



# L U R E

Carolina  
Valdez

## LURE

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“Woohoo!” said another.

A wolf whistle sounded as her music began.

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ALSO BY CAROLINA VALDEZ

*Dark Stranger*  
*In Passion's Thrall*  
*Knight of the Captive Heart*  
*Silk Stealth*  
*Sweet Chocolate Ecstasy*  
*Where Vesuvius Sleeps*

# LURE

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BY

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LURE  
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*To those who risk their lives  
in the war on drugs and illegal weapons sales,  
knowing they're losing the war.*

# CHAPTER 1

Night had closed in when Karin approached the back entrance to Pinky's. Even here a neon light sputtered "Exotic Dancing Inside." She found herself moving with reluctance toward the door. She was tired, and this wasn't an assignment she relished.

"Miz Campbell," the man outside the door acknowledged. He was skyscraper height and menacingly dark, his hair braided in neat corn rows.

She hesitated, then reminded herself she'd have to react sooner to the name she went by here.

"Joe." She returned his nod as she opened the door. It was metal and heavy, but, as usual, Joe didn't help her. He wasn't your ordinary doorman; he was a bouncer. Once the girls were all inside and the door was locked, he moved to other duties inside the club. In the early morning, as they exited for the parking lot, he'd be stationed at this exit once more.

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The door clanged shut behind her and the sounds of the club filtered through to her—glasses clinking, canned music, and, above it all, the low-pitched voices of men mingled with those of a few women. Once she was in the shoestring-width hallway, Karin tightened her nostrils against the smell of mildew and stale cigarette smoke in the old building.

*This place is such a dive. Joe's manners don't extend to opening the door for the dancers. It figures.*

She'd have to run his name to see if he had a rap sheet. It was that kind of a club.

Entering the room where the girls changed into dance attire, she breathed a little easier as the mingled scents of makeup, perfume, nail polish and hair spray gradually overwhelmed the mustiness. In the company of women, she thought. With a few exceptions, she liked being female. Always had.

"Hi, Marla," Dana greeted Karin.

I'm Marla Campbell, Karin reminded herself. Get used to it. She sighed. It'd been difficult enough to shed her last undercover name. Getting used to a new one was happening too soon for her brain to handle.

Dana's platinum blonde hair was in curlers. She was already in her costume—a sequined thong with a bit of a sheer skirt over it, and a brief top that barely covered the peach-colored areolas of her enormous tits. She had one foot up on a stool and was bent over, intent on polishing her toenails. Her shoes were silver and rhinestone with Lucite stiletto heels at the end of long, gorgeous legs.

Lettie, the youngest woman, who had an Asian tilt to her eyes and danced as Little Bo Peep, was trying to appear as if she wasn't ogling Dana. It was pretty obvious to Karin she had a crush on the big blonde.

Karin swatted Dana on her behind. "Move over, kiddo. Can't get by that big butt of yours to my locker."

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“That’s no butt, that thay-uh’s one fine, hot ah-yuss.” Maryanne mimicked a southern drawl while standing in front of the mirror, a hunk of red hair wrapped around a curling iron the circumference of Karin’s hand. She didn’t go on until later and was still dressed in torn jeans and a crop top.

Karin thought of Maryanne’s costume as “skimpy Scarlett O’Hara.” The interesting thing about the woman was the tattoo of Scarlett on her upper arm. When she flexed her bicep, Scarlett winked and pointed toward her crotch. Karin had had to keep the disgust from her face when she first saw it. Now she removed her jacket and twirled the combination lock on her locker.

Lettie was dressed in a French-cut leotard. Sitting on a bench, legs in frog position, she examined her inner thighs. “Do you think I need bikini waxing again?” She asked this as she slid her fingers over the sensitive skin with seductive slowness. Karin thought Lettie was watching Dana out of the corner of her eye.

Karin shook her head as she hung her jacket on a hook in the locker. If Lettie thought to attract Dana’s attention, it wasn’t working. Dana never showed the least bit of interest in her.

Removing her costume from her locker, Karin stripped to the waist and put on a black leather bra. Bending over, she shook the bra so the fullest part of her breasts settled in. The bra pushed them together, creating deep cleavage. Stripping from the waist down, she was just stepping into a black lace thong when Dana spoke.

“You’d better do something with the bush over that pussy of yours, hon. Your bikini wax is good, but you don’t want the middle part of your hair slipping out while you’re dancing. It’s not professional. When I danced in Vegas, they taught us to twist it and tuck it between our lips down there. If you don’t want to trim it, try that.”

Karin tried to keep a smile off her face. Dana had probably read that in a magazine. She’d seen Dana dance and doubted she’d ever danced

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in Las Vegas, unless it was off the strip in a crummy place like this one. And “professional?” The light outside might advertise exotic dancing, but these women were just plain pole dancers.

Still, it wasn’t a bad suggestion. Karin reached to try it, but Lettie was eyeing her too closely, so she stepped into the bathroom to finish dressing. One thing she didn’t want was for the girl to start getting ideas about her. The twist of hair felt erotic between her labia, and she reminded herself that, despite the winking sign outside, they were expected to be erotic dancers.

That she wasn’t too good at it crossed her mind, and it wasn’t the first time.

Over her thong went a leather skirt short enough to give teasing exposure of her butt cheeks when she danced. She pulled on knee-high, leather boots with three-inch heels.

Next came upper arm bracelets in leather studded with nails. She released her pony tail and went to work with a curling iron on the dark lengths of her hair. After adding a headband that matched the bracelets, she arranged some of the soft curls over her shoulders in front and arranged shorter curls around her headband and face.

Now she put on make up and heavy red lipstick. Studying herself in the mirror, she told herself the only thing she didn’t feel were phony about her in this get-up were her eyelashes. Long and curly, thick mascara was all they needed.

Stuffing her street clothes into her bag, she picked up a soft leather flail with knotted ends and left the bathroom.

Despite the earlier banter, in the two weeks Karin had worked here she’d come to sense an undercurrent of tension among the girls. A perfectly natural thing, she thought, because one of them, Natalia Holden, had been brutally murdered, her battered body left on the cracked asphalt of the back parking lot. It had happened over a weekend, probably early Monday morning. The club was closed on

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Mondays, and she hadn't been found until Tuesday afternoon, when Tony, the tough, older man who was the owner's right hand man as well as the club manager, had arrived to open up.

Karin was the second woman hired to take over the role of dominatrix since the death. The first new hire learned of Natalia's murder and quit after a week. That opened up a place for Karin.

Dana stood up to leave for her first performance, and, as she approached the door, she turned to Karin. "Another thing, hon. You're one sexy, gorgeous hunk of woman, but if you want to stay here, you gotta loosen up. Flaunt your sex out there. You're supposed to be fucking that damn pole, not just doing poses around it."

Karin felt her cheeks flush. She'd told Anderson Lyle, the ATF agent who was her superior officer, that she'd never done this before. The agency had provided a half-assed crash course, mostly movies with a few seconds of an actress playing a role, but now even these women, who had so little going for them in their lives, had noticed how inept she was.

She forced a laugh. "Give me time, Dana. I haven't been at this as long as you have."

Lettie giggled as Dana left. She giggled too much, Karin thought. She wondered if the girl was using meth.

Maryanne said, "Before you go onstage, select some guy out there to seduce. When you get to the pole, pretend it's him. That's what I did when I was new at this."

"One thing, though," Lettie said. "If Darryl ever asks you to dance for him...private like, you know...do it. But don't ever do him. He don't like that. He doesn't seduce us, he just..."

"Hush, Lettie. That's enough." Maryanne frowned at Miss Little Bo Beep.

Karin knew Darryl Latimore because he owned Pinky's. He'd hired her. She could still feel his disinterested gaze when she'd auditioned.

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She knew she'd been a bit of a disaster, so why she'd been hired was a mystery to her. Maybe it was the costume. Maybe he and the previous dancer had had something going, and his disinterest was the result of hidden grief. Maybe he felt responsible because she'd been attacked behind the club. And, then again, just maybe the ATF informant had convinced him to hire Karin.

She sighed again. She had to improve—and fast—because she needed to be here. The other female undercover agent was working a job out in the valley, so Karin had been the only one free for this assignment. She'd just returned from working under for a year in Florida, and there was little chance anyone would make her here in South Pasadena, but she was tired. And so far she wasn't feeling successful as a dancer.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Dana returned, waving some bills in her hand and smiling. After a time, Maryanne went out the door and down the hall to the entrance to the dance area.

A slit in the curtain through which the dancers entered allowed Karin to study the audience. The circular entertainment area was lower than the rest of the club, and although anyone in the club could see the performers, there was a single row of chairs along the wall in the well of the dance area. Velvet curtains on the walls added to the feeling of intimacy for those seated there. It also created a kind of faux privacy for customers who didn't want others to know their secret fantasies. In the center was a dais with the pole, and, in Karin's opinion, it was too close to the customers. She had to walk through an opening in the wall and step up onto the dais. Great time for them to get a look at what her thigh exposed despite the skirt.

She had a good view of the bar. Just before it was her turn to dance, a man came in and slid onto a stool, half turning toward the dance area. He was NFL linebacker size, but he looked to be an easy-breezy guy, Karin thought. There was something about the way he moved, as if he

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knew he possessed a latent power, that caused a fluttering in her chest. As he reached for a beer, his chest muscles could be seen rippling even under the loose T-shirt he wore. The shirt looked like it'd seen many washings. A five o'clock shadow, scruffy haircut, and faded, loose jeans completed his look. Dropping one leg off the stool as he turned to watch the dancing revealed a significant bulge in his groin area.

A man's man and, most definitely, a woman's man. Something stirred deep in her center.

Now there was someone she could dance for.

Her name was announced, and, making an impulsive decision, Karin smiled and stepped through the curtains. With a vision of the man in mind, she mounted the platform with a tantalizing flash of thigh and butt. Then, legs spread in a stance of power, she stood, hands on her hips. Flicking her whip, she rocked her hips, then lifted the back of her hair and let it sift through her hands as she peered down at the watchers with a come-hither-kneel-before-me look.

"Come to Daddy, baby, come to Daddy," one of the men in the inner circle called.

"Woohoo!" said another.

A wolf whistle sounded as her music began.

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\* \* \*

The man, Angelo Santini, watched her from the bar through hooded eyes. She was some woman—long legs, breasts to die for, and the promise of wild pleasure peeking out from under a skirt that covered just enough and not enough. He felt his body responding inappropriately or, rather, appropriately, he thought with a half smile.

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He sipped his beer and turned his thoughts to his assignment instead. He was here as her backup, not to seduce her. Or be seduced, he thought with a chuckle as he saw her slap her flail.

They hadn't met, yet he could swear she was looking at him, dancing for him. It was uncanny. Looking right at me, he thought, watching her lazily running her hands down her hips and up her inner thighs, stopping just short of her skirt, then, crossing her hands over her breasts, she rocked her derrière in circles as she moved around the pole.

She caressed the pole, pretending to run her tongue over it, gliding a hand up and down it as if she were playing with a man's cock. Then she grabbed it with one hand as she leaned out to swing around it, her breasts pressing against her bra, their fullness enlarged and emphasized by the movement. She flicked her flail in a come-to-me, be-submissive-to-me gesture.

He could have sworn she meant it for him. Did she know who he was? Couldn't be. He'd barely arrived from Seattle for this assignment, and they hadn't even been introduced.

She continued to tease and tantalize with her body and then she moved in to pretend to rub her clit against the pole while she faked an orgasm. Damn, but she was good. Three notches above the other women. Despite his best efforts to tear his thoughts away from sex, he was almost losing it in his pants.

The music concluded to cheers and claps. Money flooded the dais and, as she knelt to pick it up, a man slid a folded bill into her cleavage. Her hand flew to cover her breasts. Another man tried to insert money down her skirt and into her thong.

Anger flickered through Angelo as he automatically slipped from the stool, poised to go to her. Two bouncers materialized and pulled the man back. The other men in the dance area booed and jeered at this action, but they were friendly boos and jeers. They'd ached to do the same thing.

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Still, Angelo thought she'd frozen in that moment, face white. He sensed a man had physically hurt this woman at some point in her life, and the urge to comfort her, to draw her away from harm hit him like high tide against a sea wall.

\* \* \*

Back in the changing room, Karin stuffed the money into the bag in her locker with hands that shook.

Dana handed her a beer. "Judging from the applause, I'd say you did good tonight."

"Thanks." The beer was cold and wet, and it felt good going down her dry throat. "Took your suggestion about the bush. I thought I was really going to climax out there."

Dana threw her head back and laughed. "I'd forgotten about that part of it. It was a tip I got from a Vegas show girl, and they told me the same thing."

Karin nodded. She didn't mention Maryanne's suggestion. That one she was holding close to her chest. Whether or not she could manage what she'd just done if the man didn't return was something she didn't want to think about. As she left the club with the other women, she had a crazy hope he'd be there to greet her, the loose jeans hiding the bulk in his crotch that promised so much to a woman, to ask her out or something. But there was only the ever-present Joe under the blinking sign.

Don't be ridiculous. There are lots of good-looking men in the world. Your ex was good-looking, and look how that turned out.

*Besides, fraternizing with the guests outside the club's absolutely and totally forbidden. Obviously, they didn't give you enough rest after the Florida job. You need sleep.*

\* \* \*

Angelo waited in his car until she'd pulled out of the lot, then he

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tailed her to the shabby apartment the agency had rented as part of her cover. When the lights went on, he knew she was inside. He could have left then, but he waited until the lights went out. Only then did he park and enter his own apartment in the same building.

In bed, he lay in the dark staring at the ceiling, head resting on his crossed arms. He was going to have to be careful around her. She was just too enticing. And his crotch had felt too damn good when it had reacted to her dancing.

\* \* \*

Anderson Lyle was tall and slender. His dark blonde hair had a touch of silver at the temples, although Karin knew he was much too young for it. He was dressed in a dark blue suit with a red tie—the uniform of leadership in any covert government agency. He was smart, and comfortable with command. “Karin Woodhall meet Angelo Santini, your backup,” he said.

Karin and Anderson had been studying photos of the dead girl. She looked around at the man who’d just entered the room, and her heart thudded in her chest. *My Lord, it’s the guy from the bar.* The same guy with the TV heartthrob haircut, long sleeve, rust-colored shirt and faded jeans.

She stopped her gaze from dropping to his crotch and the fullness hidden there. Instead, she extended her hand, face straight. “Agent Santini.”

His grip was firm, but not too firm. Without arrogance or the need to impress, she thought. His hands were big and warm, just the right temperature to stroke a woman, and he smelled of a musky aftershave. Up close he was just as scruffy as he’d been the night before, his sandy hair still casual, and the shadow of a beard across his jaw line. The sense of power was still there, too, relaxed and casual. She was even more aware of it than she’d been at distance. It was both reassuring and intimidating.

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So this scrumptious, easy-breezy guy was her backup, was he? It should be interesting. Especially since he aroused all her senses.

“My pleasure, Agent Woodhall.” His smile was pleasant but impersonal.

The tingling that began as they shook hands was going to complicate things. Her cheeks grew hot as she remembered dancing for him the previous night, doing things her mama had taught her no real lady would ever do, and to cover her embarrassment she turned abruptly back to the pictures spread out on the table in front of her.

The victim was on her side, curled in the fetal position, hands over her head as if to ward off the final blows that took her life. Sadness swept over Karin. Usually she could look at violent deaths like this with detachment, but the way Natalia Holden had curled up, hands protecting her head, unnerved her.

“We’ve been looking at these,” she said. “She has an unbelievable amount of bruising and bleeding. I’d guess the perp broke her nose first because she bled down her front. The pain must have stunned her, stopped her from running or fighting back because there are no defense wounds. All this bruising...I’d say she was beaten pretty bad before she died.”

“A lot of bleeding from the rape, too. I agree this all happened before her heart stopped pumping blood or we wouldn’t see bruises or blood. Poor woman. I hope she was unconscious most of the time,” Anderson said.

Santini leaned closer to Karen while studying the shots. Radiant heat from him infused her. An urge to wash away the horror of the pictures by touching him, by feeling his solid body next to hers, to make sure this hunk of a man was real, rolled through her. She tamped it down, grateful he couldn’t read her thoughts. Shifting slightly, she moved away from him, away from temptation.

They studied the pictures in silence. “The blood pattern indicates

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the attack definitely occurred in the parking lot.” Anderson tapped one of the shots.

“No disagreement over that,” Santini said. “The question’s who and why.”

Karin leaned closer, using a magnifying glass. She straightened. “Bikers.”

“What?” Santini again.

“Bikers were involved. I see the marks from their boots.”

“There aren’t any boot marks, and we haven’t seen any bikers connected with the weapons we think are being sold out of Pinky’s. Bikers don’t hang at Pinky’s. Actually, it’s a little too upscale for them.” There was a note of dismissal in Santini’s voice.

She stiffened against the lack of regard for what she knew. “You ever ridden?”

“Yeah, I’ve ridden motorcycle patrol probably just like you. You ever ride patrol, Anderson?”

Anderson gave a light laugh. “What patrol officer hasn’t? Seems to me, you and I once rode together for the Jersey PD.”

“What were your boots? Standard issue, I assume.” She lauded herself for her even tone, although annoyance was spreading through her.

Both men nodded.

“If you’d ever worked under with bikers you’d know they have special tips put on their boots to stomp people. Sometimes they stomp to teach a lesson, sometimes just for the hell of it, and sometimes deliberately. To kill.”

Angelo took the magnifying glass out of her hand and studied the body again. Then he handed it to Anderson who did the same. “You see the marks, Anderson?”

With a sigh, Anderson shook his head.

Angelo tossed the glass onto the table. “Neither do I. Let’s forget

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that possibility and move on.”

Karin shut her mouth against a sharp retort. The girl had been kicked after she'd died, so there wasn't any bruising, just indentations, but Karin recognized the telltale marks. A small flame of irritation sparked inside her at how her observations had been dismissed.

She couldn't stop the small sigh that escaped her lips. Being discounted wasn't new to her. Jeff, her former husband, had been a past master at it. Now she wasn't sure if she was up against an old boys' network or just two men who honestly didn't see what she knew to be there.

It would pay to calm down. Santini wasn't her boss or her partner, and he might be her backup, but he didn't know her. Plus, he lacked the experience with motorcycle gangs she'd had in Florida.

Anderson's lack of regard for her observation disappointed her, because he did know her. Or at least he had, but she'd been out of his jurisdiction for a year while working under in Florida, and it was obvious neither he nor Santini had ever infiltrated a biker gang.

“I know biker kick marks when I see them. Doesn't mean there's any connection with the gun sales. Might've been personal. Might've been the whim of a drunk motorcycle ganger high on meth or coke. She had to have been dead when she was kicked. Like Anderson said, her heart wasn't pumping blood anymore, so that's why you don't see bruising there.” Karin shrugged.

She let the subject drop because of something she'd learned as a teenager. Her dad had been overcharged for a purchase, and her mom had expected him to challenge the person.

“It isn't right, John. He's taken advantage of you. Why don't you do something about it?”

Her dad had put an arm around her mom's shoulders and drawn her against his side. “No sense in draining energy on something this small, Ellie. A person needs to choose their battles, and this isn't my hill to

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die on.”

She remembered her mother’s laughter as she’d agreed with her husband.

This business of the boot marks wasn’t her hill to die on either, Karin decided. If motorcycle gang bangers were involved in the weapons sales, it would come out in time. Still, she couldn’t totally wash away the irritation she felt with both men. But she refused to worry about earning their respect because it would take energy she needed to funnel into the investigation.

“What’s up with you in your role as Marla Campbell?” Anderson asked as he slipped the photos into a folder.

“Although they haven’t mentioned it to me yet, I think the girls are nervous because of the death. Joe, one of the bouncers, is always in the parking lot when we leave. I tell you, he’s tall and mean looking enough to scare anyone away. Also, Lettie told me Darryl sometimes asks a girl to dance for him in private.”

“That’s too dangerous!”

This outburst from Santini surprised her. “Apparently he doesn’t touch them, and it may give me an opening. He seems in low spirits, and I’m wondering if he’s grieving for Natalia.”

Anderson scoffed. “Maybe he’s suffering guilt pangs. As far as we can tell, the bouncer wasn’t at the back door when she left that night. If you ever leave alone and he isn’t there, I want you to call Angelo and stay inside the building until you know he’s watching your back.”

Angelo nodded in agreement.

“Okay,” she responded.

“And if you dance for Latimore,” Anderson continued, “keep your eyes open. You know what to do.”

So she knew what to do, did she? She didn’t recognize boot marks, but she knew what to do? That left a bit of a sour taste to her mouth, but all she did was nod. Let it go, Karin. Let it go. She took a deep

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breath and slowly released it.

“You and Angelo, go have lunch together. Get acquainted.”

She choked at the thought. Maybe he turned her on, but his attitude about the boot marks made her unsure how she felt about this hot hunk of a man now. Thinking fast, she muttered, “I...I have other things I need to do.”

Anderson looked her in the eyes. “That’s an order. I didn’t have anyone who knew you available to be your watch dog. Wished I’d had one, but I didn’t. You’ve got to get acquainted or you can’t work together effectively. And you know what that could mean.”

Yeah, she knew. It meant one of them, or both, could get hurt. Or killed.

\* \* \*

“Stay in the building. Eat in the cafeteria, okay?” Anderson said, softening his order with the “okay.”

Angelo didn’t hear him. At the moment he’d dropped all thoughts of the investigation and was absorbed in studying Karin’s left ear. The glorious fall of black hair from the night before had been tamed into a pony tail this morning, exposing a perfectly shaped, pink shell of an ear on his side. It had three earrings holes in it. A large, gold hoop had been hooked through the bottom one, and the next one up sported a small, turquoise and silver star. The third was empty.

With her dark hair and eyes, the gold hoops gave Karin a Romany look, even though she was dressed in a plain white blouse, jeans and boots, and her ATF badge hung from a cord around her neck. He knew if he ran his fingers over her ears, his hands would feel hot and sexy to her. In contrast, his tongue brushing over it and slipping into her ear canal would be moist and hot. If she liked him—and he’d sensed from the first moment she’d danced that she did—it would trigger dampness between her thighs.

“Santini! Get your mind back here.” It was Anderson.

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“Sorry. We’re eating in the cafeteria, are we?” He turned his nicest smile toward Karin.

Her annoyance hit him as strongly as her stance had last night when she’d first stepped up on the dais. What the hell have I done? Maybe she hadn’t danced for him after all. Of course, she hadn’t known then he was her back up. He shrugged. In time he’d find out what grievous error he’d committed. That’s the way it was with women; they’d hold it all in and then when it had welled up bigger than life, they’d spew it all out.

For now, he opened the door for her and followed her into the hall as she strode ahead of him, one confident woman. Any female who worked ATF had to be confident or they weren’t accepted into the ranks. Anyone, male or female, who lacked confidence or the ability to make good snap decisions didn’t last in this profession.

He watched as she ordered a small steak medium well, and added a baked potato wrapped in foil and three patties of real butter to the plate on her tray. When she reached for a tossed salad, fruit, and a slice of thick, dark bread, he noticed her nails were clipped short; it was too easy to fire a weapon accidentally with long nails. Her whole appearance was of someone neat, clean and in control. This was in contrast to the wild, Romany look those hoop earrings gave her, he thought with a smile.

Anderson didn’t know, as he did, the erotic woman who’d danced at Pinky’s. Now there was someone not in control. Then he remembered the flick of her flail and that kneel-to-me look, and thought maybe he’d been wrong about the control thing. He smiled again.

When they were seated, he noticed a light circle on the skin of her ring finger. Had it been removed because she was working under, or was she divorced or widowed? It suddenly seemed very important that he know whether or not she was a free woman.

“So,” Karin said as she cut up her steak with smooth, deft strokes,

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"tell me about yourself. Been an agent long?"

"Probably about as long as you have," he said. "But I just transferred here from the Seattle office."

She nodded. "The weather's certainly beastly there I hear. Married?"

"Not now," he said, letting the comment about leaving because of the weather slide, happy she'd asked the question because now he could ask it of her. "And you?"

"Nope. We split."

"He couldn't take being married to someone in law enforcement? That's the way it was for me. Two years and she left. Now she's married to a dentist. Regular hours, no danger, and about the same income."

She didn't answer immediately, and he thought a shadow flitted across her face before she did. "Nah, it wasn't like that for me. We married too young and just didn't fit each other. Know what I mean? It happened long before I went under in Florida."

"Unfortunately, I do know." He smiled at her, but during the entire conversation she hadn't looked at him. She'd just concentrated on her food. He'd bet money she wasn't telling him the whole story. "Splitting up's painful, no matter how sensible the reason."

She stopped eating and looked at him, her eyes serious and thoughtful. They were beautiful eyes, large and dark. A guy could get lost in them, he thought, as something in his chest responded to her. He liked the feeling.

"Yeah, it does hurt," she said.

He sensed she drew back then, as if she'd shared something a little too personal, for she said, "Tell me what you know about the case we're on," and resumed eating.

"Informants tell us Latimore may be selling guns either out of the club or his home. It's possible the murdered dancer from Pinky's

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stumbled onto something, but it's the second murder of a dancer within a mile radius of that club in six months. We're not sure there's any connection between the weapons and their deaths."

"Natalia," Karen said.

He looked into a face as fierce as that of any Gulf War warrior he'd fought beside in that conflict.

"Excuse me?"

"She's not 'the murdered dancer.' Her name was Natalia."

He sat back and returned her gaze. This time he knew what he'd done to anger her. "That was pretty crass of me, wasn't it? I'm sorry. I didn't meant to rob her of any more dignity than has already been stolen from her."

Karen's face softened. "It's okay. It's easier when we take away their identity and detach from the horror. But there was something about the position of her body—her hands protecting her head, her body curled up to ward off the blows. It got to me."

Her words got to him, but he wasn't sure why. They sat in silence for a moment before he continued. "The ATF powers-that-be came up with the idea of sending in a lure to draw in the killer of Natalia and the other dancer, as well as to uncover evidence to convict the gun runner. That job opening was perfect for them to send you in."

Karin nodded.

Her casual acceptance of this triggered a response in him he hadn't expected. She was denying the danger this put her in, and a picture of his former partner dying before his eyes flashed in his brain. He leaned back in his chair. "Look, I'm gonna be frank. I fought against the lure thing. I don't want you or any other female agent dancing there. Being used as bait for a possible serial killer's dangerous enough, even for an experienced agent, but sending you under to get the weapons evidence triples, not doubles, the danger."

"You don't think I can take care of myself." It was a statement, not

## *LURE*

a question, spoken in a tone as hard and as volatile as stone striking flint.

Exasperated, he put down his fork. "Why in hell do you think you've been assigned a backup?"

"Anderson thinks I can't take care of myself?" The edge in her voice didn't yield.

"Oh, for Chris'sakes, you know how it works. No one goes under without back up. It's too dangerous even for a man."

The tightening of her jaw and the reddening of her face warned him she was battling to hold back a retort.

"Oh, hell, I've put my foot in my mouth again. Forget it. Let's talk about something else. Think it's gonna rain today?"

He watched as Karin struggled with her feelings. Then she surprised him by laughing. Her laughter swelled until she had to push her chair back from the table and bend over.

It was catching. Angelo laughed, too. Soon they were reaching for their napkins to wipe the tears away. "Truce?" he said when he could catch his breath.

Nodding, she extended her hand.

He shook it, wanting instead to press his lips to the back of it and then to kiss the warm and sensitive palm. With regret, he released it.

They talked more easily now about their experiences, skirting touchy issues, sharing their police academy and police experiences as they'd worked their way to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. When they talked about their marriages, Angelo again had the feeling she was holding something back, but by the time they'd finished eating, he felt they'd established at least a tentative trust and were ready to pair up as agents.

He followed her to the tech lab, where they provided her with a recording device that would fit in her boots.

"Anderson's set up a complete cover for me. The death of a non-

## *LURE*

existent father, high school and community college records, social security number, even childhood immunization records.” Karin’s laugh now was bright, like sunlight on water. “I even have an invalid mother whose health has deteriorated and might need to call me in an emergency.”

“They’ve placed an older agent in an apartment building for the elderly. When the residents become too frail to care for themselves, they move to the floor for assisted living. I visited my ‘mom.’ Pretty spry and a good actress. She whispered, ‘Just between you and me and the lamppost, Karin, I hope this case doesn’t last too long. It’s a bit gloomy here. Especially when you walk past the residents in assisted living.’”

Angelo said, “I’m on the same wave length. I hope it doesn’t go on forever either. However, the higher-ups have begun to complain about the expense of the project, and now about our apartments, our cars, etcetera. If they cancel out on us, all the work we’ve done before you arrived, and to this point, is wasted time and money. Now that you’re with us, Anderson’s working to convince them to wait a little longer.”

Angelo stepped back. The tech handed Karin a small pager she could clip to her belt. It was the trigger to start the recording and receive messages. “Your excuse for wearing this is that your sick mother may need to contact you in an emergency. However, if your mother’s number ever comes up, it means you need to contact Agent Santini as soon as possible.”

Satisfied she knew how to use the device, Angelo said, “Now, promise to go wired only if you know they won’t search you. Okay?” He didn’t want an occasion to crop up where she’d need to wear it. He hoped the informant was wrong and weapons weren’t being sold out of Pinky’s because he didn’t want this strong, sensual woman involved in the case at all.

It was crazy. He’d only seen her twice, but, most of all, he didn’t

## *LURE*

want her dancing privately for Latimore. He felt his balls tighten at the thought, and was glad it didn't show through his jeans.

“Believe me, I'll wear it only if it's safe,” Karin agreed as she accepted the device and clipped the pager to her belt.

## CHAPTER 2

Funny how her fatigue had washed away when she'd clipped the pager on. The thought of breaking this case created a rush of excitement, and her spirits had soared as her heart raced from the natural high.

As expected, Santini didn't show that evening in the club, but she stepped up on the dais with the same flair, the same sense of power she'd felt when he'd watched her. Maybe even more so because he was a handsome, stubborn son-of-a-gun who'd doubted her abilities as an agent. She danced to him still, to a vision of him in her mind.

In bed that night, she dreamed of him. Dreamed he'd pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply, while his hands caressed her hungry body and tremors of delight caused her clit to engorge and her walls to throb with the want of him inside her.

She wakened with her heart pounding, her throat dry, and an actual ache at the core of her now-lusty body. She rose and pulled on a robe.

## LURE

In the kitchen she got a drink of water. *Lusty*. She shook her head at the wonder of what she'd felt in her dream, what she felt now every time she stepped up to the pole. Felt because of Santini.

Until that first night, when she'd danced for him, she'd thought Jeff, her ex, had destroyed all those feelings, taken them away with his demands and his insults, his quickies without foreplay that never allowed her time to be satisfied. It'd taken two years for her to recognize either he was just one selfish bastard or they were too unlike to have ever made it as a couple.

When they'd had sex she'd always had the feeling he could have had it with anyone, that there wasn't anything special about doing it with her. And in all things, including their sex life, he was never pleased with her. Thus his rage when she filed for divorce stunned her.

"You ungrateful witch! After all I've done for you! You won't get a dime from me!"

It wasn't until she was in the police academy that she learned if she'd reported Jeff whenever he'd beaten her they'd have filed on him for spousal abuse. She wouldn't have had to do it. As it was, she'd walked out of that hell with nothing, nursing her wounds and discovering strengths she hadn't known she had. Every day she thanked God they hadn't had a child.

Since the divorce, she'd forced herself to forget that final, terrible evening. Forgotten it until she saw Natalia, her hands protecting her head, her body curled tight against the deadly onslaught.

Anderson and Santini didn't know the half of how she could take care of herself.

\* \* \*

Over the next couple of weeks, she carefully noted people who came and went in the club, memorizing faces and license plate numbers. There were no bikers, just the usual other lowlife clientele.

As a dancer, she became as popular as Dana, so Tony added more

## *LURE*

performances for her. She'd eliminated the thong for short, hip hugger panties in black with wide lace at the legs. Boy cut, they called them. They were provocative and produced even more catcalls than the thong, and her ass wasn't as bare.

A few times now she'd noticed Latimore watching her from the bar, his face impassive, a glass of imported, eighteen-year-old Jameson's Gold over ice in his hand. The amber liquid looked as smooth and as expensive as the drink tasted when it went down. She'd never seen anyone else at Pinky's order it, so it must have been from his private stash.

The next time she was at headquarters, writing up her report, she said, "I think Latimore may ask me to dance for him."

Santini went completely still.

"Good," Anderson said. "That's what we've been waiting for."

"Any bikers frequenting the bar?"

That sarcastic comment came from Santini, and it not only angered her, it hurt. Letting out a long sigh, Karin answered him. "You still stuck on that? Thought we'd moved beyond it."

"She got you there, Angelo." Anderson chuckled as he left the room.

They worked in stubborn silence for another hour. Angelo was the first to stand to leave. He approached her, and she turned and looked him full in the face. It was the first time she'd noticed his eyes were that blend of browns and greens flecked with mustard and gold they called hazel. And that he had a tiny scar just to the left of his mouth.

He ran one hand slowly down the side of her face and let it slide off her chin. His voice was low, husky with emotion. "Take care. Be safe. Call me if you need me. Promise?"

Her throat had tightened at his touch, so gentle, so caressing, so filled with meaning. So very confusing. Her tongue tingled with such longing for him to kiss her that all she could manage was a nod.

## *LURE*

The scent of musk, the feel of his hands against her skin lingered after he left, and she wondered what in hell was wrong with her that a man could ignite all these feelings when they'd only just met, could make her feel connected to him. With a sigh, she turned back to her work. She didn't think psychologists would ever have a scientific explanation of why one person turned you on when another didn't. Or why it was immediate with some and with others it grew slowly.

With Jeff it had been like lightning striking. He'd coaxed her into that first sexual encounter roughly but engagingly. Her climax had almost taken the top of her head off every time they'd had sex, but as soon as they'd married, everything had changed. On their wedding night, he'd taken her to an expensive hotel, then spent the night at the bar drinking with strangers.

She'd waited until two in the morning, dressed in a short, white gown that was as sheer as it was easy to remove, finally crying herself to sleep when she realized he wasn't going to come to her. After that, the emotional and physical bouts of abuse had begun. She'd blamed herself whenever he exploded over something. She'd cry, and later he'd come to her, remorseful and penitent, folding her in his arms and begging her to forgive him. Until the abuse began again, he'd be the Jeff she'd first come to love.

Or thought she'd loved. Now she knew his original wooing had been an emotional entrapment to eventually allow him the power trip of degrading and punishing her. It took leaving him and learning about spousal abuse to realize it had never been her fault. And that without help, Jeff would never change.

\* \* \*

Before Karin entered the dressing room at Pinky's that night, Tony stopped her. "Boss wants you to dance for him after the club closes tonight."

"Sure. Where? What shall I wear?" Her heart trip-hammered.

## *LURE*

“The whip outfit. I’ll take you to his quarters.”

She had one other costume now, but Tony meant the dominatrix costume, and she could put the wire in her boots. Excitement surged through her.

At the close of the evening, after the club had cleared, she pulled her bag from her locker. The receiver was in a secret pouch, but before she took it out, her gut told her to stop. If they found it, that would be the end of her. She was new and being taken into the inner sanctum. Of course, they’d check her. No wire tonight. She’d have to depend on her memory and hearing. Disappointment that the opportunity was lost spread through her.

Nervousness made her hands damp as she followed Tony to the back of the club and upstairs to what she’d assumed was Latimore’s office. Before he opened the door, he frisked her, then took a penlight and peered down into her boots.

Relief that her gut instinct had warned her not to wear the wire made her feel faint.

Tony led her into a large suite with a small kitchen and a bedroom off the office. It was plush for a club like Pinky’s, with thick carpets and black lacquered furniture. Expensive art adorned the walls, and in the center of the main room was a dais with a burnished brass pole.

“Mr. Latimore, Miss Campbell,” Tony announced as he led her inside. Turning to Karin, he asked, “Can I get you a drink?”

“Just soda water, please. I think I’ve had enough alcohol tonight.”

Darryl Latimore rose from an easy chair. He was a man of average height and slender build. Tonight he was dressed in a maroon velvet smoking jacket with satin lapels. “Welcome, Marla. It’s nice of you to dance for me tonight. You’ve been a welcome addition to my club.”

Shades of the man at the Playboy mansion, Karin thought. Only this guy’s head’s not in the real world. “Thank you, Mr. Latimore. I hope my dancing’s brought in more business.”

## *LURE*

He motioned her to a chair and sat again himself. They nursed their drinks and he asked about where she'd grown up and how she'd learned to dance. She was grateful for the cover her superiors had provided for her. Everything was in place should they investigate her, and she knew her cover story by heart. Her nerves, however, tightened up as the time for her to perform drew close. The bedroom was all too obvious and not all that far from where her boss sat. Lettie's advice not to "do" Darryl alleviated her nerves somewhat.

Their drinks finished, Latimore motioned to the pole, and Tony turned out the lights in the room. When she approached the dais, the spotlight on it thankfully put everything else in the room in shadow. Her music began and, fixing the image of Angelo firmly in her mind, Karin stepped up and danced. Caught up in the music and the drama, she relaxed, but she was more reserved here than when she performed for customers.

The music died, and she broke out of her final pose to soft applause from Latimore.

"Lovely, my dear. Just lovely. Thank you. Tony will see you to your car."

Her eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness after the brightness of the spotlight on the dais, and she had no clue what Latimore had done while she danced or what he was doing now. Watching her, some men would have masturbated, others would have enjoyed an erection, letting desire and ache prepare them for when the dancer would pleasure them in the bedroom afterwards. Absorbed in the dancing and her music, she'd heard no groans or rustle of clothing. The air was devoid of the briny smell of semen. Darryl Latimore appeared to be a gentleman, simply a man, as she'd thought, out of touch with the real world.

The room remained in shadow as Tony led her out. He waited outside the door to the women's dressing room until she'd changed. Then he walked her to her car. He was still at the club's entrance when

## LURE

she drove out of the lot.

Two blocks away, she noticed a car pull away from the curb and follow her, its lights not flashing on until they were well away from Pinky's.

Angelo. She took a deep breath of relief and shook off the strangeness of those moments in Darryl Latimore's office.

\* \* \*

She was ready for bed when a soft rap sounded at her door. Throwing on a robe, she peered through the peephole and saw Angelo holding a box of donuts. Opening up, she pulled him quickly into the room.

"What are you doing here? You'll break our cover." She dropped her voice to a whisper.

"Taking your report in person, bringing you breakfast. Where's the coffee pot?" He spoke softly too, but his face broke into a crooked smile.

"Wipe that wicked smile off your face," she said. "Coffee pot's in the kitchen."

The kitchenette in the apartment was galley size, and his body brushed hers repeatedly as they worked at cross purposes getting the coffee on, setting cups and plates out. At one point she felt his lips brush her cheek, and desire rushed through her. She stood very still, eyes closed. This was the man she'd danced for, the man who'd awakened all those dormant, sexual feelings. *Careful, Karin. You're treading on thin ice here.*

"What's this all about?" she asked.

"You were late, and I was worried about you. I'm glad you're okay. What happened?" The gold flecks in his eyes flashed as he looked at her over a steaming cup of coffee.

She took her coffee to the living room couch and motioned to him to sit in the easy chair across from her. He'd already demolished three

## *LURE*

donuts to her one.

“What happened was I danced for him and then we had wild sex. Several times.”

Shock spread across his face as he almost choked on his coffee, and his grip tightened on his cup until she thought the handle would snap. He was speechless. Then he said slowly, “You didn’t have enough time...”

She couldn’t keep a straight face any longer. Laughter bubbled up into her throat and out. She grabbed a throw cushion from the couch to smother it.

“Damn it, Woodhall, I ought to throttle you. I almost had a fuckin’ stroke.”

“I know. The look on your face”—he grabbed the pillow again, and when she’d gained some semblance of control, she ended with—“was priceless.” Once she’d stopped laughing, she became serious. “I don’t have a safe way to let you know when I’ll be late or if Joe’s not there at the back entrance. We need to set something up so I can.”

He put his cup down and stood to brush powdered sugar off his shirt. “Today. Before you go to work.”

She rose too. “You’d better let me get some sleep so I can make it to the office. Thanks for the donuts and java.” She walked him to the door, and her breath caught as he turned toward her, his mouth close to hers. She stared at his lips, wondering how they’d feel against hers, longing to know what they would taste like.

“Sweet,” he said.

“What?” She looked up into his eyes, entranced by his closeness, aware now of the state of her dishabille and the length of his body only inches away from hers.

“My mouth would taste sweet. From the powdered sugar.” He smiled. A crooked smile that endeared her to him.

Again, embarrassment caused her cheeks to heat up. He’d known

## LURE

exactly what she'd been thinking.

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and he ran a finger across her lips, his touch light and sensual, doing exotic things to her skin. His smile faded as his voice dropped, low and husky. "Not now, Agent Woodhall. Maybe some day, but not now."

Shutting the door behind him, she leaned against it until her emotions calmed down. It wasn't until she was in bed and reached to turn off the light that she realized why he'd known what she'd been thinking; he'd wondered what her mouth would taste like too.

Wicked, wicked man, she thought with a smile. Satisfied with her deduction, she plummeted into sleep.

\* \* \*

In the ATF lab the next morning, a tech, who looked like he belonged in a TV *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* episode, demonstrated an antique gold lavalier to them. "Remember, this belonged to your mother's mother. Here's her picture inside. The signal chip is hidden in the front of the locket."

Karin gazed at a face she'd never seen before because the photo wasn't of her grandmother. The resemblance to herself and her undercover mother was uncanny.

"You press the raised gold flowers on the cover, and it sends a signal that travels several blocks to the receiver on your backup agent. One press means 'emergency' and you need him, two means you need to speak to him urgently. Three means you're alone and the bouncer's not at the exit, and four signals you'll be late. Got it?"

Karin nodded.

He handed the receiver button to Angelo, then instructed Karin to press the lavalier. "Is it working?"

"Yeah, I feel it buzzing." Angelo handed the piece back to the tech, who then reversed the pieces so Karin had the receiver and knew what her backup would feel when she signaled.

## *LURE*

“Thanks,” she said.

“Terrific job. Appreciate it,” Angelo said as the tech, work completed, moved to another part of the lab.

Before she could retrieve the lavalier from him, Angelo stepped behind Karin. “Let me,” he said, and the cold locket touched her skin.

He fumbled a little, and she figured his fingers were too large to open the tiny fastener, but he finally managed to latch it. His hands were warm as they adjusted the fine chain, and they lingered a tad too long on her shoulders. His groin touched her buttocks and rubbed against her briefly when he stepped close enough to reach around and straighten the chain in front. An ache began between her legs. His breath was soft on her neck. His fingers brushed her bare skin as he centered the piece where her cleavage began. She shivered involuntarily at the sensations his touch triggered all over her body.

“Not trying to seduce me, are you, Agent Santini?” she said in a soft voice, eyes cast down.

“Why, Agent Woodhall, whatever do you mean?” The words barely issued from his closed lips.

Nervously, she glanced around the room, but the techs seemed busy and unaware of this little repartee. Through her teeth she said, “And shall I fasten the receiver on your belt?”

He moved in front of her, elbows at his hips, hands palm out in invitation, that appealing grin on his face. “Be my guest.”

She looked him in the marvelous hazel eyes as she placed the miniature clip-on in his hand. “Don’t tempt me. You might not be too happy with the spot I chose.” Then she looked pointedly at his groin.

“And then again, I might be very happy with it. Did you feel all that vibration?”

She choked back a retort.

With a sigh, he clipped the receiver on his belt. “Now we’d better give it a try.” He walked out into the hall and was gone.

## LURE

Karin's watch indicated when he might have reached the transmitter's limit. She pressed once, keeping her gaze on the timepiece.

She smiled when he walked in the door again. "Not bad considering you were walking, and there's the elevator and the security check. I'm really glad to have this. I didn't realize I couldn't get to a private phone anywhere in the club."

Angelo frowned, hands on hips, pacing restlessly with sudden abruptness. "We should've thought of this before you went under. It could've been bad for you."

Strangely, he was overreacting to the possibility. Warning flags went up: Jeff had been like this. Overprotective. Controlling. Capable of rages more dark than any she'd ever encountered with a human being before. She'd cowered with Jeff, but she wasn't the same woman she'd been in those days. No man would ever intimidate her again. "Well, it *wasn't* bad, and I have the lavalier now."

\* \* \*

Anderson was waiting for them when they returned to the secure conference room. The three of them sat around the table while Karin recounted her odd time with Latimore—the Hefner-style jacket, the formality, the man's dispirited demeanor.

"Could also be downers causing his low spirits. Where does the money for the art and the fancy furniture come from? Certainly not from that poor excuse for a club." Angelo directed this to Anderson.

"We've checked out any other sources of major income, such as inheritance or a wealthy wife. Nothing. He's not married, hasn't been. He's got an estate in Sierra Moreno. We don't know how he bought that either. Makes payments regularly on it and the club, and it's not a small amount. Abnormal number of men coming and going from his house. Lots of Sunday night parties there," Anderson answered.

"Sunday nights, after Pinky's has closed. This is changing the

## *LURE*

subject, but has anyone run a make on Joe?" Karin interrupted.

"Nothing but some old warrants for failure to pay speeding tickets, which he finally paid. Or rather, Latimore paid for him."

Karin nodded. "So Joe owes him. Not big time, but he owes him. Lately, I've noticed several men who aren't regulars coming into the club to talk to Latimore. Tony seems to know them, but I get the feeling he checks them out before he takes them to Darryl's office."

She sensed tension radiating from Angelo. Don't say it, she thought. Don't say it's too dangerous for me and I should be pulled. Knowing he didn't read minds, she breathed with relief when he remained silent.

\* \* \*

Sundays were always slow at Pinky's, and the club closed at midnight instead of two. This Sunday was particularly slow. The sky had been a dingy gray all day with the threat of drizzle. Tony let Maryanne leave early because she had a bad cold.

Karin danced last in Maryanne's place, then had a strawberry daiquiri at the bar, chatting with customers as they finished their drinks and filtered out. The week had seemed long, partly because they'd had no leads in the investigation of the gun sales or the murders, and she was growing weary of showing more of her body than she wanted to to strangers.

She was slow getting into her jeans and boots and locking her costumes away. She realized Lettie and Dana had already left, so she signaled Angelo she'd be late. Lettie hadn't fastened her lock, and as Karin reached to do it for her she decided to search her things.

As she suspected, she found traces of possible methamphetamine use. It was sad. The girl had so little going for her personality wise, and being on the way to becoming a tweaker, a meth addict, wouldn't help her build any kind of a life. Since Karin wasn't there to bust her for drugs, she replaced everything exactly as it had been and snapped the lock. Then she washed her hands to remove any chemical residue she

## LURE

might absorb through her skin.

Opening the back door, she was surprised to see the exotic dancing light was out. A rock surrounded by broken pieces of glass lay on the ground. Teenage vandals, she thought, proving their mettle. Good aim.

Joe wasn't on duty. Maybe he'd gone inside to report the vandalism. Signaling Angelo with the lavalier that she was alone, she started to re-enter the club only to find the door had shut behind her. It had also locked. Knocking and pounding brought no response.

"Damn! How could I have been so stupid?" Figuring she'd be safer in her car, she strode across the lot to discover someone had sealed the locks with Super Glue™. "Damn again!"

Now a frisson of worry niggled at her.

She turned to locate a safe place to wait for Angelo, and was confronted by a stocky man of medium height wearing a stocking over his face. There was no time to be afraid. A hard punch in her solar plexus knocked her back against the car. She doubled over, airless and in pain, gasping for breath, wanting to collapse, but knowing she had to stay on her feet. He grabbed her purse, but even dazed and struggling to fill her lungs, she clung to it with both hands, holding it tight over her ribs and the place where he'd punched her. Her forty-millimeter HK was in it, and the first rule in policing was to prevent a perp from taking your weapon. There was no way he was going to get that purse as long as she was conscious.

*Where's Santini? He should be here by now. Have to hold out until he gets here.*

The attacker pummeled her head and shoulders with his fists, and she twisted to protect her face and anything that would show bruising when she danced. No one but Anderson and Santini would know about this if she could help it. She raised her purse to her breasts so she could reach the lavalier to press the emergency signal.

Later, she remembered having had the presence of mind to notice

## *LURE*

the man wasn't wearing biker boots. As she recovered from having the wind knocked out of her and could breathe again, rage gave her extra strength. She stomped on his instep with the edge of her boot heel, and although she wished she'd been in her dominatrix boots because they had sharp, spike heels, she caused enough pain that the man cried out and was distracted. Next she kicked his knee as hard as she could. Pain shot up from her foot, and she prayed she hadn't broken it or her leg. As he grabbed his knee and swore at her, she didn't hesitate—she slammed her head into his nose, feeling with satisfaction the sudden crunch and give.

He screamed.

Breaking away into a limping jog, she headed toward the street, her heart pounding against her breastbone. From behind her, she heard him roar like a bull charging after a red flag.

"Fucking bitch! Sleazy whore!"

She'd slowed him down, but angered him in the process. He was coming for her.

Hands shaking, she pulled her gun out of her purse, turned her side to her attacker, and took a deep breath as she moved into shooting stance, both hands on the HK. She released the safety and tried to calm down to steady herself. Shooting him would be a last resort. If she shot him, there'd be no way to cover it up, and the investigation would end. She didn't want to be responsible for that.

Lights flashed into the lot as Angelo's car pulled in, its headlights illuminating the man.

Her assailant stopped, putting a hand up to protect his eyes from the lights, then he turned and ran toward her car, disappearing just beyond it through a loose board in the fence.

Angelo rolled up and reached across to open the door for her without stopping. She fell inside and closed it behind her, laying low on the seat so no one would see her.

## *LURE*

“Where the hell have you been?” she yelled. “What took you so long?”

“Easy does it,” he said. “If you must know, I was in the car peeing into a tennis can when the second signal came. That’s not something a guy can stop on a dime. You were supposed to wait inside Pinky’s.”

“Club door locked behind me. The dork glued my car locks. Can you believe that?”

“What a piece of shit,” Angelo spat out the words.

“Yeah, well, he’s one practiced piece of shit. Had it all planned out. Thank God you showed. I was ready to shoot the guy. Where the hell was Joe? Where was he?”

The drugs her adrenal glands had flooded into her blood stream, hyping up her strength so she could either fight her attacker or flee, were washing out of her system. She felt herself fading. As if from a distance, she heard her rescuer talking to Anderson on his cell telling them to repair her car’s doors and bring it to her apartment parking slot before anyone in the club knew what’d happened.

When Angelo pulled into his own space, shock had set in and she was shaking all over, her teeth chattering. When she wobbled to a stand, he scooped her up in his arms and kicked the car door shut. Balancing her, he fumbled for and found his clicker, and she heard the tiny snap as the doors locked automatically.

It was to his room he carried her, setting her down on a chair while he opened out the living room couch bed. He picked her up and laid her down on it.

She rolled onto her side. “So c..co..cold.”

He pulled his jacket off and laid it across her shoulders and back, and she felt its warmth and the comforting smell of him settle over her. He pulled a down throw from somewhere and wrapped her in it from the waist down, but it didn’t help.

Still shaking, she was crying quietly now, another delayed aspect of

## *LURE*

shock having set in. “Sorry...want to...but can’t...s...stop.

Then she felt the mattress sink as Angelo lay down behind her and pulled her up against him, his body warm and strong. He pulled a blanket over them both.

“It’s okay, kid. Happens to men too. It’ll die down soon. Then we can talk about what happened to you.” He stroked her hair, pulling strands her tears had dampened out of her face. He rubbed her neck, then her shoulder and down her arm to warm her. His hand slid down her side, massaging her hip and buttock, working to warm and relieve the tight muscles. Gradually the shaking and tears subsided.

## CHAPTER 3

No one had ever comforted her that way. No man had ever cared about her feelings this much before. Karin turned toward Angelo, grateful for being warm and calm again, grateful for his body, big and solid against hers, and for him.

He groaned.

Surprised, she looked up at him, watching as his mouth descended on hers. Excitement sprang up in her, and she opened her mouth to him greedily, welcoming his tongue, pressing her body tight against his, relishing the arousal she felt pressed against her belly. He was vibrant and warm and alive. Thanks to him, she was alive too.

He tugged at her shirt to free it from her jeans, and pushed her bra up above her breasts. The heat of his hand seared her as he let her breast settle into it. He moaned at the back of his throat as he massaged it in wide circles.

Her heart pounded in her chest. Desire swept through her, and

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moisture formed between her thighs.

She ached for him not just to play with her nipple, but to lick and suck and even nip it gently with his teeth. She arched toward him, reaching to pull up his T-shirt and run her hands over his broad, solid pecs and play with his nipples, kissing his chest as she felt them tighten beneath her touch.

He stopped and pulled down her blouse.

“Don’t,” she said, her lips against his.

“Don’t?”

“Don’t stop, Angelo. Don’t stop.”

A low, lion-like growl escaped from him.

She whimpered. Hungry for him, her body taut with urgency, she drove her tongue into his mouth, tasting him in the same way she wanted to be explored and tasted. She loosened his belt and worked at the metal buttons on his Levis. She slipped her hand down inside his boxers and found his cock, as large and hard as she’d expected, as it sprang free of the nest of curls and into her hand. She fondled him, delicately stroking him and playing with the tip, knowing from the way he writhed that he couldn’t resist her.

Suddenly she felt as powerful as she had standing at the pole that first time she’d danced to him.

“Oh, God, Karin. Magnificent Karin with her HK in hand.” He feathered her face and neck with kisses, moaning with pleasure at her touch. His hands fumbled at the button and zipper to her jeans.

She heard the whisper of the zipper as it slid down, and she reached to help him free her buttocks and sex. “Touch me. I want you to touch me there. Rub me here,” she whispered into his mouth as she guided his hand to her clit and set it in emotion while she lifted her hips so her mons pressed hard against his palm as she melted into his body.

“Are you sure you won’t be sorry about this tomorrow, Agent Woodhall?” His voice was rough from excitement.

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“Maybe, but tonight it feels too good to forego, Agent Santini.” Then, serious, “Come into me. I have something damp and waiting just for you.” She pushed down his boxers, then spread her legs and pulled him onto her. His tremors of desire transmitted to her as he propped himself on his forearms so as not to crush her. She guided his penis inside her.

With a deep sigh, he pressed into her. “So hot and wet. So damn delicious.”

She sucked in her breath as he filled her. Her walls snugged around him, and she strained to make them anchor his cock even tighter. He pushed in and out, in and out, taunting, caressing, driving her crazy with pleasure until she grabbed his buttocks and dug her heels into the bed.

“Harder.” She was wild now to come. To reach the summit and find release from the ugliness of the attack in the parking lot. From the pressure of working undercover. She wanted to be loved wholly, sweetly, fiercely.

And she was. Angelo’s hands and mouth were everywhere, his balls brushing her softly as his cock plunged ever deeper, until it seemed he’d reached the very core of her. Then came the sweet sense of rising to meet him as she felt him come. In response, her orgasm rushed through her body like floodtide, surging up her belly and through her heart, filling her, lifting her until it ended at her very fingertips.

The release left them gasping. Karin could feel his heart pounding against her breasts, his pulse matching the tumultuous speed of hers. She put her arms around him to held him tight, rolling him over so he wouldn’t have to worry about crushing her, unwilling to let him go as she let herself drift. She stirred only when she felt him, soft and satisfied, slip out of her vagina. She moved off to fall asleep snuggled up against him.

\* \* \*

## LURE

Karin awakened to the smell of coffee mingled with the sizzle of bacon frying. Outside the window, a raucous crow greeted the morning from a power line wire. There was a moment when she wondered where she was and felt afraid, then she sank back under the covers and stretched. Angelo. She was with Angelo. Happiness threaded through her.

*Good Lord, I'm with Angelo!* Memories of the night before flooded her brain.

*Oh, God, I've got to get out of here. This isn't right. I've screwed everything up for this investigation.* She threw the covers back and sat up, reaching to pull her clothes back on. Searching for her purse, she realized Angelo had no doubt already bagged it as evidence. There went my comb, she thought.

In the bathroom, where a damp towel on the floor told her he'd already showered, she checked her face and what she could see of her body for bruises from the strange man's attack, relieved not to find any. She rinsed her mouth with a bottle of mint mouthwash she found on the sink, and washed her hands and face in warm water. The heat felt good. The washing felt wonderful, as if she could cleanse from her body what had happened to her in the parking lot, and from her soul how close she'd come to killing a man.

Her hair was in shambles, so she used her fingers to smooth it, dampening the parts that stuck out the most. There was nothing to use to tie it back. Finished, she took a deep breath and went into the kitchen.

"Hi," Angelo said without turning. He was removing bacon from the pan and placing the strips on a paper towel-covered plate. His feet were bare, and he'd obviously only towel dried his hair, leaving it wild and uncombed. There was a musky scent left by his shampoo.

It fits his style, she thought. A style that went with a man who was not only sexy but easy-breezy as well.

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At the sound of his voice, low and mellow, something wonderful spread through her chest, warmed her belly. It seemed so natural to be here with him in this galley of a kitchen after a night of unimaginable love making. Feelings she knew she had to control set in, feelings she must not act on. “Hi, yourself.”

“Coffee’s ready. Mugs are in the cupboard to your right.”

She filled two of them and sat down at the table with them. “Smells terrific in here. Eggs on deck too?”

“Nope.” Now he turned and set the plate of bacon on the table next to a pitcher of cream and a bowl of sugar. Then he set an open box beside them. “Donuts. Take your pick.”

She couldn’t repress a smile. “Ah, yes, the donut man.” She chose her favorite, one slathered with chocolate icing covered in white coconut.

He poured orange juice into tumblers. Instead of plates, he put a paper towel down in front of each of them, and they ate bacon and donuts with their fingers.

Bachelor ingenuity, Karin thought. Fewer dirty dishes—just mugs, a fry pan and glasses.

“Look,” she finally found the courage to say, after she’d polished off the juice, demolished a second donut and drained her coffee mug.

“Yes?”

He turned those mysterious eyes toward her, and she faltered, but it had to be said. “I was in a terrible state last night, and I’m really grateful you rescued me. As to the other...”

His coffee mug went down to the table. His gaze pinned her, the gold flecks blazing in the green and brown depths. “As to the other...what?”

“I...I took advantage of you, and I’m sorry. It was the shock of it all. I used your body to wipe out the image of the attack, and I apologize. I know it’ll make our work relationship more difficult, and I

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hope we can forget my slip in control and go on as professionals.”

He nodded, his face unreadable. “Finished with your breakfast?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“Everyone washes their own dishes when I fix their breakfast. Come on.”

Relieved he’d taken her announcement in stride, she joined him at the sink as he squirted liquid soap into her mug and glass while handing her a sponge. They stood hip to hip in the narrow confines, and he whistled as they did the simple chore together. He handed her a towel for drying, then reached around her, his body cradling and sending off its heat to hers, while he put the mugs in the cupboard. She felt her throat shutting down from wanting him.

“You check for bruising?”

“What?” She pulled her thoughts away from what his arms would feel like if he enclosed her in them. “What I could. I can’t see much of my back.”

“Turn around.”

She pulled away, nervous that he would touch her, afraid she’d lose control again and experience more of the best sex she’d ever had with the most intriguing, although irritating, male she’d ever met.

“Don’t be silly,” he said. He pulled her around and unbuttoned her shirt, turning her so he could see her back.

She let him. Knew she shouldn’t have, but couldn’t stop herself from letting him unbutton her shirt.

“You’re clear. Except for this.” His hands lifted her hair, and her whole body reacted to his lips, hot and damp, on her neck.

The moment his mouth touched her, shivers of excitement spiraled down her spine. He nuzzled her neck, up high under one ear, then his mouth closed on that spot as he sucked hard, and harder still. She took a deep breath, letting the sensations swirl over her body as his mouth made his mark and caused her clit and folds to swell with longing.

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Hickies they'd called them in high school. Bruises from a lover's kiss. Still, as much as she wanted this man, as much as that spot between her legs ached for him, better judgment caused her to pull away. But one of his arms slipped around her waist and held her firmly. Then he turned her and pulled her into his arms.

When his lips brushed her mouth she tried to back away, her mind warring against what should be and what her body cried to have, but the sink was at her back. Next she turned her head to avoid him before her control slipped entirely and they'd regret what happened next. But desire was making her putty in those strong hands as they framed her face and his mouth closed on hers.

Later, she tried to convince herself she was still recovering from the shock of what had happened to her in the parking lot. Later, she tried to convince herself it was just because of the great sex. But at the time she knew deep down it was because it was Angelo. She'd never known a man as honest and trustworthy as Angelo. And, since Jeff, she hadn't trusted any man at all.

Even then she resisted his kiss. Wouldn't return it, didn't open her mouth until he'd kissed her eyes, the tip of her nose and then danced his hot, wet tongue along the outline of her lips. Meanwhile, his hands toyed with her ears, making them heat up. He dipped a finger in each ear canal while his body pressed up against her muff and made circling motions against the hard arousal in his groin.

Inside her, the primal need to mate with him uncoiled like a tightly wound spring.

It was when his tongue teased the corners of her mouth that she finally opened to him, sighing at the pleasure of his lips, urgent and warm against hers, his tongue plundering her mouth the same way his swollen cock had entered the most private part of her body the previous night.

"You've been into my mouthwash," he whispered.

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Clever man, he'd tricked her into letting him unbutton her shirt, and now his hands reached around to release her bra and then slipped back to fondle her breasts. She felt proud of her nipples when they turned to tight nubbins as he tugged at them, and she wanted him to do more. She slid her shirt off her shoulders, and then the straps of her bra, feeling the bra stop where their bodies meshed together.

When his mouth finally closed on one breast, she gave a another sharp intake of breath. "Oh, you do know how to please a gal, don't you, Agent Santini?"

"And do you know how to please a man, Agent Woodhall?"

That open invitation was all she needed to let her hands do what they ached to do. She slid them under his shirt, gliding over the solid pecs, the strong shoulders, tweaking his nipples until they were as hard as hers, walking her fingers down to tease his belly button, then making their way across the smooth skin of his belly to the path of dark brown hair leading below.

Pausing, she delighted in the sudden stillness of the man who held her. She felt his tension and knew he waited. Waited for her to caress his swollen dick.

He groaned.

"What?" She kept her tone innocent.

"You know." He rubbed against her.

"Do I now?"

Releasing her breasts, he took her hand and placed it on his belt buckle.

When her hands crept under the buckle and worked their way down to his waiting hard-on, he squirmed. Then he released her breasts to remove his belt completely.

Karin slowly slid his jeans down and off his feet. Next came his boxers, and as he stepped out of them she watched as his penis sprang free—engorged and damp, ready to pierce her body and her heart. She

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kissed him there, stroking his shaft with soft hands, and then her tongue spiraled around his glans until he begged her to stop for a minute.

“My turn. My turn to undress you.” His voice was so rough with desire he could hardly speak.

It was as if someone had poured ice water over her body. Shaking her head, she stepped away as echoes of Jeff’s voice cut into her thoughts. “You’re such a skinny little bitch. At your height you need to weigh more.”

Wanting to please him, needing to please him to avoid one of his rages, she’d set out on a weight gain mission, gorging herself with sugary, fat foods until she was a normal weight for her height. When she’d reached her goal, she bought a nightie of sheer, black fabric with a see-through top and a bikini bottom. The next time he came to bed, she was there, posed like a centerfold. He mounted her from the rear, using her roughly. When he’d withdrawn, and she was fighting back tears, he said, “Jeez, you’re too fat to turn any man on, you slut. I’m sleeping at my club tonight.”

Now Angelo wanted to look at her body in daylight. And what would he say when he saw it? She held so tight onto her jeans that her knuckles turned white.

“No fair,” he whispered against her neck, bathing her with his hot breath, heavy with the smell of coffee and donuts. “I saw you dance at Pinky’s. I want to see what you hint you have to all those men in the club. Who knows, maybe you’re just a big fraud.”

“I’m not a fraud. Last night should’ve told you I’m not a fraud.”

“Then let me see.”

She shook her head.

He released her, turning her face up. “Who hurt you, Karin? I know some man must’ve hurt you. Was it your ex?”

She nodded, fighting back the tears that flooded her eyes because Angelo had sensed something was wrong.

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His arms enfolded her, and she felt his heartbeat, fast and even, against her own. "I'll never hurt you, Karin. I'd like to get my hands on the man who did."

He rocked her and crooned to her, finally stopping to say, "Meanwhile, I feel a little silly standing here naked while you're still half dressed."

She brushed his lips with a quick kiss, then, eyes closed, slid his hands to her jeans.

Unlike his difficulties with the lavalier, his hands had no trouble removing her jeans. She heard his sharp intake of breath and then a groan when he saw she was wearing her black panties from the dominatrix costume.

Her legs grew weak as Angelo ran his fingers along the edges of the leg lace. She quivered as he approached her inner thighs. She gave a little cry of pleasure as his fingers slid under the panty's crotch.

Karin heard him breathing hard, but all he said was "You're wet," as his fingers slipped into her waiting vagina and his thumb toyed with her clit. He almost lifted her off her feet with the power of his hand inside her. By the time he'd withdrawn, she was so aroused and so filled with love she'd have let him do anything to her.

"You're so beautiful. Everything I thought you'd be. And sex last night with you was more than everything I thought it would be." He sighed, running his hands over her breasts, down her hips and legs, caressing her buttocks as his lips and tongue brushed the sensitive skin of her neck. "Open your eyes and come to me, Karin. Make love with me. In the daylight. So I can see your face when you climax."

His voice, low and filled with need, continued talking, coaxing. Hypnotized by his words, his hands, she let him pull her up against him, and his body was strong, the skin of his cock smooth as satin when she stroked the engorged shaft.

He ran his hands up her inner thighs again, and she shuddered from

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the marvelous sensations he created, spreading her legs to give him access. When he knelt to push her panties aside, and she felt his mouth at her portal, she groaned, running her hands through his hair, letting the musky scent of him envelope her. “That feels so good. More, Angelo, more.”

Angelo lifted her onto the table, then yanked her panties off and spread her legs once again, bringing her knees up to expose the most private parts of her naked body to his view. Not even the cold surface she lay on could tamp down the heat in her groin. Like some brazen seductress at the pole at Pinky’s, she leaned back on her hands and threw her head back while spreading her wet thighs even wider and gyrating her hips in invitation. He rubbed the tip of his penis over all the sensitive areas between her legs, and her walls began to quiver in anticipation of his entrance.

She was shocked to hear herself cry, “Stop playing around and come into me!”

He slid into her with a long sigh of pleasure. “Oh, Karin, you can’t know how good you feel.”

“I think I do. I know how you feel inside me.” Beside herself with desire, she cried, “Push, Angelo. Push!”

He not only pushed, he use the heel of his palm to massage her clitoris. She braced herself so she felt the full force of those pushes and his hand. She heard herself moaning, felt tears of tension and pleasure rush down her cheeks as the need for release overpowered her.

“Open your eyes, Karin. Now!”

She looked into the depths of those hazel eyes and never looked away as Angelo took them to the peak of the mountain and they exploded together into the stars.

\* \* \*

Dazed from the force of her climax, she half felt him lift her from the table while they were still joined and carry her awkwardly to his

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bed so his cock wouldn't slip out. When her vagina stopped pulling on him and would finally release him, she felt bereft to feel him slide out.

She rested in his arms and was on the verge of drifting to sleep with him when she felt a little pat on her bottom.

"Shower time, gorgeous."

The shower was small, but he insisted they enter it together. He kissed her, raising her arms over her head to position her breasts so he could nuzzle them, holding his tongue in her mouth as his hands ran the soapy washcloth all over her body. He paid special attention to the area between her legs, and she broke the kiss to say, "No fair, Santini. It's been too long for me. I don't think I can make love again for a while. May not even be able to walk."

"I hear you talking." He laughed as he handed her the washcloth.

As she bathed him, she looked at the limp organ that no amount of fondling could bring to attention. At least not yet.

They looked down at it together and laughed.

"I guess every soldier needs a rest after battle," Angelo said.

"Battle? You bum!" She gave him a little poke in his shoulder. "Come on, I've had enough of this steam."

He dried her off, carefully assessing her for bruises. Toweling her hair, he said, "Your hair will cover the bruise on your neck."

"You marked me."

"Yeah, I did. If it comes to it, those men who ogle you need to know someone already has a claim on you."

She didn't have an answer for that.

He left the bathroom first, and she remained to dress in yesterday's clothes. By the time she came out, he was gone, but he soon unlocked the door and returned. Handing her the keys to her car and her apartment, he told her the apartment was clear, the car repaired and in its space.

"Anderson brought the keys. Yours are in your purse and

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inaccessible right now. Fortunately, there's no security monitor back there or he might not have been able to destroy coverage of you and the attack."

"Lucky for us. Thanks for the keys. It'll be good to get into clean clothes."

It was Monday, their day off, but she declined when he wanted them to picnic together.

"Come on, the birds are singing, the grasses are brilliant in the sunlight, and there's not a breath of wind. Perfect day for a picnic. I'll cook."

"Sure you'll cook...a bottle of wine and a box of donuts." Her laughter turned to seriousness. "It's tempting, but I need to make my report while the attack's fresh in my mind, and believe it or not, I have laundry to do." She also had a lot of thinking to do about having slept with her backup. Especially because she knew he wanted her again, and the worrisome thing was—she wanted him too.

But the memory of Jeff—Jekyll-and-Hyde Jeff—still cast its shadow.

And sexual tension...her mind on Angelo's dick inside her, hot and slick and caressing, instead of the job. That was a perfect recipe for getting an agent killed. For both their sakes, she had to stay away from him.

\* \* \*

He ate lunch by himself, minus donuts, in the sunshine in a nearby park, where the sounds of quacking ducks from a pond and small children on the play equipment filtered into his thoughts. The sun warmed his body as he sat cross-legged on a blanket and considered his problem.

Even now, his sexual appetite momentarily satisfied, he missed having Karin with him. Missed the way she pushed the dark curls framing her face out of her eyes. Missed her laughter and her company

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as a woman. He wanted to see those golden hoops flashing in her ears as sunlight created glints on her hair.

Sure, he'd been sexually drawn to her that first night in Pinky's. He couldn't resist finding a way to touch that luminescent skin as he'd done using the lavalier as an excuse. Couldn't keep his thoughts off the delectable ears, the smooth tush she flaunted when dancing. But he'd also been attracted to her sense of humor, her drive to protect Natalia from further indignity and, as much as he opposed her being a lure, to her toughness at going undercover. She was a serious professional, and not about to let him convince her to leave this assignment. When he'd come around the corner last night and seen her in firing stance with her pistol drawn, face screwed up with concentration, admiration had welled up alongside his towering fear for her safety. She was every bit a sister in the band of brothers that formed the ATF unit.

So here he was. Wanting her intimately in his life, wanting to touch her, to make love to her, to converse with her. What he didn't want was this concern for her safety that ate at him like a dog gnawing a bone. He wanted to be free of the visions he had of her body riddled with bullets. Or shot or stabbed, her veins draining her life away on asphalt or bed where she lay.

Shaking those visions out of his mind, he stood up and canned his trash. Popping quarters into a vending machine, he retrieved the bag of duck food it released with a plunk into the bottom. Walking to the edge of the pond, he watched as the ducks, their iridescent feathers shiny in the sunlight, swarmed to him, pecking and diving greedily as he cast the food out in a large arc.

By the time the bag was empty, he'd made his decision. He had to stay away from Karin until this was over. Couldn't let himself love her until she was safe. The thought of loving her surprised him, and he realized that was the scariest part of all.

## *LURE*

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On Tuesday, when Karin reported to the secure room, Angelo avoided sitting next to her or touching her. His formality with her was returned; he guessed she'd come to the same unwanted conclusion about their relationship that he had.

The men had read her report and Anderson, dressed in regulation suit and tie, asked if she thought the attack had been set up to get her to quit at Pinky's because she'd been given more dance time than the other women.

"That hadn't occurred to me. I don't get any vibes of jealousy about that. Even with the extra time I may not make as much money as the other girls because I'm new. Still, I'm moving up so fast I, think you may be right that the mugging was to scare me into quitting. That the attack was planned is evident because of the broken light, Joe not at the door, and the sealing of my car doors. I don't think this is the man who committed the rapes and murders. If I'd relinquished my purse, and had been seriously frightened, I think the guy would have run off and that would've been the end of it."

"You can't identify him?" Anderson tapped his pencil on the desk top.

"Can't. Maybe they'll get prints off my purse. He swore, but that's all, and his face was covered. About all I saw were his shoes until I stepped into firing position. Then he turned when Angelo's lights hit him. You might check the hospitals for someone who came into emergency with a fractured nose."

"You think you broke the guy's nose?" Anderson's smile was wide as he asked.

Karin shrugged.

"Atta girl," Anderson said. The men laughed.

Angelo had set up the most recent surveillance tapes taken at Darryl Latimore's place in Sierra Moreno. They'd been run through the

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Demux VCR, and the multiple images were now readable. Except for the occasional sound of someone sipping coffee, they sat in silence as they watched. The smell of coffee reminded Angelo of having breakfast with Karin on Monday. He peeked at her when she was busy looking at the tapes. Just the sight of her concentrating on the tapes warmed him. It was going to have to satisfy him until this case ended.

“That man.” Karin leaned forward.

Anderson stopped the tape at a long-haired man in torn jeans and T-shirt.

Karin said, “He’s been in the club a lot. Looks like a typical biker except no gear. Multiple tattoos, ragged shirt and jeans, protuberant belly.” She identified another man she’d seen at Pinky’s, but he was in slacks and a golf shirt. “Go back. There...the man in the dark blue suit with the close-cropped hair. I remember him because it’s so unusual to see a suit in a dump like the club.”

Santini sucked in his breath. “Meredol Mansone.”

“He is...?” She asked.

“A psychopath,” Angelo said.

“We suspect he’s the arms dealer,” Anderson answered.

“He must feel pretty safe if he risks being seen in Pinky’s,” Karin said.

“Not as safe as he thinks,” Anderson murmured.

When the tape had finished with no other recognitions, Karin rose to leave. “One thing I forgot to put in my report. I think Lettie’s using meth,” Karin said.

Anderson sighed as he shut off the VCR. “I’m sorry to hear that. She was an informant. We busted her about two years ago, and offered her a deal if she’d make a buy for us so we could pull in a dealer we had our eye on. Her cooperation cut her sentence from three years to eighteen months. She’s been out about six. We learned about the opening you took at Pinky’s because she mentioned it to her parole

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officer, but no one has any idea we put someone in it.

"Keep your eyes open, but we'll hold off on that until this investigation's over. Maybe you can coax her into treatment first." Anderson said.

After Karin left, Angelo stood and paced, hands on his hips, before turning to face Anderson. "You've got to take her off this case. I told you in the beginning it was too dangerous for a woman."

"Calm down. From what we can tell, the man in the parking lot just wanted her purse. There's a real possibility it could've been a set-up to frighten her so she'd quit at Pinky's. If she's more popular than the other women now, the motive was most probably jealousy."

The memory of Karin stepping up on that dais with a flash of smooth buttocks to stand with her hands on her hips in a stance of power, slapping her flail against her thigh, flashed in Angelo's mind. Little wonder she'd become a bigger draw to the club than the others he'd seen that night. "You didn't see that man's rage. He'd have hurt her bad, and if I hadn't reached her in time, she'd have had to fire her weapon!"

"So? From your report it looks to me like she was doing a pretty solid job of handling the situation without you."

"If she'd missed, he'd have had time to reach her if I hadn't pulled in. And what if someone as vicious as Mansone catches her, and I can't get to her in time? I tell you, you've got to pull her off." Angelo slammed his fist on the table.

"What's all this about, Angelo? You fail to take the bullet for JFK or something?" Anderson's voice was harsh with irritation.

Angelo felt the blood leave his face as a wave of dizziness swept over him. "I'll get more coffee." With military abruptness, he left and headed for the men's room. After splashing his face with cold water, he held the paper towel over his face and leaned against the sink, eyes closed.

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Yes, he'd failed to take a bullet. Failed. And Special Agent Miranda Gomez, his partner, and a mother with three little kids, had died. Investigation of the incident had readily cleared both of them of any errors in judgment that might've led to her death, but he wasn't sure he'd ever clear himself. Even though he'd emptied his automatic into her assailant, and been wounded himself, he'd only reached Miranda in time for her to turn her dark eyes on him as he took her hand.

He'd known what she wanted. "I'll tell them, Miranda. Until you can do it yourself, I'll tell your husband and your kids you said you loved them."

He thought she'd tried to nod, but he was never sure. He'd knelt helplessly beside her as her blood drained away despite the pressure he'd applied to her wounds. She died on the asphalt beside their unmarked car. Her face in those moments, and the faces of her husband and children at the funeral, rarely left his consciousness.

The pain in his chest right now attested to his fear that he'd mess up one more time, and this time it would be Karin—Karin, with her easy laughter, her quick mind, and those competent, pleasuring hands—who would die.

Christ, he had to face the fact he was risking his job by ordering his superior officer around. It bordered on insubordination. Anderson cut him slack only because they'd once worked together a few years back. Now he'd complicated this assignment by becoming physically and emotionally involved with Karin. It was affecting his judgment. Might affect hers. But if he told Anderson they were involved, he'd be the one pulled from the case.

And then who would protect her?

Cursing under his breath, he finished wiping his face and tossed the paper towel into the wastebasket.

He returned with coffee for both of them. Anderson's look was a questioning one. "I think you take it black like me," Angelo said as he

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handed him the cup.

Anderson open his mouth to speak. Angelo raised his hand and stopped him. "Okay. I promise that's the end of it. I won't ask again, boss."

Anderson nodded. "Smart man."

"Now. Where do we go from here?"

"Wish I had some probable cause evidence that would get us a search warrant, but I don't. So we're still stuck waiting and observing. From what Karin says, activity must be building up if she's seeing the men our videos show at the house appearing at the club."

\* \* \*

At Pinky's that night, the first thing Karin said was, "Where were you last night when I left, Joe?"

The surprise on his face told her he hadn't deserted his post deliberately. "Didn't realize you were still here. Someone broke the light. Maybe you left when I went to tell Tony?"

And, of course, he'd lock the door when he left to report. "I probably did." Karin nodded.

## CHAPTER 4

Approaching the changing room, Karin could hear someone crying. When she entered, Dana had her arm around a weeping Maryanne, and Lettie was patting her shoulder.

“One of her sons is really sick. In the hospital,” Dana said.

“Gee, I’m sorry, Maryanne.” Karin said

Maryanne looked up, and she recognized a bruise on her cheekbone. Maryanne had covered it with heavy makeup, but her tears had washed some of it away, and Karin recognized the ruse. Her gut tightened. She’d used it herself a few times while married to Jeff.

“Sick? Or hurt?” she asked, her ATF instinct as well as personal experience telling her it was the latter.

Maryanne only cried harder.

She sank down beside her and took her hand. “Your kid’s in good hands. I’m sure he’ll be okay. Right now you have to pull yourself together so you can dance. Tony just told me Latimore’s invited special

## *LURE*

guests, so we all need to be at our best. Give me the hospital number, and I'll call for you while you're out there so you'll know how he is. I'm not going to break down over the phone like you would. If you call, you'll just start crying again. We need to stop those tears."

Her son's condition wasn't the only reason Maryanne was crying, Karin suspected. She probably knew she had to get away from this man before either she or the kids were maimed or killed. The man in her life had no control over his rage, and Maryanne didn't know how to leave him.

Karin also knew how difficult that would be without help. She could steer her to that help.

Dana looked at Karin over Maryanne's head and nodded. Karin sensed she knew what Maryanne's problem was too. "Marla's right, kid. If you don't dance, you don't get paid. That'd be hard, wouldn't it? If the doctors thought your son wasn't going to make it they'd have told you to stay."

"That's right. They wouldn't have let you leave. Your boy's probably sleeping right now." That was Lettie's contribution. For once she wasn't fidgeting or talking non-stop.

As they surrounded Maryanne with concern, Karin felt a special bond with these women. None of them had what she'd call a decent life, but if you had a problem, they were there. She recalled her first two weeks, when Dana had advised her about "fucking the pole," and Maryanne about singling out a man who turned you on and dancing to him, and Lettie who'd warned her not to "do" Darryl. That had been their way of supporting her. It struck her that none of them would have been envious enough to hurt or drive her away because she'd been given more dances.

Maryanne's tears began to dry up. "Okay now?" Karin asked.

Maryanne nodded.

"Give me that phone number and then we'd better get dressed!"

## *LURE*

Karin spoke as brightly as she could.

When she left the changing room for her first dance, Tony signaled that Latimore wanted to see her after the show.

“To dance?” she asked.

“No. Just business.”

Business? That’s strange. I was summoned to dance last time. Excited about the prospect of maybe getting more information for the case, she signaled Angelo she’d be late. Then she stepped up to the pole.

Later, she heard the roar of a motorcycle circling the club, then dying quickly as if it had been parked. She could imagine silver pipes being backed up to the curb, and when the man she called “Biker” walked into the club, satisfaction that she’d guessed correctly settled in, along with fear. Motorcyclists were true outlaws, some of them psychotic, most of them alcoholics and addicts with insane behaviors. The ones she’d known were territorial and some were bitter rivals. Two Hells Angels and a Mongol Nation patched in had been killed on a ride to the casinos at Laughlin, California, only a few years back.

The group she’d gone under with in Florida had decided to gang rape some strippers they’d invited to one of their parties. When she overheard what they were planning, she’d been ready to signal her backup so she could get out of there, even though it might break her cover. But booze and methamphetamines created such mass disorganization among the bikers that the rapes never happened.

She’d inched out with the strippers. “Stay away from these guys,” she’d whispered to a couple of them as they were leaving. “Types like this aren’t inviting you to watch you strip, and there ain’t no strength in numbers. Is the money worth a ruptured uterus or vagina?”

The girls looked at her wide-eyed, and she saw naïveté despite their occupation. She sensed she’d frightened them enough that they wouldn’t accept an invitation like this again.

## *LURE*

Tonight, after her first performance, she'd used the opening in the curtain to survey the house. There must have been ten special guests. Suit was there, and the long haired guy she called Biker, who probably owned the motorcycle she'd heard pulling up and parking outside. New faces she hadn't seen on the tapes appeared. Darryl played host, ordering drinks on the house for them, checking that peanuts and chips were out on the bar. He carried sandwiches out to them himself. From her observations, she'd lay money that Suit, not Latimore, was in charge. Karin wondered if Darryl realized it.

The men appeared to be just hanging out, eating, drinking and laughing. No conversations in a huddle, no furtive glances.

Before she danced as the dominatrix, chills and goose bumps cropped up when she looked through the curtain and saw Suit seat himself in the dais ring. She ignored him, tempering her performance so as not to give him any ideas, not to single him out for attention. If she was lucky, he'd be someone who preferred men.

After she'd finished, she phoned the hospital and learned Maryanne's boy was doing well.

Maryanne hugged her. "Thank you so much, Marla."

When Karin hugged in return, she felt her friend stiffen with pain and knew the man had hurt her on more than just her face. Tomorrow she'd check with the hospital to see if social services had made a report on her son's injuries to the Department of Children's Services.

After the club closed that night, and all the patrons and guests were gone, Karin signaled Angelo again she'd be late. When Tony took her to Latimore's office, Darryl wasn't in his smoking jacket, and Tony actually left them alone.

"You asked to see me?"

"Yes, my dear. I'm throwing a little party Monday night at my place when the club's closed. I wanted to invite you personally."

"To dance?" There was no way she wanted to dance privately for

## LURE

him at his place.

“No, no, just to kick back and relax with some of my friends. Tony will tell you how to get there.”

Karin nodded. “I’ll check my schedule, but I’m sure I can make it. Thanks.” *Schedule, what schedule? Of course I’ll be there!*

Stepping out the back door minutes later, she said, “Nice to see you here tonight, Joe. I see the light’s been fixed.”

He looked, arms folded, like an ancient Egyptian soldier. He nodded, and she went to her car.

Two blocks away, she saw Santini’s car pull out to follow her. Excitement rushed through her as she saw it, before a sort of melancholy settled over her. She wanted to discuss what had happened tonight over donuts and coffee, to be held in his strong arms, to make fierce, satisfying love with him. And tomorrow to waken in his bed to the smell of coffee and bacon frying, the taste of mouthwash mingling with chocolate icing and coconut in her mouth. But that was all over.

The night birds were singing beautiful songs as she fell asleep, but her dreams were anything but peaceful.

\* \* \*

“Great! Getting an agent inside that house is what we’ve been waiting for.” Anderson practically rubbed his hands together.

“Be sure you wear your locket,” Angelo spoke in a quiet voice without looking at her.

“Count on it. I’m not braving what may be a lion’s den without it. I don’t think I’d better wear the wire, however. I might get checked like I did the first time I danced for Latimore.”

“What do the girls do at this party?” he asked next, his voice still low but now tense.

“Unlike his office, I guess he doesn’t have a pole there from what I’ve been told. The only dancing’s social. I think it’s just your typical party—drinking, smoking, probably some pot and drugs. The girls are

## *LURE*

looking forward to it. All except Maryanne. She's got problems right now with an abusive boyfriend. I'm encouraging her to take her kids and go into a shelter for battered women."

"I've never understood why women stay with guys like that. They won't leave, and if they end up killing the guy they want to plead battered woman syndrome." This was from Anderson.

"Batterers, male or female, destroy your sense of worth. When they blow, they convince you it's your fault...if you hadn't done this or said that they wouldn't have been forced to hurt you. Women stay thinking if they don't make those mistakes again, he won't hurt them. It's like walking on eggshells. You know if you leave they'll find you and hurt you really, really bad. Their control over you is so complete you almost have to ask permission to use the john.

"If you have no marketable skills, how would you survive if you left? With kids or without, it's the same. And what skills does Maryanne have? She's an exotic dancer. All he has to do to find her is visit all those clubs in the area. These bastards are street smart. They do find women and hurt them. Or kill them."

She could tell he wasn't convinced, a sure sign he'd never battered a woman. Angelo, she saw, was studying her with a brow furrowed in thought.

Angelo left on an assignment. Anderson went into a department head meeting.

After filing her paperwork, Karin contacted the Department of Child Support Services and learned the attending physician had filed a report because of suspicious injuries to Maryanne's little boy. Karin spoke to the case worker, telling her about the marks on the boy's mother. The worker assured her they'd call Maryanne in and counsel her about preparing to leave the man who'd hurt them, and they'd provide the phone number of a battered women's shelter.

When the worker began to describe the steps Maryanne should take

## *LURE*

in laying plans to leave with her children, Karin stopped her. “Been there, done that. If it comes up, I know what to tell her. Thanks for your help.”

Next, she did an Ask Jeeves Internet search and learned there was a motorcycle gang in the area affiliated with the Alii Nation. Their colors were turquoise and purple, and the SM chapter claimed a membership of a hundred. SM for Sierra Moreno. Her suspected biker wasn’t wearing colors or gang attire, but chills made the hair on her arms stand up.

\* \* \*

Fear drove Angelo to the club that night. They were moving into dangerous territory now and he couldn’t stay away. Driven to watch her dance again, he convinced himself the real reason he was there was to view the suspects up close. To salve his conscience, he took his cell phone camera to photograph them.

He saw Suit, dressed in dark brown tonight, take a seat in the dance circle, forearms on his thighs, hands dangling. Angelo automatically reached to be sure his gun was in his back waistband.

“And here’s our lady of class...Miz...Marla!” Tony let the Miz spin slowly out of his mouth, then raised his voice at her name.

Cheers and whistles rose, and Angelo’s heart constricted as the curtains flew open and Karin stood there posed, legs apart, hands behind her back, chin on her chest. Her dark hair was up, hidden in a man’s black top hat, tipped to the left just above her eyes. On the other side, on the upward tilt, pearl studs rested in every piercing of that ear. A wisp of a finger curl dangled in front of it.

He felt embarrassed at how he’d marked her with that hickey, assuming at the time her hair would always be down. She’d have to hide it with thick pancake makeup to wear this hat.

Her lips were scarlet against her luminescent skin. Raising her head, she brought one hand around, lifting an unlit cigarette in a long holder

## *LURE*

to her lips as she pretended to inhale and blow smoke Marlene Dietrich style. Her long fingernails were as scarlet as her lips.

“Why doncha come up and see me sometime?” Tony intoned over the mike.

The men in the circle went wild, stamping and whistling. Angelo hated it.

Lady of class? You bet, he thought as he watched. Her black leather coat, belted at the waist, ended mid-thigh. Her stunning legs were encased in sheer, black net stockings, and her four-inch heels were black suede. How she managed to dance in them he had no clue.

As the cheers tamped down, she slipped the cigarette and holder into her pocket, removed her belt and unbuttoned the last two buttons on her jacket. She walked a model’s walk to the dais, mounting with one quick movement that flashed a don’t-blink-or-you’ll-miss-it glimpse of black garters holding up her stockings and lacy boy cut panties.

“Baby, baby, baby,” a male voice crooned.

Angelo’s hand tightened on his beer as he thought of her thick bush, which he knew had been twisted and tucked between her folds, folds that had felt so silken and soft to his searching fingers. Only he knew her secret heat, the tiny sounds in the back of her throat as they made love, her neck tendons tightening as she strained to reach the mountain top, and how the darkness of her eyes deepened so mysteriously when she climaxed in his arms.

Damn, but he was hard now. Thank heaven again for loose fit jeans. He withdrew from such inward thoughts and watched as, with a lift of her head and a glance that was raw sex, Karin danced.

\* \* \*

The day of the party, after thinking long and hard, Karin chose her Roper boots with one-inch heels, loose fitting jeans and a white blouse with a three-quarter sleeve T-shirt over it. No crop tops for her when

## LURE

she didn't know for sure what this party would be like. No one had mentioned a pool, so she didn't take a swimsuit. The thought of appearing in a swimsuit with that crowd held no appeal for her whatsoever.

Waved through the gate, her Mustang, its paint worn through in spots, chugged up the hill to where Darryl's house overlooked the valley. The front door was open, and powerful guitar riffs boomed out. *Old heavy metal. Maybe KISS?*

Karin stopped to take in the smog-free Los Angeles view below. Lights twinkled in the soft darkness, and her breath caught at its beauty. Then she turned to brave the loud music.

The house was white, low and modern, the furniture of clean and simple lines. The colors were beige with black accents, something a decorator had surely been involved in. She didn't imagine Darryl had had a hand in it. Again, there was expensive art on the walls.

Darryl greeted her dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans, a bourbon on the rocks in hand. "Come in, my dear Marla. So glad you came."

"Thanks for the invite." As if I wouldn't have come, she thought. Even if she hadn't been under, no employee anywhere could afford to disregard a summons from the boss if they wanted to stay in the boss's good graces.

"Wraps in the bedroom down the hall. Bar's over there." He waved his drink in that direction.

She nodded and headed over thick, white carpeting for the bedroom to leave her sweater. Looking in the rooms to locate the one with the wraps, through a partially opened door she spotted a man sitting on the edge of a bed, pants down around his ankles. He was moaning, "Suck, baby, suck." A young woman with bleached blonde hair in a bright red dress was kneeling in front of him, her head in his lap.

Karin missed a step as shock waves rolled through her, but she finally found the correct room. She disliked herself for it, but the sight

## *LURE*

had projected an image of her face in Angelo's lap and made her clit ache.

She located the bar and ordered. "A California rosé if you have one, please." She ignored the way the bartender looked down his nose at the weak-bodied wine she'd requested. He poured one for her anyway. She put money in his tip glass as he grunted a thanks. Sipping the drink, she followed the smell of steaks barbecuing outside. A chef in white coat and hat was managing the meat. A long table was covered with chips, salads, fruits, beans, specialty breads, and desserts of every kind.

Dana and Lettie were standing with a group of male employees near the tables, which were covered with colorful clothes and set with matching dishes and goblets.

"Over here, Marla." Dana waved a beer at her.

The smell of alcohol was strong on both of them, and Karin wondered if they'd been drinking even before they'd arrived. At least Lettie's pupils weren't dilated from snorting meth.

"Nice party," Karin said, nodding to the group in greeting as she joined them. "Looks like we aren't the only guests."

"Nope. Lotsa new people here."

Just then Darryl arrived and took her in tow back into the house. "Want you to meet some friends."

"Marla, this is Meredol. Meredol, Marla."

Tonight he was dressed in loose pants that tied at the waist and a casual shirt unbuttoned to show a mass of black chest hair. He wore a heavy gold necklace and a gold ring set with a large diamond. Probably eighteen-carat gold, and the diamond was real, she thought. His handshake was that of a wimp. The cold stare from his eyes told her something different.

"Mr. Meredol."

"Just Meredol." He eyed her up and down in a lazy, sensual way. It gave her a bad taste in her mouth.

## LURE

"This is Clyde. Clyde, Marla."

"Clyde." So Biker's name was Clyde. *So where's Bonnie, Clyde?* He acknowledged the introduction with a slight dip of his head. He didn't offer to shake hands, and she was glad about that. She didn't want to touch him anymore than she'd wanted to touch Meredol Mansone.

Darryl introduced her to so many people she felt the memory of their names slipping out of her brain. And she needed to remember them for her report. Too bad I wasn't able to wear the wire, she thought.

After a while, Darryl turned and glanced around the living room. "Where are the others? Outside?"

"They're downstairs at the shooting range." It was Joe. He was sitting on a couch, dressed in purple pants and a pink shirt, covered in chains. His drink of preference seemed to be whiskey, and two bleached blondes sat around him, one on his left and one on the right arm of the couch next to him. They were dressed in skimpy dresses of assorted colors and wore platform shoes without stockings. *What we used to call white trash.* Just then the woman she'd seen in the bedroom joined them, slipping a wad of cash to Joe which he pocketed. Looks like she's been pretty busy, Karin thought.

"That sounds like fun. Some kind of game? Like at a carnival?" Karin asked.

The men looked at her and laughed, and Darryl said, "No, Marla, they're shooting real pistols."

She widened her eyes and made her mouth into a perfect circle when she said, "Oh," as if the light bulb had just gone on in her head. She could play "dumb blonde" with the best of them, even if her hair was black.

"I'll take you down there sometime if you'd like. I'll even teach you to shoot."

## LURE

“Sounds like fun. I’d like that.” *And just maybe I’ll find a weapons cache there, if I’m lucky.*

It was time to eat, and since the air had chilled, she went into the bedroom where people had tossed their jackets and sweaters on a bed. Pawing through the pile to find her sweater, she upturned a worn leather jacket that had a bottom rocker on the back that read “California.” Above it in bold letters were the words Alii Nation. Flipping it over, she found a top rocker and a skull and crossbones patch. Above, over the heart, was a turquoise-and-purple patch.

There was no doubt in her mind this belonged to Clyde. The jacket told her he was a patched in member of the Alii Nation or he wouldn’t be allowed to wear their colors. Being accepted as a member required a long period as a “prospect,” sort of like a fraternity pledge process, where he would have been at the beck and call of any patched in who snapped his fingers. He would have been required to do anything asked of him.

A shiver threaded up her spine. The skull and crossbones meant he’d killed. There was no clue as to who or how many. Maybe even Natalia and the other dancer, she thought. With shaky hands, she pulled her sweater out and replaced the other wraps as she’d found them.

Karin ended up at a table with people she didn’t know. By the time she’d gone through the food line, she’d gained control of her emotions. The food was delicious, but the conversation among the men revolved around the Lakers, the Dodgers, and the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. One of the wives raised her eyebrows at Karin and shrugged as if to say, “Oh well, that’s men.” Karin felt her face glaze over. The woman’s husband was the one whose pre-dinner appetizer had been a visit from Joe’s blonde in red.

Dana and Lettie had settled themselves at different tables, and they were talking and laughing with great animation. The drinks were flowing, and she thought both women were getting drunk. She worried

## *LURE*

about Maryanne's absence. Had the man hurt her more or had she finally had the courage to skip? She wished she knew.

After they'd eaten, people wandered to various places. A group that had remained outside were passing a joint around, and the air was filled with its sickening sweet smell. Dancing had begun inside to music so loud it could hurt your ear drums. Meredol and Darryl went into the TV room. She was on her way to the bathroom, pushing her way through the dancers and moving past that room when she caught snatches of their conversation.

"She's a cop." Meredol's voice, hard and clipped, came through clearly.

Karin's heart beat bongos in her chest. She slowed her steps to hear more, but kept moving.

"No way."

"Too good at the dancing to be one of these other losers you've hired."

"Well, she wasn't that good in the beginning. Almost fired her. She's going to college, so she's a little more together than most. That's all." There was an edge to Darryl's response. "You're making that into something it isn't. Don't be so paranoid. And don't put down my dancers."

"You watch her. Hear me? Watch her."

She didn't need to hear more to know ATF was on the right track.

In the bathroom, she waited until her heart had calmed down and she'd regained her composure. Was Meredol just paranoid, or had she somehow given herself away? Finally she decided he was paranoid, maybe a coke user. The man had barely seen her and there was no way he could have spotted her as law enforcement. She was composed and ready to leave the bathroom when someone knocked.

She opened the door to Dana.

"Gosh, I'm glad you're through in there. All that beer...I'm about

## *LURE*

to pee my pants.” She moved unsteadily past Karin and shut the door.

Karin prayed she wouldn’t be behind the wheel on her way home.

She spent the rest of the evening dancing. For one slow dance, her partner wrapped his arms around her, so loaded she had to hold him up. The alcohol fumes on his breath were so overpowering she thought she might get drunk too. She wondered why people thought this kind of party was fun.

Relieved when it seemed to be ending and people were leaving, she started to thank Darryl personally, then thought better of it. That would be too classy, wouldn’t it? Maybe mark her as a cop. She left with a wave, grateful to get in her beat-up Mustang and roll down the hill to save gas. At the gate, she started the motor.

When she got home, she again felt the need to talk to Angelo, to report her observations and thoughts about what she’d seen. She started to call him, then removed her lavalier instead and put it on the dresser. Her dreams were punctuated by heavy metal, and a kaleidoscope of Meredol, Darryl and Joe scowling down at her, and blondes sucking purple-and-gold penises that smelled of semen.

It was a very bad night.

## CHAPTER 5

The bags under her eyes the next morning showed what a hard night she'd had. "Cripes, you look awful, Karin," she said to herself in the mirror. Heavier than usual makeup and a touch of powder repaired her face only a little.

She'd just finished writing her report in the office when Angelo and Anderson arrived.

"Learn anything useful last night?" Anderson asked as he sat down.

Angelo looked good enough to eat in a denim shirt with the top buttons undone and his sleeves rolled up a couple of inches. Her heart turned over, the longing to touch him was so strong.

She handed Anderson her papers. "I wish I'd been able to wear a wire. It was a big party, and I couldn't remember all the names or the license plates. I've done the best I could. The spread was delicious, but afterwards some people lit up joints, while some went down to the shooting range. Oh, and Joe's a pimp. His harem was at work."

## *LURE*

Angelo's jaw tightened as he asked, "Were you propositioned?"

She shook her head. "None of the dancers were. I get the feeling Darryl protects us. I think he really likes owning the club, and we're a big attraction. I'm guessing he feels down because he couldn't protect Natalia. Oh, the man with the long hair? He was introduced to me as Clyde. I'd pegged him as a biker, then was pretty sure I heard him park his bike the other night at Pinky's. I stumbled on his jacket in the jumble of wraps on the bed. He's an Alii patched in. Back and front rockers, colors. Skull and crossbones."

She sensed both men stiffening.

"The Aliis are more brutal than many. I'm surprised we don't see more of them at Pinky's." This was from Angelo, and his face was red. No doubt because he'd brushed off her talk about bikers.

She took a drink of coffee. "I've thought about that. You know, as much of a dump as Pinky's is, Angelo's right. It isn't bad enough for a bikers' hang out. Our biker's an anomaly, which tells me he has an important position of some kind in all this."

Karin ran a finger over the edge of her cup. "The places I was in in Florida were filthy, rough places. The floors were worn almost through in spots, and fights were a regular thing. I once saw a man wander into a bar in rival gang territory by mistake, and even before I could blink, someone had his knife out. Cut the guy before the assailant's buddies could restrain him.

"In the bars my gang frequented they threw knives instead of darts at the dart board. They drank so much it wasn't uncommon for them to pass out or vomit right on the floor. Nobody seemed to care. Those places are only for the brave if you aren't a biker or connected to one. Even then they can be dangerous." She shuddered from the memory.

"We've got a couple of biker bars like that here," Angelo admitted. "Do you think the murders of Natalia and the other dancer were a gang bang?"

## *LURE*

Karin thought it took a big man to admit bikers might have been involved in Natalia's death after having dismissed her observations earlier. "Can't say. I do know I recognized the marks on Natalia as from a biker's boots. Because she was kicked after death, there wasn't any bruising. It's easy to miss those telltale signs."

She started to leave, then turned. "Oh, and Meredol's paranoid. Maybe from coke use, maybe because of whatever's going down. Anyway, he's very suspicious of me. Told Darryl I'm a cop."

"I don't like that." Angelo stood up and pushed his chair in. His knuckles were white where he held the chair.

Anderson nodded. "Neither do I. You need to be especially careful, Karin. Good reporting."

"Thanks." One thing about Anderson, he was always fair and concerned about his agents.

\* \* \*

Fear for her safety triggered Angelo's anxiety obsession like a match igniting dry grass. Mansone was a brutal psychopath. The Aliis were just as insane.

In the hall, he signaled Karin to follow him into another room. Once inside, he locked the door. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, his penis already hard. He hugged her tight, wanting to protect her, not wanting to let her go back under. Struggling with fears so powerful he almost couldn't breathe, he managed to stop himself from blurting out a demand that she refuse to return to Pinky's.

"Hey," she said against his chest. "I'm not going on a tour of duty in Baghdad. I'm just going back to the club."

He released her with great reluctance, tipping her chin up as he looked into her eyes. "Be careful, Agent Woodhall. I don't want to lose you."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "When this is over, I'll take that rain check for lunch. Don't forget the wine and donuts."

## *LURE*

With a soft laugh, he wrapped his arms around her again, snugging her up tight, then running his hands over her body. "Your breasts feel so good against my chest. I wish we were naked and I could make love to you."

"I wish..."

"You wish what?" His voice was honey against her ear.

"I wish this assignment was over and we could be together." She kissed him, her lips at first soft and then demanding.

"I don't think I can wait for that." His hands were at his belt and zipper, and suddenly his cock was in the open, already damp with creamy pre-come dew and pointing to the sky.

She looked down, and he watched as her fingers stroked and tugged his dick with an arousing gentleness that filled him with sensation and brought him to the brink of release.

He moaned when she let go. "Know what I'm thinking?"

"What?"

He loved the throaty sound of her voice. "I'm thinking of you at that pole, flaunting peeks of that sexy tush. Those hands beckoning, caressing and stroking until you come. It's crazy, but the first night I saw you I thought you were dancing for me. Just for me."

Her voice was so quiet he had to lean to hear her. "I did dance for you. One of the women told me to pick out a man in the audience who turned me on and dance as if I was making love to him. The man I saw was you. When I saw you here the next day and knew you were my backup, I almost passed out."

He tucked her head under his chin, and whispered, "I have to make love to you, Karin. Now. Here on this hard floor." He felt her shiver, sensing she wanted this too.

"What if someone comes in?"

"I locked the door." He drifted kisses over her face, then closed on her open mouth, tasting her tongue, searching its warmth and

## *LURE*

smoothness, letting the taste of her mingle with his. He clamped his hands over her firm buttocks, then slid his palms down to the back of her thighs as she sighed. Then he was tugging at her clothes so he could get to her full breasts.

She moaned as he circled them. He flicked her nipples, feeling them peak under his touch, and felt her knees give slightly.

He took her hand and pulled her to the floor. She worked his jeans down to his feet with such frantic hands that he thought he was going to ejaculate right then and there. Next he felt her freeing her lower body. And then she straddled him, sighing as she guided his cock into her slickness, rubbing her clit against him, lifting in and out, and then driving him crazy by pausing before she lifted in and out again. He had to restrain himself from pushing his cock hard against her firm cervix until he couldn't hold back.

As she continued to repeat the in-and-out-then-pause motion, tingling spread not just through his penis and balls, but through his whole body. He was lost in her heat, her sweetness, and surrounded by the tight walls that hugged him inside her. He merged with her and she with him. The pauses built sensation and desire until finally she let the tender underside of his dick brush enough times over the edge of the opening to her vagina that he couldn't hold back. He lifted her with his thrusts.

She matched his rhythm, pushing down hard against him, accepting his thrusts against her clitoris and cervix, tugging at his nipples, trailing the backs of her fingers over his belly until she finally made a soft cry and melted against him as he exploded into her.

He held her for what he hoped was forever, knowing this might be the last time they'd make love if Mansone or Clyde discovered she was ATF.

Finally, she rolled off and began to fumble with her clothes. "I think we'd better get back to work."

## LURE

He laughed, he was so happy with her. She was not only hot and sexy, she had a good head on her shoulders. "Yes, I guess we should."

\* \* \*

When she entered the club the next night, Tony found her immediately. "Mr. Latimore would like to see you in his office after work."

"To dance?"

He shook his head. "Business."

Business again, is it?

When Pinky's closed, she signaled Angelo she'd be late and followed Tony to the office. He opened the door and, to her surprise, left them alone.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Come in, come in, Marla. I have a gift for you." He looked like a little boy on Christmas morning.

*Uh-oh. Gifts are not a good thing here.* "Oh?"

"A new costume. The minute it was shown to me I thought of you." His smile was broad as he directed her to the couch.

The new costume was Egyptian. The skirt had been spread out on the couch cushions, and Karin ran her hand over a white skirt fashioned from sheer, pleated linen. It would hug her hips, coming to a point just below her navel. The headdress was the famous pharaoh's headband with *uraeus*, the head of the female cobra with its hood flared, intended to protect the kings and queens of Egypt. The shoes were spike heels in gold with straps that worked their way up the legs to just below the knees. There were gold bracelets for the upper arms and long earrings that would reach almost to her shoulders.

"Nice," she said, stroking the pristine linen. Good so far, she thought. Then she looked at what she was to wear on her upper body and froze. It was a pectoral of costume jewels and gold paste. A pectoral. And nothing else. Sheesh, she thought, there's no way I can

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be seen in this. Anymore than I could do a line of coke or meth. Her mind whirled as she fought to figure a way out of this.

Latimore seemed so pleased with his choice she couldn't believe it. Like she'd thought earlier, he was a man way out of touch with the real world. Her mouth felt like cotton as she said, "I...I didn't realize you were getting a new license for Pinky's."

"What?"

"A topless license. I can see how this costume would work, with the headband and the arm bracelets and this chest thing, but topless? That'd be a whole new deal here, wouldn't it?" With relief she watched his face drop. Picking up the pectoral, she held it up to her chest. "What we could do is have me wear a very skimpy bra. You know, one where you can almost but not quite see my areolas. And then this pectoral coming right down to my cleavage would be really spectacular, don't you think?" It would also cover more of her chest than he thought.

He nodded as if he couldn't quite get his mind around his mistake.

"Besides, if I went topless Tony couldn't announce me as the club's 'lady of class' anymore, could he?"

Agreeing, he gave a little laugh as if relieved she'd found a way out of the predicament. "I'm so sorry, Marla. I've always been intrigued by ancient Egypt, and I was so caught up with the beauty of the costume and imagining you in it that I wasn't thinking clearly. Of course you can't go topless."

Now she felt sorry for him, and wondered how in the world someone this naïve could be dabbling in weapon sales. Either he was the perfect patsy for Mansone and his followers, or he was a very clever man who wanted the vice squad to come down on his club. Maybe even to drive away a man like Mansone.

Thank heavens, she wasn't going to be caught topless in a vice raid. Of course, if Angelo were involved, he'd get a hard-on seeing her in that costume. She heated up at the thought.

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“Thank you, Mr. Latimore.” She boxed the costume, and on impulse gave him a quick peck on the cheek as she left.

Stepping out the back door minutes later, she said, “Nice to see you here tonight, Joe. I see the light’s been fixed.

He looked all bouncer, arms folded, not a common pimp. He nodded, and she went to her car.

Two blocks away, she saw Santini’s car pull out to follow her. Excitement rushed through her and then a sort of melancholy settled over her. She wanted to discuss what had happened tonight over donuts and coffee, to be safely in his strong arms, to make fierce, satisfying love with him. But she couldn’t.

\* \* \*

Maryanne had returned, and Karin sensed a lightening of her spirits. “Sorry you missed the party. I was worried about you. Your boy okay?”

Maryanne smiled and continued changing into her costume.

“I’m so glad.” She hesitated, then plunged in. “Maryanne, no one talks about it, but are you guys scared because Natalia was murdered in the back parking lot?”

“Yeah, a little, but Joe’s there now when we leave, and no one in the club killed her. Still, we all remember her and it does make us a little nervous when we go home.”

No one in the club killed her. Very likely they were right.

Before the evening was over, they’d been invited to another party. Inwardly, Karin groaned. But if she wanted to find out what was in that basement shooting range, she had to be there.

\* \* \*

This time Karin chose a gored skirt and sandals that had straps. Her blouse covered her breasts without cleavage and ended about hipline. Angelo’s mark on her neck had faded, so she parted her hair into

## *LURE*

cocker ears to make her look younger and more innocent. Less like a cop, she thought. She lightened her lipstick color until it was little more than gloss. She left off the perfume.

The dancers were all there again, including Maryanne. Karin spotted Tony, Clyde and Meredol among the crowd. Joe had arrived with his hookers. Darryl was wearing a white Cuban style shirt that had once been popular, but she sensed an uncharacteristic tension about him.

“Hmm, what smells so yummy?” she asked as he welcomed her.

“The chef’s roasting a pig on the spit. It’ll be a while before it’s ready. What can I get you to drink?” He was a moody man, but tonight he seemed preoccupied, not his usual self.

“Bourbon on the rocks, please.”

Drink in hand, he would have guided her outside, but she pulled back. “Is the range open? You said you’d teach me to shoot.”

He smiled, seeming to finally draw his thoughts back to what was happening now. “So I did. We can try now.”

The range, which was deserted, covered the length of the house and was first rate, even to the headgear. Darryl took a key from his pocket and unlocked a gun case housing pistols, hunting rifles, a shotgun, and an assault rifle. Karin saw no evidence of another room or a secret entrance or any place to house the cache of weapons ATF suspected him of having.

“Wow, that’s quite a collection,” Karin commented.

Again, he smiled. “It’s taken a while, but they’re all mine. I’m fascinated by firearms.”

He selected a Glock for her, instructing her in the details of gun handling and safety. She feigned awkwardness as she loaded the clip. Then, knowing the safety was on, she swung around at one point to ask him a question, almost putting him in her line of fire before he gently pushed her arm away from him.

## *LURE*

“I have one rule here, Marla. Another break like that in safety and the gun gets put away.”

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Not thinking gets people killed. That’s a deadly weapon in your hand, and people die when a shooter forgets that.”

He knew a lot about guns, Karin thought, as she continued her pretense as a novice.

She shot several rounds with the Glock before Darryl returned it to the cabinet and removed a rifle. As he stepped up to instruct her in how to hold it, she heard a hated voice say, “Let me do that.”

Meredol stepped up behind her. Too close. Whiskey breath almost choked her, and his hands, when he took hold of hers to guide the rifle up to her shoulder, were rough and harsh. She knew instantly that he still suspected her.

She felt Darryl shifting behind her, as if he was nervous because Meredol had come down.

When she’d fired enough that she finally hit the target, well off center, she feigned fatigue and shoulder pain. Turning to hand the gun to Meredol, she looked straight into his eyes. “Thanks. Sorry I’m such a slouch, but I don’t plan to be doing this sort of thing. I was just curious. Just wanted to experience shooting.”

His eyes were pinpoints when they should have been enlarged in the reduced lighting. Narcotics, she thought. Narcotic induced paranoia, she guessed. Suddenly she wanted out of there fast. The farther away from him she was, the better.

The ice in her drink had melted by this time, diluting it. She planned to nurse it along for the entire evening. She couldn’t afford to lose her focus.

During a lull in the evening, Darryl showed her through his home, carefully checking rooms before they entered. She figured he knew about the hookers. There were Jacuzzis in some of the bathrooms and

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sunken tubs in others. The faucets were gold, and the toilets sat side by side with bidets. For Joe's ladies, no doubt. The minimalist décor was carried out throughout the house, and almost every room had a view over the valley.

Looking out from one of the windows, she said, "It looks like Disneyland at night down there, doesn't it? It's really neat."

He laughed as if she were a child. "Yes, it's 'really neat.'"

After she'd eaten, she took a walk around the gardens filled with blooming flowers and deep green grass with Dana. "Wonder how many gardeners it takes to keep this place up?" Dana said.

Karin shrugged. "Lots, I'd guess." Despite an intense survey of the outside of the house and the grounds, she didn't see where the cache would be kept. The three-car garage was open, so it wasn't there, and there were no other buildings on the grounds. Still, she could be missing something.

Returning to the house and heading for the bathroom, she again overheard Meredol and Darryl. The music was eardrum splitting again, and people were trying to talk over it in raised voices. Still, she knew the men were both agitated, hurling low words at each other.

"Make her do a line. If she won't do a line, she's a cop!"

It was Mansone, and she thought her heart would stop beating right then and there.

"Ask her yourself, Meredol. I know she's not a cop!"

Nausea rolled over her. Mansone hasn't given up. If he makes me, I'm dead. I don't have a weapon, and Angelo couldn't get through the guard gate fast enough, if he made it through at all. She reached the ladies room. Behind the locked door, she splashed cold water on her face and calmed her roiling stomach, grateful she hadn't tossed her cookies. On her way out of the bathroom, she saw Darryl striding out of the room, slapping one hand against his thigh in irritation. It was the most agitated response she'd ever seen in the melancholy man.

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Later, Meredol was suddenly beside her, tugging on her arm and pulling her into a room where Joe and his girls were snorting something. The sight of crystalline powder cut in lines on the glass coffee table told her it was either meth or cocaine. Judging from the antics of Joes' girls, she'd lay her money on meth. She was grateful not to find Lettie here.

"Your turn," Meredol said. "It's free. Darryl's always generous."

The girls giggled, and Joe announced he had to piss and walked out. Meredol stood near her, but one of the girls suddenly jumped up and started dancing. She stepped on his foot, and he swore. In the distraction Karin grabbed a straw with one hand while she swept the powder off the table onto the thick white carpet below. With her little finger she left a few crystals up by her nostril.

Meredol looked at her. "Humph."

Now she had to pretend to be "high."

Eventually exhausted from the evening's charade, and discouraged by the small amount of information she'd gleaned, she went out with the first group of people to leave.

Fitting the key into the Mustang's ignition, she swore when the motor wouldn't turn over. She was tired, it was cold and she'd forgotten to bring a wrap, and now this. Funny thing was the battery was new. Working her way back into the house, she happened in on what seemed to be some kind of standoff between Meredol and her boss.

Oh, great. Pretending nothing was amiss, she gave a little wave from the doorway. "Hey guys, sorry, but my car won't start. Can someone give me a jump?"

The jump didn't help. Tony opened the hood. "Here's your problem, Marla. This battery's so old and corroded it belongs in the junk heap."

"I just put in a brand new one! My gosh, someone took it out and

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substituted this one!” She couldn’t believe it. When had it happened? At the club? At her apartment? Or maybe here?

“I’ll take Miz Marla home,” Meredol said.

Darryl, a storm brewing on his face, was instantly beside her, slamming down the hood of her car, wrapping one arm around her shoulders. It was as if he was declaring his turf. “Tony will drive her. He’s taking Miz Dana as well. She’s four sheets to the wind and doesn’t belong behind the wheel of a car. I’ll take care of the battery and return your car to the club, Marla. Tony’ll pick you up Tuesday for work.”

Karin was so shocked she just nodded.

The ever-reserved Tony was silent on the way to her apartment. Dana was snoring in the back seat, giving off a waft of alcohol. Karin mulled over in her mind why someone would swap batteries. Was it just the usual thief, or had it been meant to happen at Darryl’s so Meredol could drive her home? Her skin crawled at the thought of being alone in a car with him. Darryl’s sudden protectiveness when he’d offered to drive her was another puzzle.

Or maybe it was a piece of the puzzle that fit nicely in its special place.

\* \* \*

She slept in the next day, then went to the Laundromat. In the office, she leaned back in her chair and propped her feet up on the table, tossing her report on the polished top.

Angelo was sitting with his elbows on the table, his fingers forming a steeple. When he smiled his crooked smile at her, she felt a rush of love.

“I don’t know how long I can keep this up,” she said. “These parties mean we don’t have any days off. I found nothing there in the way of a weapons’ cache. All I did was rule out his home as the place for the weapons.”

## *LURE*

Anderson entered the room talking. “We have some interesting news. A fingerprint came up on your purse, and guess who it belonged to...Maryanne’s boyfriend.” Anderson waved the lab report and handed it to her.

Swinging her feet off the table, Karin sat up. “I figured he was one nasty guy. I’d be surprised if Maryanne knows what he did. Now I’d bet money he was trying to scare me away because she didn’t get extra dances and more money. I called the Department of Child Support Services to be sure the doctor who examined her boy reported him for possible child abuse. The man’s been beating her and the smallest child. I sure hope she gets away from him.”

Angelo had picked up her report and was speed reading it. “Quick thinking with that line of meth. Did it convince him?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. For the first time, I picked up bad blood between Darryl and Mansone. The way Darryl, who’s been so down, stood up to him and wouldn’t let him drive me home made me think it’s related to Natalia’s death. Maybe Darryl learned Meredol killed her. Which also leads me to believe Meredol may have killed the other dancer too.”

“Motive?” This from Anderson.

“Couldn’t say for the first dancer, but it’s possible Natalia rejected him. He’s egotistical. Powerful. Cruel. Darryl’s a strange duck who wants us to be erotic Madonnas, not whores. Joe provides those. Darryl makes it clear if you sleep with the customers or turn tricks outside work, you’re fired. If Natalia rejected Mansone, that could be his motive. So he killed her, with Clyde doing a little kicking after her death.” Karin picked at a food spot on her blouse.

Angelo added, “You’re saying if Meredol made a pass at Natalia, she’d have lost her job if she’d gone with him. Makes sense. These women all need their jobs. I’d bet Maryanne’s the sole support of her family and that loser of a boyfriend.”

## *LURE*

"I wouldn't be surprised," Anderson said with disgust. "I'll see if we have prints on Meredol and any from the murders. Now that we at least have a lead, we might find other evidence to hook him up to both murders. From what you tell us, I have the feeling things may be going down, Karin. If you see anything at all suspicious at the club or at Latimore's house, I want you to call Angelo. He's still playing the role of your mother's doctor, Dr. Snowman. If anything breaks, you get out of there fast. Understand?"

"Got it."

"We need to add another code to your lavalier. If the situation requires our SWAT team, you have to be able to let us know." This was from Angelo, whose face was as serious as she'd ever seen it.

They concluded their meeting, and she went to the tech lab where they adjusted her code. Now a single press meant "Send SWAT." Two was for emergency of any other type, and so on up the line. The thought of needing the emergency response team sent little shivers of excitement to her fingertips.

Before leaving for work, Karin took a bus to the retirement center to visit with her "mother." Warmed by the smile that broke across the other agent's face, she leaned to receive a hug and a cheek-to-cheek pretend kiss.

"How nice, Marla. I didn't expect to see my daughter today. How are you?"

"I'm great. How're you, Mother?"

"I'm doing just fine. Hand me my cane, and I'll take you to see some wonderful roses in the garden. Such rich colors, such sweet scents. Come, right out this door."

Out of earshot, the agent spoke in a low voice as they bent to smell the roses. "A man was here asking about me this morning. Name of Meredol Mansone. Said he knew you and just popped in to see how I was doing. Nasty man, I thought. Asked too many questions. Greasy

## *LURE*

suave, too much expensive jewelry. Gave me the creeps. I'm glad you're here because I didn't phone Anderson for fear the guy maybe bugged my phone. So far I haven't found one."

"What did you tell him?"

"Not much of anything. Pretended my confusion was as bad as my heart's supposed to be." She winked.

Karin gave her another hug. "You're a dear, you know that?"

Back in her mother's room, they spent time chatting about the growing up years they'd never spent together while Karin quietly checked for bugs. When she leaned to give her a goodbye cheek to cheek, the agent whispered, "Say, that Santini guy. He's a love. Eyes sorta light up when I talk about you...leads me to believe he's a little sweet on you. I'd hang onto him if I were you."

Karin squeezed her hand and left to catch the bus to the apartment. She made it in time for Tony to drive her to Pinky's. Her car was in the back lot, just as Latimore had promised.

\* \* \*

Tony had picked her up earlier than she usually arrived because he went on duty before they opened. Behind the bar, she fixed herself a ham on rye with dill pickle, lettuce and tomato.

"Hey, who's my new assistant?" Jake, the bartender, called as he came around the corner where the wine cellar was located.

Karin smiled. "I'm a woman of many talents."

"If that's the case, would you mind bringing up a few bottles of Chablis for me while I set this keg up?"

"Sure." She caught the keys he tossed to her and unlocked the cellar door. The stairs were so rickety it was a wonder someone didn't fall.

Even before pulling the chain on the overhead light, she sneezed. Like most cellars she'd known, this one was plenty dusty. As she looked for the wine he wanted, she noticed multiple footprints in the floor's dust. They led beyond the wine racks and kegs. Curious, she

## LURE

followed them to a room fitted with a new padlock. In the hall just beyond the locked door were large double doors Karin thought must lead to the outside. From the outside she knew there weren't any doors on this side of the club. They had to open up on the street below Pinky's.

*If I had an arsenal here to unload quickly, I wouldn't carry them up those rickety stairs. I'd want to get them out through those double doors, especially since no one seems to know about them.*

Her blood curdled when she saw a spud gun on the floor near the door. Made of PVC pipe with a hairspray propellant, spud guns fired things like potato rounds or tennis balls. Sometimes used in war games similar to paint ball, they weren't illegal unless intended for deadly force or arson. Without handling it, there was no way she could determine its purpose. She could only guess, and a guess wasn't enough for a search warrant.

She sneezed again. Hurriedly, she turned and frantically hunted for and found the requested wine, switching off the light and hurrying up the stairs before anyone else knew she'd been there.

"Here you go," she said to Jake as she sneezed again, grabbing a napkin to use on her nose. "Sorry. Allergic to dust."

"That place has got plenty of that. Thanks."

Despite repeated sneezing, she managed to finish her sandwich. She had a glass of the Chablis, hoping to calm the tremor in her hands. Mulling over what she should do, she finally went to a phone near the restrooms and placed a call to Angelo.

"Dr. Snowman? This is Marla Campbell. I'm calling about my mother, Jenny Campbell. I went to see her today, and I'm worried about her. Her confusion is suddenly much worse. I think she's having paranoid hallucinations. Apparently an acquaintance of my boss visited her, and now she's checking under her mattress for bombs.

"When I was there she was terribly agitated, taking me out to the

## *LURE*

garden for fear we'd be overheard. Rambled on and on about a cellar or a basement in our house that opened onto the seashore, filled with pirates' treasure. My parents have never lived near the ocean, much less in a house with a cellar or a basement filled with pirate treasure. This has come on so fast it's frightening. I'm afraid she'll do something foolish. Could her medicines be causing this?"

She paused while Angelo said, "Okay, I get it. What we want is in a cellar, and was it Meredol who visited her?"

"Yes. Yes, you prescribed Haldol. I've heard it can do things like this." Just the sound of his calm, reasoning tone soothed her.

"Okay, a cellar and Meredol confirmed. Is this cellar at Latimore's house?"

"No, I'm not with Mother, I'm at work. The manager gave me a ride because my car battery was dead yesterday, so I came in early."

"Okay. This cellar is at the club. I read your report, and you forgot to tell us about your battery having been switched. You think that was done by Meredol so he could drive you home?"

"Yes."

"Is your car there now? I'll check it for a recording device or a transponder when you get back tonight."

"Oh, that would be wonderful if you could."

"And your lavalier is set for a SWAT signal?"

"Right. And if you can't drop by to see her, Dr. Snowman, could you at least call the staff and have them check on her for me? One more thing, doctor. Mother loves potatoes, and for some reason they won't let her have any. Is there a reason for that?"

Angelo said, "You got me on that one. What the hell's this about potatoes?"

She could almost see him scratching his head. Karin continued, "You say someone complained at dinner she was throwing her potatoes at people? They didn't tell me that. Good heavens, of course they can't

## *LURE*

let her have them.”

There was a long pause on his end of the line. Then, “Okay, got it. You found a spud gun, but obviously it isn’t enough for a warrant.”

“Yes. I’d be so happy if you could check on her for me, doctor. Thank you.”

“I think I love you, Agent Woodhall.”

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and something shot right through to her heart. She stammered. “Well, y...yes, goodbye, Dr. Snowman.”

She stood by the phone for a few moments after hanging up, letting the words echo in her mind. The she hugged her arms to her chest as if to capture the words and carry them with her the rest of the evening.

\* \* \*

They’d kept Karin’s purse for evidence, but her forty millimeter had been returned. She secured another purse containing the gun in her locker. Maryanne was there. “You look like yourself again, gal. I’m so glad your boy’s okay.”

Maryanne smiled. “He’s gone...the guy who hurt me and my kid. He’s in jail. Child Support Services is gonna find a training program for me so I can get a different job and move where he can’t find me. Dancing like this, it’d be too easy to figure out where we are when he gets out.”

“I went through something like this myself once, only I wasn’t dancing then. No kids, and I moved really far away from the deadbeat. I think he’s lost interest in me, but, you know, some guys don’t.”

Maryanne nodded. “I kinda thought you understood.”

Karin sighed. “Yeah. I’m afraid too many women do.”

Lettie and Dana wandered in, chatting. “You have to quit drinking so much, Dana. You look really hung over. Darryl can’t keep providing a ride for you cause you’re drunk. Here, take these aspirin and some Vitamin C.” Lettie dug into her purse for the pills and went to the bar,

## *LURE*

returning with a glass of water.

“Man, I don’t know why I do that. Shouldn’t go to any more of Darryl’s parties. Too easy to lose control.”

Marla wet a paper towel, rang it out and folded it. “Here. Lay down with this over your forehead until you have to dance.” She covered Dana with her jacket. Once more she was moved by the concern these women showed for each other. Talking to Maryanne and helping Dana aided her in controlling her fears about what was probably in that locked room in the cellar. The fact that she hadn’t gotten anything that would give a judge reason to issue a search warrant bothered her.

She felt like she was sitting on a powder keg ready to blow. Maybe she was about to put a match to the fuse, but before she got into her costume, she located Tony. “Would you see if Mr. Latimore can see me for a minute?”

Lifting the interoffice phone at the bar, he spoke into it. Then he signaled to her to follow him to the office. Tony returned to his duties.

“Yes, Marla. What do you need?”

“Mr. Latimore, Mr. Mansone visited my mother in the rest home today. She’s a very sick, confused woman. I can’t imagine how he even knew my mother was alive. Or where she lived or why he went to see her. But I dropped in after he’d been there, and she was searching for bombs in her room! She was so agitated and paranoid she made me go outside to talk to me so no one would overhear us. I had to call her doctor.”

Darryl’s face went white.

“She’s on a medicine that can cause hallucinations, so could you please ask him not to visit again? A visit from a total stranger only fed into that. I’ve put in a request for visits from family only, and I hope he’ll respect that.”

He rose. “I knew nothing about this. I’m truly sorry, Marla.” His face tightened in anger. “I assure you it won’t happen again.”

## *LURE*

“Thanks.” As she shut the door behind her, she hoped she’d put a nail in Mansone’s coffin of investigating and testing her. The visit had been one more indication he hadn’t let go of the idea she was a cop. And, actually, she wasn’t. She was Special Agent Karin Woodhall, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, U.S. Department of Justice. And she had the badge to prove it.

The boy cut panties she wore had a special pocket for her ATF ID card. No one knew her panties concealed more than just her genitals. That always amused her when she danced, and, strangely, knowing the card was there added to her sense of power.

They arranged for Dana to dance last that night, giving her more time to recover from her hangover.

As she opened the bathroom door to finish dressing, she heard Lettie say, “You need to go to AA, Dana. I can take you to a meeting if you’ll go.”

## CHAPTER 6

Karin was working on her report the next morning when Angelo came into the secure room at headquarters. “Where’s Anderson?”

“Department head meeting.”

He surprised her by sitting on the edge of the table, one leg on the floor, his penis and balls forming the familiar budge under his jeans. He was dressed as he had been that first night, when the wall behind which she’d locked all of her sensual feelings had broken because she’d danced for him.

A warmth spread through her.

But something was wrong this morning. He didn’t look like a guy who’d declared his feelings for her just the evening before. Rather, he looked like he hadn’t slept or eaten.

“What’s wrong, Angelo, no donut fix this morning?” Her voice was quiet and her heart slipped to her knees as she waited for him to tell her he’d made a mistake in saying he thought he loved her.

## *LURE*

He toyed with a scrap of paper on the table, not looking her in the eyes. "I found the entrance to the cellar. It opens into an alley on the street below the club. On-foot surveillance is too obvious, and it'll take a while to get cameras set up on the roofs of buildings across the way. It's only a matter of time before we find out if they're moving weapons in or out of that entrance."

Now he looked straight at her, his words harsh. "I want you out of there. We don't need you there anymore, and it's way too dangerous, especially if we pin Mansone to the murders. If snorting and checking out your 'mom' didn't convince him you aren't a cop, then he's obsessed with you. He won't stop until he hurts you. He's got some kind of psychotic fix on you."

Anger and a deep sense of betrayal drove Karin to her feet. "So we're back to this again! Wrapping me in cotton batting, whispering of love, controlling me! I had a taste of that with my first marriage, Angelo, and I'm not having it again. Get that very clear in your hard head."

He looked like she'd struck him. "Christ, Karin, I didn't sleep at all last night knowing they might have caught you in that cellar!"

The anxiety on his face was genuine, but it didn't stop her. "I can't tell you what to feel. I can't calm your irrational fears. I'll ask Anderson for a new backup."

He turned a look on her so filled with pain she almost reached out to him, but then he stood and left the room. She sank into her chair and covered her face with her hands. By the time Anderson came in, she was ready for him.

"Excellent work, Karin," he said after he'd reviewed her report. "The potato gun was loaded?"

"With a tennis ball." Her mind still reeled from the encounter with Angelo.

"See any gasoline or kerosene near it?"

## *LURE*

Either of those solvents would create an incendiary device similar to a Molotov cocktail, this time shot by a propellant instead of thrown. She had the feeling someone intended to torch Pinky's after the weapons were moved. She shook her head. "No. Sorry. Couldn't get you reasonable cause."

"Angelo assigned someone to guard your 'mother,' by the way. So far no visits from strangers, and everyone on staff's checked out. Only impropriety we found was a couple of illegals working in the laundry, and they've been there two years. If Latimore was shocked that Mansone found your mother, I think it was because he knew the guy had access to the personnel records. Obviously, he's not supposed to."

"You think that was a power play to show Latimore who's really in charge as well as to check me out?"

Anderson nodded, leaning back, hands behind his head. "I think party time's over for you, Karin. Stay away from Latimore's house now that we know what we want's probably in the club."

"That'll be a great relief. I'm not sure I could get rid of the powdered meth again if Mansone pushed it. By the way, I haven't seen any signs that Lettie's using the stuff again. I'm sure she's a lesbian, though, so maybe her giggles were caused by awkwardness around someone new because of that. I'm wondering if what I saw was maybe left by Natalia. It wasn't much."

Then, taking a deep breath, she told him about her problem with Angelo and asked for a new backup.

Anderson grew thoughtful, then agreed Angelo'd been irrationally opposed to her involvement in the case from the beginning. "I called his superior officer in Seattle, and I think Angelo has good reason for his fears." Then he told her about Special Agent Miranda Gomez.

Karin felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. "Oh, my God."

"For two years Angelo's been torturing himself over this. It's why

## *LURE*

he transferred out of that jurisdiction.” Anderson co-signed her report and tossed his pen on the table. “I didn’t know about this when I assigned him to you, and we’re closing in on the case. It’s too late to assign someone new. Can you deal with his fears now?”

She nodded, a rush of unshed tears filling her eyes as love filled her heart.

\* \* \*

Friday night, when the invitation went out for another party, Karin felt almost giddy when she sent regrets. “My mother’s getting worse, and I really need to spend time with her.”

Friday nights at the club were always busy. Karin cringed when she saw Mansone enter dressed in slacks and a sport shirt. She heard the roar of a motorcycle outside, and knew Clyde would be entering next.

This time Clyde was wearing colors. Karin’s heart beat faster as she experienced a rush of excitement.

Lettie danced first, and Karin was amused at how many women joined the inner dance circle. The thought was replaced by concern that Clyde was openly flaunting his gang colors for the first time, and what it might mean.

Karin donned the Egyptian costume, wearing white panties instead of black. She entered wearing a long, white caftan, using stripper techniques Dana taught her to gradually remove it. Joe was stationed, arms crossed, at the customers’ entrance to the circle. He was dressed as an Egyptian, adding to the effect.

She sighed inwardly. So much creativity. Such poor use of it. Next she danced as The Lady of Class, and that almost brought down the house.

Maryanne was changing in the dressing room when Karin went in. Jokingly, Maryanne said, “If I wasn’t leaving here I’d ask for a new costume!”

Karin laughed, then, watching Maryanne’s bicep flex, said, “You

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know, you need to have that awful tattoo removed.”

“My boyfriend insisted on it, and I hate it. DCSS said the county has a free removal program.”

On impulse, when Karin dressed for her dominatrix role, she put the recording device into her boot in case anything went down tonight. They trusted her now, and when she was out among the customers she might hear something.

After dancing, she slipped on a loose black-and-gold caftan over her costume and, leaving her flail behind, went out to mingle with the customers. Moving with her drink toward a table not far from Darryl’s office, she noticed the door was partially open. She pressed the record trigger when she heard Darryl start to speak.

His voice was low but determined. “Stay away from my girls.”

Mansone laughed. “You’re just pissed because I got rid of Natalia. You have something going with her? You got a hard-on for Marla? I told you, she’s a damn cop!”

Marla’s heart raced. She wasn’t off the hook yet with this man.

“No one touches my girls, and if I’d known you and Clyde were the ones who raped and beat her to death, I’d never have made this deal with you. Once you have the weapons and I have my money, you are out of here!”

Mansone laughed again. His laughter turned Karin’s heart to ice. “It wasn’t only your little Natalia me and Clydie-boy worked over. Actually, we didn’t set out to kill either of the two dancers. Just got a little carried away, I guess.”

It was nearing time for her to dance again when Pinky’s was caught in a wind tunnel of sound from the giant roar of motorcycles. Almost as one, the motors died, and Karin’s flesh crawled as she watched biker after biker, all patched ins wearing Alii Nation’s turquoise and purple colors, enter the club. The last man to enter was a young, handsome Latin male wearing a corduroy vest. She knew the vest was a mark of

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honor, of power. Only the national president was allowed to wear a vest made of this fabric.

What in hell was going on here, she wondered. This wasn't a biker club. Why were they here? Maybe brought to intimidate Darryl and bring him into line?

The men immediately crowded up to the bar, jostling each other and swearing. One of them, a huge man with hair on his face as well as on his arms, actually jumped over the bar and picked up one of the unopened beer kegs before Jake could stop him. Another biker swept up a bunch of mugs and carried them to the table where the beer keg had been placed. They tapped the keg, not caring that the beer flowed onto the floor, and they filled their mugs.

Another man swiped bottles of wine, whiskey and glasses right out from under Jake's hands, distributing them to other tables and bikers.

They brought with them the smell of unwashed bodies. Someone belched loudly at one of the tables. At the bar, one of the bikers farted, and all the bikers there laughed and slapped him on the back. They were disgusting.

They were loud. Crude. They were also very, very dangerous.

The scene was like something right out of her Florida job, and all too familiar to Karin. She pressed the lavalier signal for Angelo to call her. Tension made her neck tight as she waited. When summoned to the phone, she again felt calm settle over her just at the sound of his voice. She thanked him for calling. She knew he was busy. "I'm sorry, it's difficult to hear you over the noise. I'm at the club where I work, and we seem to have been invaded tonight by bikers. They're pretty much wall to wall here. You should have heard the roar of so many motorcycles descending on us." She chuckled.

"Aliis?"

"Yes, I can hear you better now."

"Wearing colors?"

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“Yes. I’m so glad you took her off the Haldol. Is she having fewer hallucinations?”

“Do you think there are any wives or girlfriends with them?”

“No, but that’s good to hear, Dr. Snowman.”

“Sounds bad. It’s pretty late...think you can get the dancers out of there safely?”

“It’s certainly worth a try. Thanks for calling me. I know how limited your time is. Goodbye.”

She located Tony, who looked as harried as Jake did. “I don’t know what’s going on, Tony, but I think the dancers need to leave now. These guys could get out of control at the flick of a match.”

He snapped a finger at Joe, standing guard near the cellar door. No doubt to keep the thieves out, she thought grimly. Joe shook his head, indicating he couldn’t leave his post.

“Never mind,” Karin said. “I’ll get us out. I’m supposed to dance, but there’s no way I will in this crowd. These guys could turn nasty any minute.”

So as not to betray her anxiety, she walked confidently to the changing room. “Get dressed. We’re all leaving together before this powder keg blows. Hurry.”

Three nervous faces looked at her and then they all threw on their street clothes.

Karin had worn sport pants that snapped up the sides. She tore off her short skirt and pulled the pants right up over her dominatrix boots and panties. She pulled a sweatshirt over her dance bra. Anchoring her HK in her back waistband, she added a jacket. Then, listening to be sure there was no one in the hall, she signaled to her frightened co-workers that they could leave.

In the parking lot she waited while Lettie drove out, and then Dana. To Maryanne she said, “Don’t come back here. Find a better life.” Maryanne nodded and hugged her goodbye.

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Turning to thread her way through the motorcycles to her car, she felt a hand clamp down on her arm so tight she knew it would bruise, and she looked into the face of Meredol Mansone. It took only a slight movement at the pager at her waist to trigger the recorder in her boot again.

“Escaping, Miz Marla?”

Stay focused, she told herself. Relax. Men like this thrive on fear. “Not escaping, Mr. Mansone. It seemed sensible to leave since we’re through working, and we were the only women in a club filled with rowdy male bikers.”

“Oh, but you cancelled your final act, didn’t you? Maybe you’re saving the last dance for me.”

She forced a lighthearted laugh. “Maybe some other night, Mr. Mansone. Maybe then you can come up and see me sometime.”

Rather than releasing her, he pulled her back hard up against him, placing her in a choke hold. Her hands flew up to pull at his arms to relieve some of the pressure on her throat. She felt the cold metal of a pistol at her temple. Her pistol.

“Well, whadda ya know...an HK in her back waistband. You fucking cop!”

Karin didn’t speak. Anything she might say could set him off, so she remained silent.

“You know what’s going down tonight, don’t you? You weren’t fooled by our little diversion, were you? Gang bangers causing mayhem in the club, while we unload the arms out of the cellar. Why do you think Joe was guarding the door?”

Her windpipe was so squeezed she could barely breathe. Right now she was struggling just to get air and stay alive.

“I know you were in the cellar. Jake mentioned you were allergic to dust. I knew the dusty place where you’d been, picked out your footprints by the locked doors. Two and two equals four, Marla.

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Always equals four.”

She was growing lightheaded from lack of oxygen. She reached for her throat as if to pull his arm away, but pressed the locket once instead, grateful they’d set the most critical signal at only one press. It might be the last she’d ever make.

He began dragging her away from her car.

“Let her go, Meredol.” The voice behind the words was stronger than she’d ever heard it.

Mansone stopped. Karin felt an easing of the pistol against her temple as he took aim on someone approaching them. “Well, well, well. Darryl. What are you doing out here? You’re supposed to be supervising the loading of my arsenal.”

Darryl was in firing stance, the semi-automatic Glock he’d let Karin use in his range in his hands. “I told you not to mess with my dancers, and so Joe pimped the hookers you and your men fucked. But you were greedy. You wanted Natalia, and you killed her when she refused you to protect her job. Let Marla go or I’ll kill you and you won’t get your weapons.”

A shot sounded through the night as Mansone’s gun spit orange in the darkness. Karin, her ears ringing from the shot, watched in sadness as Darryl crumpled. And then Mansone was dragging her back into the club along a hallway she hadn’t known existed and down to the cellar from a second stairway she’d missed on her trip for wine.

A huge, gray truck was parked in the alley outside the open double doors, and the man in the golf shirt from those first surveillance tapes was instructing others how to load the weapons.

Karin had a glimpse of them loading assault rifles and pistols. The truck was fast approaching its capacity.

Where’s the SWAT team?

She watched helplessly because struggling against her captor only made him tighten up on the choke hold. Passing out was something she

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had to avoid at all costs. And she didn't want Mansone firing her gun again. Heaven only knew what was in that truck. What if there were explosives and a wild shot set them off? What if SWAT set one off? The possibility was too horrible to consider.

Mansone dragged her outside, past the truck and toward a sleek, black Mercedes. Behind them she heard the truck's motor turn over, and die. Turn over, and die.

"What the hell!" Meredol cried.

"ATF, Mansone. Let her go."

Relief washed up through Karin at the sound of Angelo's voice. She had a brief glimpse of him with an arrow nocked in a powerful combination bow as dark and menacing as his SWAT uniform. The drawn bow was pointed at Mansone. Angelo had all the strength necessary to pull the bow.

"On three, Woodhall. Pull the chain. Blow." He spoke the words so fast they all ran together.

*My God, what's he telling me?*

And then it came to her.

Mansone would shoot Angelo at any second, just as quickly as he had Darryl. She stomped her spike heel into Mansone's instep with all her might. His hold weakened. She reached between her legs, grabbed his balls and yanked. She heard and felt them tear.

"Bitch!" he screamed, releasing her.

She fell to her knees as Angelo sent an arrow at bullet speed straight through Meredol's throat.

She heard her gun clatter to the ground as he fell. Mansone hadn't given Darryl a chance to fire. Angelo hadn't given Mansone a chance either. It was poetic justice, she thought.

Pull the chain. Blow. Angelo had told her to yank on the guy's balls and drop to her knees, like women do to give a blow job, giving him a clear shot.

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An ambulance wailed in the night, making its way to them. Crawling toward the wounded man, she looked him in the eyes as his life slipped away from the wound to his throat. "You were wrong, Meredol. Wrong." Her voice was raspy and painful. "I'm not a cop. Nor am I Marla Campbell. I'm Special Agent Karin Woodhall, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, U.S. Department of Justice. I have a badge to prove it."

He seemed to be looking at her as she spoke. His eyes hadn't glazed over yet. And then they did.

Who knows, she thought. Maybe the bastard heard me before he died. For the sake of Natalia and the other murdered dancer, I hope so.

She recovered her gun and Angelo gave her a hand up.

\* \* \*

Angelo drove her to the office to meet with Anderson in the secure room. He'd given her car keys to another SWAT officer and asked him to assign someone to drive the vehicle to her apartment building.

She might have known SWAT wouldn't resort to gunfire in this situation. Angelo told her they'd disabled the truck, and an arrow had killed the man in the golf shirt the minute he'd gone for his weapon.

"I never knew his name," Karin said.

"The team moved in on the Alii Nation upstairs, and Joe and Tony surrendered."

Inside the secure room, Angelo knelt to remove her boots and retrieve the recording device.

His hands were warm as he massaged her feet. "Your feet are two ice cubes."

"Nerves," she replied. "But you know the old adage: Cold feet, warm heart."

Laughing, he continue to work on her feet, massaging each toe and her ankles. She looked down on his tousled head, his strong body encased in black SWAT attire, and knew she loved him. She removed

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her HK and the pager from her waistband and laid them on the table just as Anderson entered the room.

It was the first time she'd seen him the least bit rumpled. Apparently he'd been at the command post, concerned not just about her but about all his agents in the line of fire.

"Great work, you two," he said. "We probably retrieved two hundred automatic and semi-automatic weapons plus a hand-held missile launcher and dynamite. We found the spud gun, Karin, but there was no evidence they were going to use it to torch the club. As you know, Latimore's dead, as is Mansone. The man in the golf shirt carried identity for a Jonathan Brown. That may be an alias, so will need further checking. No one still inside the club when SWAT arrived was hurt.

"Unfortunately, we may not be able to link your biker friend, Clyde, with the weapons set up, Karin. Mansone's statement on your recording may not be enough to bring him to court on the murders. If his boot tips leave marks peculiar only to his boots, and they match the marks on Natalia, we may exhume the first dancer's body. Then we'd have a case to arrest him for murder."

"I think the agent playing my mother will be relieved this is over. Heaven knows I am."

"You sound hoarse. I have a physician coming to check you out," Anderson said.

She waved Anderson away, but he insisted, so she waited like a good agent, accepting boss's orders. When the doctor had pronounced her relatively unharmed, and just needing to rest her voice for a few days, Karin began to write her report.

"Oh, no, you don't," Angelo said. "You're going to rest." He wrapped her in his SWAT jacket, lifted her in his arms and carried her away.

Anderson laughed and gave them a little salute, holding the door

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open for his burdened agent.

\* \* \*

“Your apartment or mine?” he asked when he’d parked and was struggling up the stairs with her.

“I don’t have any donuts,” she murmured, drinking in the feel of his arms around and beneath her, the powerful shoulder on which she rested her head, content for once to let someone else take charge. To let this man express how much he cared for her.

“Mine it is then.” He pressed his lips to the top of her head.

Once in his apartment, he let her stand. She moved on bare feet to his couch and sat, switching on the TV to see breaking news of the raid. Angelo asked for her apartment key and disappeared, returning with her nightie and clean clothing for the next day. She heard water running in the tub, and then the scent of Spring Rain, her favorite bath salts, wafting out of the bathroom.

Taking her by the hand, he led her there and slowly undressed her, bagging each item for evidence. When she stood naked except for black garter belt, hose and panties, something flared in her belly as she watched the bulge at his crotch enlarge. Moisture formed in her vagina and vulvae, her nerves created little electric shocks in her buttocks. As he slowly slid the black net nylons down her legs, letting his finger tips glide over her skin, the shocks shimmied through her legs and entire body.

When he removed her panties, he paused to take in the scent of the crotch before tossing them. “I love the smell of you there, and how you taste. I’d like to have more of that.”

She felt blood hit her face and knew she blushed.

He kissed her, but before he could toss the panties into an evidence bag, Karin said, “Wait.” She pulled her ID out of the secret pocket.

“Good Lord, you danced with that in your panties?”

“Every time.”

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He laughed hard and loud.

He let her soak before he bathed her, and she relaxed against the sure hands. She discovered he gave a great shampoo. She stood, and he rinsed her hair and body with pitchers of warm water. She stepped out of the tub and he towed her dry.

Taking his terry robe from the hook, he enclosed her in its rough warmth and pulled her to him. Wrapped in each other's arms, they rocked in silence.

She felt his breath warm against her ear. "I thought I'd die when I saw Meredol had a choke hold on you and a gun at your temple," he whispered.

She clutched him more tightly. "When things got rough in the club, I got the women out to the parking lot. After the last one had driven away, Meredol grabbed me. I couldn't talk my way out of it. He had a choke hold on me, but suddenly Darryl was there with his Glock, in firing stance. He ordered him to let me go. Threatened to call the weapons deal off if any of his dancers were hurt. Meredol shot him through the heart. There was no discussion. Then he dragged me down through the wine cellar. I was terrified he'd fire on you immediately too. But you gave me the clues that saved our lives."

He ran his hands lightly down her spine and across her buttocks, sending little shivers of anticipation and delight splintering through her.

"Thank God, you understood me. We had a little practice on that clue business as Marla and Dr. Snowman, didn't we?" His breathing was heavier now. His hands were moving to her breasts. The warm globes filled them as they had no other hands before his, and her nipples danced at his touch.

Her laugh was light. "It was hard to keep a straight face addressing a Dr. Snowman. It was so bogus!"

Serious, Karin said, "Anderson told me about Miranda Gomez. That must have been so hard for you. I assumed you were a very controlling

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man, and I'd had enough of that with an abusive husband. Finally, I understood why you were so adamant about me leaving the case. But you came through for me. You stayed focused and didn't let your emotions influence your judgment."

Angelo was distracting her now by showering kisses over her nose, her eyes and cheeks. His fingertips walked their way down from her breasts to dabble at her navel. His thumbs splayed across her abdomen, while his fingers caressed her hips as something deep in her belly responded.

"I'd say my emotions were what gave impetus to that focus. We made a pretty good team, Agent Woodhall."

"We did, Agent Santini. We did."

His hands moved to her inner thighs, and she gasped with pleasure as she felt for his cock and found it waiting, hard and big beneath his SWAT uniform.

"Angelo?"

"Yes?" He gazed at her with his wonderful eyes, the greens more prominent now than the gold.

"I'm not really hungry for donuts right now. Are you?"

"No, I'm not. My hunger is for something else. Something I'd like to have in my life from now on. Would Agent Woodhall consider changing her name to Santini?"

She didn't fight the tears welling up and escaping down her cheeks. "I think Agent Woodhall would love to become Agent Karin Woodhall-Santini."

Feeling a contentment she'd never known before, she opened her mouth to him, sliding the robe from her shoulders and letting it fall to her feet as she reached for the buttons on his shirt.

She sighed as Angelo reached for the moist spot between her legs.

## EPILOGUE

Karin didn't tell Angelo or Anderson where she was going. This was a personal journey, not agency business. And there were some men who found the workings of a woman's heart pure puzzlement.

After pulling through the wrought iron gates to St. Martin's Cemetery, she parked her white Camry in the visitors' section. Lifting a spray of roses from the front seat, she proceeded to the untended visitors' booth at the entrance. There she looked in the latest registry book and located the grave she needed.

The sun warmed her as she walked on the narrow path winding beside the granite markers planted flat in the grass. A noisy crow followed her for a time, pecking the grass until finally rising in dark flight to rest in a tree.

It was a lovely place, surrounded by huge cedars, pines and redwoods. The white and yellow blossoms of a hedge of honeysuckle permeated the air with their sweetness.

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Finding the spot she wanted, Karin knelt and placed the sheaf of flowers beside the marker she'd looked for. She brushed grass cuttings away to reveal its inscription: "Darryl Hanson Latimore." It bore the dates of his birth and death. Nothing more.

What could be said about a man as complex as this man had been? A sad man, out of touch with his day and time, dabbling in the sale of arms for purposes unknown for the money, opening his home to evil happenings, while shutting his eyes to it. A man who wanted respect and regard. Who gave that to his dancers. Who gave his life for one of them.

Karin laid the spray of yellow roses on the stone. Yellow for friendship, the florist had told her. "All your dancers are safe, Darryl. I needed to tell you that, and to say thank you."

She brushed her fingertips with a kiss and pressed them to his marker. "Rest easy, my friend. Rest easy."

Rising, she spread her arms to the sun. To life. And went home to Angelo, her heart at peace.

## CAROLINA VALDEZ

In her previous contemporary novella, *Where Vesuvius Sleeps*, Carolina Valdez took us to an excavation in ancient Pompeii at the foot of a slumbering volcano, and into the world of classical erotic art. This followed *Sweet Chocolate Ecstasy*, her first erotic paranormal. Carolina's association with Amber Quill Press began when her short erotic historical, *Dark Stranger*, was a winner in the 2004 Amber Heat Wave Contest. It placed third in the 2005 Lories Best Published Novella Contest. Next came a traditional historical romance, *Knight of the Captive Heart*, a "5 Angels—Recommended Read" from Michelle at FAR.

\* \* \*

***Don't miss Knight Of The Captive Heart, by Carolina Valdez,  
available at [AmberHeat.com](http://AmberHeat.com)***

*England's widowed Earl of Gladsbury has a problem: Christiana, his only child and heir, binds her breasts and often dresses as a boy in denial of her womanhood. She longs to be a knight.*

*The earl knows that should he die in battle while Christiana is unwed, she and Gladsbury would be at the mercy of the king. It's not only time that she marry, but that she learn a noblewoman's duties of managing as well as defending the castle. Hoping to awaken her sensuality, the earl assigns her for defense lessons to his most eligible knights—Guy de Bere and the mysterious new arrival, Rowan du Veau, the Dark*

*Knight. What the earl does not know is that Guy's heart is tainted by lust and greed; he wants Christiana and Gladsbury. Rowan's heart has been captured by a distant noblewoman; he needs land and wealth in order to become betrothed to her.*

*Under their tutelage, will Christiana discover the true nature of these strong men? Is a man capable of changing his loyalties? Will the earl's hopes that his daughter learn to revel in the power of her womanhood come to fruition, or will she, like many noblewomen of her day, become just a pawn for one man's greed or another man's need?*

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