the ship makes a silhouette, a perfect target.”

An insane ditty skipped in her head: *Silhouette-a, jaunty silhouette-a! Silhouette-a, U-boat blew 'im away!*

“They said if I had the guts, I could lure the monsters, and the guys could kill them and take pictures. Then we could get some soldiers assigned to the streets, clear the monsters out. They said they had ways to find their hiding places.”

“What ways?”

“Am I supposed to know? I'm just the bait, the girl.” She hid behind his hanky. The intensity of his interest would be hard to miss. But he'd been out looking for the monsters. He knew, probably better than Mr. Hillyer had, how to find them.

“You're supposed to know because you aren't stupid.”

“Hate to disappoint you, but I really don't know.”

He took the crumpled hanky and handed her a new one.

She unfolded the fresh square and pressed it against her face. No initials. Just plain, starched linen. “How did ya'll come to be monster hunters?”

“Somebody has to do it.”

“Why you? Why Jack?”

“You don't need to know.”

The familiarity of the phrase shut her mouth.

His voice dropped again. “Where did you get the bullets, Lorie?”

“You don't need to know!”

“Why not? You think Jack and I won't need guns?”

Oh. “A colored gunsmith, an old one. I didn't get his name or address or anything.”

“But you know he's colored and old, so you saw him, right? Did you go to him or did he come to you?”

“We went to him.”

“What's the nearest cross street?”

"Nobody thought I needed to know." She shrugged. "I told Jack what I remembered of the place, and where it was. I don't think he got enough information to use."

"Probably not, since he didn't tell me about it. Can you sit up now? The driver's glaring at us."

Let him glare. But her face burned at the thought. She sat up, and Tommy closed his jacket. His arm stayed behind her, though, and leaning against him felt good.

The blackout was in force all over England, wasn't it? Had to be, or the bombers would never miss. And with the Allies bombing Europe now, all those places had to be blacked out too. "Any of ...*them* in ...Over Yonder?"

"Overseas? Oh, yes. We hear terrible things. Boys overwhelmed in the fighting, the air raids and the internment centers. Boys changing before their parents' eyes and having to be killed, before they kill others. And that's of the boys who were with their parents, whose parents know what to watch for."

Jack never told me any of that. It was a lot to chew on. Little boys doomed like radio-serial villains to become monsters? Or with a chance of growing up normal unless 'overwhelmed'?

The face-man and his driver could pass for human. But those things waiting in the hotel room? They looked like monkey-dolls patched together by a drunk. She clasped her hands in her lap. All the monsters she'd seen or heard of were male, and grown up. "Are their females the same?"

"There aren't any."

That short answer brought up a mob of new questions, but an old one shoved them all aside. "What did you feed Danny, and that other one?"

He held silent a moment, and she thought he wasn't going to answer. Then he bent close and spoke in her hair. "Life."

She waited for more, but it wasn't coming without prodding. "Life how?"

He laughed unpleasantly. "Didn't Jack tell you that Danny and I were lovers for over two years? Upset my momma no end. She knows it's easier to feed from a man, since a fellow always comes while -- she said I needed to find a girl instead, and learn how to love her up right."

"I should say so! Your ma don't want you to go to Hell!"

He went rigid, and the darkness thickened between them. When he spoke, his voice wasn't anything playful, wasn't anything light. "Lorie, I kill. I steal. I lie and I covet -- Lord God, do I covet! And you think I could go to Hell for loving Daniel?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but couldn't find any answer. They rode in silence for the last little way.

Chapter Thirteen

Tommy reached overhead to pull the cord, then his large hand settled briefly over both hers. “Here’s our stop, and there’s Jack waiting. He won’t ever admit he cares for you, you know. But if any harm came to you, I *would* rather face Hell than my brother.”

“I know,” she whispered, and wondered if it was true.

The bus hissed reluctantly to a stop and the driver grumbled about his schedule while levering the door open. Tommy bounded down the stairs and turned to hand her down. She’d barely cleared the door when the bus farted, throwing her into Tommy’s arms, and moved groaning back into traffic.

Jack formed out of the darkness. “You’re late.”

Tommy chuckled, his breath warm at the top of her ear. “The driver was busy frigging himself.”

Jack recoiled. *Frigging* must be a more powerful word than she’d guessed.

She pursed her painted lips, hoping the hanky and the tears had just removed some paint, but afraid it had also rearranged what stayed on her face. “Where do we start?”

“The subway runs under the alley behind these buildings. The old storm drains run right next to them. The construction crews probably tore into the drains when they tunneled for the subway. Just waiting for you, I’ve found two locked grates, the two unlocked ones you found, and three manhole covers with keys welded in place.”

Lorie frowned. “A key?” *For a manhole cover? They’re not locked. They’re just big and heavy.*

“Think of a lever, a handle. It’s just called a key.”

“The keys are new.” Tommy said. “I would have noticed keys. Who welded them, and why right now?”

“Might not have been for the hydes, but we have to assume the worst. If they’re thinking ambush, we could get cornered too easily.”

Lorie shivered in the wind. “So what’s Plan B?”

Jack grabbed her coat-sleeve. “What’s up with your voice?”

“She’s been crying,”

Dern your hide! But Jack didn’t ask the jackassed questions she’d expected. Instead he pulled her close and sniffed at her neck.

Eventually he spoke, but more softly than before. “I stirred up your emotions; I guess I have to be prepared for the aftereffects. Your breathing is evening out and your pulse is normal. You might not be presentable in public, but if you’re up to it, we can move around outside.”

She nodded. Emotion is a lure, but not one they wanted tonight. A car crawled past, coughing and stinking, one headlight dead and one showing a flickering yellow slit. In that light, she squared her shoulders. “I don’t want to be the weak link. Even if I am, I don’t want to hold you back because I had a fit of squalling on the way here.”

He stepped back. “Okay, let’s head west toward the sound of traffic. Next intersection that rates a signal, we go to the alley on the other side of it. If we find one more open grate, we go home and come back in daylight. Tomorrow’s Sunday, so we can wander around like tourists.

Going home and staying there until daylight sounds like a good idea anyway. But nobody asked her.

At the intersection, a truck went *booloooga*, and a sharp hammering *yip yip yip, yip yip yip!* answered, just like Bitsy on Strega Road. Only Bitsy would trigger Maude, the beagle, and --

Barroo roo rooooo!

The wind shifted. The smell of boiled cabbage faded. Now she smelled the road apples the Swaravskis used to fertilize their garden. She stopped, and turned. The guys would see her, no matter how little she could see.

Yip yip yip!

Barroo roo roo!

Warmth sandwiched her, the dark turning solid. “Shy?”

“This is my neighborhood, or pretty close to the edge of it. Old Man Swaravski is fixing to throw a fit about the barking.”

Only he should have by now. Bitsy fell silent, but Maude belled on. *If I hadn’t been crying, I could probably smell the popcorn in the theater, too.*

“Lorie, you said your mother was attacked *inside* your house?”

“I -- well, she died there. I guess she was attacked there. If she was attacked outside, even on the doorstep, she would run to the store on the corner instead of climbing the stairs and then fighting with the lock, wouldn't she?”

“Show us your house,” Jack put in. “But don't get too close. Even if it isn't dangerous, we need to stay anonymous in the interest of keeping our options open.”

She stopped in front of the Swaravski's place, and pointed at the familiar brownstone across the street. “That there's my mom's room, upstairs on the right, facing the road. I have a Murphy bed in the sitting room. We share the kitchen, and, um, and all with Mrs. Babkacien, who's an old lady who yells a lot and pretends she doesn't speak English when we tell her it's our turn to use the stove.”

Somewhere unseen, a window opened. Something splashed. Probably someone dumping the dishwater. The window closed, and she continued.

“Mr. Teodor and his deaf wife and their helpless granddaughter have the ground-level rooms to the left. The Berman Sisters have -- had -- two rooms in the back downstairs. The front room downstairs on the right is empty. Someone keeps breaking the windows there. OokoJonny is the boy under the front stairs. If you want information, he's the one to ask for it.”

“Stay here, Shy. Stay with her, Tom.”

She didn't hear Jack leave, but she felt his absence, and Tom put an arm about her waist. Without speaking, the two of them stepped backward into the dubious shelter of Mr. Swaravski's barberry bushes.

Bitsy started off her *yip yip yip!* *Yip yip yip!* again and then Maude answered *barooo roo rooo!* Lorie put her hand over Tommy's mouth so he wouldn't react when the yelling started.

Nobody yelled. The dogs quieted after a little while, apparently on their own. But those dogs never quieted on their own.

Jack returned, solid warmth against her cheek. “Move now.”

She hesitated, afraid to ask, but the men hustled her in a quick-march all the way to the other side of the corner drugstore. She couldn't see the sidewalk, and several times she stumbled, but with Jack and Tommy to hold her up, she barely put any weight on her own feet.

One moment she had a man at each elbow. In the next instant, Tommy grunted and fell. Jack shoved her hard against a cut stone wall.

The blackness was featureless -- she couldn't see so much as the gold-lined edge of a blackout curtain. Unseen fists or clubs -- she couldn't tell which -- pounded mostly on what sounded like well-padded coats just out of reach. In time with the blows, men grunted, and wheezed, and occasionally gasped.

“Ah, matha,” someone groaned. Weight fell against her, pressed her against the cold, lumpy wall. A mouth smelling of rotten offal settled on her neck, licking and sucking. Stubbly beard scraped the base of her throat. “Mathav Gad.”

The muffled combat continued. She didn’t dare distract either of her guys with a call for help. She touched his shoulders to locate them, and in response he thrust his hips against her. That told her where to put her knee, but he pressed her so hard against the wall she couldn’t kick at all. *Back off!*

He slurped on her neck, and jerked open three buttons on her coat. *My buttons! My coat!*

She cooed to distract him, and reached one hand down inside his damp, steaming, nasty-smelling britches. His cock pointed up, hard and slimy, thick as a Co-Cola bottle. She wrapped her hand around it.

I guess you’re a boy monster, not a girl monster.

She bit back the laugh. If she started laughing now, she’d end up in a looney bin -- if she lived.

The thing humped in her hand like a dog in need of a good hosing-down, and ran rough-skinned hands under her skirt. Golly -- even if he was a polite, well-washed man in a flannel suit, he would have a hard time finding him a girl who would let him poke something that size *anywhere*.

Having a cock that size might sour a man on life itself.

Not four feet away, the fighters grunted and thumped each other. She couldn’t distract them -- they might be fighting for their lives.

Then again, if Tommy and Jack were thumping each other while the monster got...wouldn’t that be a pickle?

I’ll show you helpless, Jack French.

She gripped the bottle-thick cock like a handle, and moved the monster a little, cooing encouragingly, until he spread his legs at the perfect angle. Then, hard as ever she could, she slammed her knee upward.

He fell, making a horrid gurgling noise. Something clutched her coat. She staggered against the pull. *Got to kick! Make him let go! If I kick, I’ll fall.*

Blood thickened the air, blood and manure just like at pig-butcher time back home.

Jack? Tommy?

The pull let go. She fell back against the wall.

She used the end of her scarf to clean her hand and scrub the slobber off her neck. And paused. All the noise had stopped. Only her own wheezing breath, and a distant car horn, stirred the darkness.

Jack?

Someone grunted, softly.

Tommy? She couldn't sift any hints out of the icy wind.

She swallowed. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil --*

Jack touched her arm. "Tommy's been cut. The bandage may not hold. Here's a dollar and some folding money. If it goes bad, leave us -- get a taxi however you can."

She shoved the money in her pocket. *I'm not leaving you! If Tommy bleeds out bad enough he can't walk, you'll need help!*

Tommy laughed weakly. "Get me up."

Lorie boarded a bus in silence, with Tommy at her heels. They had to ride in the front seat because, from what little she could see in the beams of a passing car, every other seat was packed with muttering, sawdust-covered mill-shadows. Jack, slightly out of breath, boarded at the next stop, glanced toward the back, and simply stood for several blocks, until most of the shadows drained out at a single stop. She couldn't see Jack's face, but she could smell Tommy's blood. Her chest ached with worry.

At the bus exchange, she saw Jack was carrying a thick oilskin envelope, one end of it roughly torn open.

She boarded the bus to the hotel with the sick dread thickening inside her. Tommy and Jack sat together, a couple of seats back. She forced herself to watch for her stop, and not look back at the men.

They rode the elevator together, without speaking. Wasn't nothing she could think to say, and although being quiet wasn't awfully comforting to her, guys are different.

When they reached the stairs, she took the envelope without a word, so Jack could concentrate on helping Tommy. Then she saw the scrawl on the front: *Mis Larry*.

Larry? Lorie? The young'un under the stairs might write like that. He probably hadn't seen a day of school after second or third grade.

She toyed with the ragged edge of the envelope, but no sense poking through it until they got to the room and a decent lamp. Apart from the papers, it had a lump what felt like a wallet, and other things. The light in the stairwell wasn't good enough to read by. It barely showed the red in Tommy's blood, a glistening drop on two out of every three treads.

In their room, Jack dumped Tommy unceremoniously in the bathroom and took a brown bottle out of the laundry sack. "Undress him here and clean him up. I'll go wipe out the trail."

Tommy laughed again. "Get me naked, Lorieeeeeee."

"Hush!" She tossed the oilskin to the bed and shrugged out of her coat, then her dress. She'd measure the damage later. Back in the bathroom, she found Tommy half-out of his pea-coat.

He looked at her sidewise. "Tell me blood doesn't make you sick, Lorie."

"I *am* female," she muttered, wrestling the coat off his shoulders.

The coat had a cut in the chest, big enough for her fist to go through. The coarse cloth was wet and purple with blood. *Oh, Tommy!*

He couldn't be dying. A dying man would have to leak out more blood than a woman on her monthly. He'd have to.

She wrestled the pea-coat off him. Under it, his shirt was red with blood, as was a wadded-up cloth he clutched to him like a four-year-old's Teddy Bear.

"You wanna know a secret, Lorieeee?"

"You wanna tell me one?" she asked, prying the wet cloth out of his grip.

"You gotta promise not to tell."

"Loose lips sink ships." She pushed him to sit on the stool. His wet shirt buttons were greasy-slick, but the holes clung to them.

"Jack cut me."

All the sense left her head, left her floating. She sat down before she could fall. "Jack?"

"Shhh...He didn't mean to. With that last plug-ugly dry-humping you, we both moved in without thinking. I got in Jack's way."

He was still bleeding, soaking his lap. She steeled her nerves. A towel. Which towel was cleanest? They all were; Tommy had brought up fresh linens this morning. She tugged and jerked until she got the shirt off him, and quickly shoved a folded towel against the wet red gash under his left nipple.

He hugged the towel to him, and bent forward over it. "I might throw up, Lorie."

"Don't mind, Tommy. Do it if you need to. Bathrooms are real easy to clean."

"Is he still bleeding, Shy?"

She nodded, her throat too tight to speak. Either she or Jack was going to have to stitch up the cut. She sincerely hoped Jack did it.

Jack knelt beside her. His arm came around her. Like Tommy wasn't even there. "It's still not sucking. He'll live.

What on earth? She swallowed. "What?"

"If it was sucking, Lorie, I'd die."

"So how do you know it ain't?"

"Stop it, Tommy. You'll make her sick."

"Oh, ain't no mistaking a sucker, Lorie. The cut turns into a mouth that sucks air into the chest, noisily. When you try to squeeze the air out, so's you got room to breathe, it comes out in wet, bloody, bubbling farts."

Black and gray spots bloomed in her vision, like artillery smoke in the newsreels.

Jack grasped her shoulder. “Shut up, Tommy. Pull yourself together, Lorie. Either you can stitch him while I rinse everything and mend the coats, or you can do the washing and mending while I sew him.”

Let me out of this room and away from this raw-liver smell.

No. She slumped against the wall. “Next time, I might have to do the stitching. I need to watch you, so I’ll know how. Then I’ll sew up the coats as best I can with no spare buttons while you wash everything else, then we can soak his coat last. I hope the wool was boiled good, or it’ll shrink like nobody’s business.”

“We can take the buttons off my church suit for your coat. You need to stay warm more than I need to dress up.”

That was nice of him. Didn’t make up for having to sit here and watch Tommy get sewn up, but it was better than nothing.

Chapter Fourteen

Waking up on Sunday, the first thing she thought of was getting out from under Tommy's weight so she could breathe. The shower was running, which explained Jack's absence from the warm bed. Tommy wore flannel pajamas like he was sick or something.

He was cut. He has to stay warm so he won't catch fever.

She pulled up his pajama shirt and ran her fingertips along the stitches. The skin had swollen and heated, but only a little; she found no puffy places or hot spots along the cut. Maybe it wouldn't go septic and kill him.

"Ummmmmm, Lorie." She looked into his smile. He had such an open, happy smile. She couldn't help returning it. "We lived."

"We did," she agreed. "You scared me, though."

"Just another scar. You want to kiss it better?"

"You think that'll work?"

"Sure. And then I need to tell you about the boo-boo on my willie."

He was too close to slap!

He grinned. "I see what you're thinking. Did you and Jack go through the booty?"

"Jack had a big envelope." She looked about. There, on the lowboy. She wriggled out of the warmth and grabbed it, then snuggled the blanket back over her lower half before reaching into the bloodstained envelope.

A letter caught her fingers first.

Mis Larry, Yu mother. She wos nis lade. Landlord say yu gon. put yu things by rode. I saf pictrus but scafngers got rest. Plese be alife. Dot look for me. I joyn Navy. I gaf lade dek of luky striks to sin me in.

Yu frind, Ukochany.

She read it again. The boy was in the navy. Not safe, but not dead. "If this is right, I've lost my apartment and everything in it. I'm a pauper. A beggar. How can a landlord do that?"

"Never define yourself by what you've lost, Lorie -- only by what you are."

Easy for you to say.

Then again, maybe it ain't. I sure don't know much about you two, do I?

A folder came next. Her parents' wedding portrait, a photograph of her grandparents and their children, two school pictures, and the newspaper clippings: Pa getting his medals, her high school band competitions, and the time she'd been in that parade saluting Mrs. Roosevelt at the train station.

"That's you with the marching band, isn't it? And this would be your momma? Different face, same smile. Your smile should make the paper glow."

Her face heated. "My ma was a beauty."

"As are you. But you take after you daddy's side, don't you?"

"I 'spect so." She shrugged. "You can turn a girl's head with compliments. Or you can make her wonder what sneakiness you're up to."

"I'm just sneaking up on asking if you'll scratch my back for me. If I were a dog I'd sit up and beg for that."

She laughed, and he hitched awkwardly to lie on his folded arms. How could she turn him down? She stacked the photos and the envelope out of the way, and knelt by him. "How you want me to scratch?"

"Kind of light when clawing down. Harder when going back up, using the backs of your fingernails."

"I meant under or over your shirt?"

"Oh, under! I'll wiggle like a dog if you go under!"

Not much you won't. Not with those big old ugly stitches in your front.

"Woof!" He wiggled his butt at the first down-stroke and she giggled. "Woof! More! Tommy likes scritchety scratch! Woof! Woof! More!"

Laughing, she gave herself over to the simple pleasure of giving him the perfect back-scratch. She was shifting position about the third time when she noticed the shower wasn't running.

"Does this exercise in hedonism have a point?" Jack stood next to the bed, steaming and looking like a movie star with his bathrobe open to show his muscled chest.

Tommy laughed, "Yes. It's an excellent exercise in purest hedonism."

“Are you done, though?”

Might as well be. The fun’s gone out of it.

She rocked back on her heels, and knocked the oilskin envelope to the floor. She gathered the photos hastily and Jack handed her the envelope.

What all else is in here?

Three wallets, not one. The thick one had two different driver’s licenses, one for Jeremy Kent of Boston Massachusetts and one for Jerry Kant of Cambridge Massachusetts, and a letter from Doctor Bad Handwriting saying each of them was medically unfit for military service. Red and blue ration stamps, but not much of either. Just over a dollar in dimes and nickels. Dollar bills, seven of them. The other wallets yielded moldy stamps she wasn’t sure could still be used and another three dollars in silver.

As she counted the money out on the blanket, a scrap of paper fluttered out. WD4-7451 A telephone number? “Here’s a clue. Reckon who would answer?”

Tommy sat up fast, and groaned. Then he looked at the number and groaned again. “That’s the switchboard here, Lorie.”

“What’s the switchboard here?” Jack was struggling with a tight undershirt that clung to his damp skin. Tommy reached the scrap up toward him. He tilted his head to read it and nodded. “I also took a double eagle from one of them. The third one had more than a handful what felt like cartwheels in his front pockets, but with those footsteps approaching, we didn’t have time to grab them.”

She frowned. A double eagle, plus several cartwheels, plus the money in her lap amounted to a month’s pay for any of the girl-riveters. “Where is all this money coming from?”

“Rather a lot of it from the dead,” Jack said.

The words punched into her. Ma would have had the rent in her hand the day she died.

Rent. “That landlord can’t throw my things to the curb! My ma paid the rent. I need my clothes, my shoes, my sewing basket, the quilts Ma and I made. Why would a landlord say I’m gone when the rent is paid? Do they get to say you disappeared if you just go visiting, say?”

“Who said your things were thrown to the curb?”

“This letter said so!”

“Can you prove the rent was paid?”

She looked through the envelope. No rent agreement. No bundle of receipts. No birth certificates. No nothing, really. “I can’t prove my own name.”

Tommy shifted to put his arm about her waist. “New identity papers cost a lot less than a double eagle. Or you can take the double eagle to your landlord.”

She frowned again. "I don't know the landlord, or even his name. He collects up the rent afore I get in from work. I saw his car once, a snazzy black Fleetwood or Imperial with its license plate over the left-hand tail light."

Tommy whistled. "1938 V-16. Not too many of those were made, and who has the gas ration to run one now? Your neighbors will know his name?"

"A'course." *But will they tell me?* Most of the neighbors were elderly couples or old ladies who made snotty remarks about girls in trousers being like crowing hens. "He also owns other houses up and down the road, I think."

"We need to identify him," Jack said in his discussion-ending tone. "If he owns multiple properties in the middle of Ghoultown, he's going to be losing renters left and right unless he puts some money into stronger locks and windows. Maybe put bars on the windows."

But how would you tell him?

"I'm going to the house today," she said. "If the lock's been changed, I'll leave a note."

"You have a key?"

Her key had been in her coat pocket, and she'd left that behind. Upstairs. "I need to go upstairs."

Tommy pressed against her. "Lorie? You're scared?"

"It's daylight. I got to see if my coat's still upstairs before I go back to Strega Road." But right this minute, she didn't want to move.

Jack paced: four paces to the window and four paces to the door and four paces back. "We've explored this floor, but it's past time to check the two floors upstairs."

Tommy scratched Lorie's back. She shifted to give him a better angle. *No wonder he likes it so much. A guy's hand scratching feels a whole lot better than scratching with a soup ladle.*

Tommy spoke slowly. "The unlocked rooms above us look like the derelict wing on this floor, only with more water damage. Mold patches the size of tablecloths. Pipes and wires stripped out of the walls. Radios missing, chairs and mattresses mildewed. Doorknobs and locks broken or missing. With the hard times, the hotel just hasn't generated enough money to pay for repairs."

"The lower floors have nearly full occupancy, haven't you noticed? So why has Uncle Michael let the top-floor decay creep down? Also, why doesn't any of the staff live up here any more? Since when can clerks and maids afford better?"

He paced. Four steps. Four steps. "We need to map the changes, and we need to do it today, while we're together in the daylight."

"How about you go with Lorie to scope out her place while I look around the hotel, since I know where I've already looked and I'm better with locks than you are? My coat isn't dry yet, is it?"

Lorie scooted out of the warm bed and reached for her step-ins. "I need to go upstairs first to see if my coat is there, with my house-key in the pocket."

"If it is, it's in a locked room, Lorie. Considering the vandalism and thefts, I don't feel right busting down a locked door."

"What room were you in, Shy?"

"806." She shook her dungarees and eyed them. Not *too* very wrinkled.

Jack nodded. "The worst wing and the worst floor. What were you thinking, to go there?"

She rounded her eyes. "Well, golly gee gosh! I don't know... I guess maybe I was just taking the air. In my dainties. In November! In a hotel! In New York City! Wearing a potion guaranteed to draw monsters -- " she jerked up the zipper at her hip. " -- like a road apple draws flies! Trying not to throw up when things that pretended to be human drooled down my neck!"

She bent forward and shook into her bra. When she straightened, both men were staring like she'd pulled a rabbit out of her shirt pocket. "And what are you looking at!"

Jack swallowed, and raised his gaze to meet hers. "Give us a minute to dress. We'll both go look at 806 with you."

"Wouldn't be any monsters there in the daytime?"

"Ought not be, but we're going armed anyway."

806 was locked, but the guys each whipped out a screwdriver. Lorie stood in the dusty, musty hallway and held the flashlight, which grew heavier and heavier at the end of her arm.

"Steady, Lorie."

She switched the flashlight to her other hand and aimed it for the doorknob screws. How could holding this be lighter work than twisting a little bitty screw? And honestly, when would someone invent a flashlight that weighted less than a sack of flour?

The knob rattled, and flopped downward. Jack pulled and twisted until the works came out in his hand. He pocketed them and probed the hole with his screwdriver. The lever of the deadbolt above the hole twitched, and Jack swore, jabbing his screwdriver deep.

"Skill," Tommy advised with a grin.

"Skill your ass. Move your head and let her bring the light closer."

"You don't need light, my most foul-mouthed of twin brothers. You need to know where the right hole is and where the magic spot is and how to aim your prod -- "

Jack's elbow snapped toward Tommy's face. Tommy fell back, laughing. The lever turned, and Jack pushed the door open.

Smells of mildew and old blood flowed out. Jack looked around from his crouched position, then stood. "Something happened here, but the evidence has been removed."

“My coat?” she asked, teeth clenched.

He stepped into the room, and looked about. “No sign of it.”

“Curtain,” Tommy said.

The curtain fluttered as Jack approached. He stood off to the side and lifted the curtain a little way. “The window’s wide open, not broken. I guess whoever cleaned up in here wanted it aired.”

She frowned. “Wouldn’t anyone who looked up wonder why a window is standing open in this weather? People who are good at hiding things don’t draw attention to the hiding places.”

“Good question, Shy.” He stood off to the side of the window and lifted the curtain away from it again. “No street or sidewalk below -- just the roof for the sewing factory next door.”

Tommy checked the bathroom. “No clothes or key, but the bathtub is stopped up and some wads of hair are floating -- “

“*Shut up, Tommy!*”

Two other rooms had traces of old-blood smells, several days or maybe a few weeks older.

None of this should surprise me. But she felt numb as they searched the rest of the floor.

The numbness continued on Strega Road. The trash bin overflowed with men’s shoes, so worn and ragged even the scavengers had left them. Someone else had moved, or died, on Strega Road. Bitsy yipped like a scratched record, but Maude was silent.

A steel padlock gleamed on her front door. Her key wouldn’t have done any good if she had found it.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned and marched to the Teodors' apartment. No one answered her knock. Jack stood at her back. He felt good there, but maybe he looked frightening in the shadowy hallway? She knocked again. No answer. Okay, unless Mr. Teodor was home, nobody answered anyway.

She raised her hand next at Mrs. Babkacien’s door, but before she could knock, the old lady threw open the door, broom in hand. “Go away!” she screeched, and spit out some foreign lingo.

Lorie recoiled, and met Jack’s silent bulk at her back. The old lady looked up at Jack and made some signal with her hand.

“Go away! Devil! Devil!” She abruptly switched her grip on the broom, and thrust.

Lorie grabbed it and twisted it out of her grip. “Please, Mrs. Babkacien, calm down. I just want to ask how to talk to the landlord.”

“Go away! Go back dead!”

The old lady's spit flew through the air. Lorie shielded herself with the fan end of the broom and took a step forward. "I am not dead -- and I will not go away! Who is the landlord? Tell me!"

The only response was an outpouring of foreign gibberish. The old lady crossed herself and stepped back. Probably fixing to shut the door -- Lorie blocked it open with the broom. "Tell me in English!"

Jack put a hand on her shoulder. "I don't think she's able to talk in English. She's too scared."

Lorie looked at her neighbor's quivering, wet lips. A line of pale green edged them. *She really is scared. Scared of me. And I can't tell her it's all right, because it isn't.*

The numbness thickened on her skin. She turned and looked up at Jack, barely flinching when the door slammed behind her. "Tell me where you found Ookojonny's letter."

"You'd mentioned the kid under the stairs. He had like a little table, and the envelope on the table."

"Any other documents or letters there?"

"Sorry. No."

"The trash ran yesterday morning."

"And filled up since then. Kind of fast turnover, isn't it?"

"Not if you're hiding something."

"Or protecting people as best you can."

"What?"

"Come outside. Walk with me."

He tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and led her back out into the feeble sunlight.

"What do you mean, protecting people?"

He looked up, the sun full on his face a moment, before looking down at her to answer. "I had a feeling last night, like I knew the houses and the arrangement of the fences here. By daylight, this street is awfully familiar. I can picture myself here. I get cloudy memories of street-ball, fistfights, and kicking cans."

"You were here when you were a boy?"

"Right, and the most logical reason I would have been here, collecting those memories, was if this was where we lived the summer I was eight, when my family came up for a very boring month-long visit."

"In summer? Most families want to leave the city in summer. Yours must have had a particular reason to swim upstream."

“Maybe, but I was too young to be told. What I did know is Uncle Michael let us use the house, so I would guess he is your landlord. If a whole nest of hydes has gathered near here, instead of one or two of them, I could see him doing mass evictions to thin the population and move the more vulnerable people out of the area.”

“So we need to go see your uncle? But he’s missing.”

“Right.”

“So if there’s a nest near here, it might have got him? No, he is still alive if he’s evicting people.”

“If this is where we played, there’s a steam tunnel and a row of grates near here. We need to find them, and see if any of them have a nest. We also need to look at the storm water drainage tunnels.”

“This way, Mr. Hunter. I can show you the line of grates.”

But on the way there, stepping over a storm-water drain, he stopped. “Do you smell that, Shy?”

She inhaled. Nothing. She squatted as gracefully as she could and re-tied her shoe, while he stood over her. Down at this level, she easily caught the sweet-rotten roadkill smell. “I vote we drop some muriatic acid and a few gallons of bleach down the drain here.”

“Not right here. They don’t hide their leftovers where they sleep. But we’re close.”

Two hours later, they found the nest behind the theater, under a grating that had a lock in place but broken. Lorie stared. “Reckon how many necking couples has been dragged back here and everbody thought they eloped?”

“Let’s look for a market that’s open today.”

Chapter Fifteen

She dreamed of Jack and Tommy arguing. She woke, thick-headed, and found herself alone in the bed. The radio was turned low; she barely heard Dinah Shore crooning "*...the saddest kind of song. He knows things are wrong...and he's right.*"

The guys were arguing in even lower tones. She huffed.

"She's up anyway," Jack said.

"A'course I am. What ya'll arguing about?"

"Whether to wake you. I need to go drop the gas, and Tommy needs to go to the paying job."

"And me? Don't I need to carry one container so nobody remembers a man riding a bus in that direction while carrying both ingredients?"

"Exactly," Jack said.

"Doesn't matter," Tommy argued. "Between her riding with me and her riding with you, she's linked. Putting a container of any sort in her hand while she rides that route just puts her in jail with us if things go wrong."

"I'll get *killed* if things go wrong, Tommy! So just make sure they don't. Can't we all snuggle down and sleep just a little longer?"

Jack nodded. "You and I can, but Tommy needs to dress and head out."

Tommy argued, but Jack won. Lorie stayed out of it. *Tommy ought to learn arguing with Jack doesn't do any good.*

At eight, she sat down on the curb by the steam tunnel grate, and set a canvas grocery sack down beside her. She pulled off one shoe and pretended to shake a stone out of it. Setting down the shoe, she opened the two bottles of bleach and tipped them over.

Jack had the muriatic acid. No doubt he was somewhere in sight, even if she didn't know where to look.

She tipped the bottles further over with her elbow while pretending to fuss with her shoe. When they stopped glugging and pouring freely, she put her shoe back on and walked on toward the next bus stop. The only trick was keeping the bleach from dripping on her coat, without making a show of holding it out away from her. The wet bag and its contents went in the first trash can she passed.

They were supposed to meet up at the diner in fifteen minutes. After twenty minutes, she ordered a cup of coffee. The sour-faced waitress poured stuff so thin it looked like pot liquor. Didn't taste like coffee either. She drank it anyway. And waited. And waited.

When Jack came in, his face was tight, deeply lined. "Let's go. Now."

She didn't ask. She left a quarter on the table and went with him.

He opened the door to the hotel room and pushed her in. "Get those trousers off," he snarled, "before I tear them off."

So much for romance. She peeled out of the dungarees fast. *What hurt you so bad, to make you --*

Jack folded up on the floor, his fists against his eyes, shaking. "Don't come close to me, Lorelei. I'm not safe."

Crying. He was crying. Great shuddering sobs like the world had ended.

"Jack?" What could hit him so hard?

Tommy? Had Tommy cheerfully disobeyed instructions? Had something happened? "Jack, who was it? Not Tommy?"

"No!" The thought seemed to calm him, give him something to measure his grief by. He took a deep, heaving breath, and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Not Tommy."

"But somebody you know?" What had he been doing, looking at the dead bodies anyway? Why couldn't he concentrate on something he could do something about, like cutting down on the number of monsters who made those bodies dead?

"Three of them." He took a ragged breath. "I knew at least three of them. I think -- I think I knew a couple more."

"Can I touch you now?"

He opened his arms, but kept his face turned away from her. She came to him. He held her choking-tight, and together they rocked.

"I need to call their mothers," he muttered after a while.

"Not right now."

"I need to call my mother. She can pass the messages."

"That's a better idea. What's your ma like?"

"She writes poetry," he said unexpectedly.

Lorie held him, trying to imagine a woman who wrote poetry and raised sons like Tommy and Jack. "How does a woman find time to write poetry when she has a farm to run and young'uns to raise?"

"She writes at night, when my daddy's not home."

When she'd be worrying herself crazy, but for having something like that to do.

She snuggled against him. "One of my teachers at school kept wanting us to write poems. I was terrible at it. For the final project, I copied stuff from a library book. Teacher told me it was terrible too. I told her she didn't know good poetry when she saw it, and she sent me to the principal for a paddling."

He made a sound that might have been a laugh or a cough. But it wasn't crying.

After a long time, his cock hardened under her thigh. "Shy?"

She kissed him in answer, and took his hand and led him to the shower.

* * * * *

At lunchtime, Tommy came home with a dreamy grin and a smear of lipstick on his collar. Lorie stared at that mark, sick with a jealousy she couldn't defend.

He grinned and reminded her the lipstick proved he hadn't been endangering his soul by having carnal relations with a man. He teased until she was ready to cry or scream or slap his face -- she didn't know what.

She lowered her eyes and ate her potatoes, then carried the cookpot to the bathroom lavatory. *I won't cry. I got no call to cry. He's not my man because Jack is@.*

Tommy followed her in, all serious now. "Lorie, I'm sorry. She means nothing to me. She's just a floozy."

She scrubbed the pot fiercely, refusing to look at him. "Just a floozy? What does that make me, Mr. French?"

"Something special," Jack said from behind Tommy.

She turned on him. "Has it occurred you need to wear that shirt, with that woman's mark, all afternoon? And what will you say if she wants Round Two?"

He had the grace to blush. "Who is she, Tom?"

"Tilly, the cross-eyed one with the bubblegum-pink headscarf."

"Tilly?" She threw down her dishrag. "One of them we stood with to wait for the bus? The ones who said I was a Southerner, and a scream?"

"No, Lorie. A different Tilly. I wouldn't --"

She cut him off. "Tilly the painter's assistant?" That one had a bad eye. And a smug *I-know-things* look.

Jack put a hand on her shoulder. "Tommy, give me the shirt. I need to dress and go. Why don't you take this one I'm wearing and go pick up the laundry? Then you can find a market for what we brought in last night."

"Yes! Both of you can go! Shoo!"

Jack left by the front stairs and Tommy left by the back ones. They both whistled, but their foot-falls couldn't be any quieter if they were both ghosts.

Tommy never came back.

* * * * *

At five, darkness closed in. Lorie pulled the blackout curtains closed and pinned them before turning on the overhead light. She paced, and did some of the exercises she had seen the WACs doing on the newsreels.

Movement in the room next door startled her, but the shower turned on and she relaxed. Some salesman, unable to find or afford a better room, that's all.

He made the floor safer, just by moving around and making noise. The best targets are isolated.

With him there, she felt safe turning the radio on. *Down went the gunner, and then the gunner's mate* -- She hurriedly turned it off and paced some more. The fellow in the next room turned on his radio loud, though, and bellowed along with it. *Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!*

She picked up her shoe and hammered on the wall. "Do you mind? Some people paid good money to sleep here!"

Plaster dust sifted down, and she coughed.

The unseen man laughed. "Lady, if you're cheap enough to sleep here, come on over and I'll wake you up happy."

Masher!

But he turned down his radio, leaving her too well able to lose herself in gloomy thoughts. She turned her radio back on, very low and then lower. By the time the news came on, she had it so low she had to hold the water glass against the cabinet to pick out voices in the faint, frying-bacon sound of the static.

Montgomery this. Montgomery that. El Alamein was over. Golly -- hadn't El Alamein been over back in the summer? Among all those foreign place names, this had stuck in her memory because it sounded something like El Alamo.

On another channel, a woman with an accent said more than half the men of the Eighth had been killed or wounded.

Was the Eighth a division, a battalion, or what? How many daddies and brothers and husbands were never coming home? How many would come home like Pa, with so much lasting pain they'd eventually drink themselves to death?

A stronger voice, male and robust, took over the woman's broadcast. He identified himself as Agent Fuller with the FBI and stated that this station had been shut down for treason, because it was broadcasting false information.

Of course, it was false. *The real story is that a mysterious Gyrocopter appeared over the battlefield and shot out a mysterious ray that instantly junked all the German and Italian tanks!*

Maybe a dozen Red Blooded American Men -- all unmarried orphans -- nobly sacrificed themselves, and two dozen got neat little bullet holes in them for the pretty plump nurses in their white nun-caps to coo over.

How gullible are people supposed to be?

She turned off the radio, then turned it on again and found some jazz. She wasn't that fond of a syncopated beat, but maybe she could lose herself in trying to figure out how to score those complex rhythms and allow improvisation and still end up with a melody.

Tommy, where are you?

Just after eight, Jack came in, dripping and steaming, with a huge grin that shut off like a light bulb when he looked at her. "Did Tommy leave you here alone while he went out on a date?"

"He hasn't been back since ya'll left."

He closed his eyes, and for a moment, she could see what he would look like at sixty. Then he pulled himself together and grinned at her. "Tilly took the afternoon off. What do you want to bet they're together?"

He better not have worried me to death only to come home wearing the marks of some round-heeled floozy -- Tilly or anyone else! But he wasn't going to. If Jack thought he might, that sick look would never have aged his face. Tommy would've had a better chance of coming back from North Africa.

While Jack showered, she fried some potatoes to eat with the sandwiches. Frying took the last of the grease, but she couldn't serve a man boiled potatoes twice in one day and she didn't have any milk to mash them with. They ate quietly. She mopped her plate with the last crust of her bread and fed it to Jack. "You need to be in pairs to hunt, don't you?"

"It helps. We brought trench knives, but hoped we wouldn't need them. If you think a pair of brass knuckles gets you in dutch with the coppers, you should see their reaction to a trench knife."

"I don't want you pairing up with that Danny O'Brien. That man is crazy."

Jack looked old again. "That will not happen. He's home by now. Maybe his family has what it takes to save him."

“What would it take?” *Do you trust me enough to tell me, Jack French?*

He grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled, as if the pain helped him think. “I don’t know. I sent him home because he was ... “

Was what, Jack? Still human?

“He wasn’t so crazy I felt like giving up on him.”

She took the plates to the lavatory and cleaned them. When she came back, she stacked them neatly on the lowboy. “I need to learn how to use a trench knife, if that’s what you use.”

He grunted. “That’s what *I* use. A trench knife requires brute force. A woman’s knife needs to be sharper, able to slide in without much force. I’ll have to work both shifts tomorrow. Instead of coming here at lunch, I’ll pack a lunch pail and spend the rest of the time between shifts looking for a good dagger.”

She blinked. He hadn’t at all objected to a woman getting in close to a fight. But then, unless the monsters had forgot her, she’d be safer with him in the street than here alone.

If a woman can weld, she can shoot. And cut. Isn’t the French Resistance supposed to be half women? Well, this is a French offensive, and it can be half woman too.

We’re both talking as if Tommy is gone for good, aren’t we? She swallowed. “If I’m not working tomorrow, why don’t I spend time looking for a good dagger?”

“Shy-my-girl, have you any idea what to look for?”

Her face heated. “I’m no city girl. I know a solid tool from a shiny play-pretty. I wouldn’t waste your money.”

“Here.”

What? He threw something shiny at her. At her face! She ducked, knocking it aside with the heel of her hand. A spoon bounced across the bed.

“What kind of fool trick was that, Jack French?”

“Not a trick -- a test. You passed with flying colors. Nobody with any sense tries to grab a sharp blade out of the air unless they’ve had tons of practice. Now pick it up and see how close you can get to planting it between my ribs.”

“What if I succeed?”

“Try it, Shy. Try real hard.”

She lunged at him, one hand scooping up the mock-weapon as she passed the bed. She rammed him, chest to chest, knocking him back half a step. As he staggered that half-step, she brought the spoon in from behind and dug the butt end between his short ribs. His shirt and undershirt were thick, but that should hurt like nobody’s business.

He spun away from her, snatching the spoon from her grip. “*Christ on a Crutch!*”

She flinched at the blasphemy, and hid a smile. “Like I said, Mr. French ... what if I succeed?”

He looked disbelievingly at the spoon and threw it down, and put both hands behind him. *“Jesus Jumping Christ!”*

She saw Ma’s painting of Jesus in the Garden -- the one that made him look like Errol Flynn -- only Jesus whipped out a crutch and commenced jumping on it like a pogo stick, his long blond hair and white robes and his striped over-robe-thing flapping up and down. *Oh, golly!*

She pinched the insides of her arms hard, to drive out the image and kill her gasping laughter, but Jesus winked at her before bouncing out of sight into the depths of the garden. *Oh, golly! My soul will burn in perdition for that!*

“I’m glad you find my pain such a strong source of amusement!”

“It isn’t you!” *It could have been worse. I could have seen Jesus with hairy legs. “Bless me! I got to stop thinking before a thunderbolt strikes!”*

“What the hell?”

“Don’t make me say it! I’m already burning in perdition for thinking it, and I don’t want to know how much worse I could get for saying it!” Then she wasn’t laughing. She was crying. Jack held her, rocking her in his arms.

She clutched fistfuls of his shirt. “We let Tommy go out alone and now he isn’t coming back, is he?”

“I sent him out. *Me*, not *we*. But he should have been back long before the hydes awoke, Shy. Most likely, he got himself arrested and is trying to get his phone call in, or maybe he got beat up over a girl or walked in front of a taxicab. That’s not good, but it’s not likely to turn out fatal. Tommy is tough, tougher than you might believe.”

Waitaminnit! “He was out after dark alone the other night. Why didn’t you worry so much then?”

She saw him juggling answers. *Just the truth, Jack. I’m not a child who needs soothing lies.* He ran his fingers through his hair. “The other night he was *supposed* to be out past dark. I knew where he’d gone and where to hunt him if he stayed out too late.”

“Can the gas wait? Should we stay in tonight, in case he calls?”

“I’d already planned to stay in this evening. We can set the alarm for say three a.m. and see if it’s still raining then. If it’s clear, we can drop a load and zip back here. If it’s still nasty, we can rest until time for me to head for Brooklyn. Man alive, I don’t like leaving you alone for that hour... say, you could ride out with me, then turn around and come home alone. You wouldn’t have to change trains at all, and the sun would be rising before you had to leave the subway back here.”

In other words, get out of a warm bed in the predawn chill and keep him company for the ride. Ugh. But -- “It beats lying here in the dark, alone, looking at the ceiling and listening for *something* to sniff its way down the hall and stop with its nose under the door.”

He casually turned the knob on the radiator as far as it would go. While it whistled and rattled, he ducked his forehead down to touch hers.

“Speaking of alone...Tommy is off flirting with some nurse or jail matron, leaving you and me here alone with this big, soft bed. Beds get bored, you know. They pout if they aren’t used. Does Lorelei want to be responsible for making an old bed like this pout?”

That was Tommy’s tone of voice. Jack had his joking tone, but it was hard, like his laugh. This lighter, softer tone was all Tommy.

“Are you trying to confuse me, Jack? Talking like Tommy?”

A look that might have been hurt touched his face, and vanished. “No. I was trying to be nice. Sorry if it came off as two-faced.”

“Be Jack. That’s good enough.” Had to be good enough. No man needed to go around thinking his girl would rather talk to his brother.

“Is it?” Jack’s strong hands kneaded at her back, creeping under her flannel shirt. She might could get confused on the voice, but not on the way Jack touched her.

She took in a breath. This shirt was way too hot. She was sweating in it. She would sweat more, with that steam radiator going full blast.

She fumbled with a button. Jack caught her hands. “I’ll do it, Shy.”

“But-- ” she swallowed, tried to put some strength in her voice. Then she saw his eyes, black and sunken with pain. This was what he did instead of worrying about Tommy. He’d worry anyway, but maybe she could put something -- herself -- between him and the pain for a little while.

Like an omen, a distant radio played Jimmy Dorsey: *This is worrth fighting forrr!* She lifted her arms, and Jack tugged the shirt off over her head.

* * * * *

She smelled so damned good -- she had to have been dipping into the perfume again. Or maybe his fear painted her with the scent. In any case, he undressed her with more speed than finesse, tearing one of the little hooks on her brassiere.

She clasped his wrists, and smiled at him sadly. “I could tell you to slow down, but that would be a waste of breath, wouldn’t it?”

He couldn’t answer in words. His tongue curled in his mouth, but no words came. She set his hands on her waist and kissed him, sucking his bottom lip between her teeth and biting delicately. Her scent blinded him, and the hunger roared through him.

She laughed, the sound incongruous. She didn’t understand her danger.

He had to hold on, not just for his own sake but to keep her safe. To hold on, he needed to purge the oily darkness that oozed around the corners of his mind, tainting every thought and every attempt to think.

She urged him backward to the bed. When he felt the spread on his legs, he lifted her so she would fall atop him. She shook her head, her hair whipping his face, and wriggled down his body to kneel beside the bed. Her mouth -- yes -- her mouth. That way he wouldn't bruise her, wouldn't risk tearing her tender flesh.

She nibbled and lipped, looking up at him as if for approval.

"No teasing," he managed to say.

Without warning, her blood-hot mouth engulfed the head of his cock, and her pebbled tongue rubbed the sensitive underside.

He gripped her hair, but when she made a small noise he had the control -- just barely -- to release her and clutch fistfuls of the bedspread.

He came as quick as thought, the release flushing pain and power through him like an acid bath. The bedspread tore in his grip.

He scented another hunger, fully human and fully female. Hers.

He jerked her onto the bed, rolled her under him, and opened her thighs to his mouth. Tommy would have laughed him out of the room, to jump a girl with no more warm-up than that. She writhed under him, though, her sweet puss like a mouth kissing back. Within minutes, her energies erupted, flooding through his nerves, soothing where his had scoured, filling the reservoir he had purged.

He'd been right, that first night. She was an extraordinary feeder. And neither of them was through. He reached into the drawer for the jar of lubricant.

When he turned, two fingers white with the precious cream, she smiled uncertainly.

That uncertainty stopped him.

"Are you willing?" That growl couldn't possibly convey his questions.

But she nodded. Her pink tongue wet those full, red lips. "Will this work in the bed?"

His skin warmed. "It will work very well." And it did.

Chapter Sixteen

In the morning, she refused to ride with him to Brooklyn. "What if Tommy calls from jail or from a hospital, or from the draft office? Somebody has to be here to answer the telephone."

Jack paced, pulling his hair and throwing dark looks at her, at the curtained window, at the locked door, and at the ominously silent telephone. She didn't have to do any guessing to know what he was thinking.

"All right," he growled at last. "But I'll call at lunch, and you'd better answer. I'm bringing a pistol home this evening, too. Pistols are easier to learn than blades, more effective in a beginner's hand."

I know how to use a pistol, Jack. "Do you have money for a pistol?"

"We'll live on beans before I'll leave you alone and unarmed, after dark! On a day like yesterday, those things could be in the stairwells by four in the afternoon!"

She made the bed without looking at him. "They could have yesterday, and they didn't. What's changed?"

"We kept this room because it was most comfortable, and because two of us could defend it -- and you -- reasonably well. But if I'm not awake and armed, sweetheart, I'm outnumbered by even one of those things. When you're outnumbered, you have to keep moving. You have to clear out of a lair before the enemy finds it."

You called me sweetheart.

But that's just movie talk. "I could put the chair under the doorknob."

"It won't fit." He paced to the door and yanked on the useless chain-lock. "We need to move to another room. I think 614 was the room with good locks and a telephone, but just no heat. I'll tell the manager to move my ticket there. Maybe tomorrow I can find an electric heater that won't overload these rat-chewed wires."

"If the switchboard operator knows where we move to, anyone could know. And the switchboard has to know. We have to be available if Tommy calls."

"A hyde wouldn't inquire of the switchboard or the manager. I'll find some scrap and machine us a real deadbolt at work today. I should have set up a barricade for this door when we had time. We'll work all that out tonight."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then looked at her like a mourner at a funeral. "I can't leave you every morning like this. I can't watch night ooze through the city before I can get home to you, and wonder every minute if I'm too late."

"You can. What a person has to do, a person can do."

He grinned, an ugly snarl of a grin that twisted her insides. "That's my line."

"Then you know it's true." She took a breath. "Men go off every day knowing something could happen at home -- "

"Those are men, sweetheart. I am a huntsman. I have thumbed my nose at the enemy. He knows -- they know -- who I am and where I am. Or they will know very soon."

"How? What's different now?"

He paced, picked up the telephone handset, and put it down again. "Damned contraption."

"Something is different, Jack, and it's not just the number of men in this room. Are you going to tell me or do I have to torture myself wondering?"

He clapped one hand to the back of his neck, and squeezed as if it hurt. "They don't inquire at the switchboard, sweetheart, but they have ways of collecting basic information..." He paced. "Not all of them can talk, but if they have Tommy, they can make him answer any question they're capable of asking. It's only a matter of time."

He picked up the telephone again. "I'm calling in drunk today."

She put her finger on the hang-up button. "Not unless you want to lose your essential-worker card and visit the draft board! Put on your coat, Jack, and go to work, and trust me to be okay for today."

He jerked her close. She flinched, expecting one of those near-bite kisses, but he merely brushed his lips over her cheekbone.

"If the telephone rings," he whispered into her hair "I don't care if you're on the throne -- get up and answer it. But if someone knocks..." He closed his eyes. "No one should knock."

"No one will knock today."

He put on his coat with jerky movements, actually rustling the cloth. Normal people make noise. Jack had to be just beside himself.

She tucked his lunch pail in his battered rucksack, since he wouldn't be coming back for lunch, and a thought struck her. "Say, Jack? Do you know a doctor who would write you

a note saying you have a bum ticker, that working two full shifts a day, day in and day out, would kill you?"

He spun to face her, and his thick brows crunched together. "I may. I'll send a telegram. You have a brain in there, Shy-my-girl."

Takes more than one lick of sense to make a genius. Her eyes burned.

He went, throwing her a final dark look at the door. She closed the door and noisily set the deadbolt. Leaning her forehead against the door, she listened for his footsteps. But he was silent.

Silent come and silent go.

She turned to face the room and squared her shoulders. If they were moving this evening, the packing had best be done in advance.

He called upon reaching the yard, by which time it was light enough to begin her search for a good knife. Too bad she couldn't say why she needed it. In the second shop, she found a perfect-looking dagger, straight off the cover of a dime novel -- except it wasn't for sale. These fighting knives were all being shipped to England now. The perfect dagger, and she couldn't have it. The thing was supposed to just sit there to remind people where to find such a knife after the war.

A kid leaning on a broom suggested she could go to an Ey-Tye shop; he thought some of them were still selling stilettos.

Two bus rides later, she found a cache of stilettos -- but the thin dark woman at the counter refused to sell her one without a note from either her husband or her priest. Fuming, she wrote down the shop's address and rushed back to the hotel just in time to catch Jack's noon call. Then she had to go stand in line at the grocery store for nearly two hours.

Jack called again at six, and said he was walking home from the subway instead of waiting for the bus. She barely heard his voice over the Babel of several hundred men and women getting off work and passing through the grimy doorways.

"Be careful, Jack. The streets are already getting dark."

His voice gentled. "I'll stay with the crowds, and I'll hurry. I swapped for a bigger flashlight -- big enough to flag down a cruising airplane."

"Light..." *Waitaminnit!*

What?

Wait...light! She hadn't noticed the stairwell light on when she'd come in from shopping. A light bulb glowing in the daylight was something a person noticed. "The stairwell light is out. I'll go turn it on now, before -- "

"No!" he said with barely restrained violence. "You will stay behind a locked door until I get there."

"Jack...not every turn of bad luck is enemy action."

“Shy, stay behind the door. I didn’t want to worry you, but by the time I left this morning, the bulb had been broken. The shards of glass had blood smears.”

Blood.

Someone -- something that couldn’t unscrew a bulb without breaking it. “We’re all packed. I collected some fruit boxes this afternoon, and boxed up everything that won’t go in the suitcase.”

“Good.” He hung up without a goodbye. Without calling her *sweetheart*, but she’d heard that twice in one morning and that’s all she was ever likely to hear in her life.

She unpacked the bottle of scent and opened it. *Cedar, sage, and sweetgrass clean*, but this wasn’t a potion to hide her. Not from evil and not from good. She traced one side of her throat with the wet lip of the bottle, tilted it to kiss behind her other ear, and traced that droplet down until it dried. One more wet kiss under her bosom, and a last one on her back at the waist.

Capping the bottle, she peered down at the deeply shadowed streets. She could go back to Arkansas. Get a job there. Find a man. Maybe not until the war ended, but eventually she would find a man. Marry him. Have his young’uns. And he might call her *sweetheart*. But it would never be the same.

She closed the curtains, and pinned them shut. *Be careful, Jack French. If I lose you, I will mourn you all my days.*

Chapter Seventeen

On Wednesday morning, well before dawn, they gassed the nest Tommy had found. Jack listened to the echoes of anguished cries and whooping coughs, trying not to link faces with the sounds, praying he hadn't just killed Tommy, until Shy grasped him by the hand and led him away.

"I have to go look," he mumbled.

"No! You'd curdle your own lungs, that's all. You couldn't possibly do anything to help whoever they might have down there."

Her scolding took a moment to register. She thought he wanted to search for some cache of victims. *If you knew I was looking for monsters I knew, you wouldn't dare touch me.*

She turned abruptly, and laid her hand on the side of his face. Her cold fingers carried only the faintest scent of bleach. "There's wrongs can't nobody right, Jack, and victims can't nobody help. We do what we can, but we got to walk away from the rest. Now don't lollygag here. You look like a man who needs some loving, and I know certain-sure I need me some right now."

Their loving was hard, too hard, although he held back as much as he could. Holding her afterward made him late to work, but it was necessary. For her, and for him.

The workday passed somehow. He buried himself in the blizzard of details and decisions and noise, moving from grinder to drill press with his calipers and feeler gauges. One small thing. Another small thing. And yet another small thing. People talked at him, but he never even bothered removing an earplug. They might as well speak Chinese in the shriek of grinders and the clangor of power hammers in the adjacent workbay.

All that kept him moving was knowing Shy waited for him.

On the train back toward the hotel, the notion took him she wouldn't be there when he got in. He would open the door to a cold, empty room, to a note saying she'd decided to leave. He would be hours too late to stop her, to explain ... what? She couldn't be told the whole truth unless she married him, and the way things had been going he soon wouldn't be in any shape to marry. *Why* hadn't Uncle Michael provided a feeder?

Across the aisle, a pretty girl glanced at him, and away. And back. He closed his eyes tiredly.

Shy ought to leave; for her own good, she ought to go anywhere else.

A new vision painted itself across his nerves. The hydes had found her. She had heard Tommy's voice and opened the door to them. He would arrive scant minutes too late, in time only to drown in the smells of rot and fresh blood.

He took the stairs at a run, and flung himself at the door with trench knife in hand. He bounced off the door. He landed gracelessly on his ass in the hallway floor. Dust sifted down about him. What the *fuck*?

He smelled beans, the mellow sweetness of beans cooked softly for a long, long time. No blood. No rot.

He stood stiffly, pocketing the knife. "It's me," he muttered at the blank face of the door. "Are you okay in there?"

The doorknob turned, but the door didn't open. Shy laughed from the other side. He closed his eyes. *Safe*. The world could go to hell outside this building. All he cared about was right here, and she could laugh.

"I whittled a wedge to put under the door," she said. "I made it too small, so when I kicked it to seat it, it pretty much went all the way under. Now you've jammed it. Have you something you could stick under the door, to poke it out of the way?"

Yes, I do. The trench knife worked just fine.

Supper was a surprisingly good soup, considering it mainly consisted of beans with coffee and onions for flavor. Shy chattered lightly about how good this would be with a hock simmered in it and crackling bread on the side, and he gave the ritual assurances that it was, just as it was, the finest bean soup he'd ever eaten.

After supper, he moved the boxes and the suitcase to a more secure, if less comfortable, room at the end of the hall. Moving to a different room every night would get tiresome, but it beat leaving too easy a trail. Eventually they were going to have to leave the hotel completely. Not yet, though -- leaving the Grammaree meant giving up any hope of seeing Tommy again.

While Shy tsked over the mattress and made the bed with a double-layer of linens, he carved a larger wedge to fit under the door, and a third to jam into the crack at the top of the door. They needed every advantage they could get, to slow down the action when Tommy brought the hydes to them.

He finally set down the knife and swept the wood shavings from his lap into the wastebasket. Shy sat at the foot of the bed, watching him warily. How long had she sat there, silent, watching him?

“Shy, you look at me like you’re afraid. Are you?” *Please say no. Even if it’s a lie.*

She chewed her generous bottom lip. “I’m afraid, but not really of you. Is that what you mean?”

He sighed. “Good enough. Are you ready for bed?”

She smiled slowly. “So long as you aren’t sleepy, I’m ready.”

Did she really understand his needs so well? Or was she working on a human understanding, the human need to breed -- or go through the motions of breeding -- after a brush with death?

On Thursday, he came home for lunch and found Dr. Cray’s letter in the morning mail. “John R. French, called Jack, has been my patient for more than ten years. He has a heart condition known as...”

He couldn’t read most of the rest of it. He took the letter back with him when he reported for his afternoon shift.

Foster, the floor superintendent, read it in a glance. “Can’t say as I’m surprised, French. Half the people who work with you are talking. You don’t smell of a hangover, but all this week you’ve looked like you ate breakfast in Hell. What were you doing, trying to kill yourself in the war effort?”

Jack turned his hat over in his hands. “I thought I could work like a real man. I’m sorry, boss. It’s just too much. How can we make this work? You want me half days, or every other day, or what? What would cause the least problems?”

Foster polished his steel-rimmed glasses. “Physical soundness isn’t what makes you a man, son. Willingness to do your duty makes you a man. Showing up every day and putting the best you have into your job. Bingham’s a drunk -- stumbles in hung over and, first thing you know, he’s sucking on a bottle. He’s in the right pockets, though, and can’t be fired.”

He squinted up at Jack. “I want you to take this afternoon off. Starting tomorrow, you can come in at lunch and take up whatever he’s accomplished in the morning. If he argues, humor him. When he passes out, just step over him. I can only pay you half a day, but I can pay you at Bingham’s rate. He gets sixteen dollars a week; you’ll get eight. Is it a deal?”

Still more than I made at home. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Shy wasn’t in the hotel room. He paced, phone to window to door, door to phone to bed, pulling his arms to keep from punching the walls, until her quick tapping step echoed in the hall. *Alive! She was alive!*

He threw open the door and snatched her inside.

She dropped both her bags. Potatoes, rice, and tin cans with bright labels tumbled across the floor. *Damn!* He scrambled to gather the groceries.

Behind him, Shy laughed. He spun, outraged, to face her. She sat like a child on the floor in her brand-new blue coat, with her calico headscarf sagging about her throat. Merriment danced in her eyes, and the need to echo it itched his lips.

She pointed at him. "Laugh. You know you want to. A smart guy said laughing was good for me. Since I'm the goose, and you're the gander, it's good for you too. Laugh, mister! Don't make me come out there and force you!"

He sat on the unswept floor in a hotel's hallway and laughed with her.

* * * * *

On Friday afternoon, Jack returned to the hotel at one, catching Lorie as she dressed for a walk. She didn't really feel like going out, but she'd go stir-crazy if she stayed in this room all day, and at least it wasn't raining. Or sleeting. Or snowing. Or gloom-of-nighting, although night was a whole lot more "scary" than "gloomy" nowadays.

"The guy I'm subbing for showed up sober today," he explained. "Let's go out for fun, Lorie. We need to relax a little. Take in a matinee."

Jack was talking fun? A simple date?

The outside air was colder than she had expected, and the tightness in her chest became a weight that took up half or more of every breath. She smiled and worked around the problem as best she could. Jack had too much to worry about to be thinking about her maybe getting sick.

They would walk a little way in step, like real lovers, discussing signs in shop windows and exploring the house-lot-sized park two blocks up from the hotel. But after that little way, she would feel Jack withdraw. When she looked up, he had a tight, distant expression. She would tug his arm, bring him back to the moment and the fact they were both alive, both walking in sunlight, weak as that sun might be.

Sometimes she could even get him to smile.

In front of the theater, he cupped her cheek with one gloved hand. "Do you feel well, Shy-girl? You look peaked."

She smiled as best she could. "I'll feel better when we can sit down somewhere out of this wind."

"You should have said something earlier. You can't get sick, Shy. I'd drive you crazy with my ideas of nursing care."

I bet!

Inside the theater, though, the cartoons were no more than moving colors and splashes of sound, and during the newsreels she looked for faces that were melting to monstrous

proportions. By the time the movie started, she couldn't have paid attention for any money in the world.

"Let's just go," she finally whispered.

Jack stood without a word and took her by the elbow.

The cold air outside clawed inside her chest. She coughed helplessly, while Jack held her up and asked, over and over, if she was okay.

"No!" she finally said, and coughed again. "Stop asking!"

"Shy-my-girl, you need a stiff drink."

"Lower your voice!" she hissed, holding her ribs with both arms against another fusillade of coughing. "I don't drink -- and if I did, it wouldn't be at barely three in the afternoon!"

"I noticed. You need one anyway. A spoonful of sugar with whiskey in it is the best cough medicine around."

No, it wasn't. Nothing beat a tincture of turpentine with opium powder in it. Not that anyone could lay hands on opium these days.

He held open a door, and after a moment she realized this was the same bar where they'd seen Danny O'Brien.

"Why do we keep coming back here?" It wasn't a particularly nice place. No young marines lay on the chip-covered floor, not yet, anyway, but what were people doing in a bar in the early part of the afternoon anyway? Didn't they have jobs? A foursome of women, all wearing makeup, passed a cigarette from one carmine mouth to the next. Working women, but not the kind who appeared on propaganda posters.

"It's a place we meet," Jack said briefly.

We meant *hunters* -- *Huntsmen*, as he would call them. Was he getting freer with information now, or was she getting better at deciphering the clues he dropped?

She settled on a barstool, her knees clasped tight together, glad she wasn't wearing makeup to draw any sailor on the lookout for a cheap woman. She began unbuttoning her coat, but some masher whistled in mock appreciation, wagging his eyebrows at her. She put her hands on the bar. Overheating was definitely the lesser of evils.

The bartender, a big guy with a broken nose and misshapen ears, set an unexpectedly delicate glass of pale wine in front of her, and Jack paid him with a musical jingle of silver. She touched the glass. She'd had red wine once, nasty stuff that it was, but this looked like a different drink altogether.

The bartender polished a spoon on his dirty apron and held it up for Jack's inspection. The bartender's hand was horribly mangled. Bitten. Half his hand had been bitten off. The mangled hand thrust the spoonful of sugar under her nose. She recoiled, and Jack caught her, whispering something in her hair.

“I don’t feel well.”

“This will help,” Jack assured her, taking the spoon from the bartender.

The bartender grunted what sounded like agreement and daintily dropped six drops of amber liquid from another spoon into the sugar. The whole world paused, as the center of the mound of sugar crystals melted to syrup. The bartender added six more drops and nodded to Jack. Jack nuzzled her temple. “Open up, Shy.”

Don’t call me that in public! But she didn’t have the moxie to argue, not right now, so she opened her mouth as little as she could and still take in the spoon.

The bartender dropped one last amber-gold drop, and Jack slid the spoonful to the back of her tongue. She swallowed -- it was rum without the spice, and it burned her throat. She coughed explosively.

Jack held her about the shoulders, his handkerchief over her nose and mouth like a movie villain. She cupped her hands over his hand and hanky, gunfire coughs ripping her throat so she wasn’t sure she’d ever talk normal again.

But, eventually, she was done. She leaned into Jack’s shoulder, and he tucked a stray curl back into her chignon.

“Better?”

Yes, better. But not a whole lot of fun getting there. She shot an embarrassed peek at the bartender, now several feet away, but his battered face looked back with sympathy, not disgust.

“Your wine, Shy. Inhale it and take small sips.”

She had heard of people sniffing wine before they drank it, but all she smelled was beer and traces of stale cigarette smoke.

“Christ on a crutch,” Jack murmured.

“We been through that,” she reproved hoarsely, but when she looked up, she saw people looking at the doorway. She turned.

Twins. Identical twins.

“Stay here,” Jack whispered, dropping a handful of silver dollars into her coat pocket.

No! But he left, and the twins left with him.

She stared at her wine, and drank it as slowly as possible. Sweet. Tingly. Not much to it. She ordered another.

“Have you forgotten me?”

The face-man.

Her skin shrank on her bones, and she like to fell from her barstool.

She put one foot down to the chip-covered floor and turned, slowly, the stool whining under her. She looked at the monster’s human face for a moment before she could draw

breath enough to speak, and then the haze of smoke scoured her voice-box so she couldn't speak at all.

She reached behind her for her wineglass, but her hands shook so bad she couldn't pick it up. His yellow-tinted eyes looked past her and down, focused on her hand, and crinkled at the corners. His thin tongue flicked over his cracked, chapped lips, leaving them shiny and wet.

She found her voice. "No, sir. I couldn't forget you. You and your friends scared at least twenty years off my life with that there little movie-stunt you pulled a week ago; I'm not likely to live long enough to forget you."

He smiled, licking his longish teeth. She fought not to gag.

His face smoothed, the human resurfacing. "Movie stunt. You saw through it, eh? You're the sharp one, aren't you?" He leaned closer. "Nice perfume. You need to learn not to marinate in it, though."

Heat flushed her face. "I need enough to smell through all this cigarette smoke. Do you know I've seen four women smoking in here? Right out in public. Don't that beat all you ever heard?"

He took her elbow, tightening his grip so her flinch was as much pain as fear. "Then let's find a less common place to talk. I have some questions for you."

"Questions? Like what?"

"Who did you run to, a week ago?"

"I ran to the first taxicab I could get to stop! I'd've broke both ankles for sure if I hadn't been praying so hard!"

"Oh? How interesting." He shouldered open the door and plowed through a clutch of sailors in undress whites and pea-coats at the other side. The cold outside air again sliced into her chest. The coughing took her, and the face-man patted her back like a lover until she could stop. "Where have you been this week? You didn't have any money, as I recall."

In the street, a long car slowed and nosed up to the curb like a wheeled black submarine. The sunlight made it shimmer like a puddle of black oil. She remembered her role, and summoned what admiration she could. "Golly, would you look at that?"

"Not often from the outside." Grim amusement edged his voice. He opened the door. "Get in. I'll give you a ride."

She stalled. *Jack? Where are you?* "A ride where?"

"To where I want you. As I recall, you need money, not information. Have your needs changed? Or just your ability to pay?"

She still balked. *Play dumb. A man is always willing to believe a girl is dumb.* "I don't get it."

"You don't have to get it." Now his impatience showed. "Just get in."

She stomped his foot. He swore, and sharp pain stung her leg. She looked down stupidly. A glass syringe glittered against her skirt, the needle jabbing through the cloth.

The face-man slapped the plunger with the heel of his hand, and she fell.

Fell.

Fell.

Chapter Eighteen

She struggled through a dark, bombed-out, partially submerged building, trying to pick a path between pale-blue sailors' corpses and piles of old meat caught on barbed wire. Her feet disappeared with every step into the painfully cold water.

One blue sailor moaned. His bony hand closed on her wrist, and became barbed wire.

She woke, sitting with her back to a wall, headache and nausea fighting for attention. *Rotten meat. Old blood. Mildew.* She tried to reach her head, but pain bit into her wrist. A narrow chain, thin enough to call jewelry, looped her left wrist and leashed her to an eyebolt set into the wallpapered wall. As dim as the room was, she recognized the outdated patterns on the wallpaper, the stained bedspread, and the chair upholstery of the Hotel Grammaree.

She probably had enough chain to stand up. Maybe.

"Hold still." The rough, guttural voice froze her. Then she looked. Jack sat, bruised and bloodied, on the floor beside the bed. His wrists were chained to something set in the wall over his left shoulder.

He stared at her feet, at the man curled on the floor at her feet. A man with torn clothes, matted hair, and a rank stench. She couldn't stretch her cramped legs without draping them over him.

Not a man. Not with those yellow claws and rough, flaking skin. She cringed against the wall, away from the monster.

Don't be a sap! He can reach anyway.

A choke-chain, twice as thick as her leash, circled his neck, coiled in a tidy spiral on the floor near his chin, and ended in an eyebolt set into the floor. He couldn't stand up, but he could reach her.

After a moment, she mustered the courage to crane her neck way far to the side so she could look in his face.

Tommy. She closed her eyes to hold back the tears.

Poor Tommy. Poor Jack, to see him this way.

She looked at Jack, sitting against the opposite wall. His face was swollen, dark with bruises, and his chin had been cut deep enough to show white bone. Blood coated his throat, blackening the collar of his torn shirt, and thinner lines trickled from his wrists to blacken his sleeves. How long had he sat there, fighting the chains?

Jack's dark gaze moved from Tommy to her, and his eyes were windows to Hell.

She pulled her legs in, away from the sleeping thing that had been Tommy. Nothing she did would get her out of reach, if he wanted her. When he wanted her. "He won't wake up before dark, right? How much time do we have?"

"It's near dark now."

She glanced involuntarily at the dirty window, to blue-violet clouds in the winter sky.

"We can expect company any minute. They'll want to catch as much of the fun as they can."

They? The face-man and his crew. So why aren't they here now? She looked at Tommy, curled like a dog at her feet. "They don't really care if he kills me before they arrive, or he wouldn't be in easy reach."

"Right."

"You're out of reach. They don't want him to kill you. I'm no target. Just a lure. For Tommy and you and guys like you. Someone wants you to be hydes."

He flashed a demon-face of a grin, and relieved her by dropping it for a grimly human expression. "So you figured it out. Why did I think I had to shield you from the ugly realities?"

"Me? I was a farm girl. I've named calves, fed them, brushed them, petted them -- all knowing I'd end up eating them. I held my Daddy's hand as he bled on the sidewalk, the day Bonnie and Clyde came through town!"

"Calm down. He'll wake up soon enough as it is."

She glared at him, but dropped her voice. "You want to protect me from re-al-i-ties?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "Shy, Shy, my Lorelei. If letting out every drop of my blood would save you from what's coming, I would do it. But I can't. Only you can save yourself."

She frowned and tested her chain, trying to wiggle the eyebolt enough to loosen the plaster. The bolt held rock steady. She tapped the wall. Yep, a stud underlay the wall right here. "What's the plan?"

He cleared his throat. "Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

“You have just enough chain there to pull a loop through the eyebolt and work the loop over your head. Once the loop is under your chin, position it right across your voice box. When it’s in place, you’ll feel a scratching, gagging sensation from deep inside. Then push against the wall with your feet. Push as hard as ever you can. For a few minutes it will be bad, but nothing like what they plan do to you. You’ll be safe forever.”

She shook her head, the loose bun of hair flopping against her neck.

“Shy, you have no time to argue.”

“Suicide isn’t worth arguing about.”

“Suicide is cutting off a life. You wouldn’t do that. You’d just beat the monsters out of their game.”

She tried to unscrew the bolt. Finger pressure wouldn’t budge it. “I need a lever to stick through the eye here. Do you see anything to use?”

“Shy, listen to me.”

“Then say something worth hearing!”

Tommy groaned, throwing one arm over his ravaged face.

She flattened to the wall, breathless and abruptly ill.

Tommy’s nostrils flared. His eyes opened, glittering in the shadow under his arm.

“Hello, Tommee,” she cooed. He uncoiled, his nails clicking on the floor.

“Tom-meeee,” she repeated, as she would to soothe a mad dog.

His nostrils flared, and he dipped his face to her foot. His tongue, long and flexible like a dog’s, flicked out, tasting her ankle, and flicked again to taste the same spot.

Chill bumps raced up her leg. She jingled her chain, and his feral eyes jumped to the source of the sound.

“Look at this, Tommee.” Jingle-jingle! “I can’t scratch your back. I want to scratch my Tommy’s back, but with this mean ole chain I just can’t reach.”

He tasted her ankle a third time, but his eyes remained rolled up toward her face, or toward her chain. Did one word of what she said get through to him? Wasn’t any of Tommy left in there?

He lunged at her, and she strangled on her own scream as he slammed her against the wall. Her head cracked on the chair-rail. *Don’t bleed. Don’t bleed in front of it. It? Him.* He smelled of dead things left in the road. He made tooth-grinding noises, and fell across her lap. There he lay, a dead weight.

Asleep again, waiting for full dark? Not entirely asleep, certainly. Maybe a lazy-Sunday kind of half-doze, waiting for the last of the daylight to fade.

A shudder tightened her muscles; she forced them to relax instead.

Scratch his back. She slid her free hand up under his mildewy jacket, and scratched him through his shirt and undershirt. He rolled on her lap like a dog, moving her hand to just the right place. She scratched vigorously and he hummed, deep in his throat.

She risked a quick look at Jack, but in the thickening dusk, he was just a shape.

Tommy's rolling pulled her skirt up, entangling his chain. He yanked impatiently, ripping the cloth. She froze. He nuzzled in the bend of her knee and licked her inner thigh, just above the knee.

Rearing back, he twisted her legs hard, his claws stabbing into her skin. She fought back, locking her legs together and jingling her wrist-leash frantically.

He snapped one garter and ripped the stocking down her leg, drawing a burning line with either his claw or the broken edge of the garter clip.

He licked the line, an obscene caress, and her last meal knotted in her throat.

"Don't show pain," Jack whispered. "He likes it. He'll want more."

The only way to get loose meant more pain. The thickness of Tommy's chain meant he could probably break hers. Only question was whether her arm would break first.

"Tommeeee, get this chain. Break my chain, so I can reach you."

He released her thighs and crouched in front of her, wheezing and scrubbing both hands over his face. That had to be Tommy, fighting to be a man and not a monster.

"Help me, Tommy. Please." She jingled her leash. "I want my arms around my Tommeeee. Tommeeee. *Tommeeee.*"

He looked at her, a moment of torment twisting his face. Then his features settled into the contours of an animal with simple wants: *Feed. Breed.*

He crawled slowly up her body, his stench choking her and his heavy, cold chain trailing shivers up her inner leg. She closed her eyes. Tommy tugged lightly at her chained arm.

"Yes, Tommy," she whispered, eyes still closed. "Please break it."

* * * * *

Her scream wrenched Jack's soul, brought his hunger roaring through him. The chains chewed at his wrists. If he surrendered to the hyde's strength, he could snap them. But then he would only be free to feed alongside Tommy. He fought down the metallic taste of the hunger.

Tommy threw Shy to the floor, their chains jangling together, and she screamed again. Pungent sex-smells fueled his hunger, while Shy's gasping, pain-wracked cries rode the rhythm -- too much like the sound of stomping in blood-filled boots. Tommy's ragged coat humped in and out of sight on the other side of the bed, thrusting wordless pleas from Shy's throat.

Jack closed his eyes. If by any miracle she dragged through this night alive, she'd live the nightmare of carrying a hyde's baby. An abomination.

"Tommyyy! Nooo!

If only she could be weak, could pass out like some dame in a bad movie. But no.

The smell of blood fed him.

Blood... Rich. Potent.

He recoiled, coughing, rejecting the seduction. Still, he burned with the need to free himself and eat. His chains were as light as hers, his bones stronger. If he could accept just a small measure of the hyde's power, he could snap free.

No! Once a man sipped at that bottle, he lost all choices. The bottle took over and drank the man.

The grunting and scrabbling sounds escalated. Shy shrieked again. "Tommy, *stop! It hurts!*"

"Don't fight," Jack warned automatically. "Fighting excites him." *Shut up, Jack!* If excited enough, Tommy would save her from knowing how much worse this night was going to get.

Shy sobbed, but the noises slowed and softened.

"Remarkable," said a man.

Can't be. Jack opened his eyes.

A powerfully built man crossed the twilight room with lupine grace, silently, and arranged the blackout curtains. Then he came as silently back to the center of the room, stepping around Shy and Tommy despite the darkness, and twitched the dangling light cord.

Tommy cried out, and Shy with him. Jack squinted from under his arm. "Uncle Michael!"

"Hello, Thomas. Or is it Jack?"

Jack's hopes fell like a pinched dick. The Guardian's stance, hands carelessly tucked in his pockets, said too much.

Tommy whined and pushed Shy to the wall. She made little broken noises and held her crooked left arm tight against her blood-marked sweater. Tommy leaned against her, as if shielding her from the Guardian.

From behind Tommy, she stared up at the Guardian, her face slack and sick. Like she knew him. Knew him and thought him the scariest monster that could possibly crawl out of the woodwork.

The Guardian of New York looked consideringly at her, nodded, and stepped out of Tommy's reach. Then he turned to Jack and took his hat off. "I'd guess you're Thomas, since Jack is supposed to be the stronger one. It took me three nights to break your brother. You're most of the way there already."

Tommy wouldn't have lasted ten minutes if Lorelei was getting torn up in front of him. He looked past the Guardian to her. She gestured urgently. *Keep him talking?*

Jack tried to stand, knowing he couldn't, but the movement might hold the Guardian's attention. He raised his voice. "*You* broke him? You and my grandfather are friends! He would trust you with anything in the world."

"Yes, but you see, we both trusted Mr. Wilson with our sons. Your grandfather's sons came home from Mr. Wilson's War, while my sons did not. Your grandfather's peculiar luck blinds him to the great evil going on Over There."

"Our soldiers are there to fight the evil."

Shy oozed out of Tommy's shadow and crawled, rapidly even with only one arm, toward the chairs. She cowered between them, tear-streaks shining golden on her face.

The Guardian threw her a glance and returned his thoughtful gaze to Jack. "No, son. Our soldiers there add to the evil, multiply it. You may be too young to understand, but war itself is the evil. Evil incarnate -- and the politicians who preach war are the very acolytes of evil. Nothing justifies the dead poets, the crippled farmers, the broken children. Nothing justifies starving mothers, babies in the road, burnt orchards and bankrupt families. And nothing justifies expanding this evil."

He paced, patently searching for words. "I regret it has to be you, son. I always loved the two of you. But with enough of you as hydes roaming the night, the lights will come back on. The government will have to see -- "

Shy knocked one of the chairs against the wall. Trying pitifully to crawl under it?

The Guardian took a step toward her. "What the devil?"

Twin explosions hit, like thunderclaps, and the Guardian fell like a puppet with his strings cut.

Tommy howled, grabbing a rag of Shy's skirt and yanking her toward him. She fell, screaming, and twisted to strike Tommy's face with a twisted pipe -- *with a gun!*

Tommy howled again. Shy's outstretched gun touched his forehead. She shot again. Tommy fell, a single black hole between his bulging eyes.

Lorie turned, sobbing, the gun shaking in her outstretched hand. "Jack? Jack..."

He looked past the black hole at the end of the pistol barrel, to her tear-streaked face. "If he could have talked, Shy-girl, he would have begged you to free him."

She staggered to the window, putting the gun under her bloody arm, and yanked the blackout curtains down from the wall.

Whistles sounded, distant in the deep twilight. The voices were too faint to make out, but he knew the words. "Lights out! Lights out everyone!"

She hammered the glass with the pistol butt. The pane shattered, and he had to hope no one on the street below was looking up. Leaning out, she yelled, "Come up here and *make* me cut them out!"

Cold air poured in, carrying faraway voices. "Lights out! There's a war on!"

She aimed the gun at the night sky and fired it. Then she dry-fired it.

Shoulders shaking, she turned to Jack. "There's no street under us. Just some ugly roof with gargoyles. Nobody can actually see me."

Sweat glistened on her skin. She shivered. He couldn't watch her die of shock. Not here, not now. "Come to me, sweet Lorelei. Come and let me warm you."

Dropping the gun, she came to him.

Knowing what she knew, she still came to him. When she could have breezed into the night, free of hydes and Huntsmen forever, she came to him.

How bad was her arm? He couldn't see, and couldn't ask her to show him because then she would see too, and that would worsen her shock. Her fingers looked like sausages. How much more damage was hidden under that bloody sweater?

"Tommy..."

"It wasn't him any more, Shy." He had to keep her talking. "How did you know this was the room your people had left guns in?"

"Isss eighth floor. See the building roof across the street? I 'member it. And the bed. The chairs. They stink of old blood. And the wires, remember? Only a couple these rooms have their 'lec-tric wires." Her voice slurred. "Shtands to reason, now you think on it...too close and ssomebody...would...hear..."

Her voice trailed off. He huddled around her, trying to warm her. She coughed, and moaned.

"Shh...don't cough."

"Don' wanna."

Footsteps pounded toward them in the hall, and something harder than a fist hammered the door. "Lights out! What the name of hell are youse doing in there?"

"Get the police!" he yelled. "Get an ambulance, too! Get them here now!"

More running footsteps approached. The door splintered, spraying wood shrapnel against the walls.

A big policeman hulked in the door. He took in the room in one stunned sweep, wheezing, and turned to shove someone else back from the doorway. "Go! Call this number! Tell Sergeant Donovan to get down here immediately. With a 'special ambulance.' Use those words, hear? Special ambulance."

The big copper wrestled the wreckage of the door mostly shut, then snatched the spread off the bed and used it to cover all of Tommy and most of the Guardian.

Special ambulance. Jack couldn't think of a good meaning.

The copper looked at him. "We been looking for one of your kind for a long time, buddy."

Uh oh. Jack swept all calculation from his face. "You need a Virginian, Officer? I don't understand."

"Too bad."

"That thing -- is it dead? Really dead?"

The policeman nudged the bump of blanket covering Tommy's foot. "Yah, buddy, it's really dead. So's the suit. Who shot them?"

Jack lowered his IQ another notch, stretching his accent to match. "My girl. The suit had the thing as a pet, and was going to feed us to it. They hurt my girl awful bad."

The copper squatted by Shy's shoulder and lifted what was left of her chignon. The smell of blood thickened in the air. Jack gagged and Shy whimpered, pressing her face to his filthy shirt.

"Yah, they did," the policeman said quietly. "Where did she get the gun?"

How much would the police expect an ignorant victim notice? How little could he say, without raising suspicions?

"The gun was under the chair. While she was laying on the floor, she kept staring at the chair. I guess she saw something. When the man in the suit ordered the thing back, she crawled straight to the chair, pulled out the gun, and shot them both. Can you get the blanket for her, please? She's cold."

As if on cue, she coughed, a painful, ringing cough. *Don't let her have pneumonia.* She'd been well away from the gas. She had to have been. It was this cold air she'd been out in. His fault. She whimpered.

The policeman tucked the blanket about them both, as tenderly as any father with a pair of six-year-olds. Not covering Shy's face took some arranging, but he did it. Then he pulled a small notepad and a pencil stub from his pockets and began the questioning. "Is your girl a southerner, like you?"

Chapter Nineteen

Jack paced the emergency room. Haggard and huddled survivors of other tragedies watched him, and watched the burly policeman who leaned against the wall to watch him. He'd been told bluntly that the policeman would subdue him if he raved about anything crazy. If they'd been able to clear a waiting room for him, they'd probably have done that instead.

Someone needs to know where I am before they decide to stow me out of sight forever.

He stopped at the desk, where a sleepy, oatmeal-faced woman guarded a telephone. "I need to call home."

"Inside the borough?"

"Virginia. I can call collect."

"No long distance calls."

He eyed the policeman, who was flirting with a plump nurse, and pulled a ten-dollar bill from his wallet. He wrote quickly on it. "Here's my grandfather's number. Can you call him as soon as you get home? Please? Or even send him a telegram as soon as the office opens in the morning. Tell him Jack's okay, and tell him I'm here with my girl, Miss Gale. Can you do that?"

The sawbuck vanished. A stage magician couldn't have a slicker move.

"Mr. French?"

He whirled. Near the far door stood a bent old man in a floor-length, red-piped, black robe. The old man beckoned with one gnarled hand. "Please, son. Come this way."

"I'm Jack French. Have you seen my girl, Reverend? Is she -- "

"Would you do me the kindness of coming to the other room, son?"

Cold hands fingered his insides. "You can't say she's dead. She wasn't dying."

“This way, my son.” The priest turned and passed through the door, not waiting for him to react.

He followed, increasingly alert as the priest sped up to remain ahead. They passed an odd assortment of turns and entered a section so empty their steps echoed. They passed through a doorway guarded by a police officer, and the priest picked up his step even more, rushing past a long white desk and through the far door, and slamming it behind him.

Jack stopped, not bothering to turn as the copper slammed another door at his back. The whole scene felt unnecessarily dramatic, for a lockup. He examined the room. Strong. Secure. Definitely a cell.

For once, everything was completely out of his hands. He took a deeper breath than he'd been able to manage in days, and reached up to give the light-bulb a quarter turn.

There, nice and dark. And the desk was long enough to sleep on. He needed sleep, more than he needed pacing or fuming. *If Granddaddy gets the call, he'll come with Judge Hanlon and lawyers aplenty. If he doesn't, I'll think better with some sleep behind me.*

Two weeks later, Jack stooped to look through the peephole into Shy's hospital room. She lay under a white sheet, in a white bed, in a relentlessly white room, staring at airplane silhouettes taped to the ceiling. An evil-looking arrangement of wires and counter-weights lifted a plaster-and-pipework-encased monstrosity of an arm. Someone had gotten mighty creative to immobilize the arm and wrist, while leaving the wrist open to the air.

She still had the arm. They hadn't amputated it. The wounds hadn't gone septic.

She was alive. He should go, now, before she saw him and screamed. He should let her wonder if their week together had been some fever-dream. A phantasm from the overly fertile imagination of a girl who listened to the radio too much and who had been inexplicably attacked.

He should go. But his hand pushed the door open.

Her dark hair had been cut short. She looked pale, and thin, and unhappy.

He should go, and leave her in peace. As much peace as she could find in her life.

Her vivid eyes looked incuriously toward him, and went wide. Her lips went blue.

That look of terror said everything. To her, he was a nightmare.

She lifted her chin and closed her eyes. “Make it quick, please. And I want you to know -- I haven't told anyone.”

“What?”

“I told ever'body I was on my way home from Brooklyn, and then I woke up here. I told them I don't remember nothing else. I think by now they believe it.”

He drew closer. Her free hand fisted in the white sheets. Beside it, tucked partly under the mattress, a broad leather belt-like strap lay ready to secure any recalcitrant patient. Her wrist showed no sign of chafing under a strap. "They" believed her, to some extent.

"I didn't tell nobody!"

"Hush, I believe you."

She looked up at him. "Why? I mean -- good. I wanted you to know that. I also wanted you to know -- I'm so sorry about Tommy."

Sudden tears scalded his eyes. He blinked them back. Shy didn't like a man crying. But tears welled in her eyes. If she cried, he could share the release.

She touched the new scar on his chin. "Is there... could there have been any chance? Could he have recovered, gone back to being Tommy?"

"No. What the hyde takes out of a man's soul, the man never gets back. What the hyde gives a man's body can't be given up, not fully, no matter how much what's left of the man might want to be just human again."

"Just human again?"

"Hydes can change shape on the hunt -- partly, we think, to intensify the emotions they feed on. When they go back to a human shape afterward, it's never quite as human. They remain stronger; their ears and noses remain sharper. Their hungers increasingly rule them, until hunger is all that's left. When you see a hyde at rest, you're seeing the most human creature he can ever be."

"Are their babies human?"

A hyde's baby is an abomination. "Are you pregnant?"

She stared.

"No games, Lorelei. Are you?"

She closed her eyes. "I'm not. I wasn't sure whether to hope I was, whether I could keep something of Tommy and of you, whether you would let me live long enough to..."

He reached out to comfort her, but her eyes flew open, and he hesitated, searching her face.

Her tears spilled. "You can't abide to touch me, can you? Because I killed Tommy. And because you can't trust me not to talk, because I know, you have to get rid of me."

She flinched when he dropped his weight on the edge of her bed.

"Shy-girl, I asked you to trust me when I lied to you. Now you know the lies and the truth." He took a breath. "I want to marry you."

Her brow creased. "What kind of sense does that make? I'm ordinary. You want your own kind, don't you?"

"I want you. My kind doesn't have daughters -- only sons. But even if we had women of our own kind, I would want you. I want to hear you answer to my name. I want to go to

bed with you beside me and wake up with you still there. I want your arms around me and mine around you when the world is too terrible to bear. Will you have me?"

She traced the new scar on his chin. "I want you by me."

Relief washed through him, scalding away his fear and leaving him light-headed. He took a breath before the warning. "There's a couple of things you need to know."

She tilted her head. "Can't be too bad, or you wouldn't look so chipper."

"It's only bad if you get nervous around lots of children -- the boys are always born in pairs, and we'll need to adopt at least one girl for each pair so we'll be welcome at the gatherings of the families. Means if you get pregnant just twice, you're looking at six young'uns, and a third go-round gets you nine. Might also be bad if you've decided you hate living in New York. We have a suite on the fourth floor of the Grammaree now, with a working elevator and maid service every day. Did you ever think you would own a hotel? It needs a sight of fixing up, but what young married couple doesn't have a few challenges?" He was babbling. He stopped, and waited for her to say something.

She chewed her bottom lip. He touched it to make her stop before she made it too sore to kiss.

"I thought you were ready to change over, like Tommy did. You got better?"

"I didn't cross the line."

"How often can you get that close, without tripping and falling to t'other side?"

"It depends." *Don't refuse me, Lorelei. Don't refuse me. I need you.*

"Do you mean that someday you will cross over?"

"Maybe."

She pouted. "Next question I ask, you won't answer at all."

He sighed "I'm sorry. I can't change who I am. I can tell you that as we get older, holding the line gets easier. A nineteen-year-old crosses much more readily than a twenty-nine-year-old, and a man past forty who hasn't crossed probably isn't going to."

"Your uncle was the Guardian? And now you are?"

"Yes." He'd spent the week since his own release scouring the streets for prostitutes not owned by the Mad Hatter, linking the most promising of them with the surviving huntsmen, assigning them all to clean and repair the top floors of the Grammaree. Doing what Uncle Michael would have done, had he not been calling in huntsmen simply to betray them. He'd also met Fio LaGuardia, who'd got him a direct telephone line to the Office of Civilian Defense, which had finally divulged Lorelei's whereabouts.

"So the city needs a guardian? Like a child needs a parent?"

"Exactly, although I never heard it put just that way." *What are you thinking?*

"Parents work better in pairs. I hope you know that."

He gathered her in, careful of her arm. She weighed too little, and she smelled wrong. “Let’s get you released from here. You need the right food.”

“What I need is some fresh air and some good, strong loving.”

“If you like the smell of fresh snow, I can arrange the air. The loving...well, maybe.”

“You don’t intend to frustrate me, do you?” Her grin summoned his.

Only for a few minutes at a time, Shy-my-girl. Only enough to make it taste better when it comes.

 THE END 

Amber Green

LIGHTS OUT! is my first Loose-Id release. Being a bespectacled were-grammarian as well as a professional paper-pusher, I submerge myself in fiction in an attempt to find high adventure (as opposed to anything involving actual expenditure of sweat), lots of nookie, or sometimes just a reality that makes sense. Really. Visit me at www.ShapeshiftersInLust.com or at the Romantic Times Booklovers Convention!