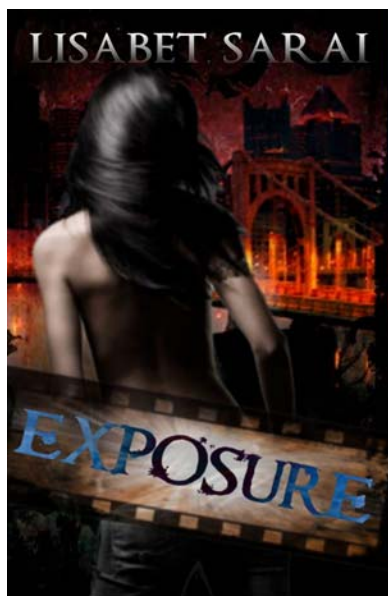


LISABET SARAI

EXPOSURE



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# *Exposure*

A novel of erotic suspense by

LISABET SARAI

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To Adrienne, who is, in a very real sense, responsible.

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# *Chapter One*

## *Private Dance*

I strip for the fun of it. Don't let anyone tell you different. It's not the money. I could make nearly as much working at the mill and keep my clothes on, but then I'd have to suck up to the bosses. Here at the Peacock, I'm the one in charge, and I like it that way.

Sometimes I think it's a sort of revenge, for all the times I heard those nasty calls trailing after me: Honey Jugs, Monster Boobs, Bouncer. Not to mention those sweaty, awkward clinches in back seats, trying to please. Trying to be popular. Now they can't take their eyes off my breasts, swinging back and forth in time to the music. Their tongues are hanging out. I can see the tents in their laps. They all want me; I know how to make them want me. I'm an expert. But I'm off limits. They can look, they can drool, they can beg me. But my job's to turn them on and bring them to the bursting point, then send them home unsatisfied.

That's my view, anyway. Some of the other girls think different. All in all, though, the Peacock Lounge is a pretty classy joint, not like some of the sleaze pits down near the railroad.

I love the moment when the lights come down, and the DJ introduces me. There's this strange pause, as if I was floating. I can feel them out there, the audience, holding their breath. Then, I hear the first notes of my routine. Energy surges through me. I'm one hundred percent alive. My nipples get hard and my sex tingles when I step out onto the stage and meet their eyes.

That's my secret weapon: eye contact. Up close and personal. I can bump and grind, shake my tits in their faces, bend over so they get a good look at the G-string settled in my ass-crack. It doesn't do any good without my stare. I try to see their

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darkest fantasies. This one pictures me sitting on him, his mouth burrowing in my bush. That one wants me to hold his dick while he pees. That guy in the back, oh, he's bad news. He aches to tie me up and beat me with his belt. Tough luck, feller. Dream on.

I don't know whether what I see is real or just my imagination, but it has a real effect. They feel my eyes; they think I know them. They get all flustered and embarrassed, wave to me, stick their tens and twenties into my G-string. Watching me, anxious-like, all the time.

Meanwhile, it turns me on. I dance a lot better when I'm horny. Sometimes I play with myself a bit before my set, to get myself into the mood. Then I hold my fingers under their noses, and watch their reactions.

I feed off their desire. The more they want me, the hotter I get, the better I dance. The more outrageous I become. So, it's particularly annoying tonight that this one guy in the front row doesn't react at all.

It's early, and it's Monday, slow. He's the only one sitting close enough for me to use my stare, and it isn't working. He's good-looking in a clean-cut, straight-laced sort of way. Blond crew cut, blue-eyed, muscles that show even under his expensive suit. At least it looks expensive to me.

He has not taken his eyes off me since I strutted onto the stage, but his face is without expression. It's like he has walls behind his eyes. I can't see into him at all. Now it's me that's getting frustrated and hot under the collar. I've already stripped down to my pasties, boots, and thong. I peel one of the tassels off my nipple and dangle it in front of him. He looks only at my eyes. He's measuring me, sizing me up for something.

I prance around on my stiletto heel boots. I shake my hips, do a slow, sensuous shimmy, cup my tits in my palms and offer them to him. No reaction. I take off the other tassel and attach it behind, where my butt cheeks meet, a lewd little tail. There's a whistle from a table in the back, but Mr. Clean just continues to study me.

Damn him. I'm sweaty from the effort. My cunt is throbbing in time with the music. I can feel that the shred of nylon running between my legs is sopping. Fixing him with my best stare, I sink onto my knees in front of him, thighs spread



wide. Then I slide both my forefingers inside the G-string and start to touch myself. We're not supposed to do really explicit stuff like that. If Joey, the owner of the club, saw me, he'd give me hell. But this is a desperate case. I will not allow this guy to get the better of me.

I'm actually quite close to coming, when finally I see him give a little smile. So maybe he is enjoying himself after all. My music is ending. Time for the grand finale. Standing up, I unsnap the sides of the thong and pull it back and forth through my crotch a couple of times. Just to make sure it's totally saturated. Then I drop it in the guy's lap and strut off the stage, naked except for my boots.

I can hear applause and yells from the table near the back. I'm shaking, pissed off, and horny at the same time. Who does that character think he is?

When I calm down a bit, I put on my kimono and go check out the crowd. A few more tables are occupied now, and there's a rowdy group at the bar. Meanwhile, Mr. Clean hasn't budged. When he sees me, he beckons me to come over.

"Good evening," he says, very polite. "I enjoyed your performance."

Oh, yeah? I think to myself. "Glad to hear it," I say out loud.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Thanks, but I don't drink."

"What's your name?"

"Stella."

"Stella what?"

"Stella Xanathakeos," I say, smiling despite myself at his reaction. Not your typical stage name. But why should I pretend to be somebody else?

"Well, Miss Xana—Xanathakeos, I have a business proposition for you."

"Look, I'm no hooker."

"That's obvious, Miss Xanathakeos. You have a presence on stage, a special flair that marks you as a true artist."

Bullshit, I think, but his politeness is softening me up anyway.

"I have an associate who has a particular fondness for

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voluptuous women of Mediterranean complexion, like yourself. I'd like to engage you to give him a private performance."

"I don't know..." I begin.

"I'll pay you five hundred dollars," says Mr. Clean. "Two hundred fifty in advance and the rest after you dance for him."

Well, that stops me for a minute. Like I said, I don't do this for the money. But five hundred dollars would bring me a lot closer to that trip to Greece I've been saving for. Ever since I was a kid, I've wanted to see the Parthenon, the island of Rhodes, the ancient ruins at Salonika. My dad used to talk about Greece all the time, how the sky was blue as crystal and the air smelled like wine. "All I have to do is dance?"

"That's right. Your usual routine, or something more creative, if you like."

"Where and when?"

"Tomorrow night, around eight o'clock, at the Hyatt downtown. I'll give you the room number."

"How long will it take?"

"An hour at most. You can be back here at the Peacock by nine thirty."

I consider the question. Can I trust this guy, with his closed-up face? He's already holding out two C-notes and a fifty, confident that I'll accept. What the hell, I decide finally. I've got my Mace, and I can deliver a mean kick in the balls. I can take care of myself.

\* \* \* \*

The next night I show up at the designated room number, at eight on the dot. I like to be professional. I've tried to dress as elegant as I can, in a nice peach linen suit that hugs my curves and makes me look dark and exotic. I'm nervous, though, as nervous as I was that first night I stepped onto the Peacock stage. Taking a deep breath, I rap three times on the door like Mr. Clean told me to do.

I recognize the man at the door immediately. I may be a stripper, but I read the papers. It's Anthony Pinelli, leading businessman, local power-broker, candidate for mayor. Hey, I was planning on voting for him, in spite of the stories about his

mob connections. Nobody's lily-white these days. From what I've read, he seems to have the kind of strength that you need to run this tough town.

I've seen his picture lots of times, but in person he's even more impressive. Big but not fat, with a shock of shiny black hair and bushy eyebrows to match. He has a nice straight nose, lips that look decisive, and dark eyes that seem to go right through me.

But more than his good looks, I'm impressed by the sense of power that he projects. Charisma, I think the word is. He looks me over, those firm lips curve into a warm smile, and I suddenly feel like I'd do anything he asks.

"Please come in, Ms. Xanathakeos," he says, standing aside so that I can enter the suite. His voice has a round, mellow sound to it. It slides over me.

"Call me, Stella, please." I look around the fancy suite curiously, noting the modern paintings on the walls, the horseshoe-shaped sofa, the bar set up in the corner. The closed door next to the desk must lead to the bedroom. My heels sink into the thick, plum-colored carpet. I'm afraid that I'll damage it. Maybe I'll have to dance barefoot.

"Well, then, Stella, you must call me Tony." He takes my hand in a kind of old-fashioned way. His touch sends shivers through my body. My nervousness is gone, replaced by a feeling of breathlessness. I won't have any trouble at all getting turned on enough to dance, that's for sure.

"Can I offer you some refreshment?" Tony asks, gesturing toward the bar.

"Just water, if you have some."

He hands me a long-stemmed glass full of carbonated water. I watch the bubbles dancing. It feels as if there are bubbles inside my chest, too.

He pours himself a tall scotch. We sit together for a few minutes on the sofa, not talking, sipping our drinks. I feel flushed and sweaty, as if I've already danced for him. His body gives off waves of heat. It's like I'm lying under a sun lamp. I don't know what to do next.

Finally, he puts down his drink. "Shall we get started? Let me get a bit more comfortable." He shrugs off his suit jacket and

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places it over the desk chair. I gasp as I see that he is wearing a revolver in a shoulder holster. He smiles, just a little, as he removes this and hangs it over the chair on top of the jacket. "I'm a dangerous man, Stella, and I have many enemies. I have to take care of myself." I nod vaguely. I'm not exactly reassured.

He seats himself back on the sofa. "The stereo is over there," he says, pointing to a complicated pile of audio equipment next to the bar. Somehow, I figure out how to insert my tape and start it playing. I turn to face my audience.

The first bars of the music free me from any anxiety. I fix my eyes on him and begin to move. Graceful. Sensual. I'm extremely turned on, but I want this performance to be classy, not raunchy the way I sometimes am.

The shoes go first. Now I unfasten my jacket, lingering over each button. Building the suspense. I'm wearing regular lingerie, flimsy and feminine, instead of one of my costumes. My breasts are like melons, encased in black lace. No padding or wires on this bra; my nipples are clearly visible, pushing the fabric into sweet little peaks.

I do the classic strip, turning my back and inching the skirt zipper down. Shimmying the garment over my hips to my ankles. I feel his eyes on my rump. When I turn back to face him, I try out the stare on him. The results are mixed.

He's not closed off like his friend. I can see deep into his soul. I see passion, hunger, clean and healthy. Not twisted and painful like some of the guys at the lounge.

At the same time, though, I feel like he sees into me. It's like he's touching me inside, probing, trying to discover what I want. It's strange and very intimate. His eyes make my clit harden and my juices flow.

But my eyes are doing the same to him. I can see the bulge in his tailored trousers. His breath is coming a bit more quickly, too.

I unfasten the bra in front. Instead of tossing it at him, which is my first idea, I let it drift to the floor. I caress my breasts, as much for my own pleasure as for his. I love their heaviness in my hands. I love the way the skin shades to rich darkness at their tips. And the nipples themselves, round and firm like the best Kalamata olives. I roll them between my

fingers, my breath starting to become ragged.

Finally, there are just my bikini panties between me and nakedness. I hold off as long as I can, letting the music build to its climax. At the crescendo, I undo the ribbons at each hip, so the thing just falls away from my body. For a moment I stand there proudly, my curly black pubic hair glistening with my own moisture. Tony's eyes devour me. Then the music dies away. I sink to the carpet in a curtsy, strangely exhausted.

I came here to dance. Just a job. But now I want more. And so does Tony.

He lifts me up. He embraces me. Neither of us speaks. We communicate only through the kiss. His mouth feels gentler than it looks. He tastes like his expensive scotch. I let myself relax, feel the stiffness of his starched shirt against my bare skin. There's more stiffness below. He rubs his erection against my damp bush, making me damper still, while his tongue plays with mine. His fingers lock on to my nipples, pinching them until I squirm with pleasure.

This is certainly a nice bonus. He strips off his shirt, pants, and briefs. He leaves his socks on, and for once, I don't mind. I usually think naked guys in socks look ridiculous, but nothing so simple could spoil Tony Pinelli. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulls out a condom. Of course he's prepared.

We're both so hot from my dance, we don't bother with much foreplay. He sits back down on the sofa and I straddle him. His latex-sheathed cock juts up, lovely and stiff, between my thighs. With one smooth motion, I sink down onto his hardness. I grip him with my thighs and we begin to ride.

We climb quickly. In this position, every thrust diddles my clit. He grabs me by the hips and works me up and down on his rod. Then I take control for a while, setting a fierce pace, building up to a grand finale.

His eyes are closed now. But I think I still feel the touch of his mind, a gentle contrast to our ferocious fucking. I close my eyes, too, concentrating on the delicious sensations in my cunt, in my whole body.

My thoughts are hazy with lust, but something catches my attention. Some faint sound, some sense that the air has moved. Then all hell breaks loose.

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Tony pulls me off him and throws me across the room. I crumple in a corner, trying to catch my breath. There's another person in the room, over near the desk. It takes me a fraction of a second to realize that the figure in Polo shirt and jeans is Mr. Clean.

He has Tony's gun, and is pointing it at the near-naked man. I scream, I can't help it, and Mr. Clean fires. At the same time, I see that Tony also has a weapon, a tiny revolver that was strapped around his calf. There's a high-pitched report, and Mr. Clean sinks to the floor in a heap. He doesn't move again, but neither does Tony.

It's long time before my shakes go away.

Eventually, I get up and limp over to Tony. My ankle got twisted when he tossed me away, but I have a feeling that he saved my life. There's blood matted in the hair on his chest. He isn't breathing. In death, his aura has fled. There's no sense of power or attraction about this motionless flesh.

Mr. Clean is dead, too, with a hole through his forehead. There's a lot of blood here as well, but it doesn't show that much on the plum carpet.

I dress myself carefully. I need to look respectable, not messed up. Then I take a look around.

In the bedroom, I find an elaborate camera, set up to take pictures through a peephole. Blackmail? But who would care if Tony Pinelli got it on with some stripper? Then it hits me. Mr. Clean wanted Tony's gun, not to shoot Tony, but to shoot me, later. And then to frame the mayoral candidate, with evidence that he was the last one to see me alive. I was supposed to meet Mr. Clean in the lobby to claim the rest of my fee. I suspect that I would not have survived that meeting.

Of course he was crazy to think that he could sneak in and snatch the gun while we were screwing. A man like Tony has to keep one eye open, even when he's in the throes.

I whisper a little thank you to Tony and to whatever gods watch over me. Open the camera to expose the film. Note that the camera is empty. Close the camera, wipe it with a Kleenex, go back to the sitting room. Put the two glasses in the bar sink and run water over them, inside and out.

Finally, I go over to the blond man's body again. I don't

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really want to touch him, but I make myself do it.

His wallet's in his hip pocket. There's about three grand inside, but I take only the two-fifty I'm owed. Then I wipe off the wallet and stuff it back into his pants.

Like I said, I'm not in it for the money. I do it for fun.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Black Widow*

I dream of blood, swirling round my boots as I strut on stage. Ripe, hot, salty—I taste it on my lips, too. Vague pain ripples through the dream and I wonder if the blood is mine.

I wake sweaty, my heart pounding hard. The pain focuses, resolves itself to a throbbing ache in my ankle. Throwing back the covers, I check out the purplish, swollen flesh. The sight of my injury brings it all back, my private performance for Tony Pinelli and its fatal conclusion.

At that moment, I know two things. First, I know I won't be able to dance tonight. Hell, I can barely limp to the bathroom. Second, I realize I've got to go see the cops before they come to me. There's a chance I wasn't seen last night, but it's pretty slim. In any case, it'd be too risky not to tell them what I know. I've got to make sure they know I was just an innocent bystander.

First things first, though. I shower, dress in a charcoal-gray suit and flats, and take a cab up to Squirrel Hill to see Dr. Mann. I've known him all my life. He used to care for the men at the mill when my dad worked there.

He's always the same, gray-haired and genial, clucking his tongue at me and scolding me in his German accent. "Stella, Stella, what have you done to yourself this time?" I wince as he prods at the stretched and mottled skin above my instep.

"Some jerk tried to grab me while I was on stage. I kicked out at him and lost my balance." Best to keep the truth to myself for the moment.

"When are you going to get a decent job, Stella? You're too old to be prancing around half-naked. Too old, and too smart."

I know he's trying to be kind, but his words sting nevertheless. "I like my work. I've told you that before. I like to strip. I'm good at it, too, partly because I am smart. And I'm



only twenty-eight. There are plenty of women older than me at the club.”

He finishes wrapping the ACE bandage around my ankle before he replies.

“Your father wouldn’t approve, you know that.” I know that he’s right. Dad had been saving to help pay for college. But then he got sick, the summer I graduated high school, and I had to take care of him. Two years of hospital bills ate up his savings, and more. And in the end, the cancer took him anyway.

They say that time heals all grief, but even now, after all these years, missing him is like a knife twisting in my gut.

“I know, and I’m sorry, but he’s gone now and I make my own decisions. What kind of job could I get, anyway, with just my diploma? Nothing that I’d enjoy half as much, I’ll tell you that.”

The good doctor sighs and sits up. “Okay, Stella, whatever you say. But for now, you’ve got to stay off that ankle. No walking, let alone dancing. Keep it elevated and on ice as much as possible.”

I laugh. “Believe me, that instruction enforces itself. I couldn’t dance right now unless I was on crutches. Of course, maybe that would make a good gimmick. Gotta have one, you know, like Gypsy Rose said.”

“Don’t you dare,” warns Dr. Mann, bristling protectively until he sees that I’m joking. He ruffles my hair as if I were a little girl. “Come back and see me in a week. And be careful, Stella. Don’t do anything foolish.”

“Okay, doctor. Thanks. I’ll see you next Thursday.”

My next stop is the Fourth Precinct police station. It’s not in my neighborhood, and it’s not near the Hyatt, but I know someone there. I limp in, trying to look dignified, and ask for Detective James Ostermann. The huge grin that lights up his face when he sees me makes me feel better than I have all day.

“Stella! What a treat! What do I owe this honor to?” He pumps my hand enthusiastically.

Jimmy and I went to school together. There’s always been some kind of sexual tension between us, though we never did anything about it. He was one of the few guys who respected me, who didn’t try to get into my pants. Last time I saw him, at our

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fifth reunion, he had just been promoted from beat cop to detective. Then just six months ago I read an article in the paper about him heading up a new task force against organized crime. That's how I knew where to find him.

"Hello, Jimmy." I return his smile. "I wish I could tell you that this was just a social call, but in fact I've got something pretty serious to discuss with you. Can we talk in private?"

"Always a pleasure," he teases, but his face takes on a professional expression as he leads me into his office. "Bill, would you mind taking a walk?" he asks his partner, a hefty black man that I haven't met before.

"Sure, Jim, no problem. Give a yell if you need me."

Jimmy closes the door and seats himself behind his desk. I sit across from my old friend. There's a newspaper on the surface between us, the headlines screaming about the double gangland murder that claimed the mayoral candidate and his aide. Jimmy notices my glance.

"Hear about what happened to Tony Pinelli?"

I nod and swallow my nervousness. "Yeah. I was there."

"What?"

"That's right. There at the Hyatt, Room 422, last night around eight forty-five."

He looks grim as I relate my tale. Shakes his head when I describe Mr. Clean's attack and Tony's reaction. I don't tell him my theory, though, about me being the target. I've got no evidence, and anyway, this morning it seems kind of crazy.

"So you didn't see anyone else, other than Pinelli and Henderson?"

"No—though I guess there might have been somebody else in the bedroom of the suite. It had a separate door out to the hall."

"How long after the shooting was it that you checked the bedroom?"

"I'm not sure. I was kind of in shock. Five minutes. Maybe ten."

"Was the dead bolt on the bedroom door thrown?"

"I didn't notice. I don't know. I could hardly think straight."

"And the corridor was empty when you left?"

"I think so. I was in a hurry to get out."

My voice stays calm through my original story, but now, being grilled, I'm trembling. His questions bring it all back, all the fear and the blood.

"Did you go out the front door of the hotel?"

"Yeah."

"And how'd you get home?"

"I took a cab..." My voice is shaking. "Look, this is really hard for me. I've told you what I know. If I think of any other details, I'll call you."

Jimmy looks up from his notepad. He suddenly sees how upset I am.

"Jeez, I'm sorry, Stella. Just doing my job. I get carried away."

"That's okay. It's just—I really don't like to think about it."

Jimmy comes around to my side of the desk. "I'm so sorry. God, Stella, it must have been horrible." He gives me a brotherly hug.

His strength feels wonderful. I relax a little and let him comfort me. He strokes my hair back from my face, murmuring nonsense into my ear. "Poor girl, I'm so glad that you came to me. I'm sorry to be such a dolt. If there's anything I can do..." Nothing has changed, but for a moment it seems as though the weight of the world has been lifted from my shoulders.

Then I notice two things. First, his arm is around me and his fingers are brushing against the side of my breast. It's casual, almost unconscious, but my nipples contract and throb in response. Second, there's a hard protrusion pressed against my thigh, conflicting with the supposedly innocent nature of this embrace.

I'm sorely tempted to give in and accept more intimate comfort, but I have a feeling that would be a mistake, at least right now. Gently, I push him away, glancing down at his tented trousers as I do so. A blush creeps over his blunt features.

"Thanks for your support, Jimmy. The main thing that you can do for me is to keep me out of this as much as possible. Keep it quiet. If Joey from the Peacock found out, he might not be too crazy about having me work there."

"There'll be an investigation. There might be a trial. Will you testify?"

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“Of course. But I hope that it won’t be necessary.”

“I’ll do what I can, Stella.” He notes my limp as I stand up to leave, and grabs my hand. “Hey, are you hurt?”

“I’ll be okay, Jimmy. Hazards of the profession.” He doesn’t let go of my hand, and I see that his erection has not subsided. I melt a bit at the sight. “Thanks for everything.”

“Thank you, for coming out about this. You’ve made things a lot easier for us.”

There’s an awkward silence. He’s squeezing my fingers, hard, but I don’t think he realizes it.

“You look fantastic, Stella.”

“Thanks, Jim...”

“Maybe we could get together some night, for dinner, or something? Catch up? Or talk about old times? I feel bad that we haven’t kept in closer touch.”

I pull my hand away. Simultaneously, I lean over and kiss him lightly on the cheek. “Maybe. You could always come by the Peacock and catch my show.” He blushes again, mottled crimson. “Or maybe I can arrange a special performance.”

“Stella!”

“Just teasing, Jimmy! I’ll see you around.”

I hobble out of his office, knowing that he’s watching my hips roll beneath my skirt. Sweet Jimmy.

Back at home, I exchange my business clothes for jeans and a tee shirt. I call the club and leave Joey a message, explaining about my injury. Strippers don’t get health insurance, but Joey’s a decent sort. He’ll pay half wages for a week if you can’t work. I’m hoping that I’ll be back on stage before that. Never mind Dr. Mann.

That chore accomplished, I try to settle myself on the sofa with a book and an ice pack. I’m tense and restless, though. In my mind’s eye, I keep seeing Jimmy, fresh-faced and energetic. I remember the delicious pressure of his hard-on, and begin to wonder what it would be like, to be with him. Before long, my jeans are unzipped, my eyes are closed and my fingers are busy in that juicy realm between my thighs.

I try to picture Jimmy naked, kneeling inside my spread legs and stroking his penis with one hand, while he tickles my clit with the other. He’s got that grin on his face, cat that ate the

canary, and then he bends down to eat me, his tongue tentative at first, then insistent.

Now I imagine him filling me, ramming his cock into me as he moans my name. My breasts bounce with the force of his thrusts. I arch my back, forcing him deeper inside, digging my nails into his pale, freckled butt. I've never seen him naked, but that's how I imagine him. I know that he's wanted this for a long time, and now finally we're together. He's fucking me like a slut but I know that he still cares, he still respects me, he cries out "Stella!" as we convulse together, thrashing and kicking, clinging to each other as the spasms rock us.

I can't make myself come with just the physical motions, like some women can, but a good fantasy will do it every time. Maybe that's why I can read my audience so well, see into their minds. The fantasies are all there in my head, just waiting to be awakened.

It takes several minutes for my breathing to return to normal, and then the pain hits. My ankle is screaming with new intensity. I realize that I must have kicked the sofa arm while in the throes. The ice is scattered all over the parlor floor. Damn, damn, damn.

Still, it's almost worth it. I'm relaxed as I haven't been since the events of the previous night. Somehow free again.

I feel full of new energy. I decide to spend some time in the garden. I haven't done any weeding in more than a week. The tomato plants are strangling, and the grass is a foot high around the bean trellises.

My father left me this house. It's nothing fancy, a modest, flat-roofed, tar-shingled row house just like the ones on either side of it. But it's mine, free and clear, a haven, and a resource if things should get tough.

It's all that I have left of him.

Sometimes it seems like he's still here. I almost expect to hear my name called from his workshop down in the basement, or to come into the parlor and see him settled with a book, smoking his pipe. The place still smells, faintly, like his cherry tobacco. His pipe rack and humidior are sitting on the mantel. He's been gone more than five years, but I can't bring myself to throw out all of his stuff.

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Anyway, there's a fenced square of yard in the back, opening onto an alley that separates my house from the houses on the next block. He grew flowers and herbs there. After he got sick, it turned into a wild, overgrown jungle, but I'm starting to tame it again.

I kneel, so I won't be putting weight on the ankle. Digging my fingers into the earth, I seek the roots of the invaders, rip them free, and toss them over my shoulder into a bushel basket. There's a soothing rhythm to this simple task. It's almost like a meditation. Dig, rip, toss. Dig, rip, toss. Again and again. My hair is tangled in my eyes and my shirt is streaked with muddy sweat, but I don't notice.

The doorbell is so faint, I hardly hear it. Cursing at my awkwardness, I struggle to my feet. The interior of the house is cool and dim after my time in the sun. When I open the front door, there's the sun again, and until my eyes adjust all I can see is the slender figure of woman, silhouetted black against the glare.

"Ms. Xanathakeos?" The voice is soft, cultured, but with an underlying edge.

"Yes, that's me, Stella Xanathakeos. Who are you, and what can I do for you?"

"I'm Francesca Pinelli."

I don't know what to say. I stand there paralyzed, speechless, like some dumb broad.

"Anthony Pinelli's wife," she continues, assuming that I need some explanation. "Can I come in?"

"Of course. Sorry, you surprised me." I step aside so that she won't have to brush against my dirty gardening clothes, and gesture down the hallway to the kitchen at the back of the house. I don't want to get mud all over the upholstery in front room.

She stands in the middle of the linoleum floor, apparently at a loss. She's slim and elegant, shorter than me, with brunette hair that's cut in a brisk, executive style. Her pale skin stretches flawlessly over good cheekbones. She has a thin, determined mouth and intelligent hazel eyes. She's dressed all in black, an expensive summer wool dress, black stockings, and a gold cross on a chain glinting at her throat.

"Please, Ms. Pinelli, have a seat." I indicate the battered

dinette where I used to eat my corn flakes. She lowers herself onto the chair, graceful but formal. There is a long silence.

"I understand that you saw my husband last night," she says finally.

I nod, wondering how she knows.

"You were there when he was killed." It's a statement, not a question, but I nod again. She must think I'm stupid. I've barely managed a coherent sentence since she arrived.

"Tell me about it. I want to know everything that happened."

I am acutely aware of my sweaty disarray. "I'll tell you what I know," I reply, "but if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to take a quick shower first. I've been weeding my garden. Rewarding, but rather dirty work."

"Of course," she replies, her frostiness thawing slightly. "Go ahead."

"Would you like a drink?" I gesture toward the glass-doored cabinet in the corner, where I keep a couple of bottles for guests. "There's bourbon and scotch in there, and ice in the freezer. I'll be right back."

Now she actually smiles, a bit wanly. "Thank you, Ms. Xanathakeos. I appreciate your hospitality."

"Call me Stella. My last name is quite a mouthful."

"Very well, then you must call me Francesca. Go clean up, Stella. I'll be fine."

The hot water sluices off the sweat and grime, supremely sensual. I don't linger, though, don't want to leave Tony's widow alone too long. I don't know what she's up to, or why she's here. I towel off my hair and put on my favorite thick terry robe, then return to the kitchen, damp ringlets spread over my shoulders.

I don't expect the sight that meets my eyes. Francesca is crying, tears trickling out between her fingers and into her drink. Her icy composure seems to have fled completely. I put my arm around her shoulder, and she buries her face in my robe, sobbing pathetically.

"Don't cry, Francesca." I stroke her hair awkwardly. I've never been good at comforting people.

"I miss him so much already," she whimpers. "I can't

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believe that he's gone. I don't know how I'll stand it, day after day. Month after month."

"You're a strong woman, Francesca, I can tell. You'll manage. You'll heal, gradually forget. You'll remember only the good things about your husband and forget the pain."

She wears some light, sophisticated scent. Her hair is much softer than it appears. There's a strange sort of tightness in my chest as she looks up at me, eyes brimming, and tries to smile. When she removes her head from my breast, I miss the weight of it.

"Thank you, Stella. I'm sorry to break down. Please accept my apologies."

"Never mind, I understand. Your husband was a special man."

She glances at me sharply, then her shoulders sag. "Of course he was. Tell me what happened now. Tell me it all. I know that Tony had a—weakness—for beautiful women like you. I knew, and accepted it. A small price to pay for having him be mine. So you don't need to hold anything back. I can take it."

So for the second time that day, I relate the story of my private dance. When I describe Mr. Clean and his behavior in the club, she nods, but there's pain in her face. "Andy," she says softly, "Andy Henderson, Tony's assistant. I always wondered whether he provided that sort of assistance."

I manage to hold together reasonably well until I get to the point where Tony kissed me. Then I falter. Francesca's gaze burns into me, demanding the truth, but I somehow can't reveal the intimacy that her husband and I had shared.

She looks at me for a long time, until I have to look away. Then she stares at her hands, her long pale fingers adorned with a plain gold band and a large diamond.

"So then you had sex," she murmurs. "You and Tony."

I nod, dumb again.

She sighs. "Then what happened?"

I describe those last violent, confusing moments as best I can. She seems genuinely shocked. "Andy shot Tony? I can't believe it!"

"It's possible," I say softly, "that he was aiming for me."

"You? Why would he shoot you?"



“I don’t have a clue. But I was on top. If Tony hadn’t heard the noise, and thrown me off, the bullet would have gone straight into my back.”

Where is this theory coming from? Last night I thought that maybe Mr. Clean planned to kill me later, but now I’m somehow convinced that he wanted to murder me then and there. The whole scene seems like a crime of passion, not a careful plot.

“Tell me more, Stella. I want to know everything.” She leans forward, her tears gone.

Her eagerness makes me suspicious. Why in the world should I trust her? She has every reason to hate me, the floozy who was with her husband when he was murdered.

“That’s it. After that—there was just two dead bodies and a lot of blood.” I remember how Tony looked, empty, all his life and power gone. At the time I was too shocked to know I was afraid, but now the horror hits me, full force. I am confused and dizzy, and suddenly I am shaking again, my breath coming in gasps, close to hysteria.

I feel her arms around me. She’s comforting me now; my head is on her chest. “Hush, Stella, it’s okay. Don’t worry. It’s over. You’re safe. It’s terrible, but now you’re safe.”

I’m sobbing, gulping in air, trying to get control of myself. Still I notice that her breast is pleasantly round and firm beneath my cheek. Her scent envelops me in a sensuous cloud. She runs her fingers through my hair, working out the tangles, while she croons in my ear. I begin to feel a bit better, and then suddenly, she slips her hand inside my robe and begins to stroke my breast with cool, delicate fingers.

I raise my head and look into her eyes. Her lips curve into a half-smile. She leans down and kisses me, open-mouthed. I kiss her back.

It is as if I am watching myself from a distance. I feel the sensations, her smooth skin, her minty taste, the tickle of her hair as she bends to suck on my nipples. I can’t understand why her touch arouses me so much. I’m still afraid, still suspicious, but the sensation of her tongue prodding my swollen flesh pushes everything else into the background. She nips at me. My cunt contracts into a tight knot, aching to be undone. She laps more gently, circling my nipples with her tongue. My sex relaxes,

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opens, trembles waiting for her next assault.

I am eager, wet and ready when her fingers find my cleft. I clutch desperately at her dress, arching my back and humping myself against her hand while she plays with my tits. She finds my rigid clit and works it with her thumb while her fingers play in my pussy. I squeeze my eyes shut, grinding against her, reaching for the climax that seems only a breath away. Pleasure washes over me, each wave more powerful than the last. Her fingers strum and stroke. My whole body vibrates with sensation, ready to shake itself apart, as I teeter on the edge for what feels like forever.

I feel all this and yet I am far away, wondering who this woman is, wondering why she wants to give me pleasure and why I am allowing her to. My orgasm is shattering and yet it seems to occur behind a wall of glass. I am divided from myself in a way that is totally foreign to me. It's a little frightening.

None of it seems real again until I find myself slumped in the chair, still panting, my robe hanging open, my thighs sticky. The kitchen reeks of sex. Francesca seems cool and collected. She smiles enigmatically and finishes her scotch.

"Thank you for your honesty, Stella. You've been very helpful."

She rises and heads for the front door. "Don't bother to get up," she calls over her shoulder. "You should stay off that ankle. I can let myself out. I'll be in touch." I hear the click of the latch as she leaves.

Sunset slants in through the kitchen windows, painting golden patterns on the linoleum floor. I sit, my ankle throbbing, my clit still tingling, wondering at myself. I feel like I'm in a cocoon, wrapped in some sort of silken shroud. Bound, tangled, pulled into this train of events against my will.

This is not like me, to be passive and clinging, the object, the victim. Usually, I'm the predator.

I shiver, and limp out to the hallway to make sure that the door is locked.

## *Chapter Three*

### *Intruder*

A screaming siren wakens me at four-thirty. The sound fades off into the distance, but my heart continues to pound against my ribs. Somebody else bleeding, maybe dying. Another victim.

I try to argue myself out of these dark thoughts and back to sleep, but it's no use. The rectangle of gray that is my uncurtained window gradually brightens: first to charcoal, then to ash, finally to pearl. I turn my thoughts to Jimmy Ostermann, but they keep sliding away to Tony Pinelli.

Finally, around six, I give up and head downstairs for a cup of coffee. Throwing open the back door, I take a deep breath of the early morning. The air is cool and smells of earth and growth. It's drizzling, the sticky warmth of the previous day only a memory.

My work means late nights. I don't usually get out of bed before noon. I hardly know what to do with myself at this time of day. Munching on a piece of toast, I consider the question.

Rainy weather. Good for paperwork: paying bills, filing receipts and so on. Maybe I'll spend some time looking through those Adriatic cruise brochures I got last week.

And Tony? Some other part of me interrupts my planning session. You need to figure out what's going on with this situation, she says. If only to protect yourself. How did Tony's widow know who you are, or how to find you? Why did she come by, and why did she seduce you? And why did you tell her that Mr. Clean—Andy—intended to shoot you in the hotel room? What's going on, Stella? You're a smart lady; figure it out.

This other voice is giving me a headache. Okay, I'll spend some time on these questions. But bills first, and then a bit of a

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workout. After that, I'll sit down and do some serious thinking.

Telephone, electric, gas, dry cleaning account. (My costumes need special care.) Department store charge. (They had a big sale last month, and I do like to dress well.) Maintenance fee for my dad's cemetery plot. With a sigh, I update the balance and slide my checkbook back into the desk drawer. I can take care of myself, but it feels as though I have been doing it for an awfully long time.

Some stretching will pull me out of this funk. I change into leggings and a jog bra, then carefully unwrap my ankle. It's still swollen, but a lot less discolored. Definitely better. When I put full weight on it, though, fiery pain shoots up my leg. Okay, so I'll go easy for today and just do floor work and my weights.

A Supremes album on the turntable, I begin with some leg lifts and sit ups. It doesn't take long before I'm shimmying my shoulders in time with the beat, singing along with Diana. "Stop, in the name of love," I moan as I alternate bicep curls with pec presses. "Before you break my heart, think it over." This music never fails to cheer me up. Three quarters of an hour, and I feel like myself again: Stella Xanathakeos, queen of the strippers, one tough cookie.

I throw on a sweatshirt and sit back down at my desk with a legal pad, ready to attack the puzzle of Tony Pinelli's murder. The telephone interrupts me before I can start.

"Hello?"

"Stella? It's Jimmy Ostermann."

Warmth floods through my body at the sound of his voice, warmth with a definite component of wetness.

"Hi, Jimmy. How are you?"

"Fine, fine. How are you doing?" There is real concern in his tone. I continue to liquefy.

"Well, my ankle's a bit better, and I guess I'm a little less shaken up than I was yesterday." I recall our embrace in his office. I know he's thinking about that, too.

"That's good news." Jimmy pauses. I can imagine him blushing.

"Any developments in the Pinelli case?" I ask, suddenly wondering if he had anything to do with Francesca's appearance at my door.

“Nothing yet. Forensics is working on the firearms. Pinelli’s funeral has been set for the day after tomorrow. We’ll have people there to watch for anything suspicious.”

“Well, I should probably tell you that I had an interesting visitor yesterday afternoon. Anthony Pinelli’s widow.”

“Mrs. Pinelli? What did she want? How did she know who you were and how to find you, anyway?” I hear a thoughtful scowl in Jimmy’s tone now.

“That’s exactly what I wondered. So you didn’t tell her about me?”

“Of course not. We agreed I’d keep what you told me confidential as long as I could.”

“Thanks, Jimmy, I appreciate it. Anyway, she somehow knew I was with Tony when he died. She wanted to hear my story of what happened.”

“Hmm. Strange. I suppose that someone else in the department might have seen you, and shared the information with her. I’ll ask around.”

“Let me know what you find out, okay?”

“Sure, Stella.” There is another one of those heavy pauses. My nipples tighten in anticipation. “Anyway, I didn’t actually call to discuss the case.”

“Oh?” I let my voice rise, teasing him a bit. “So what can I do for you, Jimmy?”

I actually hear him swallowing nervously on the other end of the line. “I was wondering if you’d like to have dinner with me tonight. If you don’t have other plans...”

Images from yesterday’s fantasy flood my mind. I realize that the crotch of my leggings is soaked through. I catch sight of myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. I am wearing a silly grin.

“I’d love to, Jimmy. There’s a fantastic little Lebanese place on Oakland Avenue that I haven’t been to in a long while. What would you think about that?”

“Sound great. Shall I pick you up around seven?”

“Perfect! See you then.”

“I’m looking forward to it, Stella.”

Jimmy’s call brightens my mood further. I feel focused and alert as I pick up my pad and create three column headings on

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the lined yellow paper, labeled Facts, Questions, and Theories.

Fact: Mr. Clean, aka Andy Henderson, engaged me for a private dance at Tony Pinelli's request.

No, that's not quite right. I cross out "at Tony Pinelli's request." and write in the Questions column: Did Tony ask Andy to get him a girl, or was it Andy's idea?

Fact: Tony was expecting me. And Andy was expecting me, since he hired me.

Theory: Andy was in the bedroom of the suite.

Question: Did Tony know that Andy was there?

Fact: There was a camera in the bedroom, focused on the living room, presumably installed by Andy.

I cross out the last phrase and add a new Question: Who installed the camera?

Fact: Andy snuck out of the bedroom and got hold of Tony's gun. Fact: Andy and Tony shot each other.

Question: Why did Andy want a gun?

Theory: Andy planned to shoot me later, and frame Tony. But why the camera, then? The cops would find it hard to believe that Tony would have set up a hidden camera to photograph himself balling a woman that he would later kill.

The camera is just hard to figure. It fits much better with a blackmail motive, but I'm pretty sure that raw pictures of Tony Pinelli getting it on with some sexy broad would just increase his popularity.

Question (underlined twice): What happened to the film?

Theory: Something happened in the hotel room before I arrived, which was grounds for blackmail. Or maybe Andy expected something to happen afterward. But what?

Theory: Andy wanted to shoot me right there in the hotel room. This is the tale I told Francesca, but it doesn't make any sense. Still, when I remember Andy's cold blue eyes, this theory has a feeling of truth about it.

Theory: Tony Pinelli had underworld connections and this whole scene has something to do with the mob. I can't go anywhere with this notion. Despite the stories about strip clubs, I'm fairly certain I've never met anyone from the mob. Except maybe Tony, of course.

Fact: Tony Pinelli was running for mayor. Theory: The

scene in the hotel room was somehow politically motivated.

I feel like I've reached a dead end. I need more information. All I've got now are hunches and guesses. Still, writing this down has clarified my thoughts. I am definitely less muddled than before.

The telephone rings again. I hope that Jimmy is not calling to cancel. But it's a female voice on the other end of the line, cool and cultured.

"Hello, Stella. It's Francesca Pinelli." It suddenly hits me that I didn't record any facts or questions at all about the grieving widow.

"Hello, Francesca. I recognized your voice. What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you have time to meet with me tomorrow. There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Really?" I keep my voice steady, but I'm both curious and suspicious. "What's that?"

She hesitates for two breaths then continues. "Well, actually, I'd like to offer you a job."

"A job! You know what I do for a living, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, but with your injured ankle you won't be able to dance for a while. I need your assistance only temporarily, for a few months. Until the campaign is finished."

"The campaign?" I sound like a parrot, mimicking her.

"Tony was totally committed to his dream of being mayor of this city. Now that he's gone—I feel that I should take up his dream and realize it. I've decided to run in his stead."

I wonder to myself if this is legal.

"It's a bit unorthodox," she continues as if she overheard my thoughts, "but considering how late in the campaign it is, as well as the respect everyone had for Tony, the City Council has agreed to allow my candidacy."

So. This doesn't sound kosher to me. But the news that Ms. Pinelli has political ambitions definitely expands the set of characters and motives in this case.

"What kind of job?" I ask evenly. "I can't imagine that you'd need a stripper."

"You can do a lot more than stripping. Don't underestimate yourself. But I'd rather discuss it tomorrow, in person. Assuming

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that you're interested, that is."

"I might be." I'm cautious in replying. I don't want to give anything away. But I realize that working for Francesca Pinelli might allow me to gain some of the information I so sorely need.

"Come for tea, then, around four." She gives me the address, in a fashionable section of Shadyside. "I'll look forward to seeing you, Stella."

Long after she hangs up, I sit with the receiver in my hand, thinking and staring at my list. I can't begin to articulate all the notions swirling around in my head. Finally, I pick up the pen and write at the bottom of the Questions column: Francesca?

Somehow I get through the rest of the day. Around six I begin dressing for my dinner date with Jimmy. I'm all butterflies inside. Haven't felt this way for a long time. I agonize over what to wear. Jimmy and I haven't seen much of each other since school. I want to make a good impression.

I reject my blue velvet halter dress. Too formal. I look sensational in the black kid miniskirt and jacket, but maybe that look is too aggressive. Don't want him to think I'm some biker chick or hoodlum. I definitely want to look sexy. But I don't want to be too obvious about it. I don't want to feed any notions he might have that all strippers are whores.

Finally, I lay my hands on the perfect costume, the burgundy sun dress. It has a deep V neck and a short, flared skirt, with little pearl buttons down the front. Feminine, flattering and flirty, without being too blatant. Underneath, I drop all pretenses, donning a black lace demi-bra that emphasizes my endowment, and a satin thong. But he won't see that, will he?

Who am I fooling? Jimmy turns me on, and I just might take a chance on him.

I'm careful with men. Despite my tumble with Tony Pinelli, I normally think long and hard before jumping into the sack. I've been hurt a few times, and I've had a few men make the mistake of thinking they could control me. That leaves a bad taste in your mouth, believe me.

But Jimmy—I've known Jimmy a long time, though we kind of lost touch after graduation. And he knows me, knows that Stella Xanathakeos makes her own decisions. I'm pretty sure that I can trust him to accept me as I am and not try making me



into his perfect woman the way some guys do.

I'm meditating on Jimmy's stellar features when the doorbell rings. I actually jump. It's good that I'm wearing flats because I seem to trip over my own feet on the way to the door. Cool it, Stella, I tell myself. It's just a dinner date.

Jimmy's dressed up, jacket and tie, his unruly blond hair slicked down. He grins with obvious delight when he sees me. "Hi, Stella! These are for you." He thrusts a bouquet at me, a bit awkwardly. It's lovely, astromeria and miniature roses.

"How sweet of you! Though definitely not necessary. It's just me, you know, your old chum..."

"I wanted to do something, to make you feel better about—well, you know."

"Let's not talk about that tonight, okay? Come on in. I'm going to stick these in some water and then we can go."

He's brought his car, a battered but beloved Mustang convertible. The rain has stopped; the evening is mild and clear. He leaves the top down as we drive the short distance to the Al-Khalil. The breeze tangles my hair in my eyes, and I breathe deeply, trying to calm my racing heart.

As we enter the restaurant, a short, balding man hurries over to seat us. His bristling black eyebrows and mustache suggest a scowl, but when he recognizes me, he breaks into a huge smile. "Stella!" he cries, giving me a bear hug. "It's been a long time!"

"Hello, Haji. Good to see you, too. How are things? Your wife? Your sons? And the restaurant? How's business?"

"Fine, fine," he says, bustling us off to cozy corner table. "Everything is fine, though maybe not quite as good as when you worked for me."

I turn to Jimmy. "I waitressed here for a year or so, after graduation. Before my father got really sick."

"She was the best waitress I've ever had," Haji interrupts. "Brought some class to the place."

"I don't doubt it," Jimmy remarks, and I'm astonished to find that I'm blushing.

After his effusive greeting, Haji leaves us more or less alone. We dine royally on his wonderful fatoush, kibbee, muhdjara and baba ganoush, but I hardly taste the food. I am overwhelmed with memories, memories of hard work and

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laughter, camaraderie and innocence. Memories of Layla.

Jimmy seems to have gotten over his nervousness. He chats comfortably about his job, his hobbies, his upcoming vacation. I try hard to pay attention, but I keep seeing her slender frame and soulful eyes. I remember the pebbly firmness of her nipple between my lips, her slickness and her writhing under my fingers, her rich yeasty scent. I can't help it, I'm transported back to that short, magic time we spent together.

Jimmy stops talking suddenly and stares at me. "You're a thousand miles away, Stella! You haven't heard a word that I've said." He shrugs. "Guess I should have known that you wouldn't be interested in an ordinary guy like me."

Guilt hits me in the gut. "No, Jimmy, that's not it. I just have a lot on my mind right now." Should I tell him about Layla? That I had a brief but torrid affair with Haji's other waitress? That she disappeared one day without a word of goodbye? He strikes me as incredibly straight; I don't want to frighten him away. "I haven't been sleeping well since—the other night. I find myself distracted by all sorts of disturbing thoughts."

He nods, instantly sympathetic. "Of course, I understand. I shouldn't take it personally."

I reach for his hand and squeeze it tightly. "No, definitely not. I really enjoy your company. Really. I'm incredibly glad that you got me out of the house tonight. Otherwise, I think I might have gone crazy."

He's wearing some kind of cologne. I can smell it from here, something fresh and nautical. He rubs his thumb gently over mine. It is a gesture of affection. Maybe an invitation. His skin is warm and dry. I'm the one sweating with nervousness.

Jimmy signals for the check. Suddenly he's confident and in control. He gives me one of his crooked smiles. "Feel like a walk? It's still early, and it's a lovely night. We could go up to Schenley Park."

I mentally check the status of my ankle. The throbbing is hardly noticeable. "I'm supposed to stay off my feet," I reply, smiling into his eyes, "but it's very tempting."

"We won't go far. And if your ankle begins to bother you, we'll turn back."

We leave the car at the edge of the park and stroll along the paths to the crest of the hill. We seem to have the place to ourselves. New leaves whisper on the oak branches that arch over our heads. The spring air is like wine. It seems totally natural that we should be holding hands. I feel my heart quicken as we emerge from the trees and see the lights of the city spread out before us.

This place is breathtaking. The broad lawn slopes downward nearly half a mile. When I was a child, I rode my sled down this incline, screaming with excitement as we gathered speed. Past the grove at the foot, we see the lights of Oakland, violet and orange, and further to the west, nestled between the rivers, the glittering towers of downtown.

The night is moonless, so clear that even with the urban brilliance below, the stars are visible. There is some kind of perfection here. I breathe deeply and feel the knot of tension in my chest soften. Peace, for the first time in two days.

We don't speak. Jimmy leads me to a bench where we can fully appreciate the view. His arm is around my shoulder, his fingers warm on my bare arm. I welcome his touch. For a moment, I just let go, close my eyes and lean my head against his chest. His aftershave mingles with his natural odor, a luscious masculine scent that I find amazingly comforting. Yes. This is what I need.

I am not surprised to find his lips on mine, firm but undemanding. Again, this feels natural and right. I sink into his kiss, opening myself to his tentative tongue, tasting the beer he had with dinner. "Stella," he murmurs, his hands wandering over my body.

My nipples spring to attention as he brushes them with his fingers. My sex swells and dampens when he lays his palm across the curve of my belly. He has not stopped kissing me. Our tongues dance like familiar partners. With each twirl, I grow more aroused.

I realize that he is unfastening my dress, one slow button at a time. Part of me wants him to rip it off, to take me without any warm-up, but I also appreciate his measured, gradual approach. He's afraid I'll stop him, I realize. Suddenly I feel that I must reassure him.

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“Just a moment, Jimmy,” I say, my voice barely more than a whisper. I stand and face him, continuing the work he began on my buttons. One hand unfastens them from neckline to waist, the other from waist to hem. He’s transfixed, watching me. I see the fabric between his legs stir as he grows more excited.

My timing, as always, is perfect. The delay at each button is painful and yet he savors the wait, the building suspense. I don’t try to get into Jimmy’s head. I merely watch him as he watches me. His excitement feeds mine, and mine his, in a hot loop spiraling tighter with each breath.

I shrug my dress onto the grass. “Take out your cock, Jimmy,” I murmur. “I want to see you. Touch yourself for me.”

Jimmy needs no second invitation. In a flash his fly is open and his erection is swaying in the night air. The taut skin on the shaft shines pale in the dim light. The knob is much darker. Without taking his eyes from mine, he cups the bulb in one hand, rubbing the swollen flesh against his palm. With the other hand, he grips himself near the root and begins a slow stroking.

“That’s lovely, Jimmy.” Exposed by the half-bra, my nipples throb each time he squeezes himself. I roll them between thumb and forefinger, wishing I could take them in my mouth.

There’s no point in removing the brassiere; he can see all my charms, and the black lace contrasts nicely with my dusky skin. But the thong is definitely in the way. I can feel myself blooming, unfolding in anticipation of having that hardness inside me. I suddenly lose patience with my gradual progress. Without ceremony, I push the panties down to my ankles and step out of them.

In twinkling city light, I think I must look like a goddess: breasts like globes, thighs like columns of marble flanking the dark entrance to the mystic grotto. Jimmy is hugely erect now, but he almost looks frightened, confronted as he is by the awesome mystery of womanliness. I feel a surge of affection that nicely seasons my lust.

“It’s okay, Jimmy,” I whisper in his ear as I roll a condom over his hardness and sink my pussy down onto his cock. That is the last thing that either of us says for some time.

It’s wonderful. I’d love to describe how he feels, how he smells, the deep earthy glory of it. But we’re in that place where

there are no words. I'm groaning, screaming, bucking myself against him. He's arching his back to penetrate more deeply. We're together, tangled, connected. Electrified, writhing in the throes, the sparks surging from my body to his and back, the circuit of life completed once again.

We reach the top together, there on the heights above the city. We go soaring into that lovely, strange, ethereal place that one reaches only through the caverns of the physical. We float gently down, back to our twisted, sticky bodies.

I lie on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. The breeze dries the sweat on my back. For a blissful time, I forget about everything except my lover.

We're shy afterwards. We hardly talk on the way back to my house, but his kiss when we arrive is heated and fervent. "Do you want to come in for a while?" I ask, wondering how it will feel to have a man in my bed after such a long time.

He shakes his head. "I'm done in," he says with a mischievous grin. "Somebody really put me through the blender." He kisses me again, more gently. "And maybe now you'll get a good night's sleep. I'll call tomorrow."

"Thanks, Jimmy. For everything."

"Anytime," he laughs, then turns toward his car.

I'm careful to lock the door behind me, but I'm still high from the evening's events. Only when I come out of the shower do I notice anything strange. I open my lingerie drawer to get out my silk kimono, and find that all my lovely things are jumbled together, without any order. I was nervous and fussy while dressing, I remember, but I can't imagine that I would have left my underwear in this state.

I check the other drawers. They are equally muddled. Most of the sweaters and jerseys are folded, but clumsily, and my usual organization by color and season is totally upset. Whoever rummaged through my clothing tried, without success, to disguise that fact.

Someone was in my house, while I was out with Jimmy. An intruder into my personal space. My haven! I sink down on the bed, shaking with mingled anger and fear at this violation. After a moment, I regain control of myself.

Someone had been here. Someone might be here still. I fish

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around in my purse for my Mace. I retrieve my haircutting scissors from the bathroom. Donning my terry robe, I creep into the hallway, a weapon in each hand.

Across the upstairs hall is my den and office, formerly my father's bedroom. I stop and listen outside the door. All is silent. Reaching inside, I flick on the light. The room is empty. There's no closet, nowhere to hide. But there are signs of disturbance. My desk drawer is open. My checkbook is on the writing surface as if someone had been reviewing the register. And my yellow pad, with my attempts at analyzing the events around Tony's murder. I know that I left it on the desk. Now it's gone. I search the rest of the desk, the cubbies and the file drawer. It's simply not here.

Somehow I'm not surprised. I feel cold, cold and clear as arctic ice. Someone was here, someone who knows something about Tony's death. Someone who thinks I know something, or have something that will lead me to the truth.

Shivering, I inch my way downstairs and check the front parlor. All is quiet and empty, though the burglar left his mark here, too. Knickknacks misplaced on the mantel. My father's humidifier left half-open.

Finally, I make my way to the kitchen. Here, there's the clearest evidence: a tumbler with remnants of scotch, and a cigarette butt snuffed out in a saucer. By this point, it seems, my unwelcome guest didn't care if he left traces.

The back door, I discover, is unlocked. I'm one hundred percent certain I didn't leave it that way. Carefully, keeping my body behind the door, I scan the yard. The light filtering from the kitchen windows is bright enough for me to see that there is no one in my little square of turf. It also shows me crushed tomato plants and bean vines torn from their trellises, clearly marking the intruder's escape route.

At that point, my rage finally overwhelms my fear. I pour myself a finger of scotch and sit at the kitchen table, simmering in helpless anger and vowing some kind of revenge.

Then a horrible thought crosses my mind. Jimmy knew I would be out tonight. He was the only one who knew. Was it possible that he was involved in all this, somehow? Is it possible that smiling Jimmy might have betrayed me?

## LISABET SARAI

The balance shifts again. Shudders shake my body. Sitting alone under the fluorescent lights, gripping my drink, I am paralyzed by the realization that I don't know who I can trust. If anyone.

## *Chapter Four*

### *Afternoon Tea*

There's no way I'm going to fall asleep after that. Reason tells me that the intruder would not be back. He (or she?) had plenty of time to search the whole of the small house; why return? But I am not listening to reason. I'm too upset.

I make sure both doors are locked and chained, then set a kitchen chair against each one for good measure. Then I simply sit there at the dinette, gripping my scissors, staring blearily into space, a bit dizzy from the unaccustomed alcohol. Guarding my domain.

About five AM I finally stumble upstairs and fall into bed. I don't remember my dreams, but I wake with a headache the size of Mount Washington. The light streaming in my window has the slant of afternoon. I glance over at my alarm clock: two o'clock. Two hours before I'm supposed to meet Francesca.

I try to get up and get ready, but my body feels heavy as a granite statue. Fifteen, twenty minutes I lie there, unable to muster the energy to rise. Finally, the ringing of the telephone motivates me to move.

It's Jimmy. He sounds affectionate and concerned. Should I tell him about the break-in? Hearing his voice, I cannot make myself believe that he was involved. But who else knew I'd be gone last night?

Anyway, even if he is totally innocent, what can he do? He might decide to put a couple of his guys on twenty-four hour surveillance of the house. At that point, it would be pretty tough for me to remain officially uninvolved in the Pinelli affair. Why should I worry him? He has enough to deal with without my problems.

So I keep my mouth shut, and make a date to have dinner with him Sunday night. I have plans for tomorrow, Saturday. I'm



going to attend Tony's funeral. Whoever is responsible for Tony's death, and for the burglary of my house, is likely to be there. I'm not sure that I can find out anything new, but I plan to try.

Now, in the taxi on the way to Shadyside, I wonder if I made the right choice. Jimmy doesn't know anything about my appointment this afternoon, either. What if it's a setup? What if Francesca's arranged for a kidnapping, or even a murder?

When we pull up at the beautifully landscaped house, though, I have to laugh at my overactive imagination. The place looks so substantial, so stodgy, so upper-middle-class ordinary. My fears retreat even further into the background when Francesca answers the door. She seems genuinely glad to see me.

"Stella! Come in." She holds the door for me and ushers me into a spacious hallway paneled in oak and lit by a round stained-glass window in the stairwell. "I'm so pleased that you could make it."

"Hello, Francesca. How are you?"

She looks lovely, young and fresh-faced, lips lightly glossed. She's still wearing black, but the loose tunic of crinkled rayon and matching long skirt are a far cry from the conservative clothes I last saw her wearing. Hematite beads glitter in her earlobes. High-heeled black sandals adorn her small feet.

Her sigh seems heartfelt and genuine, though. There's even a glint of moisture in her eyes. "As well as can be expected, I guess. I never knew a house, a bed, a life, could be so empty."

I remember the way the house echoed after my father's death. "I know what you mean. My dad died of cancer five years ago, and for months afterward, there were these huge gaps. These voids in my day-to-day existence that he had previously filled."

"I'm sorry about your father."

"Thanks. But of course we both knew it was coming. We had time to get adjusted to the idea, to say goodbye. It wasn't sudden, like Tony."

At Tony's name, a shadow crosses her features. I realize how tactless I am, clumsy, forthright Stella. "Sorry, Francesca, it probably hurts to talk about it." My hand in on her arm. The fabric of her dress is cool and slithery.

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"Never mind, I have to get used to it. Come out to the conservatory and we'll have tea. How's your ankle, by the way?"

"Still painful, but getting better, I think." In fact, I've hardly thought about it since last night, with all the other things on my mind.

She leads me down a corridor toward the back of the house. I'm not sure what to expect; I've never been in a "conservatory". It turns out to be a kind of indoor garden, with glass walls and skylights in the roof. The weather has turned warm again, and the skylights are open, letting in the breeze.

"Please, sit down. I'll be right back. Today is Rosa's day off, so I'm on my own in the kitchen."

I settle down on the wrought iron bench, lean back against the floral-patterned cushions, and marvel at my surroundings. The table and bench are an island in a sea of tangled green. I recognize ornamental plants and flowers—philodendron, coleus, dieffenbachia, fuchsia. There are pots of rosemary, sage and oregano, and some tomato plants. In one corner, I spot a fruit tree dotted with tiny orange spheres; in another, a gardenia bush blooms, filling the space with its rich tropical perfume. There are plenty of plants that I don't know at all.

Everything seems to be thriving. I take a deep breath, savoring the mingled sweetness of the herbs and flowers.

She swishes into the room, carrying a tray which she sets on the table. I catch a whiff of her perfume, cutting cleanly through the garden smells.

"This is incredible, Francesca. You must have a fabulous gardener."

She smiles and shrugs as she hands me a bone china cup full of steaming tea, a delicate slice of lemon balanced upright on the saucer. "Just me."

I'm a bit envious of Francesca's apparent green thumb." Where do you find the time?"

"Well, I don't have any children, you know." That shadow flits across her face, and I kick myself once again. "I find it calming to work out here among the plants. It centers me."

"I know exactly what you mean. You probably didn't notice, but I have a small garden in my backyard." Suddenly I recall the current bruised state of my beloved vegetables. A chill

runs through me, effectively freezing all my sympathetic feelings toward my hostess. I can't trust anyone. I need to remember that.

Francesca seems not to notice my sudden stiffness. "Have some shortbread," she offers. The buttery cookies melt in my mouth. Sinfully good. We sip our tea quietly for a few moments, sitting side by side among the lush greenery.

"So, you wanted to talk to me about a job? Something connected with your campaign for mayor?"

"Yes, I did. I need someone to act as my press secretary. Someone to talk to the papers and the TV people, write news releases, handle my media bookings and so on. Represent me to the public."

I burst out laughing. "You want me, Stella the stripper, to represent you, Madame Candidate for Mayor? You're joking, I assume." But Francesca looks entirely serious.

"Not at all. First of all, you have tremendous presence. Despite the way you make your living, you're stylish and professional-looking."

I'm pleased that I chose this suit, beige linen with the chocolate silk shell underneath. It's understated and classy.

"As a woman candidate, I particularly need to appeal to the women voters. You'll help me do that, I'm sure. Meanwhile the fact that you're a native of the city, and from a working class family, can only help when it comes to convincing regular people that rich Lady Pinelli from Shadyside really does know something about their interests and needs."

"I have no media or public relations experience," I begin, but she waves her hand as if to brush away my objections.

"Are you trying to tell me that there's no public relations involved in stripping? You're a performer, and from what I hear, a highly skilled one. I'm just asking you to perform for a different audience."

What does she know about my skill? I wonder. Could she have been the one that sent Mr. Clean out to hire me?

"Furthermore, I happen to know that you have some writing experience. You were assistant editor of your high school paper, if I'm not mistaken. You also wrote some very good poetry."

I blush, despite the suspicions she's triggering. "You've done your research, I see." My voice is cool. "You seem to be

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very good at finding things out. So, if you don't mind my asking, how did you know I was with Tony the night he was killed?"

I'll give her credit, she doesn't bat an eyelash at my question.

"The desk clerk at the Hyatt described you. You're not exactly ordinary looking, you know."

I think back to that fateful night, trying to remember whether I went anywhere near the front desk. I recall smiling at a couple of business men who were nursing drinks in the busy lobby bar, but I don't remember anyone else. Still, I had been thinking about my commission for the evening, a bit nervous, focused on my own feelings. I might not have noticed.

"Even if he saw me, how did you connect that to Tony?"

Francesca's lips press together into the ghost of a frown. "I knew Tony's tastes and made an educated guess. You are precisely his ideal type of woman."

So I was just a "type" for Tony? The connection I felt to him, that instant intimacy, that wasn't real? I'm annoyed. Why did he marry you, then, I almost ask the slender, refined woman in front of me, if what he likes is earthy, ample women like me? But I hold my tongue. I need to maintain a good relationship with this woman so that I can find out what she knows.

She is watching me, searching my face to see if I believe her. I let my features relax into a friendly mask. "He did seem to enjoy my performance," I say, working hard to sound sincere rather than catty.

"I don't doubt that he did." The widow sets down her teacup on the table and leans toward me. "I imagine I would have enjoyed it myself."

I'm prepared this time, when her mouth meets mine. Somehow, I expected this, from the moment I heard her voice on the phone. She probes almost tentatively at the joining of my still-closed lips. I open and suck her tongue into my mouth, tasting lemon and butter this time, I will not be taken. I will not be passive and vulnerable.

I grab her shoulders and pull her against me. My mouth is rough on hers, mashing her lips against her teeth. My tongue probes rudely.

She likes my forcefulness. I can feel her melt beneath me as

I push her back against the cushions. She sighs when I pull my mouth from hers and nip at the flawless skin of her neck. I let my hands wander shamelessly over her body, its curves and hollows hardly hidden by the light crepe of her clothing.

She isn't wearing a bra. Her breasts are compact against my palms, the nipples poking smartly through the cloth. I give them symmetrical squeezes and she moans, squirming and rubbing herself against me. Guess I'm her type, too.

I like that. I don't trust Francesca but her lustful behavior is so at odds with her proper exterior, I can't help feel some affection. Not to mention answering lust. My silk panties grow wetter every time she whimpers at my touch. She is slumped against the wrought iron back of the bench, her thighs splayed open in a most unladylike way, her ankle-length black skirt bunched up to her knees.

Bending closer to her, I take one of those pert nipples in my teeth and at the same time slide one finger through the cleft between those thighs, under the skirt. I find no panties, only bare, shaved skin, slick and soaked. My cunt swells and seeps with matching desire. Her pelvis jerks forward at my first touch. I stroke her, lightly, but she grabs my hand and tries to push it into her. Liquid gushes around my fingers. A musky perfume rises from her, mingling with the floral scents around us.

It all floods back, what I learned from Layla during our brief, incandescent affair. My fingers know exactly what to do. Francesca is desperate, twisting and writhing, reaching for release. I rake the tip of a fingernail across the rigidity of her clit and her back arches in response. Almost, almost there. "Stella..." she moans. "Please, Stella."

She seems to have no connection to the prim, well-coiffed widow who wrung that orgasm from me two days ago. As for me, I'm enjoying having power over her. At this point, I bet she'd do anything I asked, sexually. I could make her kneel in front of me and I could force my hairy pussy into her face, and she'd lick me till I told her to stop. The image creates delicious spasms in my cunt, but I don't follow through with the notion. I don't want to give myself up to her, not again, not this time.

I pull my hand from her crotch, sit up, and gaze at her. Her eyes are closed. Her creamy complexion is flushed and mottled.

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Her mouth is slack. Her chest rises and falls with her panting breath.

She realizes that I have stopped. Her dark-fringed lids flutter open and she fixes her gaze on me. I can read the pleading in those hazel depths, but she says nothing.

“Take off your clothes,” I command. “Spread them out on the bench and then lie back down on them.” She follows my instructions without comment. She must be near forty, but naked she looks much younger—her trim, athletic figure almost that of a teenager. Her breasts are perfect hemispheres no larger than half-apples. Her nipples pucker and seem to strain towards me, dusky against her paleness.

Layla had the same slender form, the same delightfully modest breasts. Longing flashes through me, leaving me empty afterwards, and maybe a bit cruel.

“Pull up your knees, and spread your thighs. I want to look at that nasty wet cunt of yours.” My voice is harsh to my own ears. Francesca gives a little shiver as she obeys me.

I walk around the bench, examining her from a variety of angles. Her lower lips are a shiny crimson. The hollow between them deepens almost to purple. As if she feels the weight of my gaze, her labia flutter and twitch. As for me, I’m outrageously horny, my thighs slippery with my secretions, my breasts heavy with blood. At the same time, I’m detached, feeling a kind of power that is new to me, and quite intoxicating.

I notice Francesca’s basket of garden tools behind the bench. Using the shears I find there, I cut a scarlet rose from a nearby bush. The petals are like velvet when I brush the flower across my palm. The color nearly matches Francesca’s ruddy flesh. I sweep the head of the bloom through her folds, from front to back, wringing a moan from her. Then I press the stem, thorns and all, into the tender parting between her legs.

Francesca screams. Her body explodes into motion at the sudden pain. Her thighs gaping wide, she shakes and swings her pelvis from side to side, trying to dislodge the stem or to stimulate herself further. I can’t tell which. I reach for the thorny length of vegetation and peel it out of her cleft. She arches forward as if trying to follow it, to keep it within her.

The tough, elastic stalk is slick with her arousal. Holding it

at the blossom end, I snap the stem against the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs. First one side, then the other, while she rolls her hips and moans incoherently with each stroke. She's quivering all over now, biting her lower lip, pulling at her nipples as if to rip them away from her body. It's time.

I gather the rose into my hand, heedless of the thorns. The blood-colored head protrudes between my fingers and thumb, shaped like a missile or an arrowhead. I take two deep breaths. Then I plunge fingers, flower and all, as deeply as I can into Francesca's cunt.

There's brief resistance, then her folds part and my hand is inside her. She's wailing and thrashing. Her cunt pulses around me, gripping my fingers. Her juices spill out over my wrist, and I realize I'm almost there myself; the briefest touch would send me over with her.

But I resist the temptation. I will my breathing to slow. When her convulsions die away, I pull out my hand, leaving the rose buried in her vagina.

I stand up and straighten my clothing. Francesca lies motionless upon the conservatory bench. I lean over and kiss her lightly on the mouth. Her eyes struggle open, but she doesn't speak.

"Thank you for the tea, Francesca. As far as the job is concerned, I'll think it over and let you know tomorrow. Don't get up; I can let myself out."

Turning my back on her, I limp out of the house and down to the bus stop.

I don't realize until I get home and strip off my suit how exhausted I am. Still, I can't stop myself from burying both hands in my sex, reaching for the climax I denied myself this afternoon. I play back the scene as I touch myself, remembering Francesca's obedience and her need. It's exciting to recall, perhaps even more exciting than when I was there in the flesh.

I don't come, though, not until I elaborate the images. Not until I picture Francesca Pinella bound and gagged, with the rose protruding obscenely from her cunt, blood from the thorns dripping down her thighs.

It's only six in the evening, but I can't fight off the sleep that engulfs me. It's only when I wake, around two AM, that I

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start to wonder about the wisdom of my apparent conquest.

I thought I was the one in charge, but what if I'm wrong? In the cold light of early morning, my old house mumbling and creaking around me, I am uncomfortably certain that something does not add up.

Francesca Pinelli is not the submissive type, any more than I am. She must have been faking. She must have some hidden agenda. Why does she want me to work on her campaign? Does she just want to keep an eye on me? Is she plotting to get rid of me?

I flash back to the image of her pale, perfect body, stretched out compliantly before me. No, that isn't Francesca. It just doesn't add up.



## *Chapter Five*

### *Ashes to Ashes*

It takes what feels like hours to fall back to sleep. I can't stop the churning of my mind. Theories and suspicions whirl around in my head, all jumbled up with images of Francesca's moist pussy and Jimmy's eager cock.

Finally, I doze, but the alarm clock wakes me almost immediately, or so it seems. I groan. Morning is not my favorite time, but according to the *Post-Gazette* they're burying Tony Pinelli at two this afternoon, and I have a lot to do.

My usual hearty appetite has disappeared. I force myself to eat some toast and drink some tea. Then, dressed in jeans and a sweater, I catch a bus on the corner, heading for the Salvation Army thrift store down on Murray Avenue. If I'm going to attend Tony's funeral, I need a disguise.

I was in the drama club in high school. I was good, though they never gave me the innocent young heroine parts. My tits were too big. I played the aunt in "Our Town", and Lady Macbeth. Even then I loved putting on the makeup, donning the mask, stepping onto the stage and hearing the intake of breath from the audience. Wouldn't old Mr. Riley, the club advisor, be tickled to find out that I'm still in the theater!

Anyway, I know something about costumes and such. I rummage through the racks until I find a dowdy black suit in a size sixteen. Way too big for me, but that's the point. I also pick up some scuffed black oxfords in my size. It takes me a while, but I finally locate the final touch in the costume jewelry box. Among the tangled strands of fake pearls and rhinestone pins, there's a gaudy chrome-plated cross on a chain. Probably belonged to some punk who paired it with a skull pendant, but it's just what I need.

At twelve bucks, my purchases are well within my budget.

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My ankle is starting to ache and I'm tempted to take a cab back, but I remember the trip to Greece. So I take the bus home, my father's advice about discipline versus self-indulgence echoing in my head.

It's nearly noon by the time I get back to the row house. I check the locks carefully. No sign of any interference. The sight of my poor trampled garden makes me sigh. I'll replant it sometime this weekend, I resolve. After all this craziness, getting some dirt under my fingernails should be highly therapeutic.

Now I'm ravenous. I grab an apple, a hunk of cheese, and some crackers, washing it down with a glass of milk. Then I go upstairs to get dressed.

I start by pulling my hair into a tight bun, no easy task given how thick and wavy it is. I need half a package of bobby pins to keep the stray curls in place. Then, closing my eyes, I dust my head with talcum powder until my jet locks are a convincingly dull gray.

I put on a pair of black opaque stockings and a heavily wired black bra. I have to use a safety pin on the waistband of the skirt I bought at Salvation Army so that it doesn't fall off. Next, I pull two bulky sweaters over my head, the outer one a rusty black. My arms feel like sausages, wrapped in the layers of padding, but when I slip on the suit jacket and button it up, the effect is just as I had imagined. I look like one of those stocky old women with barrel chests and no waist that are so common in the back pews of churches. The klutzy shoes, the cross, and a pair of my dad's old reading glasses perched on my nose complete the picture.

I limp over to the mirror, noticing that my injury makes the disguise even more convincing. No sign of Stella the stripper, just a frumpy and pious old lady shuffling off to Mass. I need something to cover my head, I realize. I dig out a black chiffon scarf that I sometimes use as a veil in my act, and drape it over the gray-streaked bun. Perfect!

Fortunately the weather has turned cool again. As I lock the door behind me, I sniff the air. There's a promise of rain. I go back and retrieve my father's big black umbrella, which can double as a cane. Then it's back to the corner to wait for the bus. An old lady on a pension wouldn't be likely to take a taxi.

I had expected that Tony would be buried near Shadyside, his home territory. Instead, his funeral is taking place at Saint Benedict's, in the old Italian district of Bloomfield. It's lucky for me, actually. Saint Benedict's cathedral apparently has its own cemetery adjoining the church. That way, I can easily attend both the service and the burial. I definitely want to see who stands at the edge of Tony's grave.

Mass is already in progress when I slip into the sanctuary. St. Benedict's is huge, a relic of the time when the faithful were more numerous than today. Still, it is packed. Apparently, Tony had many people who loved him. There are probably quite a few who hated him, too, but who are here to keep up appearances. Even at the back, every pew is full.

Standing just inside the door is a familiar figure: Jimmy Ostermann. My heart quickens when I see him. I honestly don't know whether this is from excitement or fear. Bending over my umbrella so that my face is in shadow, I shuffle right past him. He hardly seems to notice. His attention is focused on a row of men seated not far from the door, wearing identical black cashmere coats and, oddly, sunglasses.

My ankle throbbing, I make my labored way down the side aisle toward the nave. There are no seats here, either, but there's a shrine to Our Lady of Sorrows in an alcove not far from the front. I kneel awkwardly in front of the life-sized plaster image of the Virgin and clasp my hands reverently below my chin. Hopefully, no one will notice me. However, if I turn my head slightly, I can see the priest, the coffin, and the occupants of the first few rows.

Francesca, of course, is right in front. Her extreme paleness, contrasted with her widow's garb, make me think of an old black and white photo. As far as I can tell, she's not crying. Her lips are pressed together, as if she is trying to keep herself from screaming.

There are others whom I don't recognize, but who have enough resemblance to Francesca that I suspect they're her family. There's nobody who looks even remotely like Tony. I vaguely remember reading that he was abandoned at birth and brought up in a Catholic orphanage. Figures. He probably learned to rely on himself at a pretty early age.

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My knees are starting to hurt. The stone church is cool and dank, but still, I'm sweating in my many layers of clothing. I begin to wonder if this whole thing was a good idea, when I have the sense that someone is looking at me. I bow my head, checking around as best I can with peripheral vision.

It takes me a few minutes to locate him. He's in the shadows, to the left of the altar. It's Bill the detective, Jimmy Ostermann's office mate at the precinct, and he seems to be staring right at me. Of course, he's far enough away that it's hard to tell, but still I feel the hairs rising on the back of my neck. I make the sign of the cross, an old gesture from my childhood, trying to make my character more convincing. The familiar motions are oddly comforting, though I stopped believing long ago.

When I peek again in Bill's direction, his eyes are elsewhere. My heart pounds against my ribs, under my padding. Come on, Stella. It makes sense that he'd be here. After all, Jimmy's here. Jimmy told you the police planned to have a presence at the funeral. There are probably lots of other cops here. No reason to be alarmed. I try to reason with myself, but it's several minutes before my breathing returns to normal.

The priest's voice rises and falls, chanting the ancient ritual. The service reminds me of the Greek litany, when my mother used to take me to the onion-domed St. Nicholas' Cathedral. I close my eyes, letting the music and rhythm of the Mass fill me. I remember the scent of incense and perfumed oil, the flickering of the candles, the bearded priest's gentle hand on my hair when he blessed me. I couldn't have been older than five.

Resolutely, I push the memories away. Memories will just make me vulnerable. I need to be clever and alert, to focus my attention on my enemies. Tony's enemies. I gaze up at the pastel-hued statue of the Madonna, noticing the realistic tears on her pink cheeks.

I'm beginning to wonder whether I'll ever be able to walk again, when finally the long service concludes. Six ordinary-looking men in black raise the coffin to their shoulders and bear it away, out the side door to the graveyard. The crowd files up the aisle and through the main door. I wait for everyone to leave before struggling to my feet and heading after them.

As I predicted, it has started to drizzle. The damp, fresh air revives me. The mourners huddle under their umbrellas, arrayed around the grave. I wait in the background, under a tree, as the casket is lowered into the waiting hole. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," the priest chants, scattering a handful of dirt over the coffin. Francesca bursts into noisy sobs.

Ashes to ashes. I remember my brief, overwhelming encounter with Tony, the fire that burned inside him. I remember the way he fondled my breasts, almost reverently. My nipples tighten at the recollection, pushing uncomfortably against the layers of clothing that bind them. I can almost feel the glorious length of Tony's cock, filling and stretching me. I recall the sense I had, that I knew this stranger and he knew me. It suddenly seems like the most awful crime, that someone should have snuffed out such a brilliant light.

I pull my veil over my face to hide the tears in my eyes.

In contrast with the Mass, the graveside ceremony seems to take hardly any time at all. I struggle to control myself, to keep my attention on the assembled mourners as people begin to drift away from the muddy hole.

Francesca is the center of a knot of people who are shaking her hand and hugging her. Her eyes are dry once more; she looks weary and distracted. I have a sudden longing to kiss her.

Someone new strides up to her, takes her hand, murmurs in her ear. I recognize the stocky frame, sandy hair and florid complexion, but can't place it for a moment. Then I remember seeing his picture in the paper. It's Graham White, the prominent Pittsburgh business leader who is Tony's opponent in the race for mayor. Was Tony's opponent, that is. Now he's running against Francesca.

There's something weird about this interaction. Of course, he's just being polite and paying his respects. Somehow, though, he seems too intimate. Francesca apparently feels the same way. I can sense her shrinking away from the burly man, who towers over her. Still, she allows him to lead her away from the grave to her waiting limo.

It's time for me to leave. I'm feeling chilled, even in my bulky costume. My ankle is throbbing. I limp toward the gate, planning to catch the bus at the corner.

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My way is suddenly blocked by a massive figure in a black cashmere coat. “*Che Dio ti benedica, madre,*” he says, looking straight into my eyes.

I panic. I don’t understand Italian, don’t know how to reply. The man obstructing my path is almost bald, with a hawk-like nose and a bushy black mustache. His lips are thin and formed into a half smile. He looks dangerous.

“Eh?” I croak, pretending I’m deaf.

“*Che Dio ti benedica,*” he repeats, more loudly. “May God bless you, revered mother.”

“Ah—and you also, my son,” I reply, my voice hoarse with tension. Trying to sink deeper into my role as the pious granny, I make the sign of the cross over him. “May the Lord bless you and keep you.”

He looks startled, then his eyes narrow. However, he steps aside to let me pass.

I am halfway to the bus stop when I realize that I made the Orthodox sign, not the Roman one, right shoulder before left. I have a sinking certainty that he noticed.

The bus arrives quickly and I climb on, grateful for the warmth and dryness. As we’re pulling away from the curb, another passenger runs up, from the direction of the cemetery. It’s a teenage girl, though her gender is not immediately obvious: she has short-cropped hair and wears the unisex uniform of baggy cargo pants and tee shirt, under a scarred leather jacket.

She sinks into a seat and drops her heavy backpack on the floor, then squeezes her eyes shut as if she can’t bear to have them open any longer.

She has a sturdy, androgynous frame, but her face is delicate and feminine, with pleasingly arched eyebrows and a vulnerable mouth. Gazing at her from under lowered eyelids, I notice the tracks of tears on her cheeks. Could she have been at Tony’s funeral? Certainly her expression suggests that she’s in heavy mourning. When she opens her eyes again, I see that they are deep brown wells full of anguish. Every few minutes, an isolated sob shakes her body. Then she is quiet again, staring straight ahead but clearly not seeing me.

Passengers arrive and leave. At some point, the bus is empty except for the two of us. The girl rummages in her pack for

something. A photograph, passport-sized. I can't see the picture from my present position across from her. I can't miss what she's doing with it.

First she brings it to her lips, kissing it tenderly. I glance at the driver. His eyes are on the road, and I swear, this woman doesn't even know I'm here. She takes the photo, then, and rubs it against her cheek, caressing herself. After a while, she brings it to her chest, brushing it over her breasts, which begin to take form under the loose cotton of her shirt. Her eyes are closed again; she is lost in some kind of trance.

The pain in her face has faded somewhat, replaced by an expression that I know well: sexual excitement. Her lips are parted and her pale skin is mottled with red blushes. She has started to wriggle and twitch as she pleasures herself with the photo.

I'm fascinated, and I admit, vicariously aroused, though the strangeness of the whole scene holds me back. I'm not even pretending to ignore her. It doesn't seem to matter. Even I am a bit shocked when she slides the photo under her waistband and into her pants. It's clearly positioned over her pubis; she rubs her fist against her crotch, grinding the photograph into her clit and writhing silently on the hard plastic seat.

The bus reaches my stop, and so I don't get to see her come, but I know that she will, before long. There's a hot throbbing between my legs as I make my way back to my house. My ankle is also throbbing, unfortunately not in the same way. First a long shower, I promise myself. Then, perhaps, a bit of self-entertainment. My nipples tighten in anticipation.

As soon as I'm inside the house, I strip off the constraining costume and dump it on the floor. I'm dying to be naked.

The shower is heavenly, soothing my aching ankle, washing off the dried sweat, and magically erasing the gray from my hair. It also rinses away my excitement, leaving me languid and lazy. My poor sleep from the night before is catching up with me. I decide to take a nap before dinner.

As I'm about to doze off, though, a stray thought rouses me. The whole world was at Tony's funeral. It's hard to know if I had learned anything useful or not. But what about Mr. Clean? Andy, Andy Henderson, Francesca had called him. Who would

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see him off on his journey to the next world?

I scan today's paper. Nothing. Yesterday's *Post* is still in the parlor, so I go to check it. I can't find anything in the announcements section, but there is a small paragraph in the obituaries:

*Andrew Henderson, of 4123 Beeler Street, Pittsburgh, died of accidental causes on April 27. He left no survivors. Mr. Henderson was cremated privately. Anyone wishing information should contact Ms. Francesca Pinelli...*

Accidental causes! And no survivors! Talk about euphemisms.

And Francesca was listed as contact person. Very curious.

I am suddenly more tired than ever. I toss the paper onto the coffee table and head upstairs. A sound stops me, a soft knock that I might not have even heard, if my nerves weren't on edge.

The door is locked and chained. I peer through the peephole into the dusk, but can't see anyone. Wrapped in my bathrobe, I stand behind the door, my ears straining, but I don't hear anything more. Finally, my heart hammering in my chest, I unlock the door. Leaving the chain attached, I gaze out through the narrow opening.

No one. Nothing, except the rain, which is falling steadily now on the cracked sidewalk.

However, there's something on my stoop. It's a Macy's shopping bag. I don't dare open the door. I fetch the umbrella and use the crook to grab the handle of the bag. I drag it inside the house and relock the door.

If it were a box, I wouldn't open it. Not likely that somebody would try to bomb me, but the way things have been going, I'm not about to take chances. However, I can look into the bag without actually touching it. I see that there's something small at the bottom, wrapped in multi-colored tissue paper.

Could it be from Jimmy? But no, Jimmy would deliver a gift himself. He wouldn't want to miss the opportunity to see me.

I reach a tentative hand into the bag and pull out the contents. It's very light. The tissues are girlish pastel shades, aqua and pink and purple.



LISABET SARAI

I unwind them to find a naked Barbie doll. Her lips and the tips of her unnaturally large breasts have been painted scarlet. Streaks of red also decorate her thighs. Black circles have been drawn under her eyes. Her limbs are twisted at impossible angles. One leg has been completely snapped off at the knee. One hand is missing three fingers.

A sheet of paper tumbles to the floor. It's a rough scrawl written in black felt tip pen: *Mind your own business, slut, or you'll be very sorry.*

My body shakes uncontrollably for five minutes. Then my mind takes over again. Obviously, someone saw through my disguise at the funeral.

The question is, who?

## *Chapter Six*

### *Show Time*

I'm not usually superstitious, but I can't decide what to do with the doll. My first thought is to throw it in the garbage. Then I recall that it's supposed to be an image of me. I still remember the stories my grandmother used to tell, about the women back in the old country, effigies and curses. I don't have the nerve to destroy it.

Finally, I clean off the paint, straighten out her arms and legs as well as I can, wrap her in one of my silk nightgowns, and hide her in the back of my bottom bureau drawer. Hopefully, by the time I find her again, all of this will be just a dim memory.

I sleep the proverbial sleep of the dead. I wake up around nine the next morning, surprisingly refreshed and alert.

Over breakfast, I replay Tony's funeral in my mind, trying to figure out who might have figured out my real identity. There's Bill, of course, but I'm not even sure he saw me, and even if he did, I was hardly acting suspicious. If Jimmy recognized me, and managed to hide it, then he's more of a genius-cop than I'd ever expect. Francesca might have seen through the disguise—she knows me better than anyone else there except Jimmy. She seemed totally involved in her own emotions, though.

I recall the strange interaction with the bald guy in the cashmere coat. I slipped up there, I know, and I wouldn't be surprised if he noticed. Who was he, though, and why should he care about me?

I figure I'm stuck, but the paper provides an unexpected answer. The City News page has a full page spread on the funeral, entitled "Requiem for a Honcho". There's a photo of Francesca, looking far more composed than she seemed to me yesterday, one of casket smothered in flowers, one of Graham

White (“the dead man’s political rival”). There’s also a distance shot of Mr. Cashmere, hurrying away from the camera with dark glasses on his beak of a nose. The caption identified him as Julio Orestino, a “prominent businessman.”

Julio Orestino. The name rings a bell, though I’m sure I never saw the guy before yesterday. Then I remember Loretta at the Peacock, joking one time about “Don Julio” trying to buy Joey out. “I don’t know about you,” she’d said with a wink, “but I don’t want to work for the mob.”

Don Julio. I remember the whole pew filled with identical black cashmere. It fits. But why would a mob boss care that some stripper attended Tony’s funeral in disguise?

The deeper I dig to find the truth, the less it seems that I know. The phone interrupts my frustrated pondering. Don’t trust anyone, I remind myself as I answer. But I can’t help melting at the sound of Jimmy’s voice.

“So, Stella, are we still on for tonight?”

Images of our last meeting flood my memory. I become all loose and warm with the recollection. I know that he can sweep away all my tensions and fears, at least for a little while. Which is why I have to refuse him.

“I’m sorry, Jimmy, but I’ve been feeling really wiped out. My ankle’s still killing me, too. I think it would be better if I took a rain check.”

There’s a long silence. When he speaks again, I hear the pain in his voice. “Are you sure, Stella? We could do something really low key. Why don’t I bring over some take-out and we can just sit and watch TV?”

I want so much to accept. I remind myself about the doll, the break-in, my mangled tomato plants. “I don’t think so, Jimmy. Not tonight, anyway.”

“It’s not...the park, is it? What we did? I’m sorry I came on so strong...”

“Don’t be silly! I was the one who seduced you. And it was great, Jim. I loved it, I really did.” The other memories are getting the upper hand, memories of his gentle fingers and assertive tongue. “I’d love to do it again. Just not tonight, okay?”

“Okay, whatever you say. You can call me anytime. Day or night. You know that, don’t you?”

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I want him so badly that I can hardly keep my voice steady. “Yes, I know. I’ll call you soon.”

“Take care of yourself, Stella.”

“You too, Jimmy.” The mob boss pops into my head, and I worry briefly about Jimmy’s safety. But he’s a cop, right? I’ve got to believe he can manage things for himself.

By the time I hang up, my desire for Jimmy has me tied in knots. I can spare a few minutes, I figure, to do something about that.

I’m still wearing my robe. I shuck it off my shoulders and spread it on the carpet, then lie down on my back on top of the plush terry cloth. My nipples are tight, aching bullets of flesh. I cup the weight of my breasts in my palms and flick my thumbs across the stiffened tips, sending shocks through my body with each stroke.

It’s not enough. Readjusting my body a bit, I manage to take a nipple into my own mouth. I suck hard, imagining it’s Jimmy’s eager tongue that’s rasping over the sensitive flesh. I see myself feeding him my lush tits, first one, then the other, while I stroke away at his smooth shaft. Suckling me would be enough to get him off, I suspect. I sense his cock contracting in advance of his convulsion and let go, pushing his head down toward my pussy instead.

Very few men know how to eat pussy, I’ve found. I don’t know yet how Jimmy will do, but I picture him between my thighs, licking and nibbling. Meanwhile, I simulate the effects of his tongue, working my cunt with both hands. I’m as slick as if I’ve been oiled, inside and out. My fingers of my left hand glide over my swollen lower lips to settle deep inside my cunt. I massage the inner muscles, feeling them pulse whenever my other hand squeezes my clit. I bring in my heels, closer to my butt, so that I can rock my pelvis against my hands, one probing, the other circling, teasing, flicking across the rigid nub until I can hardly stand it. My thighs spread wider as I imagine Jimmy burrowing deeper. “More,” I whisper. “More...”

He’s using his hands now as well as his mouth, holding me open while he sucks me for all he’s worth. His thumb continues to prod and tickle my clit. I writhe and arch against him every time he touches it. Now his other hand is wandering. He slips

two fingers into my cunt and pumps in time with his suction. "More," I moan, close now but needing just that extra little push to send me over the edge.

He's listening. He's tuned in to what my body needs. There's a brief awful moment of loss when he pulls his fingers from my cunt. Before this registers, though, he plunges his thumb into me in their place. And then, half a breath later, he slides one of the liberated fingers smoothly into my ass.

Oh, Jimmy, you're so nasty, I think as I scream and topple into bliss. Who'd ever think a nice, respectful guy like you would be like that? My body continues to shake with the aftershocks of the climax, my pelvis jerking in the air. Would he really be like that? I wonder vaguely. I want more than ever to find out.

Finally, I relax and stretch out my legs. I cringe at the sharp pain in my ankle. Right. Until a few minutes ago half my weight was on that ankle, as I strained my pussy toward the ceiling, trying to come. Got to be more careful when I play with myself, or I'll never heal. Next time, I should lie on my stomach. Or maybe do it on my hands and knees, so I can imagine Jimmy screwing me doggy style...

I'm actually getting turned on again, enough that the pain begins to fade. The pictures are rolling in my mind again, clearer than ever. Jimmy's grinning at me, his cheeks smeared with my juices, as he positions himself behind my elevated butt. He leans over and slides his tongue up my crack from front to rear. The next thing I feel is his swollen knob, rubbing back and forth outside my well-lubricated cleft.

The telephone rings, rudely shattering my fantasy. I hope it's not Jimmy again, trying to make me change my mind. Because at this point, I'm not sure I have the strength to say no to him.

It is a different sort of challenge, though. Francesca.

"Good morning, Stella." Her voice is warm and fluid, like honey. "Hope I didn't wake you."

"Oh, no, I've been up for hours." My own voice sounds strained and breathless. I can't tell if that's from my recent orgasm or it's some effect that Francesca is having. "Actually, I was just working out. Since I haven't been dancing, I've got to

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work hard to stay in shape.”

“You’re very diligent.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have much choice. It doesn’t take long for muscle to turn to flab.” I groan inwardly at my silly, shallow conversation. Pull it together, girl, I tell myself. Don’t let her manipulate you.

“So, what can I do for you, Francesca?”

“I was wondering if you had given any further consideration to my offer.”

Damn! I had totally forgotten her proposal that I come work for her. The scene in the conservatory effectively wiped it from my mind.

Don’t do it, advises one voice in my head. She’s dangerous. She knows how to get to you, to make you lose control.

The doll could have been her doing. It was, after all, a rather feminine notion: voodoo Barbie.

There’s another voice, though, calculating and almost arrogant.

If you want to know what really happened that night in the hotel room, you’ve got to take her up on her offer. Think of the opportunities you’ll have. Get her to trust you and before long her life, and Tony’s, will be an open book. You’re a tough cookie who can take care of herself. She may be smart, but what does she know about the streets?

And it does seem that she’s at least as susceptible to your charms as you are to hers...

Torn and confused, I’m silent for an uncomfortably long time.

“Stella? Are you still there?”

“Uh—yes, of course. I just haven’t decided yet. It might be kind of difficult, you and me working that closely together.”

Francesca laughed girlishly. “Don’t worry, Stella. I know enough not to mix business with pleasure. While we’re working on this campaign, I promise to keep things strictly professional. Now that Tony’s gone, I want to be the next mayor of this city, more than anything else.”

Even more than me? I wonder.

“And I know that you can help me get what I want, Stella. You’re exactly what I need.”

"I'm flattered by your confidence, Francesca, but..."

"No buts. I know you can do this. And maybe this temporary job will be a stepping stone for you, a bridge to a new career that will be better for you than stripping."

What do you know about stripping? Irritation erases my uncertainty. I like stripping. I choose to strip. I won't say that it's art, but it's a lot closer to drama than people realize.

I deliberately calm myself before answering.

"Okay, Francesca. I'll give it a try, though I still think that the media are going to crucify you when you bring me on stage."

"Maybe at first. But you'll win them over, Stella. And the voters are going to love you."

"So. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. I've called a press conference in front of City Hall to formally announce my candidacy, and to introduce you. You won't have to say much this first time. After we meet the fine ladies and gentlemen of the press, we can come back here to Shadyside. I'd like us to spend some time together so that I can bring you up to speed on my platform, the issues that I see differentiating me from Graham White, and the image I'm trying to project. *We're* trying to project, that is."

Might as well plunge in. "Sounds reasonable."

"Good. I'll pick you up at noon tomorrow. We can have a bite of lunch before the event."

She doesn't tell me how to dress or anything. I'm grateful for that.

"Noon is fine. I'll be ready."

"Good." There's an awkward silence, and I'm about to hang up, but she speaks again. "Oh, and about your salary..." She names a figure three times what I make in a week at the Peacock, including tips. "Will that be acceptable?"

"Sure, Francesca," I say, smiling as images of Greece float through my mind. "That will be fine. See you tomorrow."

Tomorrow I'll start my new job and my detective work. Meanwhile, it's a glorious spring morning, sunny and pleasant. Perfect for fixing up my poor garden. I change into old jeans and a sweatshirt and go out to survey the situation.

Most of the bean poles were knocked down. Whoever rampaged through here seemed to have been trying to cause as

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much damage as possible. The plants are still fine, though. The vines snake along the ground, bright green, tangling with the tops of carrots. I get my spade and hoe from the basement and dig new holes for the stakes. Then, very gently, I untangle the vines from the other vegetation and wrap them around the poles. I use twist ties to keep them in place until they can take hold by themselves.

The tomato plants are another story. Most of them are crushed, stems broken, little white flowers trampled into the earth. I'm going to need new plants. I pull out the remains of the old ones and drop them in the rubbish basket. Then I head for the hardware store three blocks away.

Mr. Olsen looks surprised when I bring my two flats of seedlings to the checkout. "Hey, Stella. Didn't you buy tomato plants three weeks ago? It's kind of late to be putting them in now."

"Rabbits. Munched on every one."

"That's too bad. Maybe you should pick up some hardware cloth, fence those little buggers out."

"Maybe I should." A fence would protect my plants from people as well as animals. "Can I leave these here while I go get it?"

"Never mind, you just wait here." He calls over his shoulder. "Lars! Could you bring out a roll of hardware cloth for Stella?" Olsen's younger brother comes out of the back room, carrying a cylinder of wire mesh on his shoulder.

"Hi, Stella. This stuff is pretty heavy. You want me to drop it by with the truck later?"

"No, thanks. That's okay. I've got my grocery cart."

Lars settles the roll into the folding cart, then balances the tomato flats on top. "Do you need tin shears to cut that stuff?"

"My dad's workshop is full of tools. I'm sure he would have tin shears." I ignore the little stab of pain that mentioning my father always brings. "Thanks for all your help."

"No problem. We're always glad to see you, Stella."

I carefully roll my cart home, grateful that I can at least trust my neighbors.

It's past two, so I grab a bite of lunch before plunging back into my gardening. It's good that I can work mostly on my



knees. After the trip to the hardware store, my ankle's aching again.

As usual, digging my fingers into the soil seems to settle my soul. I'm careful and thorough, setting each plant in its hole, mounding the dirt around the roots to support the fragile stems. The air is sweet, full of the sharp scent of growing things. I finish planting the last seedling and sit back on my heels, looking around in satisfaction.

I notice something gleaming in the sun, over near the back fence. Stiffly, I make it to my feet and go over to investigate. It's a shiny metal disk, about the size of a half-dollar. It seems to be made of silver. On one side, in relief, there's a design of a human figure holding a torch, with other figures kneeling at its feet, their hands raised. I can't make any sense of it. On the reverse there's engraving in fancy script: "PPD, Five Years".

PPD. It only takes me a minute to figure it out. My peaceful mood evaporates like mist.

Pittsburgh Police Department.

I turn the commemorative coin over and over in my palm. It's not tarnished or dirty. It could not have been here more than a few days. Clearly the burglar who vandalized my garden must have dropped it.

Five years. I remember Jimmy telling me about his promotion, back at the reunion five years ago. But the burglar—it couldn't be Jimmy. He was with me. In the park. Unless he was here checking the place out before we went out. Or after.

The afternoon sun beats down on me. I suddenly feel hot and sweaty, and very, very tired. I haven't put up the fencing yet, but I no longer have the energy.

Back in the house, I shower and change. Then, reluctantly, I call Jimmy.

He answers on the second ring. "Stella! Are you feeling better? Did you change your mind? Shall I come over?"

"Sorry, I'm afraid I'm still under the weather. But I need to ask you something."

"Sure, ask away."

"When you made detective first class, did the department give you anything? Any kind of trophy or plaque?"

"I don't think so....No, wait, there was something, an

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engraved silver coin. Kind of silly, I thought.”

“Do you still have it?”

“I haven’t seen it in years. It’s probably buried in some drawer.” Curiosity edges into his voice. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I found something like that at my house. In the bushes outside the front door.” Why am I lying to him? I’m not sure, but I go with my instincts. “It says ‘PPD’, which I figured must be ‘Pittsburgh Police Department’. I wondered if it could be yours, like maybe you lost it when you came to pick me up the other night.”

“Not mine. I wouldn’t carry something like that around.” He’s quiet for a moment, thinking. “But who else might have dropped it? Have there been any other members of the police around your house?”

“Not since that drunken customer followed me home from the Peacock two years ago.” I force a laugh. “Never mind. Actually it could belong to anyone. Some other cop might have lost it, and someone picked it up. Or somebody might have pawned it. Just because it’s from the police department doesn’t mean that it was left by a policeman.”

“True. But it’s kind of strange anyway.”

“Yeah, it is.”

There’s another pause on Jimmy’s end. “So anyway, you’re sure that we can’t get together tonight?”

“I’m sure. Don’t worry, we’ll see each other soon.” I’d like to believe that but despite his assurances I’m still suspicious. As I hang up, I wonder if he’s telling the truth. He sounds convincing. I wonder if he could produce his coin, if I asked him to.

It occurs to me to wonder whether someone might have deliberately dropped the coin. In order to make me suspect Jimmy.

It’s a long, lonely evening. I order a pizza and eat in front of the television. The movie channel is playing a Katherine Hepburn marathon. I try to concentrate on the trials of Hepburn and Bogart as they struggle against all odds to sink a German warship and to hide their love. I lose patience with the silliness as Hepburn and Grant chase the errant Baby, but I don’t turn the TV off. Finally, I fall asleep on the couch to Hepburn and

Spencer Tracy trading legal jibes.

It's past ten AM when I wake, stiff and for some reason groggy. The morning sun seems weak, half-hearted. It takes me a minute to remember what day it is. Then it hits me. Monday. The day of my debut as Francesca's assistant.

I shower and dress, choosing my most conservative outfit for the afternoon's ordeal. Even a charcoal pin-striped suit doesn't manage to make me look exactly business-like. The skirt comes to mid-knee, the crisp white blouse buttons high on my throat, but my long, shapely legs and ample breasts are hard to hide. I put up my hair, twisting it into a complex knot at the back of my head, and apply only minimal makeup. I gaze at myself in the mirror and shrug. Sex appeal is hard to disguise, but after all, this was Francesca's choice. Sorry, sweetheart, but what you see is what you get.

The doorbell rings. I slip into low-heeled pumps (it won't do for me to appear taller than Madame Mayor-to-be), grab my purse, and limp downstairs.

Francesca, as I expected, is wearing black. The cut of her suit is so stylish, though, it hardly looks like mourning. I see approval in her eyes as she looks me over, but she has the good taste not to say anything.

She takes me to the restaurant at the William Penn Hotel, just around the corner from City Hall. The waiters seem as highly starched as the white linen table cloths. The silver fork is heavy and awkward in my hand as I nibble at the salad nicoise that Francesca recommended. The recessed lighting and the low murmur of the businessmen conversing at the tables around us are strangely soothing. I listen more than I talk.

"This is a city of working people, Stella. They're the people Tony wanted to represent, and I feel the same way. You might find it difficult to believe, but both Tony and I have working-class roots. Tony's grandfather came over from Italy to work in the steel mills. Mine ran a grocery in Bloomfield, half a mile from where Tony's buried. We were fortunate to have industrious, ambitious parents who knew the value of education. I remember my mother brushing my hair, telling me again and again that I needed to go to college or I'd never have any opportunities.

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“After Vassar, I was a freelance journalist for awhile. I was always fascinated by politics, though. When I met Tony ten years ago he already was planning to run for Mayor. He asked me to help him. As he built his businesses, cultivated his contacts, served on the City Council, ran the Chamber of Commerce, made deals, friends and enemies, I was always there behind the scenes. Planning, organizing, smoothing the rough spots. Giving him whatever support he needed.”

There’s a strange, somber expression on her heart-shaped face, grief tinged with bitterness.

“I’m sure that he was grateful for your help.” I sense that I need to say something.

“Of course he was. He told me so, often. And he made sure that I had everything that I wanted. Within the limits of his character.” Another awkward pause. Her fork is raised, halfway to her mouth, a lettuce leaf trembling in its tines. Is she going to cry, here in public?

“And now he’s gone. But I won’t let our dream die with him. That’s why I need you, Stella. I need you to help me the way I helped him. To be my voice, my eyes, and my ears. To do whatever needs to be done.”

This sounds ominous to me. Her story has its inspiring aspects, but I still don’t trust her.

Her face softens as she looks at me; she seems almost girlish, and surprisingly needy. I have an almost overwhelming urge to reach out and stroke her cheek. I try to ignore it, along with the melting sensation between my thighs. This is business.

I try to read her, the way I read the customers at the Peacock. Of course I can’t give her the stare, but I gaze into her eyes with what I hope is a sympathetic expression.

“I’ll do what I can, Francesca. Just let me know what you need.”

She feels the question in my eyes, and makes her face into a mask. I’m suddenly reminded of Mr. Clean.

“I need to be mayor. That’s the last dream left to me, and I’ll fight like the devil to fulfill it.”

She dabs at her lips with her napkin and signals the waiter. “And now, Stella, it’s show time.”

My stomach contracts with sudden nervousness. I wish that

I hadn't eaten.

Together, we walk the short distance over to the site of the press conference. This is part of Francesca's strategy; she wants to seem like a woman of the people, and arriving in her Mercedes wouldn't fit that image. It has become a cloudy, blustery day. The wind cuts through my jacket, making me shiver. It teases a few curls from my neat twist, probably making me look poorly-groomed and unprofessional, but there's not much I can do about it.

There's a knot of people milling on the City Hall steps, with lights and other equipment. I notice vans with the logos of WQED and WPXI. The news people all have their backs to us, as if they expected us to come from the opposite direction. Francesca's voice rings out, clear and commanding. "Over here, ladies and gentlemen." We march up the steps, through the confused crowd.

Francesca waits quietly while the media people rearrange themselves and adjust their equipment. Then, when they've settled down, she waits a moment longer, scanning the crowd, looking elegant and serious.

I have to admire her showmanship. By the time she begins to speak, she has the attention of everyone, even the technicians squatting in the doors of the mobile studio vans.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for taking the time to join us on this raw and stormy afternoon. I won't keep you long.

"As you all know, my husband Anthony Pinelli wanted to serve this city as its mayor. Pittsburgh was his birthplace. It nurtured him, educated him, made him wealthy and successful. It gave him the opportunities and benefits that he could not have found anywhere else. Tony Pinelli wanted to give some of this back to the city he loved. That was his most cherished dream.

"Tony's tragic death has shocked us all." Francesca allows a quaver into her voice. I'm impressed. She really knows how to work the crowd. She pauses and swallows hard, as if resisting tears. Her voice is calm and forceful when she continues. "As his wife and partner, I am determined not to allow his dream to die with him. That is why, today, I am announcing my own candidacy for the position of mayor. I am determined that, even though Tony has left us, the next person to preside over the

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administration of this fine city will be Mayor Pinelli.”

The crowd erupts in enthusiastic applause. I find that I’m clapping myself. The hubbub continues for quite a while. Francesca holds up her hand, asking for quiet.

“During the remaining weeks of the campaign, I will be sharing with you my vision—Tony’s vision—for this city. Assisting me with this task will be my press secretary, Ms. Stella Xanathakeos. Like Tony and me, Stella was born here. She knows the problems and the aspirations of the ordinary people of Pittsburgh. She will help me to explain why a vote for me is a vote for a bright, secure and prosperous future—for all of us.”

Francesca turns to me. “Stella, would you like to say a few words?” Expectantly, the cameras and microphones swing in my direction.

I’m not entirely unprepared. It was reasonable that Francesca would want me to speak. Still, I have a moment of panic. I’m a performer, but words are not my usual instrument.

I pause for a moment, take a deep breath and survey my audience. They are mostly male, though I recognize the blonde bob and creamy complexion of Teresa Kelly, the Channel 5 news anchor. I remind myself that in this situation, my sexuality is a liability. Just in time, I remember not to lick my lips. I clasp my hands in front of me to keep them out of trouble.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m proud to be standing here today, next to this brave woman. When you lose someone you love, your first impulse is to just give up. You want to crawl into a hole and die yourself. I know this, from my own experience.” I pause, looking out over the attentive faces. I hope that they’re not just paying attention to my tits.

“Francesca Pinelli isn’t giving up, though. That’s not the sort of person she is. She was her husband’s closest aide. She understands his goals and his plans for Pittsburgh. And she’s determined to turn those plans into reality, regardless of her personal pain.

“As for me, I’m just an ordinary person. My mother died when I was six. My father was an immigrant who worked hard all his life to support me. He had to fight against discrimination, and sleazy bosses, and government by the rich for the rich. I’ve worked hard, too. It’s an uphill battle for most of us in this city. I

believe that Francesca Pinelli wants to make that battle easier. What's more important, I believe that she can."

I am startled when people begin to applaud. Francesca face wears a broad smile as she steps forward and reclaims the attention of the crowd. The wind whips her hair into her face. The first chill drops of rain spatter against my cheek.

"Thank you, Stella. I appreciate your confidence. I'll do my best to be worthy of it, worthy of the trust of every person in the city."

"Ladies and gentlemen, you'll be hearing more from Stella in the next few weeks. Since the weather is turning nasty, I think we should cut this short."

"A few questions, Ms. Pinelli!" shouts someone from the crowd. "Don't go yet!" echoes another voice. "Give us a chance!"

The crowd presses toward us, waving microphones in our faces and effectively trapping us on the stairs. Somebody opens an oversized umbrella and holds it over our heads.

"Very well, we can take a few questions. No more than five minutes, though, or we'll all be drenched." A few more umbrellas open. The media people push closer to hear us against the wind.

"Ms. Pinelli." The question comes from Terry Kelly. "Pittsburgh has a reputation as a rough city. We've got the unions, the old industry barons, the mob. Do you really think it can be run by a woman?"

Francesca stands erect, looking taller than usual. "Don't you think, Ms. Kelly, that it is time a woman had the chance to show what she can do?" There is scattered applause. "You probably know that Tony was a tough guy. He wouldn't have chosen me as his partner if I couldn't be just as tough, when the need arose."

A skinny reporter in dark-rimmed glasses steps forward with his tape recorder. "Graham White, your opponent, has headed the City Council for more than five years. You have no political experience. Why should the voters choose a novice like you, over a seasoned politician like Mr. White?"

Francesca laughs. "No political experience? I was married to Tony Pinelli for more than ten years, including his two terms

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on the council. Believe me, I know about politics!" The audience chuckles. "On the other hand, I don't think this city needs a politician, as much as we need a leader."

"Ms. Xanathakeos!" I'm startled to hear my name. It's coming from a chubby, balding guy who's grinning unpleasantly. "I'm sure that we all appreciated your homily to the working class. But isn't it true that for the past six years your primary employment has been as an exotic dancer?"

Gasps and snickers come from the audience. The questioner looks pleased with himself. So there it is. I glance over at Francesca. She looks perfectly calm and untroubled. I straighten my back, so that my tits thrust out a bit, and look the bald guy in the eye. I know what you like, I think to myself. You like to dress up in your wife's lingerie when she's working the late shift. That's what I see, though it might be my own imagination. Still, as I stare at him, he begins to squirm and finally has to look away.

"Quite true, Mister...?"

"Rostropovitch," he answers reluctantly.

"You've done your research, Mr. Rostropovitch. I am indeed an exotic dancer, as you put it. A perfectly honest line of work, and believe me, not an easy one. Do you have some problem with that?"

"Well, it hardly seems appropriate for a mayoral candidate to be associating with hookers..."

Now I am really annoyed. "A stripper is not a hooker, Mr. Rostropovitch. In any case, I am what I said I am, a woman born and bred in this city, who knows the problems working people here, particularly women, face. I'm also a voter. I am definitely qualified to give Ms. Pinelli advice and insight into these issues."

I give him a long cold stare that I hope makes him feel naked. "In Francesca Pinelli's Pittsburgh, everyone will be entitled to fair treatment and respect—even reporters!"

The crowd breaks into raucous laughter and applause. I sense that Mr. Rostropovitch is not well-liked by his colleagues.

The wind rises suddenly and pulls my hair loose from my carefully-constructed twist. Curly strands whip round my face, obscuring my vision, but I can't miss the reporter's hostile glare. Great, another enemy.



Serious rain hammers against our umbrella. Meanwhile Rostropovitch's umbrella turns inside out. Most of the press scurries for vans, cars, or doorway overhangs, but he just stands there, staring at me evilly, rivulets of water running down his receding forehead.

"Come on, Stella, let's get out of the rain." Francesca has one hand on my sleeve, pulling me into the City Hall atrium. With her other hand, she's dialing her cell phone.

"I called us a cab, asking them to pick us up at the side entrance. They told me it would be ten minutes. I'll pick up my car later." She leans toward me, close enough that I can smell her perfume. For a moment, I think that she's going to kiss me. "You were fantastic, Stella. I was truly impressed. I think that perhaps you were born for politics."

Now that the show is over, I find that my legs are shaking. The chill, damp weather isn't helping my ankle, either. I untangle myself from Francesca's grasp and try for a light tone.

"Hey, it's all show business, isn't it?"

"Of course I realize that you know how to work a crowd. I'm talking about something else. The passion in your speech, and the honesty. That's what really had them hooked, Stella. They don't encounter honesty very often."

I wonder how she measures up on that quality. She seemed so sincere about her desire to serve as mayor, but I can't get over the notion that she is just playing a part. That she really wants something else. I decide that I should give her the benefit of the doubt. For now.

"Thank you, Francesca. I'm glad that you're happy with my work. But I'm warning you, today was just the first example of the flak you're going to get for hiring someone with my background."

"I have no doubt whatsoever that you can handle it, Stella. Especially after this afternoon." She peers out the glass door into the swirling rain. "Good, here's our cab. When we get back to the house, I want to spend some time planning the campaign. Is that all right with you?"

"Sure. It's not exactly a day for a walk in the park, is it?"

My employer giggles a bit at my silly remark. There's more color than usual in her cheeks, and she seems to have mostly

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shed her dignified Madame Mayor manner. “Well, the house should be warm, dry and cozy.”

Maybe too cozy.

In the taxi, Francesca sits closer than she needs to. Her thigh presses against mine; whenever I adjust my position to relieve that pressure, she moves to reestablish contact, spreading her legs wider than I would consider modest. Her scent fills the cab, a mingling of her expensive perfume and her natural musk. I’m annoyed by her insistence, when she promised to be “professional”, but at the same time I can’t help being turned on by her closeness.

She told me that my passion was my strength, but I’m starting to consider it a serious weakness. When her hand drifts across to settle in my lap, I leave it there, trying not to respond. I’m all too aware of the cab driver watching us in the rearview mirror. After all, we’re still on stage.

Luckily, it’s not a long ride, and Francesca doesn’t make any more obvious moves. The rain has slackened by the time we get to Shadyside, but the wind is still sharp enough to cut through my wool suit as if it was a negligee. I shiver. Francesca does not miss this.

“Come inside, Stella. You need to get out of those damp clothes. I can probably find something of mine that fits. And I’ll have Rosa make us a hot pot of tea.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” I follow my new boss upstairs to her office, trying to ignore my reaction to the trim buttocks flexing under her skirt. “I’m really not wet at all.”

“Well, I’m going to change. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be back shortly. And the tea should be here in a minute.” She gives me a smile of such warmth that I almost melt, despite my decision to resist her charms. Then she disappears down the hall. I sit back in my fancy, high-tech chair and look around me. Alone in her office. I realize I should make the best of the opportunity.

Francesca’s work space is neat and uncluttered. There’s a laptop computer, closed, upon her desk. Just as well. I wouldn’t have the foggiest idea how to—what’s the word, hack?—into her files looking for incriminating material. The two-drawer filing cabinet appears to be locked, based on my quick attempt to pull

it open. But there's an orderly pile of file folders on the corner of the desk. I'm leaning over, trying to read the titles lettered on the tabs, when Francesca enters the room.

I smell her before I see her. She must have freshened her perfume when she changed. And certainly she has changed. Her stylish but severe suit has been replaced by a black velour lounging outfit, a loose tunic and flowing pants. Her hair is a mass of damp curls, as if she just towed it after a shower. She has exchanged her fashionable mauve lipstick for bright red. She looks ten years younger, and I have to admit, incredibly desirable. The velvety fabric of her outfit just cries out to be touched.

She notices me looking at the folders. "Those are Tony's files on the campaign. I left them out for you. There are draft speeches, position papers, notes on people and places, ideas for campaign activities." She glides across the polished wood floor and stands behind me, her hands resting on my shoulders. "I always told him he should get a PDA, but in some ways he was very old-fashioned." Her breath is warm on my neck. She lifts the heavy veil of my hair and brushes her lips over the sensitive skin behind my ear. Hot blood rushes to my earlobes, my nipples, my sex.

"For example, he liked old-fashioned girls, with plenty of curves." Now her hands are cupping my breasts, her thumbs gently massaging the nubs that protrude even through three layers of bra, blouse, and jacket. She flicks her tongue along the line of my jaw. I gasp at the answering lightning that arcs through my body. "You know what I mean, don't you, Stella?"

She's taking control, gentle but determined. Oh, how I long to give in to her! I want to sink into her, drown myself in her kisses, lose myself in her strength. I'm so tense, vibrating between fear and desire, that I'm ready to scream.

She grasps my chin, turns my face to hers, her lips already parted and ready. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse the pile of folders. This is not why I'm here, I think, as her mouth fastens on mine and her tongue probes me. But I can't seem to resist her.

Her lipstick is cherry-flavored, which almost makes me laugh. Then I gasp as she slides a bold hand up the inside of my thigh. She finds the bare skin at the top of my stocking. "Mmm,"

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she murmurs, nibbling at my lips. "A garter belt. So old-fashioned. So sexy. You're such a delicious, old-fashioned slut."

That word, from her, is too much of a shock. The tortured Barbie leaps into my mind. My whole body stiffens. Hoping that I am not insulting her, I push her away and stand up hurriedly. A spike of pain skewers my ankle at the sudden weight.

"No, Francesca. We agreed that our relationship had to be platonic if we were going to work together. You think today was bad, just think of the circus if the press found out that we were lovers."

Francesca smiles weakly. "Well, we'd get the gay vote." She sighs, and brushes my hair out of my eyes. "But I suppose that you're right. For now we need to keep our hands off each other. It's so difficult to resist you, though." She gazes longingly at my bare throat, where my blouse had come unbuttoned. Then she straightens and smoothes her tunic. I watch her face rearrange itself, from eager lust to calculated firmness. The liquid warmth in her eyes freezes to a glittering hardness.

"I'm so lonely, Stella. I apologize for trying to seduce you, but since—that night—being alone has just been unbearable. I'm strong, though. You know that. I'll make sure that it doesn't happen again, if that's what you want."

"You know what I want." I recognize her play for sympathy, but I feel sorry for her anyway. "I just don't think that's what's best for us right now. For either of us."

"You're right, Stella. We need to work. The election is only three weeks away. We've got to make sure that everyone who planned to vote for Tony is ready to vote for me. And then we've got to figure out how to convince everyone who is undecided that they should choose me instead of Graham White."

"Tell me a bit about White." I'm happy, for the moment, to move the conversation in a more businesslike direction. "Who is he? Where's his power base? What are his weaknesses?"

"Old money. His great-grandfather was one of Andrew Carnegie's cronies. White's father was mayor for one term back in the fifties. Now Graham figures that the City Hall should be his by right of inheritance."

"Married?"

"Divorced, with a teenage daughter. The story is that

Graham's wife ran off with a musician, and he always acts the part of the injured party. Raised the girl alone in the face of her mother's irresponsibility and moral turpitude, and so on. On the other hand, I've heard that the girl is pretty wild, not much of a testimony to his efforts."

"What else?"

"In the past ten years, Graham's become quite the philanthropist, funding hospital wings and playgrounds and such. He's a pillar of the church—Methodist, I think—and an anti-drug, anti-porn crusader."

"Oh, great! I can imagine what he must think of me!"

"Never mind. He doesn't know you, Stella. You're going to be my secret weapon."

"So, he's squeaky clean, super-moral, rich and privileged. Any skeletons in the closet, other than his runaway spouse?" I remember the funeral suddenly. "Any mafia connections?"

"In this city there are always rumors. But no one's ever found any fire behind the smoke. No, Graham usually lives up to his image as fine, upright citizen with an impeccable pedigree. Though I've heard that he has a violent temper, which he tries to hide. Anyway, the local politicians and the captains of industry all support him. He's got more of a problem, I think, with the working people. That's where we have an advantage, and we need to capitalize on it."

"Right." I sink back down into my chair, my head buzzing with ideas. "I think we should plan a series of appearances for you down on the streets. At church festivals and neighborhood block parties. Visiting the local day care centers and the senior clubs. There's a farmer's market in Squirrel Hill every Tuesday and I read about a flower show in Highland Park next weekend."

"Sounds like a good strategy. Why don't you work up a schedule and see if you can make arrangements? You can use the phone here." Francesca gestures at a sleek black device whose purpose I might not have even recognized.

"I'd also like to take a look at Tony's files, if you don't mind. See if they give me any other ideas."

"Go right ahead. That's why they're there." Francesca fixes me with her eyes, which have melted again to pools of warm chocolate. "I'm going to see whatever happened to our tea. Then

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I'll retire with mine to the conservatory and leave you alone to work."

I wonder if the mention of the conservatory is meant to tempt me. I push the memories out of my mind. "Thanks, Francesca. I drop down later and give you a report."

The slender, black-clad woman lingers on the threshold a moment longer, before turning her back on me. Five minutes later, plump, dark-skinned Rosa brings me some tea. I guess that Francesca doesn't trust herself.

Tony's files are interesting. Even inspiring. They're mostly marked up typescripts, though there are also pages of hand written notes on lined yellow paper. Tony writes in heavy black ink. His hand is strong, open, and readable. Reviewing his speeches, I hear his voice in my mind, warm, rich and full of passion. Once again, a stab of grief twists in my chest. No wonder Francesca misses him. I only knew him for an hour, and even I am mourning his loss.

I'm halfway through the files when I realize that I should spend some time making phone calls. Maybe I can take the folders home with me.

I pick them up to straighten them, and something falls to the floor. It's a leather-covered appointment book, not a day planner, but something smaller and simpler. My heart slams against my ribs as I bend to pick it up. I look over my shoulder, but no one is watching me.

Hardly breathing, I leaf through the pages, looking for anything suspicious. Would I even recognize something suspicious if I found it? Scattered through the last month there are frequent references to "Andy" and "Fran", as well as lots of names that I don't recognize. Tony's style is pretty abbreviated. After all, he's making notes for himself, nobody else.

Tears prick my eyes as I flip to the day Tony died. He had a dentist appointment at ten and then "lunch Fran 12:30 Toro's". Two unidentifiable meetings in the afternoon. Then there is the final notation. "J.O. 6:30 Hyatt".

The rest of the book, of course, is blank.

## *Chapter Seven*

### *Dirty Tricks*

For the next few days, I'm too busy to think much about the note in Tony's planner. Francesca and I have public appearances all over the city. We show up at the Hunting and Fishing Show at the convention center and the Sacred Heart School graduation. We eat pierogis at the Polish Hill Festival and steak tartare at the Opera Society ball. Everywhere we go, the press follows, attentive if not exactly friendly. Francesca's picture is in the paper or on the news almost daily. There are pictures of me, too, standing by the candidate's side in my sensible flats, taking notes or handing out flyers or carrying the many little gifts the people give her. Francesca didn't lie. The regular people of the city loved Tony, and now they have transferred that love and loyalty to her.

I'm careful not to give the media people any chance to catch me alone. I know they're eagerly waiting for me to make some slip. Like they expect me to start taking off my clothes at any moment. Jeez.

On Friday, the *Post-Gazette* publishes the result of its latest poll. Francesca has pulled ahead of White by a couple of points. WPXI calls to invite Francesca onto their evening talk show, and the *Post-Gazette* contacts me to set up an exclusive interview with her.

"Let me take me out to dinner to celebrate," Francesca insists after our morning gig at a nursing home. "It's your doing. The people adore you, just as I predicted. They identify with you."

I don't want to be alone with her. I'm feeling too exhausted and too vulnerable. "Thanks, Francesca, but what I really need is a day off. My ankle is still bothering me, and if I don't do my laundry soon, I'm going to be showing up at our next public

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appearance in sweatpants and a tee shirt.”

“I’ll get Rosa to do your laundry. And by the way, you should be giving me your dry cleaning bills. They’re a reimbursable campaign expense.”

“Please, give me a day. Half a day. We have that reception at the university tomorrow afternoon. I’ll meet you there, okay?”

Francesca’s expression suddenly holds concern. “You do look tired. I’m sorry to be so selfish. Take the time that you need. Maybe our schedule has been too intense.”

“It’s paying off, though, isn’t it?” I find that I’m proud of the work we’ve done together. I almost trust her. She hasn’t made a pass at me since that afternoon in Shadyside, though I sometimes catch her looking at me in a distinctly carnal way. “Anyway, it’s just a few more weeks and then you’ll be mayor.”

Francesca laughs. “And you, perhaps, will be the mayor’s assistant.” Her voice becomes low and intimate. “I’d love to have you in my office.” She smiles sweetly as I get into my cab, leaving me to wonder if the double meaning was deliberate, or just my overactive imagination.

Back home, my first order of business is a long, luxurious bath, complete with bubbles. The tension gradually seeps out of my muscles as I lie in the claw foot tub. The hot water brings delicious relief to my still-swollen ankle.

Now that I’ve stopped running around, though, the doubts and fears crowd in.

Who was *J.O.*? Possibly the last person to see Tony Pinelli alive, aside from Mr. Clean and me. It takes me a while to remember Don Julio’s surname is Orestino. I hate to think that Tony had a meeting with a mob boss, but I can’t ignore the evidence. Certainly the mafia is no stranger to murder. But then where did Andy Henderson fit in? Did he work for Don Julio? If so, why did he solicit me to dance for Pinelli?

My head starts to ache. Even the soothing waters of the bath can’t wash away this puzzle. With a sigh, I pull myself out of the tub and wrap myself in a towel. I’m on the way to the medicine chest for some aspirin when the phone rings.

It’s Jimmy. I’m sure of it. I feel that familiar ache between my thighs, and know that my juices are flowing at the mere thought. Like that dog drooling at the sound of the bell.



Nothing has happened to undo my suspicions. It's still true that my house was burgled while Jimmy conveniently kept me away. Still, I'm eager to hear his voice.

"Hello! Jimmy?"

"Is this Stella Xanathakeos?" The voice is male, but unfamiliar.

"Yes, this is Stella. Who are you?"

"Ms. Xanathakeos, this is Graham White."

I'm shocked and confused. Why would Francesca's rival be calling me? How, in fact, did he get my unlisted number?

"Ms. Xanathakeos, are you there?" I pull myself together. I don't know what he wants, but it's important to be professional—and give nothing away.

"Yes, of course, sorry, Mr. White. I'm just surprised to hear from you."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but I wonder if you'd be willing to meet with me this afternoon. I have some important information for you."

"Information? What information?"

"I really can't tell you over the telephone. Will you come to my house? I'll send a car for you."

Don't give him control. Don't trust him. I should refuse. But then perhaps he has the key to Tony's murder.

I keep my voice carefully neutral as I reply. "This is a bit unusual, isn't it? Meeting privately with the enemy camp."

White's laugh has a snide, unpleasant edge.

"I hope, after you hear what I have to say, that you'll realize I am not your enemy. What time should I have you picked up?"

He seems very sure of himself. "Tell me where to come and I'll get there on my own."

"Very well. The address is 3267 Penn Avenue. Point Breeze. It's on the corner of Elmhurst, a three story brick and stucco house with azaleas on the front lawn."

"Got it."

"What time can I expect you?"

"I can be there by three, if that works for you."

White's greasy chuckle fills my ears.

"That works for me, my dear. See you at three."

I'm fuming when I hang up. Nobody calls Stella

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Xanathakeos “my dear.” I’ll teach him to have a little respect, that’s for sure.

I put on my new charcoal gray suit, with my lavender silk shell underneath. It’s the lady lawyer look. However, my vicious spike heels add a deliberate hint of bitchiness to the otherwise professional impression. No flats for this gig.

I’m turning off the bedroom light when I notice Tony’s appointment book sitting on the bureau. Maybe I should put it away. I stuff it in back of the drawer next to the Barbie doll. Let her stand guard over it.

A hint of sadness tinges my feisty mood. Too bad it wasn’t Jimmy. I’d much rather be dressing up to go see Jimmy Ostermann than Graham White.

I’m just locking the door behind me when I realize that Jimmy’s initials, too, are J.O.

\* \* \* \*

White’s house is very grand, even bigger and fancier than Francesca’s. I am determined not to be impressed. The leaded glass door is opened by a sour-faced maid in a black uniform. I hand her one of the business cards that Francesca insisted on having printed. She doesn’t try to pronounce my name.

“Mr. White is waiting for you in the library.” She points to the French doors on the left of the winding staircase. My heels click aggressively on the black and white marble tiles of the entry way.

White opens the door before I can knock. “Come in, Ms. Xanathakeos. Or can I call you Stella?”

“Actually, I’d prefer Ms. Xanathakeos, if you don’t mind.”

Graham White grins at me. No, that’s not right, he leers. He puts a hand on my arm, as if to lead me into the room, and I have an almost overwhelming urge to punch him in the nose.

I manage to control myself. Barely. Only the thought that I am representing Francesca keeps me from treating him the way I’d treat a pushy customer at the Peacock.

I snatch my arm away from him. He shrugs and settles into an armchair on one side of a magnificent stone fireplace decorated with what probably are priceless Chinese antiques. He

gestures at the matching chair opposite him. "Please, sit down, Ms. Xanathakeos." The way he drawls out my name makes me want to punch him even more. Still, I sit, needing to take the weight off my ankle.

"You told me on the phone that you have some important information for me. What information?"

"Actually, it's more of a proposal."

I sit silent, waiting for him to continue.

"As you can imagine, I have been watching your campaign work for Francesca Pinelli. Watching quite closely. You're doing a bang-up job."

"Thank you—I suppose."

"What I'd like to propose is that you come work for me."

I burst out laughing. I can't help it. I can see the headlines: Stripper becomes hot political property.

"I'm serious, Ms. Xanathakeos. I'll pay you three times whatever Francesca's paying you."

Gradually, my laughter fades away. But the situation still strikes me as absurd. "Really, Mr. White, do you think that I'm for sale to the highest bidder?"

White leans forward eagerly. "Everyone has their price. I'm willing to meet yours."

I look him over, sizing him up. Big, sort of puffy, but not really fat. Thick copper-colored hair, prominent nose, fleshy lips. As I had noticed at the funeral, he has the rosy complexion of someone with high blood pressure.

His eyes are a bit of a shock, crystalline blue, and cold as shards of ice, despite his broad politician's smile. I hold his gaze, trying to glimpse his secret perversions, and fail utterly. The only thing I see in him is raw ambition.

He thinks that I am considering his proposition. I could string him along, but I'd like to get out of his obnoxious presence as quickly as possible.

"There's not a chance, Mr. White, that I'd ever work for you."

His eyes narrow and his face gets redder. "Why not? I hope it's not out of loyalty to the poor bereaved widow. Because let me tell you, my dear, you can't trust Francesca Pinelli. She'll discard you as soon as she doesn't need you anymore."

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"I'm not your 'dear,' Mr. White. And my arrangement with Ms. Pinelli is strictly temporary, in any case."

"Oh, are you trying to tell me she doesn't have her claws in you yet?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, and frankly, I don't care." I stand as gracefully as I can with my bad ankle. "This interview is over. Don't bother to get up. I can find my way out."

His face is a mottled crimson. White splutters—that's the only way to describe it—trying to get sufficient control of himself to speak. As I'm closing the door behind me, he finally finds his voice. "You'll be sorry, you slut," he yells after me. "I'll make you sorry." There is a loud crash from the library, then another.

Terror suddenly mixes with my anger. This man sounds mad enough to kill. I try to open the heavy front door, but it appears to be locked.

"Psst. Hey! In here." A doorway under the stairs opens, and a pale, vaguely familiar face peers out. The glass in the French doors shatters behind me. I grab the hand reaching out to me and let it pull me into the dark space beneath the stairway. We crouch together, not daring to move, as White rages outside.

"Where are you, bitch?" I hear the sound of the front door being wrenched open, and White's furious voice receding as he searches outside. "Come back here. You can't just walk out on me..."

Gradually the noise dies away. At last all we can hear is the sound of our breathing in the dark. "I think the coast is clear," whispers my unseen companion. "But just in case, maybe you should come with me." She opens another door, at the back of our refuge, and leads the way into another stairway.

"These are the back stairs. Dad will never look here. They lead to the servant's quarters, my room now. Come on up."

With a bit of difficulty due to my high heels, I follow my guide up two flights to a simple, pleasant room under the eaves. The late afternoon sun slants in the open window, turning the white-washed walls to gold. "Have a seat," she says, pointing to the only chair. She sits cross-legged on the bed and looks at me curiously.

It's the girl from the bus, from Tony's funeral. The one who was masturbating with the photo. My cheeks grow hot as I remember. Of course, there's no way that she could recognize me from that day, given my disguise.

"You're the stripper who's working for Francesca Pinelli," she says finally. "Stella."

"That's right," I say with a smile. "Stella Xanathakeos at your service. And I gather that you're Graham White's daughter?"

"Yeah, I'm Letty. Leticia. Wish I could say that I wasn't his daughter, though. I despise him." For a moment her sweet face is a mask of hate. "You can see why."

I'm not sure that agreeing with her is the right thing to do. "He does seem to be a bit difficult."

"Difficult!" Letty laughs bitterly. "He's the devil. Selfish and cruel, but oh so smart. Most people don't see through him. He fools them, makes them think he's such a good, pious, charitable man. But I know better."

I think briefly of my own father, the trust and caring there was between us. My heart aches for this poor young woman.

Letty rummages into the pocket of her cargo pants. "You want to get stoned?" she asks, holding out the joint. Without waiting for an answer, she lights it up and takes a deep drag. When she finally exhales, her voice is high and strange.

"What's Francesca Pinelli like?" The girl passes me the joint. I puff on it, just to be sociable. In fact I hardly ever did drugs in high school. I wanted to stay in control.

"Smart. Really intelligent, though in a kind of calculating way. She understands people, too, knows how to make them do what she wants." I wonder whether I should be sharing these insights with a stranger, but I feel too relaxed to resist. "She's totally focused on becoming mayor. And I think she'll do a good job if she gets elected."

"Yeah? Well, anyone would be better than my father. God help us if he wins." Letty takes another deep toke and then hands me the roach. It burns the tips of my fingers as I finish it off.

Leticia leans forward, her voice earnest and conspiratorial. "Did you ever meet Tony Pinelli, Francesca's husband?"

Suddenly my body feels like a hot air balloon. I'm about to

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float away. The trees outside the window make dancing patterns in the golden light. I remember dancing, dancing for Tony. I remember his confident touch, his smell, his taste...

"No, I only started working for Francesca after he died."

"He was wonderful. Handsome, smart, tough, but honest. You could trust him. He had heart. My father tried to buy him, but he wouldn't be bought. That's probably why they killed him."

Letty hugs her slender body and rocks back and forth, moaning in pain.

"Killed him? Who killed him?"

"I don't know. But someone did. I know it's because they couldn't buy him. And now he's gone, gone..." Her voice trails off into a wail. I don't know what to do, my wits addled by the drugs and the surprises of the afternoon.

I find myself on the bed, my arms around her, holding her sobbing form. "I loved him so much, so much. I wanted him..."

Through her tee shirt, I can feel her firm young breasts pressed against my full ones. I stroke her short, rust-colored locks and make soothing noises. She smells of soap and sweat. As she clutches at me, I feel the rising of desire. No, this isn't right, not here, not now. I try to untangle myself from her but she only holds me tighter.

"Oh, Stella, please..." What is she asking of me?

"What is it, Letty? What can I do?" She gazes up at me, her eyes red and swollen from crying, her lips begging silently for a kiss. She wants Tony, that's who she sees in her mind, but I will do.

Gently, I pull away. "I've got to go, Letty. Your father might be back at any moment."

"No, stay here. Stay here with me."

"I can't. But if you give me your number, I'll call you." What was I promising here? Anything, to get away without hurting her any more.

Letty gives me a scrap of paper, which I stuff in my jacket pocket. "Wait a minute," she says, and ducks into the bathroom. When she returns, she's once again the tough, cool chick I had originally noticed on the bus. Her eyes are dry, her mouth set in a hard line.

“Come on. I’ll take you out the back door. You can cut through the backyard to the alley and then onto Elmhurst.”

“Thank you. Thanks for saving me from your father.”

“You watch out for him, Stella. He’s dangerous. More dangerous than you probably believe. I only wish that he had been killed, instead of Tony.”

“Leticia! You shouldn’t say such things.”

“Why not? It’s true. Don’t you believe in honesty?”

Her gaze is a plea and a challenge. I can’t answer either. She holds open the back door.

“I’ll be careful, don’t worry. And I’ll call you to see how you are.”

Letty shrugs as I start to cross the manicured back lawn, my heels sinking into the sod. “Whatever.” When I reach the back gate, I turn to wave, but she’s already gone.

\* \* \* \*

It’s late by the time I get home, nearly seven, and I still have to do my laundry. I swap my suit for jeans and a T, stuff my big gym bag full of dirty towels, sheets, and underwear, and head for the coin wash on the next block. It’s a warm night. Folks are out on their porches, chatting quietly as the dusk deepens to full darkness. A car passes me, the radio blaring out an old Beach Boys tune. I can hear the yells of the kids playing softball behind the grammar school, and faintly, opera music coming from someone’s open window.

This kind of mild, sweet spring night makes me nostalgic. I guess I’m not paying attention. I reach the gap in the middle of the block, where the road runs over a drainage culvert, when somebody grabs me from behind. I drop my bag, trying to struggle, but find my arms pinned behind me.

“Help!” I try to scream. Before I can get the words out, someone else stuffs a wad of cloth smelling of tobacco and motor oil into my mouth. “Shut up, bitch,” hisses shadowy figure in front of me. “We don’t need none of your smart talk, or your screams, neither. We just wanna give you a nice, quiet beating.”

I’m suddenly doubled over as he punches me in the stomach. I can’t breathe. The blow forced the air out of my lungs

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and the disgusting gag seems to prevent me from taking in more. He slams his fist into my ribs, once, then again. I choke on the gag, swallowing my own saliva.

The next blow lands on my left breast, and sends pain shooting through me. My attacker stops for a moment grope me. “Nice jugs, baby.”

Bastard. I’ve heard that one too many times. He aims another punch for my gut, but I’m ready this time, bending backward so the force is less. Then, using the leverage of my crouch, I bring my knee up, fast and hard, and connect solidly with his balls. The guy wails and backs away, holding his hands to his crotch in agony. Meanwhile, my surprise resistance distracts the man behind me long enough for me to whirl and jab an elbow into his belly. “Ow...you bitch...” he begins. I grab my bag, swinging it by the handle, and slam it into his face. He sinks to his knees on the ground. Bad move. I kick him in the chest, glad that I wore my Doc Martins instead of my sandals, and he goes over like a bowling pin.

Then I run. Fast as I can, I head back up to where the street is lined with houses, trailing my bag behind me. Ignoring the searing pain in my ankle, and the ache in my stomach. Ignoring the stares and calls of my neighbors. I slam the door behind me, flip the dead bolt, fasten the chain.

Then I sink to the floor, gasping, tears trickling silently down my face.

Maybe I black out. Pain wakes me. I try to get up, but I’m too stiff to move. Oh well. The entry hall is dim and a bit chilly, but it smells like home. I’m behind a locked door. I’ll just stay here, stay for a while.

I notice something white, not far from the door sill. With difficulty, I manage to get hold of it. Every motion makes something hurt.

It’s an envelope. Don’t open it, I tell myself, but then I never listen to my own advice.

Inside, there’s a photo cutout from a newspaper. I can just make it out in the rays of the streetlight that filter through the hall window. It’s a picture of a slaughterhouse, animal carcasses hanging from the ceiling, men in white coats and masks going about their business.



LISABET SARAI

There's a note, of course. In thick black pen, hand-lettered:  
*Watch it, or you're dead meat.*

I open my mouth to scream, but there's no sound.

## *Chapter Eight*

### *Surveillance*

I don't really sleep. I slip in and out of consciousness, waking when the images in my dreams get too awful to bear. Then I sink back under, drowning in my own exhaustion. I wake again, maybe ten minutes later, the rancid taste of the gag lingering in my mouth, sadistic threats and lewd suggestions ringing in my ears.

In the morning, I feel a bit better. I manage to crawl up the stairs and into a hot shower, which melts some of the stiffness from my muscles. Afterwards, I gaze at myself in the mirror. No bruises on my face, at least, but my ribs hurt and there's a big black-and-blue patch on the side of my breast. My eyes are wide and frightened. I hate that helpless look. After all, I fought the bastards off, didn't I?

This time.

I know what I have to do. Even if Jimmy is involved in this somehow, I just can't believe he'd send a bunch of goons to rough me up. As soon as I've had some coffee, I'm on the phone to the Fourth Precinct. I don't know he'll be working on Saturday, but I'm guessing, hoping, that he will.

"Detective Ostermann, please." While I'm waiting for Jimmy to come to the phone, I consider how much I should tell him. I decide to focus only on the attack and the threats. No need to share my suspicions, especially since he's one of their objects.

"Hello, this is Detective Ostermann."

"Jimmy. It's me, Stella."

"Stella! How are you? Is everything okay?"

Do I hear knowledge in his voice, an expectation of some confession?

"Not really. I was mugged last night. On the way to the Laundromat."

“What happened? Are you hurt?”

“Not too bad. I managed to get away before they did too much damage.”

“You ought to move out of that neighborhood, you know. It’s getting rougher all the time.”

I feel a small surge of annoyance. “This wasn’t a random mugging, Jimmy. These guys were looking for me. They knew who I was.”

“So you think this is about the Pinelli murder?”

“Seems like it. I’ve also been getting threatening notes.” I tell him about the doll and the newspaper photo. I hear his sharp intake of breath. “I don’t know why they’re bothering me. Whoever they are. I don’t know anything. But I want it to stop.”

“Well, you are making yourself a bit conspicuous, working for Mrs. Pinelli’s campaign. Maybe you should resign, just lay low for a while.”

“I can’t, Jimmy. I made a commitment to Francesca. Besides, there’s a chance I might find out something that would explain the whole scene that night in the hotel. Something that might help your investigation.”

What am I saying? Damn my big mouth. There’s silence on the other end of the line.

“Look, Stella, I’m worried about you. I want to send out a man to watch your house. You’re all alone there.”

“That’s exactly why I’m calling, Jimmy. I know they’re trying to scare me. Well, I’m scared, at least scared enough to take some precautions. During the day, when I’m out working the crowds with Francesca, I should be safe. But at night...”

“I’ll get someone on it right away. Twenty-four hour surveillance. But you know that if you want some company at night, you only have to ask...” Jimmy’s tone changes from briskly professional to almost pleading. Something awakens in my battered body at the sound of his voice.

“Thanks. I know, and I appreciate your—concern.”

“I miss you, Stella. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

I know what he’s talking about. But this time I keep my mouth shut.

“Of course, I understand that you’re under a lot of stress, that you might not be feeling much like—that sort of thing. I’m

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sorry to put more pressure on you.”

Gratitude surges through me. Most guys figure that a stripper is always going to be interested in sex, that sex is basically what she’s about. Jimmy sees me a person, not just a hot body. Meanwhile, it’s his sensitivity and shyness that really turn me on.

“Yeah, at the moment I’m so sore that I can hardly move. I didn’t sleep much last night, either.”

“I can imagine. Look, no pressure, no strings. Just call me if you want me, and I’ll be there.”

*I want you!* I almost say, but I manage to control myself. I see him taking me in his arms, comforting me, gently stroking my hair. My nipples contract and harden and my sex dampens even at this innocent image.

“I will. But please, don’t feel like I’m rejecting you. This just isn’t the right time.”

Jimmy sighs. “I understand. I’ll get someone out to your house right away. Keep in touch, and let me know if anything else happens, okay?”

“Sure, Jimmy, I will. Thanks. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“And, Stella...”

“Yes, Jimmy?”

“Be careful.”

I’m always careful, I think as I hang up the phone. Then I remember yesterday’s interview with Graham White, his disrespect and his rage. I shouldn’t have gone out there alone. That was not being careful. From now on, I need to remember: I’m a target. Somebody wants to hurt me, or at least to shut me up.

Before they succeed, I need to figure out who.

I’m supposed to meet Francesca at Baker Hall at two. The university is presenting her an award on Tony’s behalf, for his services to institutions of higher education in the city. Basically, it’s another photo op. But she says she needs me there.

Meanwhile, my eyelids are drooping and my body feels like lead. First I double check that all the doors are locked. Then I set the alarm for noon and pull the bedcovers over my head, hoping for a few hours of sleep before I have to face the world.

Way too soon, the ringing of the clock pulls me from a deep

slumber. Dreamless, as far as I remember. I'm grateful for that at least. I shower again, and consider what I can put on that won't hurt too much. My usual underwire bras are agony. I settle for a soft cotton jog bra, and a boxy navy blazer that will hide that fact that my skirt is unbuttoned at the side. My stomach is not marked, but it's tender. Low heels, as usual, and today that's a blessing.

I limp out to my cab, trying to figure out some story to tell Francesca.

As I expected, she notices my stiff movements as soon as I walk into the echoing central hall of the historic building. "Stella, what's wrong?" She hurries toward me, looking surprised and genuinely concerned. I mentally cross her off of my list of suspects who might have arranged last night's ambush. Not that I'll trust her with the truth, of course.

"My bad ankle gave out and I fell down the stairs."

"How awful! Have you seen a doctor?"

Suddenly I remember that I missed my appointment with Dr. Mann. Well, I assume that he's seen me in the papers and won't worry.

"No, I'm just a bit bruised. I'll be fine tomorrow."

"Are you sure? Maybe you should have X-rays? I'll send you to my specialist, the one who fixed my shoulder when I dislocated it playing tennis..."

"No, really, Francesca. I'll be okay. Thanks, though."

Tony's widow scans my face, looking for something. "Why won't you ever let me help you? I could do so much for you." She sounds slightly wounded.

"I appreciate your concern, and your generosity. But I've been taking care of myself for a long time. I like to know that I can stand on my own two feet."

Francesca shrugs, but there's still some hurt in her tone. "You're a stubborn woman, Stella Xanathakeos. I just hope that it doesn't get you into trouble."

The president's secretary herds us into our chairs under the glaring lights. The ceremony begins. The president of the university drones on and on about how loyal Tony was to his alma mater, how he was a role model for today's students trying to get ahead in hard times, etcetera, etcetera. All I want is to

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finish this up, get home, and get back to bed.

Finally the speeches are over, the engraved plaque has been delivered, the photos and videos and comments for the press are all done. I'm so tired that the room is swimming around me. I close my eyes briefly. When I open them, a movement way up on the third floor gallery attracts my attention. There's someone up there, someone dark-skinned and dressed in dark clothes, holding up a camera with a long lens. Pointed at me.

A chill runs up my spine. All at once I'm alert. Who is watching me, and why? I squint, trying to make out the man's features. Just then he puts down the camera, and I recognize him. It's Bill, Jimmy's partner on the force.

Relief floods through me. Jimmy didn't just give someone the job of surveying my house; he's got someone looking out for me even when I'm outside, around town. For a moment, I feel safe, safer than I've felt in weeks.

Then I start to wonder about the camera. Then I remember the break-in and the mangled doll and the initials J.O. in Tony's black book. The sense of safety melts away. More than anything, I want to go home.

\* \* \* \*

Another shower, a two hour nap, and a cup of tea, and I'm feeling a bit more human. I skim yesterday's *Post-Gazette*, which includes the interview with Francesca. She's such a pro, I have to smile. She uses every question to paint a glowing picture herself as the poor, honest, hard-working daughter of the city who had some luck and wants to share it with "her" people. There's no mention of her half-a-million dollar home, or her cars, or her designer wardrobe, or even her exclusive education. She mentions Tony occasionally, with care; she doesn't want people to forget who he was, or that she's his widow, but she doesn't want people thinking too hard about his death, either.

Why did Tony die? I ask myself again, for the hundredth time. Nothing makes any sense. I remember what Leticia said, that he was killed because he couldn't be bought. Was she suggesting that her father had Tony murdered? If so, why was it Mr. Clean, Tony's close associate, who did the deed, instead of

some hired gun? That didn't seem like White's style. He was a businessman, and smart. He'd use someone invisible, expendable.

And why, why were people hounding me? The warnings to mind my own business, keep my mouth shut—what do I know that they want to keep quiet? What do they think I know?

It has been long enough now that I can recall the events of that night without shuddering. I replay the scene in my mind, again and again. I fast forward over the sex; that memory is still too personal and painful, and it can't possibly be related to the crime. Can it?

Mr. Clean had a gun. Clearly he planned to use it, at least to threaten. But maybe Tony wasn't the intended victim. I remember my original notion, that I was the target for the bullet that killed Pinelli. There's no motive, though, no reason for somebody to kill an anonymous stripper. Besides, if that was what they wanted, I'd probably be dead by now.

What else? There was the camera. That makes me think of blackmail. These days, though, sex is hardly shocking enough to provide blackmail material. I wonder if Mr. Clean took pictures of Tony and me together. I'd kind of like to see them...

The photos. The film. The film was missing from the camera. It wasn't in Andy's pockets when I took my money. Even in my shell-shocked state, I would have noticed. So who took it? Who had it?

A light bulb goes on. Someone thinks I have the film. And they are pretty worried about what I might do with it. Worried enough to risk beating up a woman who was no longer anonymous, but definitely in the public eye.

I realize suddenly that my job with Francesca might have saved my life. So far.

It's another long night, and I find that I'm restless. I try reading, watching television. Nothing holds my attention. I think about bringing out my cruise brochures and daydreaming about my trip to Greece. I ration myself in this activity—don't want to either burn out the anticipation, or get too frustrated from the delay. Every day that I work for Francesca gets me closer to my goal, but somehow, tonight, I can't get excited over the prospect.

I make myself a sandwich and bring it out to the parlor,

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along with a glass of orange juice. Lying on the sofa, my ankle propped up on a cushion, I try to relax. It's no use. I'm so tense I can't sit still.

The house is quiet, so quiet that it makes me uneasy. I peek through the blinds covering the front window. The street is empty tonight. It's starting to rain. Across the street, huddled in the shadows under a tree, I can just make out the shape of man. There's a flash as he lights a cigarette, bright enough for me to see that he's dark-skinned. Is it Bill? Another member of the city's finest, guarding me? Or is it somebody stalking me?

I jump when the phone rings. The sudden movement sends a jolt of pain through my ankle. For a moment, I consider not answering. Maybe it's another threat. Or another "opportunity" like the one that White offered me. I don't want to deal with either one. The ringing doesn't stop though, and finally I give in and pick up.

"Stella! Are you all right?" Something inside me melts at the sound of Jimmy's voice.

"I'm fine, tired and a bit sore, but basically okay."

"When you didn't answer, I was worried..."

"Sorry. I was in the bathroom. Really, I'm doing okay, Jimmy. There's no reason to worry. Your man is outside. My doors are all locked and chained. I'm perfectly safe."

"You can see the policeman who's on guard?"

"Yeah, he's across the street, under a tree."

Jimmy swears under his breath. "He's supposed to stay out of sight. In case anybody else is watching you."

I shiver, the hair rising on my bare arms. "I thought the man outside might be your partner, Bill, though on a night like this I couldn't see well enough to be sure."

"Bill Dougherty? He's a senior detective, same rank as me. We wouldn't send him out on routine surveillance duty."

The chill deepens.

"Oh well, I might be wrong. It's pretty dark out there."

There's an awkward silence. I can hear Jimmy's breathing on the other end of the line, and my own heartbeat, speeding up. I'm beginning to feel warm again. Even hot.

"So, what are you doing?"

"Not much. Reading, watching TV. Trying to relax."



“Would you like some company?”

Loneliness slams into me and runs over my body like a ten ton truck. Do I want company? God, I’ve never felt so alone in my life.

Be careful, I tell myself. You can’t trust anyone.

“I don’t know, Jimmy...” I begin.

“It’s okay, I understand. I’m sorry that I asked.” He sounds so lost, so forlorn. So sexy.

Screw being careful. “Yes, I’d love some company. I’m going crazy here, all by myself.”

“Really? You don’t mind?”

“Really. I’m not up to my usual form, but I’d love to see you.”

I can imagine Jimmy’s ear-to-ear grin. “Well, then. I’ll be right over. See you in about fifteen minutes, okay?”

“Great, Jimmy. See you.”

I know I’m being weak, but I’m really too excited to care. Fifteen minutes. Just enough time to change. Should I put on those black satin lounging pajamas I got on sale at Victoria’s Secret? Or maybe the embroidered silk kimono? On the other hand, maybe that’s coming on too strong. Jimmy finds me scary enough already. Perhaps the long hippie dress of Indian cotton is the right look. It’s casual and understated but still kind of exotic...

In the end, I don’t have the energy to climb the stairs to my closet. I figure that Jimmy’s an old friend, and he’s already seen me naked. I don’t have to put on a costume for him. I sit there on the sofa, wearing the lightweight summer bathrobe I put on when I got up from my nap. It’s that peach color that sets off my skin so well. It will have to do.

There’s a soft knock. I hobble over to the door and peer through the peephole to confirm that it’s Jimmy. It seems to take hours for me to unfasten the chain and retract the bolt, but I finally get the door open.

“Hi, Stella.” His voice is soft, concerned. It feels like a caress. “I didn’t want to ring the bell. Figured your nerves were kind of shot, the last thing you need is the jangling.”

Jimmy looks a bit ruffled. His sandy hair is in his eyes. His white business shirt is damp, wrinkled and untucked in the

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back. He needs a shave.

He looks good enough to eat.

“Come on in out the rain. I’m so glad to see you.”

“Not as glad as I am to see you.” Jimmy wraps his arms around me in what begins as a brotherly hug. He buries his face in my hair, breathing deeply. “I’ve been so worried about you, Stella. This whole thing with the murders...”

“Shush, let’s not talk about that.” I am enjoying the feel of his lean, strong body pressed against mine. I ignore the dull ache from my bruised ribs. I want that to be my only reality. He smells clean, despite his disarray: soap, menthol, some kind of lemony aftershave. Just a hint of sweat, enough to blend the other scents into something organic and distinctly Jimmy. Breathing him in, I feel a bit light-headed, like he was some kind of drug. My knees go weak, and I hold onto him more tightly.

“Stella...” he whispers. His hands begin to roam, gliding from my back under my arms to cradle my breasts. He holds them almost reverently, ignoring for the moment the swollen, demanding nipples poking into his chest.

I adjust my position, inserting one thigh between his legs, to seek out the rigid bulk I know I’ll find there. Ooh, Jimmy! Very nice! I rub myself back and forth over his cock, teasing, feeling him grow even bigger and harder. A shudder runs through his frame and I think for a moment that I’ve gone too far, that he’s already going to come. I try to back away, but he grabs me and pulls me back, grinding his thigh against my pubis.

Even through two layers of cloth, my clit pulses and throbs exquisitely. I reach around and grab his butt cheeks so that I can control the friction. He does the same to me. For I don’t know how long, we stand there tangled up in the doorway, dry-humping each other like two teenagers.

I’m halfway to coming, when he stops suddenly. I start to protest, but he silences me with a rich, delicious kiss. It’s strong and sweet like Greek coffee, brazen tongue probing, shy lips nibbling. I kiss him back eagerly, trying to pour all my gratitude and my lust into the moment.

All at once I’m off balance. Before I realize what is happening, Jimmy sweeps me up in his arms and carries me into the parlor. “Jimmy, you’ll hurt yourself!” I’m half laughing, half

concerned. I'm not a small woman, and Jimmy's no Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"Just relax and let me do the work." He settles me gently on the couch and for a moment just stands back to look at me, something like adoration in his eyes. I'm embarrassed by his intensity. I focus my attention on the appealing bulge in his groin.

"Why don't you open your fly and make yourself more comfortable?" I reach for his zipper, but he catches my hands in his, holding them tight. His lips twist in an odd half-smile.

"Why don't you let someone else take control for a change?" A flicker of fear shimmers through me. I have the strange notion that he is planning to get out his handcuffs and restrain me. I swear, the image is so vivid, it must come from his mind. All my years of dancing have made me sensitive to men's perverse desires.

Terror seizes me briefly. I wonder if I can escape. Then lust floods in, and I wonder if I want to.

The moment passes, though. Jimmy lets his fantasy slip away. Instead of binding my wrists, he separates them and places them gently on the couch on either side of me. "Just leave your hands there, okay? Lie back, be still, and let me touch you."

The strangeness has passed and he is my gentle, horny Jimmy once again. With one knee, he nudges my thighs apart. Then he reaches down to untie my robe and pulls the fabric open to expose me.

For long minutes he does nothing but look. But his eyes are like fingers, sweeping over the ripeness of my breasts, trailing across the roundness of my belly, tangling in the curls hiding my sex. I feel every glance. I'm used to men staring at my naked body, but this is new. I want to writhe and squirm under these eyes, which stroke and probe and tease me until I can hardly bear it. My cunt juices spill out of my cleft and drip down my thighs. I want to plunge both hands deep into my cunt, to fill the throbbing emptiness that is gaping there.

I lie still, as he has instructed, my breathing shallow as I try to hold on. Touch me, I want to scream, please, before I die of lust. Just when I think I can't bear any more, Jimmy kneels between my thighs and fastens his mouth on my aching nipple.

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All the blood in my body rushes to that one swollen nodule of flesh. Jimmy sucks strongly, then prods it with his tongue. Each touch sends sparks singing along a web of nerves that reach my fingertips, my earlobes, and of course my clit. He rasps his tongue across the tip and my hips pump air. He draws wet, lazy circles on the crinkled surround, and I spread my thighs wider, straining, aching for some touch that's not a phantom. Switching to the other side, he nibbles on the rigid nub like the olive it resembles. Then he sucks, as if he'd take my whole tit into his mouth.

It's glorious torture. My cunt spasms and pulses each time he applies the suction.

"Please, Jimmy..."

He looks up at me, a blissful smile on his face. "I've been wanting to do this for nearly fifteen years, Stella. Ever since we met in ninth grade." He pinches me, hard, and I moan in agonized ecstasy. "Do you know how many wet dreams I had, fantasizing about your incredible tits? I used to picture myself straddling you, with my cock stuffed between them, rubbing back and forth until I sprayed my jizz all over them. It never took long; half a dozen strokes was enough when your tits were involved."

"Jimmy..."

"Or sometimes, you'd do it for me. You spread yourself over my face so that I could eat you. Meanwhile, you'd be down in my groin, sucking me while you smothered my cock in your breasts. I always like to imagine the come dripping from your lips down your chest, gathering in little drops on your nipples."

"PLEASE, Jimmy! You're driving me crazy!" Was he trying to be cruel, or was he just lost in adolescent memories? "You want to eat me? Don't talk about it, do it! I'm begging you."

Jimmy seems to wake from a kind of dream. "What? God—I'm sorry, Stella. I didn't mean to neglect you." He leans over and kisses me. I arch my back, trying to rub my clit against his body. "I'd love to eat you, sweetie. My lifelong ambition."

He bends over, and with gentle fingers separates my lower lips. Then he blows warm air on the hot, damp flesh. I convulse, my flesh twitching. Next he touches the tip of his tongue to my

rudely jutting clit. The sensation's incredible, but it's not enough. It's too tentative, too delicate.

"Jimmy, don't tease me anymore!" I beg. "I need you." I grab his head in both hands and try to force his mouth down on my cunt. But he's strong. I can't budge him. Gently he untangles my fingers from his hair and places my hands back on the couch. "Let me," he says.

Then he bends to my sex and swallows me whole. He fastens his mouth on my cunt like there's a vacuum seal. Like I'm a fruit and he's sucking out my pulp. Like he truly wants to consume me. His lips capture my labia. His tongue probes my folds. His teeth graze my aching clit, sending bolts of pleasure arching up my spine. The suction distorts and displaces my swollen flesh, pulling me along toward my climax.

I couldn't resist even if I wanted to. I thrash and scream, clamping my thighs around his head. Everything is dark, except for the stars whirling around my head. His saliva flows in streams down my thigh, mingled with my own juices. I am drowned, flooded, washed away.

The stars streak through the dark. Lightning strikes my sex and sizzles through me, burning everything in its path. I hear myself scream, feel my body shaking in some kind of fit. I am rising, floating, freed by the convulsions racking my flesh.

I hear the tearing racket of shattering glass. I think this is part of my incredible orgasm, until Jimmy yells.

"Ow! Shit! What the hell..." I open my eyes. Jimmy's on his knees, on the floor, holding one hand with the other. There's blood on his white shirt.

"What? What's going on?" I begin to sit up but Jimmy pushes me back with his good hand.

"Don't move. There's broken glass everywhere."

"You're hurt. I need to get disinfectant, bandages."

"I'll go. I'm wearing clothes, and shoes. You're practically naked. Stay put." There's a surprising authority in his voice. "Agreed?"

"Okay." I sink back onto the couch, trying to avoid the evil slivers on both sides of me. I'm suddenly exhausted.

I hear Jimmy rummaging in the bathroom upstairs, then coming down again. "Do you have a vacuum?"

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“Broom closet. In the kitchen.” I sit on the sofa, passive, while Jimmy bustles around cleaning up the mess.

“Okay, you can get up now.” He runs the brush over the area of the couch where I had been sitting. I hear little clinks as the machine sucks up a few last shards.

“You might have to get rid of the couch. I’m not sure that there’s any way to get all the glass out of the upholstery.”

I feel like I’m going to cry.

I suddenly realize that the air in the room is cool and humid and smells of new grass. “What happened?”

Jimmy picks up something from the floor and hands it to me. I don’t expect the weight. “Brick. Thrown through the window. And this was wrapped around it.”

The napkin has a little blood on it from Jimmy’s cut, but the logo is clear. The logo of the Pittsburgh Grand Hyatt Hotel, where Tony died.

Finally, I do cry, cradled in Jimmy’s arms, my cheek pressed against his bloody shirt.

## *Chapter Nine*

### *Caught in the Act*

Jimmy wants me to go to a hotel. But I'm not going anywhere. These bastards are not going to drive me out of my own house. So we go down to my father's old workshop in the basement and find enough scrap wood to board up the smashed window. By the time we're finished, it's two AM. We collapse together on my bed upstairs, too tired even to say goodnight.

The birds wake me at dawn. I'm surprised how alert I feel. Jimmy lies on the pillow next to me, dead to the world. Relaxed in sleep, his face looks even more boyish than usual. I remember him in high school, the skinny kid who was friendly but so shy he could barely talk to me. I never realized that he was secretly lusty after me, imagining incredibly lewd things.

Of course, his boyhood fantasies might be after the fact. Did we even know about oral sex, back in high school? Probably not. Back then, the guys didn't do much but grope and poke. Still, it's kind of flattering that Jimmy's been using images of me to jack off to all these years. It's strange to realize that if it hadn't been for Tony's murder, I might never have known.

I lean over and brush my lips against Jimmy's. His mouth curves into a smile before he even opens his eyes.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

"Ah..." Before he can reply, I kiss him, a deep, wet kiss that I hope conveys my affection and my gratitude. He tastes good to me, even first thing in the morning. He grabs me and pulls me to him. His hands begin to wander over my bare butt cheeks. His tongue dances in my mouth. He's still fully dressed, but I can feel the iron bar of his erection, pressed against my belly. My sex immediately melts; my juices make damp spots on his trousers as I grind my crotch against him.

"Mmm...I was going to make you some breakfast, but it

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seems as though you want an appetizer first.”

“Stella...Damn, what time is it?”

“Relax, it’s barely seven. Plenty of time to fool around a bit.”

I try to hold onto him, but he pulls away. “Damn, damn. Now I’m never going to catch the guy who threw that brick. The trail’s already cold. I should never have fallen asleep.”

“You didn’t have much choice, Jimmy. We were both totally destroyed. Speaking of which, how’s your hand?” I peel off the bandage and check the damage. It’s a long, nasty cut, running across his palm from his ring finger almost to the base of his thumb. However, it’s closed now, and looks clean, a bit red along the edges but not puffy. “You should stop off in the emergency room. That might heal better with a few stitches.”

“No time, Stella. I’ve got to get back to the station and see if we can find out anything about who did this.”

“Let me make you something to eat. I cook a mean feta omelet...”

“Sorry, Stella. I can’t.”

“Well, at least take a shower. You can’t go back to work smelling like pussy!” I show him the wet areas on his wrinkled pants. “I can probably find some clothes of my dad’s that would fit you. There are extra toothbrushes in the medicine cabinet. And you’d better borrow my razor, too.”

I point him to the bathroom. “Go, make yourself presentable. I’ll brew up some coffee for you to take with you.”

Jimmy grins apologetically. “Thanks, Stella. I’m sorry. This isn’t at all what I had in mind for our first time sleeping together.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you.” He gives me another kiss, more sweetness than passion. “When this is all over, let’s go away somewhere. Ever been to Atlantic City? I hear it’s a lot of fun.”

I hug him, thinking that I really would like to spend some serious time with him.

“How about Greece?” I always imagine myself there alone, independent, exploring the landscapes of my dreams. Walking in the footsteps of my ancestors. But now I have a sense of how



good it might be to have somebody special, somebody like Jimmy, there by my side.

“Greece! You’re a lady with big ideas!” He reaches over and sweeps a tangled lock of hair out of my eyes. “We’ll see, baby. Anything is possible.”

I realize that I’m humming as I measure the coffee into the percolator basket.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Jimmy’s gone, though, my good mood evaporates. I need to call to get my window repaired. Those boards are strictly temporary. But it’s even more urgent that I talk to Francesca. After last night, I’m starting to agree with Jimmy. I might be safer if I stepped out of the limelight.

We already have an appointment to meet at ten at her place, but I figure that she won’t mind if I show up a bit early. My cab drops me off around nine. I ring the bell, then knock, but there’s no answer.

I try to push away my sense of foreboding. Maybe she’s in the shower. Or perhaps she had a sudden errand. But I can see that both the Mercedes and BMW are in the garage.

There’s an unfamiliar car, a big shiny black Cadillac, parked across the street.

I ring again, then in desperation try the knob. It’s unlocked. I shiver. That kind of carelessness is not like Francesca, not at all. The clack of my heels on the polished wood floor of the foyer is incredibly loud. “Francesca?” My voice echoes through the seemingly empty house. “Francesca? It’s me, Stella.”

I head up the stairs. Francesca’s office is at the back of the house. As I come closer, I hear voices, Francesca’s and a male voice, from behind the closed office door. I can’t make out what they’re saying, but I get the sense that there are strong emotions involved. The voices keep interrupting each other, rising to a level just below shouting.

I’m tempted to put my ear to the door, to try and hear more clearly, but I resist the urge. Instead, I take a seat in Tony’s office, across the hall from Francesca’s, and wait.

The argument begins to sound nasty, but I’m still deeply

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relieved that Francesca is okay. The strength of my feelings surprises me. When did I stop thinking of Francesca as a threat and begin to imagine that she is a victim?

The door opposite me opens suddenly. I'm startled to see that the person Francesca has been conferring with is her rival Graham White. His ice-blue eyes skewer me. I don't have time to hide.

"Ms. Xanathakeos," he says politely. There's no disrespect in his tone now, only contempt and suppressed fury. "How nice to see you again."

Chill fingers travel up my spine, but I manage to stand and nod correctly. "Mr. White."

"You know each other?" I can't miss the suspicion in Francesca's voice. Something warns me not tell her about White's "opportunity."

"We introduced ourselves at the 'Meet the Candidates' mixer last Wednesday. The one at the Chamber of Commerce." I glare back at White, annoyed that I have to lie. "He complimented me on the effectiveness of our public relations campaign."

"Really?"

White nods curtly. "Yes. Ms. Xanathakeos is quite an asset to your campaign. You should take good care of her." He breaks away from our mutual stare, and warmth floods back into my body. "I've got to get going. Think about our conversation, Francesca, and get in touch when you want to discuss things further."

"Don't hold your breath, Graham."

"I can let myself out." His burly frame is halfway down the stairs by the time Francesca rouses herself to follow. I hear the click of the dead bolt shaft sliding into its socket.

When she comes back upstairs, I see that she is even paler than usual. Two spots of red color her cheekbones, and her eyes are blazing. She looks feverish.

"What's wrong, Francesca? What did he want?"

"It doesn't matter. He's not going to get it." Francesca shudders and hugs herself briefly. "God, I despise that man. I forget, when he's not around, what a snake he is. His public persona is so convincing, it even works on me. He's the

respected businessman, the philanthropist, my honorable opponent. It's only when we're face to face that I remember the truth."

"I don't like him much, either." Francesca seems to need comfort, encouragement. I suppress the urge to put my arms around her. "He strikes me as the kind of person who'd do anything to get what he wants."

"He is. But this time, he's not going to succeed. I'm going to be mayor, despite his sleazy machinations. I won't let him blackmail me."

Blackmail? I'm more curious than ever. However, Francesca's attention finally focuses on me. "What are you doing here so early, anyway? You weren't due here till ten."

"I got up early, couldn't sleep. Thought I'd come by so that we could work on the schedule for the volunteers, before the Rotary lunch. Then we'll be all ready when we meet with Sheila this afternoon. We want to make sure they're communicating the right message when they go knocking on doors."

"How are you feeling? Still sore from your fall?"

I haven't thought about it. I do a mental inventory and discover that actually, I'm feeling pretty good. My ankle is hardly bothering me, and the ache in my ribs is gone. Amazing what a great orgasm or two will do for a girl.

"Much better. Thanks for asking. Still, I'll be glad when the campaign is over and I can get back to the Peacock. I'm not cut out for this kind of stress!"

"We'll talk about that after I'm mayor. For now, let's get down to work."

Francesca leads the way into her office, but turns halfway to look back at me. Her eyes soften. "Thanks, Stella. Thanks for your support."

"Hey, I'm just doing my job." I realize that I can't resign, not now. Seeing White with Francesca has raised the stakes. I know she's tough and smart, but ultimately she's rich, cultured, Ivy-league. Sheltered. White's dangerous. She doesn't understand what he might do.

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The remainder of the day goes smoothly. The Rotarians give us a rousing welcome as well as a tasty if heavy roast beef lunch. Meanwhile, Sheila seems to have Francesca's small army of volunteers well in hand. They're college kids, mostly, unkempt and shaggy, but incredibly sincere. Some of them wear buttons with Tony's face on them. A few have medallions around their necks, as if he were some saint.

It's hard to tell the girls from the boys. A few of them remind me of Leticia. A pang of guilt hits me. I promised to call her. Maybe tomorrow. But I won't say anything about her father's visit to Francesca. Why upset her more? She doesn't need to know everything.

I love Sheila. She's a short, round black woman with wire-frame glasses and a constant smile, easy going but ferociously competent. She seems highly amused by me, the stripper turned media consultant. She treats me with respect, though. I appreciate that.

We're finished by five. Tonight's the night of Francesca's gig on the CityTalk show; I offer to come along, for moral support, but she waves me off. "Just be sure to watch. Nine PM on Channel 5."

So I have a couple of hours to kill. I don't feel like going home to my blind, boarded-up house. After the Rotary feast, I'm not at all hungry. There's something I crave, though. It takes me a little while to figure out what it is.

The turquoise and purple neon sign flickers into life just as my taxi pulls up in front of the Peacock Lounge. In the fading light, the place looks a bit shabbier than I remember it, but not too bad. I go around to the side door, which as always is unlocked.

Loretta squeals happily when I walk into the dressing room, and Ginger jumps up to hug me. "Stella! God, you look fabulous, lady! How are you?" Her warm brown eyes are huge, outlined in gold glitter. I hug her back. I don't care about the shiny flecks raining down onto my forest green jacket.

"I'm okay, doing well. But I've missed you all. I just had to come by and say hello."

Mary Ellen flicks a wave of blonde hair out of her eyes. "We've missed you, too." Course we get to watch you on TV!

What's it like to be a celebrity?"

"Boring. Tiring. Not much fun at all, believe me." Petite little Gina comes out of the bathroom, wrapped in her tropical print kimono. She hands me a Coke, a straw protruding from the bottle. "Thanks, sweetie." I take a long, sugary swallow. "That's good, just what I needed."

"So how are things here at the Peacock? What's new? Joey been on one of his rampages lately?"

"Naw, he's been pretty tame," Loretta offers. "Spends a lot of time dealing with people who come by asking about you, though."

"Really? What kind of people?"

"I figure they're reporters, mostly. Most of them have notebooks, or tape recorders. They want to know all about you. What your routines are like, what music you dance to, what kind of costumes you wear. Who your friends are. What you like to drink. How much money you make. Where you live."

I remember my shattered front window. "What does Joey tell them?"

Gina laughs. "A big fat nothing! He's not going to spill your private information to some newspaper goon. He's got—integrity, I think the word is."

"The publicity's been good for business. So Joey can't really complain. I've made more in tips in the week since you started working for Pinelli's widow than I did in the two months before that."

"Sometimes guys come directly to us, looking for some juicy story about you, but we just brush them off." Mary Ellen gives me one of her deceptive, girl-next-door smiles.

"Yeah, there was this character last week, offered me two hundred bucks if I'd give him your phone number." Ginger grimaced. "What does he think I am? Anyway, he was such a creep I could hardly bring myself to talk to him. Big head, a lot of hair, red face, and eyes so cold they made you feel like somebody shoved you into a walk-in freezer."

White? A wave of queasiness washes over me.

"He was so pissed off when I refused to tell him anything, I was scared he was going to hit me. He got red as a beet. I thought he was going to explode. When I threatened to call Joey,

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though, he backed off.”

White. “When was that, exactly?”

“Not sure. Maybe last Wednesday or Thursday.” Ginger sighed. “It’s hard to keep track. Seems like everybody in the city wants to know about you.”

There’s a knock, and Joey’s narrow face appears in the half-open door. “Five minutes, girls.” Then my boss notices me. “Stella! Don’t you look spiffy!” It’s hard to read his expression but I think he’s glad to see me. “To what do we owe this honor?”

“Knock it off, Joey. I was just missing the girls and thought I’d come by to say hi.”

“When are you coming back to work? These days, you know, you’re really in demand.”

“Should be a few weeks. After the election.”

Joey looks me over thoughtfully. “You sure that you want to come back, after hobnobbing with the high and mighty? I must say, you look pretty comfortable in that fancy outfit.”

I laugh. “It’s just a suit, Joey. You’ve seen me in a suit before. I wore one six years ago when I came to apply for this job.”

“Yeah, well, back then I wasn’t really paying attention to what you were wearing. Besides, you didn’t have it on for long.” Joey grins and I realize that he’s teasing me. Then he’s all business again. “Good to see you, Stella. Three minutes, ladies. Mary Ellen, you’re on first tonight.”

Mary Ellen has swept her gorgeous hair into two pigtails, tied with red ribbons. She’s wearing her schoolgirl costume: short plaid kilt, white cotton blouse, ankle socks. I smile to myself, remembering the slutty lace half-bra and tiny panties she has on underneath. Her lips are painted into a scarlet bow, and her cheeks are heavily rouged. She has even added a few false freckles. “How do I look?”

“Good enough to eat. But don’t let them get that close!”

As she puts the final touches on her make-up, I realize that I’m jealous. I don’t just miss my friends. I miss the music, the lights, the rush of putting on an exotic costume and then teasing the crowd by taking it off. My current life suddenly seems terribly dull and depressing. Posturing for the press. Running home to watch my boss on TV.

"I'd better get going. I've got an appointment that I can't afford to miss."

"Oh, Stella! You just got here. Stay for a while. Come on out and watch."

No, that will just be too painful. But Ginger already has my hand in hers. She leads me out of the dressing room, along the corridor and into the club. Then she sits me down at a table in a dark corner, near the back, but with a fine view of the stage. "Don't want anybody recognizing you," she purrs. "There'd be a riot! Now don't go away. I'll be right back."

The opening bars of Mary Ellen's number bring a hush over the audience. The girls were right; it's much fuller than I've ever seen it this early in the evening. The crowd is enthusiastic, too. They clap and whistle as Mary Ellen begins to unbutton her blouse.

"Here you go. This should cheer you up, darling." Ginger sets a full whisky on the rocks down in front of me.

"You know I don't drink, Ginger."

"I think you need to make an exception, sweetheart. I've never seen you looking so blue." She settles down on the bench next to me, her warm thigh pressed against mine. "See, I've got one, too. Cheers!"

We click glasses, and Ginger downs half her drink in one gulp. I take a cautious sip of mine. It burns my throat but sets up a pleasant warmth afterwards. I take another mouthful. Definitely pleasant.

Mary Ellen is down to her panties, her pasties and her ankle socks. The socks are such a nice touch. Her body's perfect for the little girl routine, with small firm breasts and hips that swell gently from her tiny waist. You'd never guess that's she's nearly my age.

Ginger kisses my cheek. "I've gotta go, honey. I'm up next."

There are howls and applause when she finally sheds her bikini to reveal her G-string. It doesn't cover much. You can tell that her pubis is as naked as a baby's. I reach for my glass to take another sip of whisky. The glass is empty. Still, Ginger was right. I do feel better. A lot better.

Ginger's routine is hot and raunchy. She wears an animal

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print jumpsuit, gold and black. She shakes her tawny hair around her face like a mane. The costume is all zippers. Little by little she sheds pieces of the skin-tight garment to reveal the real skin underneath, creamy dark brown, glistening with sweat. She's a jungle cat, sinuous, dangerous. I imagine I can smell the musk from way back here. My nipples tighten to aching nubs under my silk blouse. I squeeze my thighs together, creating ripples of sensation in my cunt that grow more intense the longer I watch Ginger's performance.

By the time she's finished, I'm actually panting. I'm amazed at my reactions. After all, I'm a professional. I know it's all show business.

Maybe it's the alcohol. Maybe it's the after-effects from last night, the explosive sex cut short by terror. I don't care. I'm having a wonderful time. I'm glad I came.

Who's next? I wonder. Then the music starts, and it's like someone plunged a knife into my heart. Chris Isaak. "Wicked Game." My song.

Before I realize what's happening, I'm walking between the tables, making my way to the stage. It's like I'm in a trance. I climb the stairs to the platform, swaying already in time with the haunting tune.

The audience realizes that something odd is going on. The men fall silent, their eyes following me as I move dreamily around the stage. "Strange what desire will make foolish people do," the singer's hoarse voice croons as I slowly unbutton my jacket.

I shrug and it slips from my shoulders, making a green puddle on the stage. My blouse is beige silk, high-necked, buttoned up the back. My nipples poke lewdly through the fabric of the demure garment. I cup my breasts, slowly stroking my thumbs across the protruding flesh. Pleasure shimmers through me, sparkling in the shadowy chasm between my legs.

I scan the audience, but I'm not really seeing anyone. I'm not using the stare. I don't sense any particular person's lust. I'm just floating in the sea of their collective desire.

I turn my back on the audience, working the buttons of my top. My hair is coming loose from my businesswoman's twist. Tendrils keep getting caught in my fingers as I struggle to



release myself from the confining embrace of the silk.

Finally I get the last button undone. In triumph, I pull it over my head, turning to face the audience as I do. The clips holding my hair in place surrender completely. Black curls tumble over my shoulders, hiding my breasts.

I flick my hair back and smooth my hands over the satin of my bra, caressing the fullness it hides and constrains. The song rises to a climax. My sex spasms every time I stroke my fingers across the smooth, taut fabric. My tits ache for freedom, for nakedness. I reach for the front clasp of my bra, eager to release them.

“Stella!” I hear somebody call. There’s a flash of light, then another. The spell is broken. “Stella!” Another voice takes up the call, and then there’s applause, and raucous cheers. “Stella! We love you, Stella!”

I blink, confused, suddenly dizzy. Somebody grabs my arm.

“Come on, hon. We’ve got to get you out of here.” Ginger drags me off the stage, pausing to grab my jacket and blouse on the way. “Stella! Stella!” I hear behind me, echoing through the corridor. They’re pounding on the tables, clapping in rhythm. “Bring back Stella! We want Stella!”

“Whoa, girl! I’m sorry. I had no idea that a bit of liquor would affect you so much.”

“No—umm—it’s all right, Ginger. I’m fine. I think...” Another dizzy spell shuts me up for a moment. I sink into a chair. “Geez, that was intense!”

“Sure was. I just hope that Jed can grab that photographer’s camera before he gets away.”

“Photographer?” I’m still dazed. Nothing is quite making sense.

“Yeah. It was a short, nerdy guy, nearly bald with glasses. No fashion sense, and a nasty grin. Had a professional looking camera, with a zoom lens.

Rostropovitch. All at once I feel nauseous.

“Stella, honey, are you okay?”

“Uh...I’ve been better. Could you get me a glass of cold water?”

While Ginger goes off to the fridge, I struggle to collect my thoughts. What in the world have I done? Unless the bouncer

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manages to relieve the reporter of that film, I am in major trouble.

Francesca will be furious. She'll be forced to fire me. Then she'll lose the election, and it will all be my fault. Just because I didn't have the self-discipline to stay in my seat, instead of getting up and making a fool of myself.

Still, it had been a weird but exciting experience, that dance. Guilty as I feel, I can't honestly say that I wish it hadn't happened.

I down the water in three gulps and stand up, ignoring the dizziness. "Let's go see if Jed caught the creep." I stride out the side door, Ginger trying to keep up.

Jed gives me a bear hug. His arms feel wonderful, and I hold on a bit longer than might be strictly appropriate.

"Wow, Stella! It's great to see you. Guess you shook them up a bit tonight, huh?"

"Guess so. Did you nab the guy with the camera?"

His apologetic expression contrasts with his shaved head, shark-tooth necklace and bulging, tattooed biceps. "I'm not sure what happened to him. He didn't come out the front door. But Joey did a pretty thorough search and couldn't find him inside. Maybe he snuck out the side door before you came out.

"He came in the front, though. I noticed him right away. Kind of the shifty type. He must have had the camera hidden under his coat. If I'd seen it, you know I would have taken it off his hands."

Jed gestures toward the "No Photos" sign above the door. "I don't like people who break the rules. Don't worry, though. I'll remember him if he ever tries to set foot in the Peacock Lounge again. I never forget a face."

Something clicks in my whisky-addled brain.

"I've got a question for you, Jed. About two weeks ago, the last night I was working here, before I hurt my ankle. There was a customer that night. Blond guy, late thirties or early forties, very smooth and well-dressed. Do you remember him?"

Jed thinks for a minute. "Classy guy, but kind of creepy too? Like only his mouth smiled, while the rest of his face was like stone?"

"Yeah, that's him."

“He came in for about half an hour, then left, right?”

“Right. Did you notice anything when he was leaving? Which direction he took, or anything? Was he with anybody?”

Jed spends a moment searching his memory. “As I recall, he got picked up somebody in a fancy car. A Mercedes, I think. The driver was a woman. I couldn’t see her face, but she was thin, fairly young, and had short hair. Classy, I thought. Just like him.”

I’m not sure why, but somehow I expected this. Francesca.

Well, at least now I have no reason to feel guilty.

## *Chapter Ten*

### *Temptations*

Jed hails me a cab. I get home with fifteen minutes to spare before Francesca's show is on. I look around carefully before I unlock the door. Somebody might be hiding behind the hedge that separates my tiny front yard from the street, but I don't see any shadows or movement. There's no sign of anyone watching the house, but I suppose that's a good thing, given Jimmy's comments.

I'm still feeling high from the whisky and the dancing. My mood drops through the floor, though, when I see my board-covered window. Damn! I've got to get that fixed. Ten minutes before CityTalk starts. I drag out the yellow pages and pick out a twenty-four hour glass repair place in Oakland. When I call, all I get is their answering service, but the woman takes my phone number and the measurements of the window, and promises somebody will call me.

It's nearly nine. I slip off my jacket and shoes and settle down in front of the TV. The camera focuses on the suave face of Jeremy Martin, host of CityTalk, then zooms out to take in his snazzy suit and colorful tie, and finally, the female figure seated beside him.

"This evening we have the privilege of talking to one of the two people who are trying to become the next mayor of Pittsburgh. Ms. Francesca Pinelli is making history by taking over her late husband's quest for the top spot in city government. If she wins, she'll be only the second woman to serve as our chief executive."

Francesca looks relaxed and comfortable. I notice, feeling bitter, that although she's soberly dressed, she's no longer wearing black. Guess that she's done with mourning. Was it really all a show, her tears for Tony?

I try to get my mind around Jed's news; Francesca was at the Peacock with Andy Henderson that night. Not so surprising that she and Andy would be together, given that Andy worked for Tony, but if Tony asked Mr. Clean to find him some female companionship (me), why was Francesca tagging along?

Of course, it's possible that Tony didn't actually request my company. But certainly he was expecting me.

"Stella Xanathakeos?" The sound of my name coming from the TV grabs my attention back. Martin is asking Francesca about me, how we met, whether she feels that it's appropriate to have a stripper on her campaign team.

"Stella's a fine example of what has made this city great," Francesca replies. "She's tough, smart, honest and hard-working. She's the kind of first generation American that made our country strong."

Yeah, right. I wonder what she'll say tomorrow, after she sees the papers.

The rest of the interview goes smoothly, but offers no surprises. I've heard it all before, Francesca's sincerity and humility, her populist policies and plans, her brief and tactful invocation of Tony's memory.

I wonder if anybody else believes her?

I switch off the TV with a sigh. The stress of the day suddenly plows into me, turns my body to a dead weight. I can hardly drag myself upstairs. I'm so exhausted that I just leave my clothes lying on the floor. Not like me at all. In the shower, I'm dizzy again. Maybe I'm getting the flu or something. The thought of being forced to spend a couple of days in bed is actually appealing.

As I'm toweling off, I hear the phone. I scramble to the office to get it before they hang up. It just might possibly be the glass place. I'd really like to get that settled.

Even better, it's Jimmy.

"Hey, Stella. I thought you might be out."

"Just in the shower. Again." I'm warm all over, remembering the last time he called.

"How are you? Did you get the window fixed yet?" The concern in his voice can't possibly be counterfeit. All I want, at this moment, is to feel his arms around me.

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"Tomorrow, I hope. Today was just too busy."

"Don't put it off. It's dangerous that way. Anybody with a crowbar could pry those boards off and get in."

"Aren't your men still keeping watch over my place?"

"Of course. But nobody can pay attention a hundred percent of the time. Or somebody might stage some kind of incident to act as a distraction."

"Don't worry, Jimmy. I'll get it taken care of."

"I really wish you'd go stay somewhere else. Somewhere safer."

"No way. This is my house, my father's house. I'm not going to be driven out of it."

"You could come stay in my apartment..." From his tone of voice, I can tell that he's blushing. "I'd be happy to have you."

"I'm sure you would," I reply with a laugh. "But would you be able to get any work done? Would I?" I imagine what it would be like to wake up in Jimmy's bed, pressed against his body, surrounded by his scent. I'm sorely tempted.

"I'll come visit you, Jimmy, when things settle down. After the campaign. After the police figure out what happened with Tony. Did you find out anything about the brick, by the way?"

"Looks like it came from a construction site two blocks from your place. No fingerprints, of course. The surface is too rough. The napkin comes from the bar in the hotel lobby. We're scanning the security tapes from the last two weeks to see if anybody suspicious was hanging around there, but to be honest, it's looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Yeah, well..."

"You didn't keep the notes that came with the doll and the clipping, did you?"

How could I be so stupid? They're locked in my desk. Why hadn't I given them to Jimmy? They were handwritten; surely the police had experts who knew how to analyze handwriting.

On the other hand, what if Jimmy simply wants them so he can destroy the evidence?

Come on, though. Did I have any reason to suspect Jimmy?

There was the note in Tony's diary about J.O. And the break-in that happened while he had me away from the house. And his partner Bill's strange behavior at the university

ceremony. Plus Jimmy's repeated insistence that I should leave the premises. Maybe that's just so he or one of his gang can search it again.

Come on, Stella. Get a grip. This is Jimmy you're talking about.

"Sorry, but I trashed them. They were so creepy, I didn't want them around."

"I can understand that. But if anything else happens, any threats, anything at all suspicious, I want you to call me right away. Before you do anything else. Agreed?"

"Okay, okay." How can I figure out whether to trust Jimmy or not? There's got to be some way. I can't stand lying to him.

"So, when can I see you, Stella?" There's such naked longing in his voice that I can hardly bear it.

"Soon, Jimmy. I'll call you. Soon."

I go to bed aching for his touch. But I don't do anything about it. I've already done enough damage, giving in to temptation.

\* \* \* \*

I intend to wake up early, but I forget to set the alarm. Instead, the jangling of the telephone drags me from a heavy sleep. Somebody's running a jackhammer inside my skull. Every movement makes my head hurt. The phone is so painfully loud that I want to throw it across the room.

"Stella. It's Francesca." Of course it is. I expected this. "Have you seen the morning papers?" Her voice is even, but I can hear the fury underneath her control.

"Umm—no, I just got up. What happened?"

"I think you know perfectly well what happened. You've probably finished my political career with your little stunt. All that's left now is damage control. Be here in an hour."

"Okay, I..." But she has already hung up.

I grab the *Gazette* from the front stoop. Squinting against the painful morning light, I peer up and down the street for signs of Jimmy's men. There's nobody but a couple of kids, pushing their bicycles up the hill.

Maybe there's no one protecting me after all. If someone

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was watching, how did the brick thrower manage to smash my window without getting caught?

My head hurts too much to think about it. No more whisky. Never again. Back inside my comfortably dim parlor, I unfold the newspaper.

Most of the front page is taken up by a picture of me in my bra, up on stage at the Peacock. In one corner there's a small photo of Francesca, caught in the middle of a speech, her face stern and her finger pointing accusingly. "Would-be Mayor's Aide Bares All!" the headlines scream. The byline, as I suspected, is Stanley Rostropovitch.

It's actually a pretty good picture, with my sexy hair tumbling over my shoulders and my face all dreamy and seductive. Poor Francesca! I start to laugh, but the spasms create little daggers of pain in my temples.

Better go face the music. She'll probably fire me. I don't mind, really, except that I'd like another chance to check her office for clues. Now that I know she had something to do with Mr. Clean, maybe I'll recognize a clue when I see it.

\* \* \* \*

Rosa lets me into the house. She gives me a sympathetic smile and points to the den, where Francesca is watching television. I slip into the room quietly, not wanting to disturb her.

Graham White is on the screen, along with the bouffant blond host of "AM Pittsburgh". He's dressed in a three-piece suit and looks formal and serious. "Well, Gloria," he says, "one has to question my opponent's moral character, when we see the people with whom she surrounds herself. What kind of message does it send to our children, when our leaders consort with lowlifes, drug dealers, prostitutes, and porn stars?"

I don't know whether to scream or laugh. Porn stars! He's so silly and pompous, I can't believe anyone would take him seriously. Three aspirin have only slightly reduced the pounding in my head, though, so I don't say anything. Nevertheless, Francesca senses me behind her. She rises from her chair to confront me.

"Good morning, Francesca."



“Stella, I’m so disappointed in you. I believed in you, counted on you. How could you do this to me?” She’s angry, I can see, and worried about the impact, but she’s also hurt. Maybe I can use that.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to do any harm. I was feeling stressed out and lonely, and I just dropped by to see my old friends. I don’t usually drink, but one of my friends gave me a big whisky. Before I knew it, I was up on stage.” In a calculated move, I reach for her hand. “I didn’t think anyone one would see, or know, Francesca...” She pulls away from me.

“You didn’t think at all! That’s the problem! Of course the press would be keeping an eye on your old haunts, trying to dig up some dirt. They don’t care about truth; all they want is to sell papers. You should know that, after this time working for me.”

“You’re right, of course.” I pretend to be ashamed, but the more she rants, the less guilty I feel. Who is she to tell me how to run my life? “I guess I’m not really used to politics. Please, forgive me, Francesca. It was a big mistake, but I really would never do anything to hurt you, or your campaign. You must know that...”

Francesca’s eyes narrow, as if she’s trying to decide if I’m sincere or not. When she speaks again, her voice is slightly less harsh. “It doesn’t matter at this point. What’s done is done. Now we need to figure out how to respond, see if we can minimize the effects of your recklessness and irresponsibility.”

“Of course, Francesca.”

“So, what’s on the calendar today? When do we next face the public?”

“This afternoon you’re giving a talk to the Parent-Teacher Association of Squirrel Hill. Then tonight there’s that black-tie cocktail party with Friends of the Library.”

“Let’s cancel the PTA meeting. I’m not in the best position at the moment to talk about impressionable young minds. The library event should be less of a problem. They’re a pretty liberal group. I can discuss freedom of expression and the fact that we’re all part of the same community...”

I shrug. “I’ll call the PTA secretary right now, if you want, tell her you’ve got another urgent appointment. But you know, you’ve got nothing to apologize for. I’ve got nothing to

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apologize for. Regardless of what White says, I'm not some lowlife. I'm not a criminal, or a drug dealer, or a hooker. I'm just making a living, in a perfectly legal way, doing something that I enjoy. And that I'm good at."

"I know that, but that's not the spin that White will put on it."

"Who cares? I think the people of this city are just as likely to be put off by White's holier-than-thou attitude as taken in by it. One thing about White; he's no fun. Why don't we take the offensive here, instead of tiptoeing around and acting like we did something wrong?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Why don't we schedule a campaign event at the Peacock?"

Francesca looks at me like I'm crazy. "You're joking, right?"

"Not at all. Everybody's got all these prejudices about strippers. Why not show them they're wrong? The girls at the Peacock are voters, too. So are the customers. Let's invite the press to meet another segment of the city. You're always saying that you want to be everyone's mayor, right? Not just the people with power. Show the city that you mean what you say."

Francesca still looks skeptical. "It's a bizarre idea. But I suppose we need to do something radical at this point. It's hard to think that we have much to lose..."

The ringing phone interrupts her. She frowns as she picks it up, but gradually her face relaxes into a surprised smile. "Yes—yes, this is she. Oh, good morning, Ms. Wentworth. Yes, that's true. Well, of course I'd consider it...Just a moment, please."

Palm over the receiver, she whispers to me. "It's ABC. National television. They want me to appear on *Good Morning America*."

"Wow, that's great."

"Go on up to my office. I'll be up in a few minutes."

Just what I need. Some time alone with her files. I'm gone before Francesca resumes her conversation.

Unfortunately, there's nothing on the desk except a pad of paper, her computer and the fancy two-line phone. The light labeled 'line one' is a red dot. So I'll know when Francesca hangs up. The filing cabinets are still locked. Damn. I look

around and notice that the wastebasket is at least half full.

What the hell. I dump the contents onto the floor and start to rummage through them.

Junk mail, mostly. Offers for credit cards and magazine subscriptions. A draft of one of Tony's speeches, marked up in red in Francesca's neat hand. I sift through the pile as quickly as I can, not really knowing what I'm looking for.

Near the bottom of the pile, I hit pay dirt. A business card, crumpled into a little ball as if it was discarded in anger or frustration.

I glance up at the phone, noting that the busy light is still lit, then unfold the card. It belongs to Attorney Howard B. Siezmynski. "Family law: wills and trusts, custody disputes, divorce."

Divorce. I never completely believed Francesca's tears.

I don't notice when the phone light goes off, but I hear her on the stairs. Hastily, I sweep the trash back into the basket and set it next to the desk. Then I sit down in her chair and grab the paper and a pen, trying to look busy. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a few scraps that didn't quite make it back into the trash. I'm ready with an excuse about knocking the basket over by mistake. But Francesca's not in any mood to notice.

"They want me in New York on Wednesday. They'll tape that night and air the show on Thursday morning. I can hardly believe it. Most of the time, America acts like Pittsburgh doesn't exist."

"That's fabulous, Francesca! Lots of people I know watch the morning news shows every day while they're getting ready for work."

"We need to get the word out, get everyone to tune in. Even if they're planning to vote for White, they'll want to see their city featured on national TV. I want you to call every local newspaper, radio and TV station and let them know about this."

"Sure thing." I've never seen Francesca so excited. Her eyes are sparkling, and it seems that she can't stand still. "What about the PTA? Should I still cancel?"

She claps her hands together like a child. "No, of course not. I can handle them, I think. You were right. We shouldn't apologize. At this point, the more people I talk to, the better. The

election's less than two weeks away."

Two more weeks. I'm not sure that I'll survive.

A sudden quiet comes over her. She regards me gravely. "This is all because of you, Stella. I know that you didn't mean this as a publicity stunt, but it's your story that attracted the attention of the national media. I owe this to you."

"No, really, Francesca. I shouldn't have..."

"I'm sorry that I was so hard on you earlier. I should have tried to see things from your perspective. I'm so focused on winning this election, I never pay attention to how much the campaign is costing you."

"It's okay, really."

"No, it's not." She comes closer, crouches in front of my chair, and puts her arms around me. Her perfume seems sharper than usual. Her lips brush my neck, just below my ear. "If I can't take care of my own people, how can I care for the city?"

I don't trust her, but my body responds anyway. I let my head fall back, let her trace a path in feathery kisses down to the hollow of my throat. She unfastens the top button of my blouse. I think that I should stop her, but I don't. Instead I close my eyes, focusing my attention on the velvet sensation of her lips and the shocking wetness of her tongue.

She undoes another button, exposing the top of my breasts where they swell out of my bra. She dips her tongue into my cleavage. I can't control my sigh of pleasure. It's almost like last night, a lustful dream that takes me over completely. Her touch is something I cannot understand and cannot argue with. My mind screams out warnings, but I am powerless to stop what it happening between us.

I bury my face in her hair as she lifts one breast out of the bra cup and suckles me. Breathing her patchouli and lilac makes me dizzy. She is gentle at first, then rough, tugging greedily as if she really could draw sustenance from me. The milk of desire begins to flow between my thighs. I feel it soaking through my linen skirt. My animal smell mingles with her floral scents. Both of my breasts are free now. She kneads and strokes and sucks at them as if that satisfies her completely.

But it's not enough for me. "Francesca," I murmur. "Is there somewhere else..." The office door is wide open, the desk chair

is awkward, and I need, desperately need, to be naked.

“My room,” she answers, gazing up, her lips slick with her own saliva. “Come on.” My bare tits hanging out of my blouse, I let her lead me down the hall to a closed door. Inside it’s cool and dim and smells of Francesca.

As soon as the door closes behind us, I strip off my blouse and skirt. I’m in a hurry. I’m not trying to tease. Still Francesca watches me, fascinated. My panties are so wet that it’s hard to get them off, and my bra is all twisted under my breasts. I growl in frustration.

“Let me help you,” she says slipping behind me, unfastening the hooks, freeing me. She weighs my tits in her palms. The flesh overflows her small hands. “Abundance,” she murmurs. “Plenty.” She releases my breasts and transfers her attentions to the swell of my buttocks, cupping and stroking. I replace her hands with my own. I roll my taut nipples between finger and thumb. Each twist spirals through my body. Pleasure coils tighter and tighter in my cunt.

All at once she’s on her knees behind me, nudging my thighs open. “You make me so hungry, Stella.” She dives between my legs, licking and sucking, trying to reach my clit. It’s delicious, but standing, it’s still awkward. I can’t spread my thighs wide enough to fully open myself to her mouth.

She senses this. She pushes me toward the bed, urges me up and onto my hands and knees. Now, with my legs splayed and my back arched, she has full access, and she takes full advantage. Her tongue dances in the shallows and probes the depths of my pussy. I squirm and thrash against her when she swallows my clit. I scream when she uses her teeth.

I mash my cunt against her face, wanting more. She’s drowning in my pussy juice. She pulls away, gasping for breath. “Don’t stop!” I beg, my ass twitching with the aftershocks. “Please...!”

She answers me by shoving three fingers up my cunt. I slam my pubis against her hand, grinding my clit against the hardness. “I have what you need,” she whispers. But then, as if to taunt me, she removes her fingers, moves her body away.

“No! Please...” I begin. I don’t have the breath to finish. With a force that would be painful, if I weren’t so excited,

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Francesca rams something long and hard into my aching cunt. There's a low buzz. The thing begins to vibrate, setting my whole body quivering in time. My clit is so swollen that it's painful. The pleasure is too intense. I scream, unable to bear it.

Francesca slides the toy halfway out, then slams it in again. I can't take it, but still I want it. She pumps the vibrator in and out of my cunt, faster and harder the louder I yell. She's the devil, I think, she wants to kill me. But that doesn't stop me from humping the silicon cock working inside me, straining toward release.

The buzz gets louder. The vibrations become stronger. Francesca's thrusts become more brutal and more exquisite. I'm nothing but a greedy lump of flesh, hovering on the edge of oblivion. I am aware of nothing but the sensations in my cunt.

All at once my cunt is empty. Before I can curse her for disappointing me, Francesca presses the vibrating rod directly against my clit. The surge of pain and pleasure shatters me, reduces me a swarm of vibrating atoms. I collapse, helpless and quivering, as the aftershocks sizzle through my flesh.

I come to my senses, finally. Francesca is watching me, a half-smile on her face. I realize with a shock that she's still dressed, though her makeup is smeared and her skin sticky. I'm embarrassed by my greediness.

"Francesca..." I begin, reaching for her.

"Never mind, Stella. It was your turn. If you recall." I remember the scene in the conservatory, and I'm more embarrassed than ever.

She leans over to kiss me. My taste is strong on her lips. I want, all at once, to know what she tastes like. I try to pull her down onto the bed with me, but she gently looses my hold on her.

"Really, Stella, it's all right. Consider it my way of saying thank you. For everything."

There's an odd light in her hazel eyes. I wonder what she means.

"Now I've got to get ready for that afternoon meeting. But maybe you'd like the shower first?"

"We, uh, could shower together." I feel awkward and shy, after exposing the depth of my need to this woman. "I could

wash your back.”

Francesca’s laugh is like a bell ringing. “Maybe some other time. Actually, you go ahead and use this shower. I’ll use the guest bedroom.”

Before I can object, she’s gone. In the shower, I find that my sex is too sore to touch. Tit for tat, I guess. Francesca’s cunt was probably pretty raw after my trick with the rose.

Somehow I am not satisfied, despite the incredible orgasm. I’m not one of those people who confuse sex with love, but even for casual sex this doesn’t feel right. There’s some kind of imbalance here. But I really can’t tell who took advantage of whom.

I think about Jimmy, how his roughness never seems like cruelty. I think about Tony. I barely knew him, but with him, it felt right. I wonder about Tony and Francesca making love. Having sex. They must have, at least early in their relationship. It’s actually kind of hard for me to imagine.

I want to go home and rest, but I still have to make those calls for Francesca. I’m on the phone with WPXI when she stops at the door on her way out. I motion for her to wait. She points to her watch. “Tomorrow,” she mouths, and hurries away.

I’m glad she’s gone.

I’m not sure why I’m still there, talking to the *Post-Gazette* and the *Three Rivers Chronicle* and all the other neighborhood papers. I should quit. I’m pretty sure that I’ve reached a dead-end in my amateur detective work. I know that Francesca and Henderson were involved in some kind of dirty business. I know that Francesca planned to divorce Tony. I doubt that I’ll learn much more in this house.

There’s no reason for me to continue working for Francesca. And it seems as though it’s hazardous to my peace of mind, if not my health.

I’ll tell her tomorrow.

I’ll miss the money, of course. But that’s never been a big issue for me. I decide to celebrate my freedom from Francesca by taking the bus home. Like the old days.

It’s a gorgeous spring afternoon. The sun is like spun gold. The air is sweet with the scent of a dozen Shadyside gardens. The schedule posted at the bus stop tells me that I have a twenty

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minute wait for the next bus, but on a glorious afternoon like this, who cares?

I'm daydreaming about Jimmy when a long black Lincoln pulls up to the curb. The windows are tinted so dark that I can't even tell whether there's a driver. The rear door opens soundlessly. A gloved hand reaches out and grabs my arm.

"Ms. Xanathakeos. Get inside, please."

Despite the polite words, it's clear that this is an order. I scan the street, looking for a policeman, a gardener, anyone who might help me. There's no one. I could scream, but who would hear?

"Ms. Xanathakeos, please." The voice is quiet and controlled but I catch a note of impatience. "I don't like to be kept waiting."

The leather-clad fingers dig into my arm. I decide to cooperate, for now.

It's dim inside the car. It smells of leather and money. I turn to look at my captor. I'm not all that surprised to see that it is Don Julio Orestino.

"Ms. Xanathakeos. It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

"And who are you, if I can ask? It's hardly a pleasure for me to be kidnapped."

The man smiles and removes his dark glasses. His eyes are dark brown, almost black. He radiates confidence and intelligence. For a moment, I'm reminded of Tony.

But Tony's mouth was generous. This man's smile is cruel.

"I'd hardly call this kidnapping. I just wanted to have a private talk with you. That's not the easiest thing to do these days. You're a rather public figure."

I know he's talking about last night. I'm flustered in spite of myself. "Can I know who I'm talking to?"

"I think you know who I am, Stella." He pronounces my name carefully. It sends a chill down my spine. "But for now, let's just say that I'm a friend of Tony Pinelli. Just like you."

"I never knew Tony Pinelli. But I heard that he was murdered."

"Don't play the innocent, Stella. We know that you were with Tony when he died."

How did he know? Francesca? I never figured out where



she got her information, either. But who else knew? Only Jimmy and his staff. Of course, anyone could have been spying on that room that night.

In any case, I don't answer. I'm not going to admit anything that I don't have to.

"We also know that you don't have the film," he continued. "If you had it, you would have used it by now."

"I really don't know what you're talking about." I try to sound haughty and annoyed, but the quaver in my voice spoils the effect.

Don Julio shrugs. "Have it your way. In any case, I wanted to warn you. Even without the film, you're in a dangerous situation. You should get out of the city as soon as you can."

"I can't. I have responsibilities."

"Responsibilities worth risking your life for?"

"Are you threatening me?" I should keep my mouth shut, I know, but now I'm more annoyed than scared.

The man laughs. "Not at all. Really, I'm trying to help. I don't think you know very much, but what you do know could be a severe embarrassment to certain parties. And certain parties take a less civilized approach than I do about removing obstacles to their ambitions."

He reaches into his jacket. I hold my breath, somehow expecting him to pull out a gun. Instead, he hands me a bulky envelope. Without thinking, I take it.

"Look, Stella. There's five thousand dollars in here. Use it to take that trip to Greece you've always dreamed about. Just get out of the city until after the election. And don't let anyone know where you've gone."

"I can't..."

The don smiles, but there's an edge of menace in his voice. "Every hour that you stay here, you're in more danger. And let me remind you that stubbornness is not generally conducive to self-preservation."

The car rolls to smooth stop. Don Julio reaches across my body to open the door. "Here we are. I believe that this is where you live, is it not?"

The boarded-up window is a soundless reproach. The silent threat hangs in the air between Don Julio and me.

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“Goodbye, Ms. Xanathakeos. I feel confident that we will not meet again.”

I’m left standing on the sidewalk in the spring sunshine, clutching the money and shivering.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### *Runaway*

It takes me a few minutes to realize that standing out on the street holding five thousand dollars is maybe not the smartest thing for me to be doing. I stuff the envelope into my purse and fish out my keys. I'm about to slide in the deadbolt key, when I notice that the bolt is not thrown. I can see the gap between the door frame and the door. I try the knob. It's unlocked, too.

I'm one hundred percent sure that I locked both of them when I left. I was in a hurry to get to Francesca's, but not that much of a hurry. These days I check all the doors three times whenever I go in or out. So somebody has picked the locks. Somebody who doesn't care that I know he broke in. Or who is still inside.

Don Julio's warning rings in my ears. I should get out of here. I should run down to the pay phone by the corner store and call Jimmy. Speaking of Jimmy, though, where were his men when my lock was being picked? I glance around. There's nobody to be seen. Maybe there's nobody there.

Jimmy would tell me to leave. But this is my house.

As quietly as I can, I ease the door open. For once, the hinges don't squeak. I slip off my shoes and close the door behind me.

I notice the smell immediately. Cigarette smoke. Then I hear the noise of a chair scraping against linoleum. He's in the kitchen. I need a weapon. I dig my Mace out of my bag and grab my father's big black umbrella. It will have to do.

I tiptoe down the hall and peek around the door frame. I'm ready for some masked hood or a mob guy in sunglasses. Instead there's a teenage girl in a tee shirt and baggy jeans. She's leaning back, legs stretched out and eyes closed. A cigarette smolders between her fingers, dropping ashes on the backpack next to her

chair.

“Letty! What are you doing here?”

She sits up and looks at me defiantly. “Aren’t you glad to see me? You said that you were going to call. When you didn’t, I thought maybe I should drop by for a visit.”

I sink into the other chair, weak with relief. The umbrella clatters to the floor. “I’m sorry. I’ve been really busy...”

“Yeah, busy having a good time. I saw the papers.” She grinds out the stub of her cigarette in a saucer, then lights up another one. Normally, I don’t let people to smoke in my house, but I don’t want to make her angrier.

“You’ve got the wrong idea. That day, after I was at your house? A couple of guys attacked me on the street. Tried to beat me up. And then, you saw my window, didn’t you?”

She nods, watching me closely. “Did somebody break in?”

“Not exactly. But it’s amazing how much damage a brick can do. Somebody’s been trying to scare me. To shut me up or make me leave town.” A thought occurs to me. “Do you think it might be your father?”

“I wouldn’t put anything past him.” Letty grimaces. “But threats are not exactly his style. He tends to favor direct action.”

I notice suddenly that there’s a bruise on her cheek. I reach out to touch her face. She pulls away. “Did he...?”

“What do you think?” She snuffs out her butt and leans toward me, elbows on the table. “But that’s the last time. I’m not going back there. He can’t do anything about it, either. I’m eighteen now. He’s got no hold on me anymore.”

“Where will you go? Do you have someplace to stay?”

The girl laughs bitterly. “Actually, I thought I might stay with you, for a few days at least. But now I think that might be dangerous. For you, I mean.”

I realize that I would like to have her company. “Actually, I do have an extra room.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think it’s a good idea. I’m leaving for California next weekend, anyway. But before I go, I want you to have this.”

Letty digs something small out from the front pocket of her backpack. “Here. I don’t know what to do with this, but maybe you will.”

It's a roll of 35mm black and white film. I feel cold, then hot. I know where this comes from.

"What? How did you get this?"

Leticia buries her face in her hands. "It was—that night. The night that Tony died..."

"Yes, I know. I know. What happened?"

"Tony...Tony." She looks up at me, her cheeks wet with tears and a desperate look in her eyes. "You know I loved him. Completely and hopelessly. I met him six months ago at some public function that my father made me attend. He was so kind, so warm, even though I was only his rival's kid. And so sexy. I just couldn't help falling for him. After that, I spied on him, whenever I could. I was there the afternoon that he turned down my father's dirty money. I was there the night they murdered him."

"What did you see?" Did she know I was there? If so, she hid it well.

"Not much. I followed him that evening from his office downtown to the Hyatt. He checked in and I went up in the elevator with him." A sob stops her. "He didn't even notice me. I might as well have been invisible. When he went into his room, I hid in a linen closet across the hall. I figured I'd wait until he was finished with whatever he was doing there, and follow him out."

"Then what happened?"

"I heard doors opening and closing. People going in and coming out. I couldn't really see much. Mostly people's backs. First there were a couple of men in dark coats. Then later, there was a woman in a suit. I only dared to open the closet door a crack, and the hall was sort of dim."

"And then?"

"And then I heard gunshots. And I knew—I knew somehow that something bad had happened to Tony. I rushed out and tried the door to his room, but it was locked from the inside. But the door to the room next door was open. Inside, there was a camera on a tripod, pointed through a peephole into Tony's room. Whoever set it up was trying to harm Tony. I rewound the film, opened the camera, and took the cartridge. I'm not sure why. I just knew it was the right thing to do."

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“Did you look into the other room? Tony’s room?”

Tears overwhelm her. She shakes her head, unable to speak. I put my arm around her, telling myself it’s just to comfort her, trying to ignore the little flame of desire that flickers in my sex when I touch her. She clutches at me like someone drowning. Her firm breasts, braless under her tee, press against mine. I don’t want to want her, but I can’t stop my nipples from turning hard and terribly sensitive.

“Oh, Stella! I didn’t dare look. I didn’t want to see. But I knew. Somehow I knew.” The young woman finally releases me. She rubs her fists in her eyes, making them redder than ever. “When I read the newspapers the next day, I wasn’t surprised. But I just couldn’t bear it. I locked myself in my room and stayed stoned for a week.”

I want to comfort her. I want to distract her, brush her tangled hair out of her eyes, silence her sobs with my kisses. I push these thoughts away and try to concentrate on the information she’s supplying.

“After you took the film, do you remember anything else? Did you see anyone else?”

“I think I was in shock. And I was terrified. I went down the fire escape and out the back of the hotel. By that time there were sirens and probably all hell was breaking loose in front, but in back it was pretty quiet. There was just one car, parked in the alley, with two guys in it. Actually, I was kind of surprised that they were just sitting there.”

My heart skips a beat or two. “What kind of car? What guys? Did you see their faces?”

“The car—I think it was a Chevy, nothing special. One of the guys was black. The other, the driver, was white, with kind of straw-colored hair. I really couldn’t see them that well. I was in a hurry to get out of there.”

A black guy and a white guy with sandy hair. Could it be Bill and Jimmy? J.O.? I need to know more, but Leticia has retreated into sullenness again. She lights another cigarette and looks me up and down, her eyes narrowing.

“Tell me the truth, Stella. The woman in the suit, visiting Tony. That was you, wasn’t it?”

I’m just too tired of lying to deny it. And she has shared her

truths with me. “Yes, that was me. How did you know?”

“Well, even from the back, you’re pretty distinctive. But mostly, it was the way you reacted the other day when I asked you if you knew Tony. You looked like someone had plunged a knife into your gut.” She inhales deeply and blows the smoke out her nose. “It didn’t hit me at first, but later on I realized what was going on. You knew him. And you fucked him, too, didn’t you?”

Her harshness makes me cringe. “We—had sex, yes. I didn’t plan that, it just happened. Tony’s assistant hired me to dance for him in his hotel room. One thing led to another. You know how attractive Tony was. More or less irresistible.”

“So?”

“So we were in the throes when Mr. Clean—Tony’s henchman—pulled the trigger. Tony had a gun, too, and shot him back.” I’m suddenly trembling, remember that awful night. “I was lucky to survive.”

I squeeze my eyes tight. I don’t want to cry in front of this girl. “That was the only time I ever met him. Really.”

“But you still miss him, right?”

“You said it.”

“He had that kind of magic. He never even touched me. Yet I would have done anything for him.” Leticia laughs bitterly. “Maybe it’s a good thing we were never lovers. I might have thrown myself into his grave.”

I remember her on the bus, distraught and yet burning with lust. Tony had told me he was a dangerous character. It was true in more ways than one.

“So how did you end up working for Francesca Pinelli?”

“I wanted to see if I could find out what really happened that night. Why Tony died.”

“Well, maybe the pictures will help you find out. I’d like to know myself. So I can punish whoever is responsible.” Her eyes are suddenly as cold as her father’s. “You will let me know what you find, won’t you?”

“Of course. But how can I get in touch with you?”

Leticia stands, brushes the ashes off her jeans, and swings her backpack up onto her shoulder. “Oh, I’ll be around.” She’s a female James Dean, insolent, brave and so very young. I ache to

kiss her.

“Are you sure you don’t want to crash here until you head west?”

“Thanks, but I really don’t think it’s a good idea. For either of us.” Her expression softens for a moment. “Be careful, Stella. Those pictures could get you into even more trouble than you’re in already.”

“I will. Thanks, Leticia. Thanks for trusting me.”

“I had to trust somebody. I decided to trust someone who loved Tony like I did.”

The phone rings, interrupting our goodbye. “Don’t worry, I’ll let myself out,” Letty says as I pick up the receiver. “See you soon.”

I’m ready for a heavy breather or some new threat, but it’s the glass repair company. We agree that they’ll come by in half an hour. I’m pleased. An attack on my house feels like a personal violation. I’ll be happy when the place is whole again. Of course, I still need to finish replanting my garden, but one step at a time. The film is bound to bring me closer to the end of this nightmare.

What am I going to do with the film, though? I can’t just take it down to the local one-hour photo place. Who knows what’s on that roll? I rack my brains, trying to think of anyone I know who develops his own pictures. I vaguely recall that Jimmy was a photo buff in high school. He’s definitely off the list, though, until I can discover whether it was him in that car behind the hotel, and what he was doing there if it was.

Guess I’ll just have to try developing them myself. Jimmy used to say that black and white film was easy. He asked if he could take pictures of me, I remember now, back in senior year. I refused. I was afraid he’d spread them around the school. I didn’t know him very well, I realize now. Jimmy might have used those photos himself for some nasty purpose, but he would never have done anything to hurt my reputation.

Why am I so sure of that, given my new suspicions? I don’t know, but I am.

The doorbell rings. The glass installer is a burly, middle-aged Greek who reminds me of a younger version of my father. He’s friendly but respectful, and wonderfully efficient: in twenty minutes, I have a new window and a crystal-clear view of the



street.

Apologetically, he hands me the bill. It's seven hundred dollars. My heart sinks, but then I remember the envelope in my purse. Seems fitting to use some of that cash, given that the mob might have been responsible for smashing the window in the first place.

As soon as the glass repairman is gone, I lock up the remaining cash in my desk. I'm at a loss about where to hide the film. Finally, I pull out one of my hand weights. I unscrew the weight on the end. Sure enough, the handle is hollow. I slide the cartridge down into the handle, and screw the weight back on. Then I head for the neighborhood library.

I cheer up when I see that Mrs. Hamid is still at the front desk. She's been the head librarian ever since my father began bringing me here to check out picture books when I was five. Her glossy hair is heavily streaked with gray, but her dark eyes still sparkle, and she still wears a silver ring on every one of her gnarled fingers. She still speaks with a soft Lebanese accent, after all these years in America.

"Stella! How nice to see you. It's been a long time. But I gather that you've been quite busy, from what I see in the papers."

"Well..." I begin to make excuses, but then I see that she's beaming with approval, even as she tries not to laugh.

"Don't worry, Stella. We're all proud of you. Those vultures, those paparazzi—they're just trash. All they want is to drag people's names in the mud. No one pays any attention to them."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hamid. I hope you're right."

"Of course I'm right," she snorts. "I've seen this sort of thing a hundred times before. Anyway, how can I help you? Looking for some light reading to take your mind off of politics?"

"Actually, I need a book on photography. A how-to book. Something simple."

"Taking up a new hobby?"

"Um—not exactly. My teenage cousin asked me to help him set up a darkroom."

"Ah, I know just the title to recommend. Come with me." I

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follow her plump figure back into the stacks. “Does your cousin live in Pittsburgh? Because the Downtown YMCA has an excellent darkroom that’s open to the public. I think they charge ten dollars an hour or something like that. It seems as though that would be easier and cheaper for him than setting up his own.”

I congratulate myself on visiting Mrs. Hamid, who has always been a great source of local knowledge. I hadn’t actually figured out where I was going to develop the film. I had been focused on the how.

“Thanks for the suggestion. I’ll pass it on.”

“Here you go. *Introduction to Photography and Photo Processing*. It’s basic, but quite complete, and very clearly written.”

“Great. Sounds like exactly what we need.”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s all. Thanks for your help.”

“My pleasure. It’s wonderful to see you. You’re looking very sophisticated these days, I must say.”

“Well, you know, I’m in the public eye.”

“But you also look rather stressed, Stella. Like you haven’t been getting enough sleep. Don’t forget to take care of yourself.”

Is it that obvious? “I won’t. Thanks for your concern, Mrs. Hamid.”

“All part of the service, Stella. See you soon.”

\* \* \* \*

I stop off at the Giant Eagle for a few groceries on the way home. I’m juggling two paper bags, my purse and the book, trying to unlock my door, when I hear the phone ring.

It’s Jimmy. At the sound of his voice, all my suspicions and concerns melt away. How could such a nice guy possibly be involved in anything as nasty as this business around Tony’s murder?

“Hey, Stella! You’re home. I’ve been trying to reach you all day.”

“Just got back from some errands. This morning I was over at Francesca’s.”

There’s a chuckle at the other end of the line. “How did she

react to this morning's featured news story?"

"At first she was furious. Then she got a call asking her to appear on national television later this week. That sort of changed her attitude."

"I'll bet it did." He laughs again, a bit nervously. There's a second or two of silence. I can sense Jimmy gathering his courage to try a more personal topic. "So, what are you doing tonight? Are you free? I thought that maybe I could take you out for dinner."

And after dinner? The notion is awfully tempting. My pussy is still sore from Francesca's rough handling, but we could probably find other ways to amuse ourselves.

But then there's the film. Not to mention Letty's story about the men in the car.

"Sorry, Jimmy, but I've got some work that I have to get done tonight. For Francesca. Plus I just bought food for dinner."

"I could come over and cook for you..." I can see his boyish face in my mind, filled with mischief.

"Are you sure that dinner's all you have in mind?"

"Well, what if it isn't? Does that really bother you, Stella?" Bother me? I'd probably tear off my clothes and throw myself at him the moment he came in the door.

Be strong. Be smart. Don't give in.

"I can't, Jimmy. Not tonight. Maybe in a day or two. Francesca's leaving for New York on Wednesday. Maybe we can get together Wednesday night."

"I'd like that, Stella. I'd like that a lot."

"Okay—it's a plan, then. Unless something else comes up."

"Like what?"

"Well, you know how things have been lately..." Threats. Attacks. Dirty tricks.

"Did you get the window fixed, by the way?"

"You'll be happy to hear that I did. Today." Shouldn't he know, if he has somebody watching the house?

"Good. I still worry about you, alone in that house."

"Stop worrying. I can take care of myself. And your officers are still on duty outside, aren't they?"

"Of course. Especially after that stunt with the window."

"So I should be perfectly safe. Look, I've got to go. I'll call

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you on Wednesday to finalize things, okay?

“Sure. Sounds great.”

The conversation seems to be over, but neither one of us has hung up. I take a deep breath and decide to plunge in.

“By the way, Jimmy...”

“Yes?”

“I was wondering what you were doing the night of the murders. Where you were and all that. Were you called to the hotel after they discovered the crime?”

“Uh—no, actually I was in Harrisburg all day—uh—doing research on another case. I didn’t get back to the city until late. I didn’t even hear about the murders until I came into work the next day. Why?”

Jimmy is not a good liar. I can tell that he’s hiding something. “Oh, I was just wondering. But you’re working on the case now, right?”

“Yes. Me and Bill and two other detectives from the Tenth Precinct.”

“So, do you have any idea yet why Tony was shot?”

“Not a clue.” This time, I think he’s telling the truth.

\* \* \* \*

I make myself some scrambled eggs and a salad and settle down in the kitchen with *Introduction to Photography*. Black and white developing seems pretty straightforward, but it’s clear that the slightest carelessness can ruin the pictures. The wrong proportions of chemicals. A stray ray of light. If I spoil this film then precious information is gone forever. I only have one chance to get it right.

After I wash the dishes, I get out my notepad and write out a step by step procedure, underlining all the points where there’s a particular risk. I study my notes until my eyes are bleary.

I just can’t look at the notes any longer. I go around and check the front and back doors and all the ground floor windows. The house still smells of Letty’s cigarettes. Remembering her easy entry, I drag a chair from the kitchen to the entry way and brace the back against the doorknob. It won’t keep out anyone who’s determined to get in, but it might buy me some time.

I'm so tense, I expect to have trouble falling asleep. But exhaustion wins out over worry. I'm sucked down into sleep so deadening it's almost like a coma.

\* \* \* \*

When I regain consciousness, I find myself standing naked with my legs spread wide, tied at the wrist and ankle to some type of wooden frame. At first there's just me. Gradually I realize that there's an audience as well. They're in shadow; I can't see their faces. But I can hear their heavy breathing and their whispering.

A spotlight hits me and plays over my breasts and thighs. I feel the heat on my skin. I can feel the eyes that follow the light. Then another spot highlights a door stage right. Francesca struts onto the stage to thunderous applause.

I almost laugh. She's dressed in a costume from some kinky porn movie, black leather corset, thigh-high boots, elbow-length gloves. A black domino covers her eyes. Her skin looks paler than ever in contrast. Her hair is gelled into a dark, spiky crown. Her breasts are bare, the nipples painted cherry red.

She carries a short whip made of dozens of leather strands. My laughter dies in my throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she begins. I could swear that she's about to launch into one of her campaign speeches. "I invite you to witness the punishment of a slut. Take a look at this woman."

She strides in a circle around my bound body, close enough that I can smell her perfume. "Look at these breasts, so ripe they're obscene." She flicks her whip and strands of leather catch and pull at my erect nipples." The sting turns almost immediately to heat. The heat flows and pools in my sex.

"Look at these thighs, like columns of marble at the entrance to the temple of lust." Again she flicks her wrist. Parallel lines of red mark my skin. Parallel streaks of pain flash through my body, then once again the heat takes over. She strikes my other thigh, creating a symmetrical pattern. Pain. Heat.

My pussy is slick. My juices overflow, dripping over the

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stripes painted by her whip. She notices and points this out to the audience.

“See what a slut she is! Even her pain becomes lust. Look at this cunt, hidden by this fur, wild and rank like some animal.” She trails the whip down between my breasts, across my belly, and lets the tendrils rest gently against my pubis. Even that light touch is enough to make me writhe in my bonds. She crouches between my legs and sniffs at me like some animal herself, then forces two gloved fingers deep into my pussy.

I grind myself against her helplessly. She snatches her fingers away and holds the soaked leather up for the audience to see. “See how shameless she is, how lewd, how totally unable to control herself.” I moan, wanting her fingers again. Wanting any contact, even the whip.

“She’ll fuck anyone. She fucked my husband. She even fucked me.” Francesca circles behind me. She punctuates each sentence with a stroke of the whip on my buttocks. The leather strands bite into my flesh. The pain arcs through my body. It feels like I’m bleeding, but that might be just sweat. “She’s nothing...but a...body...a set of holes...aching to be filled...” The leather rains down on my shoulders, on my back. I’m crying, not so much from the pain as from frustration.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Stella Xanathakeos, queen of the sluts.” She slips to her haunches again and rams the handle of the whip up into my pussy.

My whole body contracts and shakes. Pleasure rolls through me like thunder, laced with lightning sparks of pain. The audience roars as I climax there in front of them. Francesca pulls out the whip handle and slashes the thongs over my still-trembling pussy flesh. I climax again.

“Stella! Stella!” the audience chants. Now I hear my music, “Wicked Game,” and I want to move, want to dance, but instead I fall into another orgasm.

“Hey, Stella,” says a voice close to my ear. It’s Jimmy. He dangles his handcuffs in front of me. “Wanna fuck, slut?” I feel fingers probing me, opening my rear hole, and I want to scream, but there’s a leather palm stopping my mouth, not Francesca this time, but Julio Orestino. “I told you to be careful, slut,” he hisses, and then I feel his thumb push itself into my anus. I try to

twist away, but I'm still bound. Another orgasm shakes me.

When I recover, there are lips on mine, Letty's lips, and her hands are groping my breasts. "You want me, Stella? You know you want me. What a slut!" She twists my nipples until I yell, but my cries are drowned out by the audience and the music.

"Stella," says an unfamiliar voice. I open my eyes to see Detective Bill's dark, naked shape parading in front of me. A huge erection sprouts between his legs. He strokes it with both hands. "You ready for me, slut?"

There are hands all over me, fingers and cocks and dildos all violating me. My whole body hurts and I'm dying of shame, but I don't want it to stop. A rain of come splashes against my face. I lick it eagerly off my lips.

"Slut! Slut!" the audience is yelling now. Somebody is whipping me in time with their chant. I look around me and see that the stage has become the scene of an orgy. Bill is crouched behind Francesca, screwing her doggy style. Leticia kneels, naked, in front of Jimmy, sucking him off. Don Julio is sodomizing the deathly pale but clearly living body of Mr. Clean. Bright lights flash again and again. I see the bald, repulsive face of Stanley Rostropovitch, catching it all on film.

"No," I scream. "Stop it! Stop!" Another orgasm rolls over me. I sink, limp and helpless, into my bonds, vibrating between lust and terror.

I look around frantically for someone to help me. For the first time I notice there's another bound figure on a frame in the shadows stage left. It's blurry at first, but as I concentrate, the image resolves itself. It's a dark haired, muscular man, shackled with his arms stretched wide to either side. Blood trickles from wounds in his hands, in his chest, on his side.

Horror swells and bursts in me like another orgasm as I realize that it is Anthony Pinelli.

## *Chapter Twelve*

### *Exposed*

I wake up howling. My breath comes in gasps, like I'm running for my life. My room is black as coal. Dawn must still be hours away. Against the background blackness, I still see the awful image of Tony's bleeding body.

Some nightmare. I flip on the bedside lamp and go off to the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face. Sitting on the toilet, I discover that my pussy is tender and soaking wet. The insides of my legs are sticky with cunt juice. "Slut," I hear someone whisper. I shake my head, trying to drive the remnants of the dream out of my mind.

A hot shower helps, a bit. I wash my thighs, half expecting to see the marks of Francesca's whip, but my skin is as white and smooth as ever.

My grandmother believed that dreams held messages for the dreamer. I remember sitting on her lap when I was four or five, while she brushed my long hair and asked me what I had dreamed the night before. Usually I made something up. I don't tend to remember my dreams. Then I would listen, fascinated, while she created some complicated myth around my childish story and then figured out the moral.

This dream, though. What's the message? Maybe it's a warning to me that I am thinking too much about sex these days. That my lusts will lead me into danger.

On the other hand, maybe it's just my insecurity taking concrete form. I do always worry about people's impression. I'm afraid that people assume, given my body and my job, that I'm loose, available, maybe even a whore. In fact, I'm very selective about who I get involved with, even if I don't look like it.

Francesca—well, Francesca was an exception. I should have known better than to allow her to use me for her own



pleasure. Although the dream makes me wonder whether the whole thing with her is really more about power. Francesca Pinelli, dominatrix and ringmistress of the carnal circus. And me? Tough, independent, I-can-take-care-of-myself, don't-mess-with-me Stella? Reduced to a quivering mass of desperate flesh, begging for another stroke of her whip.

I'm embarrassed and ashamed, but thinking about that part of the dream, I begin to get turned on again. Then I remember Tony, spread-eagle and oozing blood. Crucified. For whose sins? I know that Tony was hardly lily-white and pure, but all of a sudden I see him as a martyr. He was killed because of other people's lust, greed, ambition. I'm completely sure of this. I just don't know who are the truly guilty ones. Yet.

It's time to get to the bottom of all this. I'm not going to allow myself to be distracted any more. And as soon as it's daylight and a reasonable hour, I'm going to call Francesca and quit. I don't know whether she had anything to do with Tony's murder, but whether she did or not, I'm sure now of one thing. She's not healthy for me.

\* \* \* \*

The resolution soothes my body and my conscience. I fall back into sleep which is seemingly dreamless. When I wake, the May sun is pouring through the gap in the curtains. A new day. A new chance to finally free myself from the grip of this horror.

After my shower and a quick breakfast, I sit down in front of the telephone. Time to call Francesca. Despite my determination last night, now I'm feeling nervous. She will not be happy with my news, I know. She'll try to convince me to stick it out till the end of the campaign. But I've got to get away from her. Especially now that I've got the film.

She answers on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Francesca, it's Stella."

"Good morning, Stella!" She's in a good mood. Her events yesterday must have gone well. Or maybe she's still in seventh heaven because of the ABC gig. Or perhaps she's remembering yesterday's sex scene, and enjoying the fact that she has me under her thumb. "How are you? Are you coming over this

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morning? We need to lay out a publicity strategy for you to implement while I'm in New York..."

"I'm not so good. Actually, I have something to say to you. Something that you probably won't want to hear."

"Yes? What is it? You can tell me anything, Stella."

I swallow my nervousness. "Francesca, I want to resign. Right away."

There's a twenty second silence. I can imagine her face, lips pressed together in that determined way she has, eyebrows knotted up in thought. She's trying to figure out how to best handle me.

When she finally speaks, her tone is gentle. I know that it's an act, a performance intended to make me lower my guard. "I'm sorry, Stella. It's because of yesterday, isn't it? I should never have given in to temptation. I promised you that I would treat you professionally, and I broke that promise." Her voice catches, as if she's trying to hide a sob.

"It's just that—I needed you so badly. With Tony gone, I'm so alone. And you—you're so gorgeous, so completely irresistible. I just couldn't help myself. Anyway, you seemed to want me, too. Didn't you?"

I blush, even though I know that she's deliberately playing with my emotions.

"It's not just yesterday. It's everything. All the publicity, the constant feeling of being watched. I like to perform, but now I'm on stage all the time. It's just too exhausting. I feel like I'm in prison. No freedom to do what I want or be who I am." Of course she doesn't know about the attacks and the threats. Does she? I don't mention them, but I let all that fear and the tension into my voice anyway, let her hear that I'm pretty desperate.

"Stella, I need you. We've come so far together, accomplished so much. Please don't abandon me now, on the final stretch. Help me to finish the race and emerge as the victor."

"You're going to win with me or without me. You're nearly ten points ahead in the polls already. After your TV gig this week, White will never be able to catch up with you."

"But Stella..."

"I can't, Francesca. I just can't. I have a huge amount of

respect for you, and I want you to win, but I can't work for you anymore."

"Respect?" Her voice is bitter, and now, I think, her feelings are genuine. "I thought, I hoped, that you felt more for me than that."

I don't answer. What can I say? There is something more between us, but I have a definite feeling that it's not something that's good for me. Maybe not for her either.

She finally speaks again, after a long silence. "Will you do me a favor, at least? Don't make this decision public. Let people think that you're still in my camp until the election. I'll concoct some excuse to explain why you're not making appearances with me."

Should I agree? If somebody's afraid I'll learn too much by associating with her, then breaking all ties would be safer. On the other hand, keeping her happy is probably a wise move. Especially if I can do that without having to spend time with her.

"I guess I can do that. It's less than two weeks."

"Right. And of course, I can't have you going back to your old job until then, either. You understand that?"

I'm annoyed, but I realize that she's right. "Yeah, I understand."

"I'll continue to pay you."

"No, I..."

"Think of it as severance pay. Or as a bonus for having done such a good job."

"Well..."

"As long as you keep quiet about resigning, you're still on my payroll. Is it a deal?" There's a threat behind her smooth words. If I talk, I'll regret it.

"Okay. It's a deal, Francesca."

"I'm really sorry that you feel that you have to do this. That our association has to end this way. I'll be honest. It hurts."

"This isn't easy for me, either."

"Yes, I think I understand that. In any case, if you have second thoughts, please, please, let me know. I'd be really delighted to have you back. Anytime, under pretty much any circumstances."

"Thank you, Francesca. I appreciate your understanding."

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“Yes, well. I’ll miss you, Stella. But given that I care about you, I have to let you go your own way, if that’s what you think you want.”

“Thanks.”

The conversation is over, but neither of us hangs up. This feels weird, as though I was breaking up with a boyfriend.

“Goodbye, Francesca. And good luck in the election, though I don’t think you’ll need it.”

“I don’t want to believe this is goodbye, Stella. But good luck to you, as well. You deserve it.”

I’m sweating when I finally put down the phone. That was harder than I expected. But now, now I’m free! Free of her influence. Free of the burden of being a public figure. And free to discover the truth about that night at the Hyatt.

I feel curiously light as I get ready for my trip downtown. This isn’t as dangerous as Tony’s funeral, but I need to take some care that I’m not recognized. At this point, my face is going to be pretty familiar to most people in the city. I can’t do the Italian granny again; that wouldn’t make sense (and would be damned uncomfortable on this warm spring day). I decide to try the role of a nerdy college student.

The clothes are easy: worn jeans and a loose CMU tee shirt that comes down over my hips and makes me look a bit chubby. Flat-soled sandals. I part my hair in the middle, then make a single long braid that hangs down my back. No eye makeup or lipstick, of course, but I use some pale foundation to generally lighten my skin. Then with brown eyebrow pencil, I make my brows look bushier, and paint a dusting of freckles across my cheeks. Glasses are the last touch, not the wire frames that I used for the funeral, but an old pair from my high school years, before I got contacts, with heavy black plastic frames.

When I check myself out in the mirror, I have to laugh. Sexy, sophisticated Stella is nowhere to be seen. The pale makeup flattens my cheekbones. The freckles make me look more Irish than Mediterranean. The baggy clothes hide my curves. I experiment with a slumping posture that makes the illusion of plumpness even more effective.

The only problem is my vision. The glasses definitely make things a bit blurry. Of course, in the darkroom I’ll have to do

everything by feel anyway.

I get the roll of film out of its hiding place and stuff it into my jeans pocket, along with my wallet and keys. On the top shelf of my closet I discover a beat-up old backpack, another relic of my high school years. I use it to carry the photography book. I can read the book on the bus and use it to strengthen my amateur shutter bug image.

Before I leave, I peek out the front window. The street appears to be empty. Either Jimmy's men are really experts at hiding themselves, or they're totally imaginary. I decide to use the back door, anyway.

I thread my way between the rows of vegetable plants. I never did get to the summer squash. Some are brown and rotting. The new tomatoes seem to be doing well, though, and the string beans have revived into a tangle of green. Later this week, I'll clean up and finish replanting. I should have plenty of time, now that Francesca's out of the picture.

I unlatch the door in the back fence and let myself out into the alley. The spring-loaded door slams behind me. Nobody seems to be around to hear, though. I head down the narrow lane toward the cross street, backpack slung over my shoulder, reminding myself to walk like a self-conscious, overweight college kid, not like a model on a catwalk.

Tomorrow I'm supposed to see Jimmy, too. I remember his leering face in my dream, and the handcuffs. But Jimmy's not really like that. That was the stress talking, and the emotional dregs of that scene with Francesca. Jimmy's a bit of a square, an old-fashioned guy who still carries a torch for the girl he had a crush on in high school.

All of a sudden I have this intense desire to see him. Not just to see him, to touch him, to smell him, to feel his hands on my body. We've never really made love, not yet. Maybe tomorrow night we'll have the time to truly connect. Maybe by then I'll know the truth and be able to put the night Tony died behind me.

Everything is a bit out of focus. The azaleas in my neighbor's yard are surrounded by a purple halo. I try looking over the top of the eyeglass frames. The scene clears, but the strain on my eyes starts to give me a headache.

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I'm so preoccupied with trying to see what's around me, I almost run into the man coming towards me on the sidewalk. And then, I nearly lose control completely when I realize it's Jimmy. It's as though I had conjured him out of thin air.

"Oh, excuse me, miss." He barely looks at my unglamorous form. His attention is focused on my house.

"Uh, yeah, sorry, no problem," I mumble, eyes to the ground. I shuffle on, my heart pounding. Did he really not recognize me?

Halfway to the next corner, I duck behind a tree, take off the glasses, and watch him. He's at my door, ringing the bell and then peering through the glass into the hall. He waits for a while, shifting his weight from one foot to another, then presses the bell again.

What does he want? What's he doing here? He seems to think I should be at home. Does he know that I quit working for Francesca? Does he, somehow, know about the film?

He looks up and down the street, as if trying to decide what to do next. I shrink back out of sight. When I dare to check again, he's gone.

I'm torn between suspicion and delight. If Jimmy didn't see through my disguise, I should be safe from the random voter who's only seen my picture in the paper. But why was he here, today of all days? He's never shown up unannounced before. He always calls first.

I push the worried thoughts away. I need to concentrate on the matter at hand: getting these photos developed without anyone realizing what's going on.

I stop at a convenience store on the way to buy another roll of film. The book says to practice handling the film before you actually start developing. I figure I can manage at least one practice run.

The Y has been rebuilt since I last visited, years ago. It's now a big brick building that takes up half a block along Boulevard of the Allies. It's busy. Muscle-bound guys with skin the color of coffee, young mothers in tight jeans with toddlers in tow, skinny teenagers with heavy metal tee shirts and the scruffy beginnings of mustaches, all bustle through the corridors. There's still a faint smell of chlorine, just as I remember. I find

the information desk, but I have to stand in line for five minutes before I get my chance to talk to the dreadlocked clerk.

"Somebody told me you have a public darkroom. I'd like to use it, if I could."

"Just a sec. Let me check the signup sheet." He ruffles through a loose-leaf notebook till he finds the page he's looking for. "It's booked until one. Do you want to reserve it then?"

"Yeah, that would be great."

"For how long? It's free till five."

How long will this process take? I don't really have a clear idea. "Make it two hours," I guess."

"Okay, sure. If nobody else reserves, you can keep it longer. Are you Y member?"

"Not anymore."

"Non-member fee is ten dollars an hour. Pay when you're finished."

"Okay, thanks."

"Your name?"

"Uh—Kathy. Kathy Riley."

"You're all set, Kathy. The darkroom's in the basement. Just go down those stairs there and it's the first door on the left."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

Looks like I've got a couple of hours to kill. I stroll the few blocks over to Market Square, find myself a bench, and haul the photography book out of the backpack. I review all the steps of the developing process. I'm sure I have them memorized.

A tourist couple wearing matching designer sportswear wanders through the square, holding hands. A few businessmen make their way briskly across the neat cobblestones, headed for an early lunch at one of the trendy restaurants that have sprung up around the open plaza. There's jazz drifting from a cafe opposite. There's a bronze plaque, and a sign that warns against feeding the pigeons.

It's all so false. I remember when there really was a market here. Dad and I used to come down here on Saturdays and make our way through the crowded aisles, filling our baskets. I remember the stalls piled with bright vegetables and fruit, fish fresh enough to still be wiggling, homemade sausage coiled into tight spirals, meat heaped up, red and juicy, inside the glass

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cases. I remember the smells of brine and vinegar, pickled garlic and sharp, musty cheeses, the mouth-watering scent of rotisserie chicken and the greasy-sweet smell of fried dough. I remember the shrill cries and friendly smiles of the hawkers.

It's all gone now. Like so much of what was real. From out of nowhere it surges up and swallows me, that painful hollowness that my father left behind when he died. Nothing's the same anymore. The world has become shabby and empty.

I take off my glasses and look up at the sky. It's a glorious clear blue, without any hint of clouds. It looks fake, like the background of some computer game. The square is starting to get crowded as noon approaches. Everybody is slim, tanned, well-dressed, and mostly, white. Where are the grizzled workmen in patched jackets who used to hang around the market, smoking and talking for hours? Where's the frail old women who used to have the pigeons eating bread right out of her dark, gnarled hand?

In the sea of Caucasian faces I catch sight of one that is black. He's a tall, powerfully-built man wearing a Steelers jacket and a baseball cap. He is striding back and forth on the opposite side of the square. He seems to be waiting for someone, or something.

At this distance I can't see his face. But as soon as I focus in on him, I recognize Detective Bill, Jimmy's partner.

What's he doing here, anyway? It seems unlikely that he could have followed me here, but I can't believe that it's just coincidence, either. Casually, I put the book into the backpack. I wait until a pack of fashionably-dressed office girls crosses in front of me. While they block his view, I slip away and into the gloomy, familiar interior of the old bar on the corner.

The Original Oyster House hasn't changed, at least. It's still got the same scarred wooden tables, the same historic photos on the walls, the same smell of beer and tartar sauce, as when my father used to bring me here for a fish sandwich. The sandwich is now six bucks instead of fifty cents, but it feels like a bargain to find something genuine in the midst of all the false history and manufactured atmosphere.

I take a high stool near the window, where I can watch Bill as I munch on my sandwich and sip my coffee. He's stopped



pacing. Now he's standing in front of the Starbucks, smoking a cigarette. It's quarter to one; if he doesn't leave soon, I'm going to have to risk him seeing me. I can't afford to lose my time in the darkroom.

When I check again at ten to one, though, I don't see him. I put on the glasses, grab my pack, and hurry out of the bar. I choose a route back to the Y that will be as congested as possible with lunch hour pedestrians. In the crowd, I don't see any sign of Detective Bill. I hope the opposite is true as well.

The information desk is unmanned. That's fine with me. The fewer people who see me, the better. The basement is empty and dingy, with a faint smell of mold, but the darkroom is easy to find. I set the inside latch, which I know should light up the "In Use" sign outside. There's also a regular lock on the door. I push in the button. I definitely do not want to be interrupted.

In the dim yellow light, I look around me. I locate the chemicals I need, the sink, the timer, the drying cabinet. A beer bottle opener for getting into the film cassette. A pair of scissors. A thermometer. There are several developing tanks of different sizes; I find the one that matches most closely the picture in my book. The film reel is inside. I remove it and put it on the table in front of me, next to the tank and the tank cover, just like book recommends.

I take out my practice roll, put away the book, and take a deep breath. I don't turn off the light yet, but I try closing my eyes. First thing I need to do is open the cassette. This is surprisingly easy; I simply flip off the flat end like a soda bottle cap. Next I remove the roll from the cartridge. I grip the end of the film in my fingers and pull a bit out of the cassette, then cut off the end like the book said to do. Then I try threading the film into the spiraling channel of the spool.

I just can't do it with my eyes closed. I have to look, and even then it's awkward holding the strip of celluloid in exactly the same plane as the spool, so that it feeds smoothly.

I finally get the knack of it. Of course, doing it while watching my hands is quite different than doing it in the dark. But I can't wait any longer. I dig the real film, from the night at the Hyatt, out of my pocket and place it next to the tank.

I stare at the table, trying to memorize the positions of all

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the items. Then, breathing a little wordless prayer, I turn out the light.

The blackness is total. I feel like I'm blind. I suddenly doubt that I can do this. But what alternative do I have? I pause for a couple of minutes to get the feel of the dark. I can almost feel my pupils dilating, but there's not a hint of light. Guess that's good.

I grope for the film, find it, open it and cut off the end of the film, just as I did with the practice roll. Running my finger over the spool, I locate the spot where I need to feed in the film. It takes me at least ten minutes to get the end of the film into the slot. It's like trying to thread a needle with a rubber band. I get one corner in, only to have it spring out when I try to slide in the other corner. I'm swearing under my breath, worried that I'm going to use my whole two hours simply getting the film onto the reel. I fumble around, getting more and more agitated. This is just impossible.

Finally, I get the end solidly into the opening. I begin to feed the rest of the roll in after it. There's a bit of resistance, but mostly it slides smoothly, coiling around the center of the reel.

I'm just about to place the loaded reel into the developing tank when there's a knock.

"Um—sorry, somebody's in here. Can't you see the sign?"

There's no sound from outside. I stand there in the blackness, holding my breath, the fragile film in my hand.

Somebody rattles the doorknob.

"Go away! The room's in use." I couldn't possibly have used up my whole two hours. The knob shakes again. I'm grateful that I locked the door.

Whoever is out there begins pounding rhythmically on the metal door. The sound is dull and hollow. Bang, bang, bang. Slow and nerve-wracking.

"Go away! Leave me alone! Damn you, stop it!" I'm getting more and more upset. I almost drop the loaded film reel on the floor. That would be a disaster.

I breathe deeply, trying to calm down. The banging stops, starts again, stops. I'm suddenly sure that is somebody, somehow, knows what I'm doing and wants me to mess it up.

It's not going to happen. Carefully, I insert the film reel into the tank. Then I screw on the cover, and make sure that it's tight.

Okay. Time to turn on the safe light.  
The yellowish glow seems incredibly bright.  
I breathe a sigh of relief.

The rest of the process goes smoothly. My mind is amazingly clear. I pour in the developer after checking its temperature, turn the tank over, and slosh it around for six minutes, which is what the book specifies for this kind of film. After pouring out the developer, I add the stop bath, and then the fixative. The book says to let the film sit in cold running water for five minutes, but I'm beginning to feel antsy and cut it short a bit. There's no more sounds from outside, but who knows whether somebody's out there waiting for me?

Two more minutes for the "Hypo Eliminator," and the negatives are ready for the drying cabinet. I take a quick look as I cut the roll into strips. There are definitely pictures there, though it's too dark for me to see the details. I'm surprised to see that although the film was 35mm, the pictures seem to be smaller, with two shots to each frame.

The fifteen minutes for drying the negatives seems to last forever. I try to keep busy, pouring out all the chemicals, cleaning the tank, and generally putting everything back where I found it. There's still ten minutes to go. I'm tempted to unlock the door and peek outside, but I control the urge. Until the negatives are done and put away in my pack, I can't take any risks.

At last the time is up. I slide the negatives into the cellophane carriers I discovered in one of the drawers. Then I store the carriers inside the photo book.

It's over. I've done it. The key to the mystery of Tony Pinelli's death is in my hands.

First, though I need to get out of here without being seen. I undo the latch. Though I know this will tip off any watcher that I'm about to come out, the door won't open with the latch set. I listen carefully, but everything is quiet.

I open the door a crack and look out. Same empty corridor. Same moldy smell. Of course, somebody could be waiting behind the door. I push it open with all my force, slamming it against the corridor wall.

Nope. Nobody there.

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I put on the unsexy glasses and slouch upstairs. The information counter is still unoccupied, which strikes me as strange. I tear an empty sheet from the notebook, wrap it around a twenty dollar bill, and scribble "From Kathy Riley" on it. I leave it stuck inside the notebook front cover.

I'm stuck on the bus during rush hour. I don't get home until nearly four-thirty. I'm eager to check out the pictures, but I'm also a bit nervous. I wash the makeup off my face, unbraid and brush my hair, take a pair of aspirin to combat the headache from the old glasses. I change out of the hot jeans into a loose skirt and a peasant blouse. Finally, I sit down at my desk with a glass of orange juice, a magnifying glass, and the negatives.

As I noticed in the darkroom, each picture takes up only half a frame. Apparently this is a way to get more pictures from a single roll. I remember that the film canister said thirty-six exposures, but there are clearly more than that many pictures here.

The camera is focused on the sitting area of the hotel room. The first two shots show Tony alone, with a drink on the coffee table. In the third and following pictures, though, he's joined by several other men. One of them is Don Julio.

So I was right. There is some mob connection here. I scan the pictures one by one, holding them up to the light and using the magnifier.

Tony and Don Julio are discussing something. Both of them are Italian; they talk with their hands. Don Julio seems agitated. Then there's a briefcase on the coffee table. In the next shot, the briefcase is open. It's filled with cash.

The pictures have a stop-motion quality, like stills extracted from a movie. Each one advances the action a bit. In some of them, the characters have their backs to the camera. I wonder why the photographer would have chosen that particular moment to take a picture.

Then it hits me. There is no photographer. These pictures were taken using some kind of timer that automatically opened the shutter every couple of minutes.

But if there's no photographer, what about Mr. Clean? He was in the room with the camera, certainly.

Almost as if in answer to my mental question, the pictures

change. Don Julio and his henchmen are gone. So is the money. Instead, there's Tony and Mr. Clean, clearly involved in some kind of intense conversation.

Henderson's got his back to the camera. I can't see his face. But Tony looks worried, and strangely, sympathetic.

All at once, Mr. Clean is on his knees in front of Tony. I can see quite clearly what he's doing. He's trying to unzip Tony's fly.

In the next frame, Mr. Clean is sprawled on the floor, on his back. His normally composed face is a mask of anger and hurt. Tony towers over him, not exactly threatening, but obviously rejecting his advances.

Mr. Clean was gay? Where did that fit in? I'm really confused, and I'm only two thirds of the way through the pictures.

Something attracts my attention, some slight noise from downstairs. I listen closely but don't hear anything more. Maybe I should get up and investigate. But first I want to skim the rest of the photos.

Mr. Clean slinks away. Tony settles back on the sofa, waiting for something. For me, of course. There's no shots of my arrival or of my dancing. I was out of the camera's line of sight. The camera shows only Tony, smiling appreciatively at my performance.

Soon, though, there is picture that shows me from behind, totally naked, climbing on to Tony's lap. And then there are last half a dozen shots on the roll, which simultaneously make me blush, and bring tears to my eyes. The pictures bring it all back, the sweet connection between Tony and me, the excitement and then the horror.

There are no photos of the actual murder. I don't need them. That scene loops in my mind, again and again, more vivid and bloodier each time.

I want it to stop. I can't take any more.

There's a flash of light and an explosion of pain at the back of my skull.

And everything stops.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### *Conflagration*

Light, hazy, and wavering. And pain. The brighter the light becomes, the harder it becomes to ignore the throbbing at the back of my skull. Everything is blurry. I think my eyes are open, but I can't tell for sure. I'm in the middle of a cloud of pain.

I try to reach up and touch my head where it hurts the most. I can't move my arms or my legs. Another bondage dream? There's nothing the least bit sexy about this, though. My ankles are strapped together, maybe with tape. My wrists, too. My arms are fastened behind my back, behind the back of the chair I'm sitting on. I can feel the strain in my shoulders.

The air is damp and smells of sawdust and mouse turds. Where am I? Slowly, trying to be gentle, I turn my head to the left. Pain flashes through my skull, blinding me for a minute. When my vision clears again, I see a bare concrete wall.

And to the right? This time I'm even more careful, and the pain's a bit less overwhelming. The view to the right is more informative.

I'm in the basement, in my dad's woodworking shop. On the right wall, his tools hang neatly, ready and waiting for him to come back and take up another project. The chisels and mallets and screwdrivers, the drill press and the band saw, everything's right where he left it.

I fight against the tears that blur my vision again. I need to stay in control of myself. Because I'm not alone here.

There are two people over by the workbench. They've taken down the fluorescent shop light and laid it on the bench. The sickly glow shining up on their faces makes them look like ghosts. I still can't see all that well—maybe my contacts popped out when I was hit—but it's easy to recognize the dark, broad features of Detective Bill.

I catch my breath. His companion is Francesca.

"He loved me," she complains. "He swore that he loved me. We were going to leave this filthy city after the divorce, move to San Francisco or maybe even Europe."

Bill snickers. "Yeah, well, it looks like you weren't the only person he loved. Course, I'm not sure I'd call that love."

"Do you think that he and Tony ever...?" She sounds disgusted. The irony would make me laugh if my head wasn't throbbing so badly.

"Don't know. I'd say Tony cut him off pretty quick this time, though."

Francesca stares at the photos again. "If Andy loved Tony, why did he shoot him?"

"Revenge? Jealousy? Maybe he didn't like seeing Tony with the slut you set him up with."

"Hey!" My voice creates little ripples of agony in my head, but I can't keep quiet.

"Ah, the slut is awake." He looms over me, his mouth twisted into a nasty grin. "Tenderhearted Francesca didn't want me to tape up those big, juicy lips of yours. I've got the roll right here, though. If you know what's good for you, you'll shut up."

I swallow my anger. It won't help at the moment. "Francesca. I can't believe you'd do this to me."

She shakes her head sadly. "I had no choice. I had to have the photos. You could do too much damage with them."

"But you knew you could trust me..."

"Did I? You had just resigned. Maybe that was because you were planning to expose me to the press."

It's no use protesting. "How did you know about the pictures, anyway?"

"Officer Dougherty came and offered me his services the day after the killings. I thought that it might be useful to have someone from the police on my side. He's had his eye on you ever since."

I glare at the detective. So much for my clever disguise. His grin just grows broader. "What about Jimmy? Was he in on this?"

"Jimmy? He's just an honest slob who's too stupid to see what's in front of him. He was working the Hyatt with me that

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night, shadowing the Don, but he never really figured out what was going on.”

So Jimmy did lie to me. I slump back in my chair.

Jimmy lied. Francesca had me followed and attacked. Probably she was responsible for the break-in, the threats, the broken window. My mangled garden. I close my eyes, exhausted, defeated. My instincts were right. I should have taken Don Julio’s money and gotten away while I could.

“What about the Don, though?” Francesca seems to have read my mind, but she’s talking to herself. “The setup with Stella was my idea. Those pictures would have looked good in court. But what about the earlier shots? Tony swore to me that he was finished with the mob, that he wanted his campaign to be clean. That he didn’t want to be beholden to anyone.”

There’s a creak from the door at the top of the stairs.

“Who’s there?” Francesca is alarmed, but Bill doesn’t seem surprised in the least as heavy footsteps clump down the old wooden treads and Graham White’s pink face comes into view. I feel nauseous at the sight of him.

“Just me, Francesca. Thought I’d come join your little party. I heard that you had some rather titillating photographs. I wanted to evaluate whether they might be useful. Or dangerous.”

“How...?” Francesca already knows the answer to her unspoken question, though. She backs away from Bill and White, even as the detective takes a step toward her.

“You’ve heard of the highest bidder, my dear. You of all people know that everyone has his price.” He nods and Bill grabs Francesca, whipping her slight body around and pinning her arms behind her.

“You double-dealing snake!” Francesca struggles, but the burly cop has her in a tight grip. White drags over another chair and Bill forces her down onto the seat, then keeps her wrists together while White calmly wraps them in layers of duct tape. She tries to stand up. Bill grabs her thighs and pushes her back down.

“Let me go, you slimy bastard!” Bill slaps her face, twice. She sinks down in the chair, subdued for the moment. Bill keeps hold of her legs to prevent her from kicking while White binds her ankles.



“Yes, everyone can be bought. Even your Andy Henderson.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Andy set up that little meeting between Tony and Julio Orestino, on my request. And arranged to have it captured for posterity.”

“What? Why?”

“I knew Tony would refuse the money. But I also knew that any evidence of Tony’s connection with the mob would hurt his campaign. Andy agreed to help me get that evidence. In return for a generous reward, of course.”

White strolls over to the workbench and pockets the negatives. He circles around our chairs, looking satisfied. “Tony was the only person I wasn’t able to buy.”

He stops in front of me, leering. “Actually, I never did find Ms. Xanathakeos’ price, either. Kind of unusual, for a whore.”

Fury blazes up in me, wiping out the pain and the despair. “You know very well I’m not a whore, White.”

“Do I?” He leans forward, grabs the neck of my blouse, and tears it open down the front. His eyes roam over my breasts, barely hidden by the fabric of my bra. He licks his fleshy lips. “You certainly look like one to me.”

Looming over me, he reaches down and tweaks one of the nipples protruding through the satin. I try to twist away. Pain arcs through my head. My shoulders scream in protest.

“Doesn’t she look like a whore, Bill? All tied up, and her tits are still swollen with lust. I’ll bet that her cunt is sopping wet. She’s the kind who likes it rough.”

White moves to lift up my skirt. “Don’t touch me, you creep!” I swing my legs up and catch him in the groin. It’s a glancing blow, but enough to make him grab his crotch and shout.

“You bitch!” His face is flaming red, but his eyes are ice. “I’ll do anything I damn well please to you, cunt.” He unzips his fly. I’m shocked to see that he’s fully erect. The shaft of his cock is paste-pale, but the knob is an angry purple. “Come here, Dougherty, and hold her down. Open your mouth, slut, and take what’s coming to you.”

“There’s no way I’m going to suck your disgusting little

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prick.” The head bobs a few inches from my face. His flesh stinks of some fancy cologne.

“Leave her alone, White. She’s got nothing to do with all this.” I’m surprised to hear Francesca pleading on my behalf.

White ignores her. He grabs my head with one hand and his rod with the other and tries to force it between my lips. I twist my face away. He slaps me so hard my teeth rattle. The swelling at the back of my head blossoms into new agony.

“Bill, get your ass over here so I can teach this slut a lesson.” He’s panting, as much with anger as lust.

“Boss, I don’t think we have time for that. We’ve got the pictures. I think we should get going.”

White grabs his cock with both hands and begins to work it roughly. “At least I’m going to splatter my come all over her face.”

“Really, I don’t think that’s a good idea. We don’t want anyone to link you up with them. DNA testing...”

“Oh, please, Dougherty! But, I suppose I shouldn’t waste my energy on this worthless creature.” He stuffs his still-swollen prick back into his pants. I release the breath I hadn’t realized I had been holding. “Let’s finish this thing and get out of here.”

“You won’t get away with this, White. Somebody will find us. And don’t think I’ll hesitate to talk, even if I have to admit some unsavory facts about my own involvement.”

Graham White smiles at Francesca. Bill is rummaging around under the stairs. “By the time anyone finds you, Francesca, you’ll be nothing but charred cinders.” Bill emerges with a gallon metal can and Dad’s rag bag. He starts pulling pieces of cloth from the bag and piling them up at the foot of the stairways. When he opens the can, the astringent odor of turpentine fills the close basement.

“No! You can’t...!”

“Who’s going to stop me, Stella?” I wriggle around in my chair, trying to loosen my bonds. The chair wobbles a bit, but the tape simply seems to grip me tighter.

“You want to have murder on your conscience? Two murders?”

“Not particularly. But if that’s what it takes for me to become mayor, so be it.”

“What?” Francesca yells. “You’re crazy, White! Look, you don’t have to do this. Let us go and I’ll bow out of the campaign. I’ll make up some scandal. I’ll let the world know that Stella and I are lovers. That should do the trick, don’t you think?”

“Francesca, you continue to amaze me.”

“Come on, Graham. You can’t get away with this.”

“There’s where you’re wrong, my dear. Everybody knows these old row houses are fire traps. Nobody in his right mind would keep oily rags and turpentine in one of these basements. Spontaneous combustion, you know...”

He and Bill are part way up the stairs. The fumes from the paint thinner are already choking me.

“White!” I call desperately. “Let us go. If you take off the tape, I’ll fuck you.”

“Too late, slut,” he laughs. He lights a match and watches the dancing flame for a moment, then drops it onto the heaped-up rags below. “Too late.” The turpentine-soaked rags catch with a roar as White and his henchman disappear up the stairs.

“Leave the door open,” I hear White say. “The air will feed the fire.”

“Oh shit,” moans Francesca. “Shit, shit shit. Stella, I’m so, so sorry.”

The fire is rapidly consuming the rags, but so far the stairs don’t seem to be burning. Maybe it will burn itself out. I experiment with some more wiggling around. The old kitchen chair is pretty rickety. I remember Dad brought the whole set down here to tighten up and reglue the joints. Before he got sick. He never did get around to it. Like so many other things.

I try to stand, but there’s a rope that goes around both my waist and the chair back. I rock myself from side to side. The chair sways under me like it was made of rubber. I speed up the rhythm, swinging from side to side like a human pendulum. The wood creaks in protest.

“What are you doing, Stella?”

I don’t bother to answer. I’m concentrating on the feel of the furniture against my body, trying to figure out the points of weakness. Sweat pours down my forehead. The air in the cellar is already hot enough to sear my lungs. I rest for a minute and glance over at the stairs.

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The fire has climbed halfway up the stairs to the first floor.

Using all the force I can gather, I throw the full weight of my body to the right. The chair teeters for a moment on two legs, then topples over, carrying me with it. There's a cracking sound. I hope that it's not my bones. Pain, reawakened by the impact, explodes in my head. Briefly, everything is dark. The flames dancing inside my eyelids bring me back.

"Are you all right, Stella?"

I experiment with moving my arms. Just as I hoped, the crash tore the back of the chair loose from the seat. "Better than all right. I managed to smash the chair. I can move around, at least a bit."

I untangle myself from the wreckage of the chair back. With my ankles taped together, I can't walk, or even get myself to a standing position. I wriggle my way across the floor like an inchworm, headed for the workbench, and the tools.

The fire is eating its way through the boxes of scrap lumber my dad kept next to the bench. I try to keep to the other end, but the odd flame still licks out at my bare arms and legs. The foul smell of burning hair fills my nostrils. Fortunately, there's still not much smoke.

"Look out, Stella! The shelves...!"

I look up. The framework for the rack that holds the heavier tools is steel, but the shelves themselves are plywood, and they're on fire. I work my way past them as quickly as I can, scraping my knuckles and knees on the cement floor. Finally, I reach my goal: the corner of the workbench where my dad bolted his band saw.

And realize that there's no way I can reach it. With my ankles trussed together and my wrists attached behind my back, my freedom of movement is terribly limited. I can sit up; I can pull my legs up underneath my butt on one side, but without the help of my hands, I can't even make it to a kneeling position. I try lying on my back, raising my hips and pulling my knees to my chest, to see if I can bring my arms under my hips to the front. With all the flexibility that comes from my dancing, I still can't make it work. My arms are just too short.

I slump down on the floor, defeated. There's a crash from the left and then the clatter of metal on concrete. One of the

shelves has collapsed, releasing a blast of heat that singes my eyebrows and eyelashes. Even my tears are scalding.

“Stella!” The roar of the fire is deafening now, but somehow Francesca’s voice reaches me. “The workbench frame—it’s steel, isn’t it? Why not try that?”

I understand what she’s saying, but I’m too exhausted and depressed to move.

“Come on, Stella. Give it a try.” Damn that Francesca, why can’t she just leave me in peace? I work my way up to a sitting position, with my back to the bench. My arms bump the leg of the bench. I move them to the right, searching for one of the steel struts.

No luck, at first. I try raising my arms higher, despite the pain in my shoulders. Yes! The diagonal length of steel is almost too hot to touch. I squirm around until the edge of the strut is against the duct tape. Then I begin to saw back and forth, rubbing the tape against the metal.

It seems to take forever. Once or twice my hands slip. Wearily, I move them back into position and continue the sawing movement. I feel a loosening. Perhaps I’ve worked through the outer layer of tape. But there are still several layers to go.

The smoke thickens. I’m seized by a fit of coughing. The force jerks my wrists apart. And miraculously, the tape gives way.

With my hands free, I can pull myself to a standing position. Sparks rain down on my head. Through the haze, I see that the ceiling beams are burning now.

I grab a pair of tin shears from the pegboard behind the bench. They’re so hot they blister my fingers. I drop the shears, grab a rag, pick them up again using the rag to protect my hands. It takes only seconds for me to cut through the bonds on my ankles. Little islands of fire are scattered over the floor. I pick my way among them, headed for Francesca.

She’s slumped in her chair, unconscious. I slice through her restraints. She moans.

“Hang on, Francesca.” Her body seems light and fragile. I lift her easily and prop her against my body. Her patchouli fragrance is noticeable even with all the smoke. She stirs and moans again.

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“We’re free,” I tell her, holding her against me. When I look around, though, I realize how foolish a statement that is. The stairs have become a solid wall of flame. There’s no other exit, only a little window near the ceiling, to the right of the workbench. Even if we could get up there, I’m not sure we’d fit through.

It’s a moot point, though. Piled against the wall there, underneath the window, are the old kitchen table and the rest of the chairs. Made of bone-dry wood and varnish, and blazing like some scene from hell.

“Stella...” Francesca’s awake again, but she looks groggy. “It’s over, isn’t it?”

I’m still not willing to completely give up hope. “Shh, don’t talk. Save your strength.”

She holds my gaze for a long moment. She is naked to me. Emotions flicker across her face. Fear. Shame. Sadness. Resignation. And finally, incredibly, desire. Her eyes become unfocused. Her mouth goes slack. She pulls me to her, kissing me fiercely.

I don’t fight her. What would be the point? My own body ignites. My lungs are parched; my lips are cracked; my mouth is desert-dry, but still I return her kiss as well as I can.

A ceiling beam collapses to the floor with a deafening crash.

Sparks rise and swirl around our joined bodies like a swarm of stars.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

### *Retribution*

I don't know how long the kiss lasts. It seems like forever. I'm woozy from the smoke and fumes. I can't think straight. I can't think at all. All I can do is cling to Francesca as the heat smashes into us in blistering waves.

We'll die together. Just like Tony and Mr. Clean. It's no comfort to me. I briefly wonder if this is some kind of punishment for our lust.

I try to pray, try to fill my mind with images of the church from my childhood. I try to imagine that the reek of the burning wood and the echoes of Francesca's perfume are the sweet, heavy scent of patriarch's incense. Our Father, I begin. Then I remember my own father, wonder whether there's any truth to the notion that we meet after death.

I'm too confused to concentrate. Thoughts and images drift around in my mind like smoke.

Francesca's lips slide away from mine. She slumps against me, unconscious again. I don't have the strength to hold her anymore. We sink together into a heap on the floor. My eyes close, but I can't shut out the orange glow.

I smell burning cloth. I force my lids open. A tendril of flame has reached us. My skirt is smoldering.

I don't have the energy to do anything but wait.

All at once there's a shattering of glass, sharp against the dull roar of the fire. Damn, another brick through my window. Another threat. I'm confused, struggling back toward awareness.

"Stella! Stella, are you there?" The voice of a woman. I should recognize it. I shake my head, trying to clear the haze.

"Stella, it's Letty! Wake up! Come on!"

I can't see anything through the smoke, but I feel the cool air rushing in through the smashed window. It revives me

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somewhat.

“Letty! We’re here. Me and Francesca.”

“Come on then. Find something to climb on. I’ll help you out.”

“Can’t. Everything’s on fire over near the window.” I try to think. Dad used to have a fire extinguisher here. Where did he keep it?

On the rack near the stairs. No help there; the fallen ceiling beam is a fence of flame blocking that part of the cellar. I search the room, seeking some kind of inspiration. Boxes of old books. Furniture to be repaired. Woodworking and gardening tools.

Gardening! I move as close to the window as I can and shout to be heard above the fire. “Letty! There’s a hose, near my garden. The spigot’s near the back door.”

“Just a sec.” I realize my skirt is still burning. Frantically, I tear it off. “Got it,” yells Letty. Sure enough, through the smoke, I see the dark shape of the hose snaking down through the window.

“Stop! No more. Now turn it on.”

Letty opens the tap full blast. The burning furniture under the window hisses and spits as the water hits it. A cloud of steam expands out, scalding me. I back away, toward Francesca, trying to rouse her.

“Hey, wake up. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Stella...?” She’s groggy and unsteady when I get her to her feet, but she’s basically okay.

At first the water seems to have little effect on the blaze under the window. The flames die down briefly, then surge up again. Gradually, though, as the wood gets completely soaked, the pile becomes a smoldering, smoking pile of embers. Finally, Letty turns off the flow.

“Okay, Stella, come on. You don’t have much time.” Another ceiling beam gives way and disintegrates as it falls. Droplets of fire spatter on my face and hands.

We still need something to get us up to the level of the window. The bottom of the chair I was bound to is still intact. I don’t know if it will hold our weight, but it will have to do.

I clear a space in the rubble under the window, scrabbling at the charred wood with my bare hands, ignoring the blistering



pain. Hope is blazing in me, hotter than the still-glowing embers. I settle the rickety chair bottom in the spot I cleared, then go to get Francesca.

"Come on. Up you go." I half drag, half push her up onto the chair. "Letty, grab her arms." The window's almost three feet wide, but barely two high. Still, Francesca's slender, and Letty is strong. Together, we hoist her up and out without too much trouble.

I'm much bigger, though. And there's nobody behind me to push. I don't need to give Leticia instructions. I raise both arms and she locks on to me, grasping my wrists while I hold hers. I've only got one chance. "Pull!" I yell, and try to jump.

The force wrenches my shoulders. The chair collapses behind me. For a moment, I'm dangling against the concrete wall, flames licking at my feet. Letty pulls again, dragging my shoulders and chest through the narrow space.

Fragments of glass embedded in the frame shred my skin. But worse, my breasts are in the way, by far the broadest part of my upper body.

"Stella, push!"

"I'm stuck." I kick and squirm, trying to worm my way through the opening. "Try pulling again."

"I don't want to hurt you."

I can feel the soles of my feet roasting and peeling as the fire chases me out. "Never mind. Pull, as hard as you can."

She takes me at my word. With one powerful jerk, she drags me through, and out. The jagged remnants of the window slice through my flesh, leaving trails of blood on my arms, my breasts, my thighs. My shoulder joints scream, strained to the point of dislocation. Rough wood scrapes against my blisters, tearing them open to expose the rawness underneath.

I lie on the concrete path, gasping. Fresh air races into my lungs, icy-cold after the searing atmosphere in the cellar. Blackness wells up. I don't fight it. I need a hit of oblivion.

Letty's shaking me, trying to rouse me. "We've got to get out of here. The house might collapse any time. Can you walk?"

I can, barely. She leads me through the back gate, down the alley, and across the street, and sits me down on my neighbor's lawn. "I'll go call 911. You stay here and rest."

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Francesca's curled up on her side under a tree. I crawl over and lay my sooty hand on her face. Her eyes flutter open. They're blank for a moment. Then she clutches painfully at my shredded flesh.

"Stella?"

"It's all right, Francesca. We're free. We're safe."

"Free?" She looks as though she doesn't understand the meaning of the word.

I'm almost naked, my burned skirt discarded, my blouse, already torn by White, now in tatters from my trip through the window. White. Damn that bastard. I'll get even with him, if I die doing it.

Letty returns with a couple of blankets. I realize that I'm shivering so hard my teeth are chattering. She drapes one around me, then gives me a squeeze, awakening echoes of pain. "They're on their way."

We sit together, her arm around my shoulder, watching my home burn. The whole place is on fire now. Flames shoot out from the windows of my bedroom and my father's room. Flames writhe like snakes around the gaping hole where the front door used to be. The roof caves in suddenly, raising a pillar of sparks that climbs high into the night sky. It's agony to watch my life and my past being consumed, minute by minute, but somehow I can't look away.

There's a crowd on the lawn now. Old Mr. Molinescu, my neighbor on the left, is wringing his hands. "Where's the fire department? My house could catch any minute!"

Sirens wail in the distance, answering him. A fire truck lumbers round the corner and screeches to a halt in front of the burning building. Firemen spill out like ants. In less than thirty seconds they have two pressure hoses trained on the blaze.

A handsome, middle-aged guy in full emergency gear clumps over to us. "Anyone inside?"

"Not anymore." My voice is hoarse from all the smoke I inhaled. The fireman looks me over, noting, no doubt, all the cuts, scrapes and burns. He's slightly embarrassed by my state of undress.

"You're hurt, miss. Let me get you to the hospital."

"Not yet. But you should take her. I think she's worse off

than me.” Francesca’s still unconscious. I worry, suddenly, that she’ll suffer some kind of permanent damage.

Oh, yes, White is going to have to pay.

Once the firemen arrive, it’s over surprisingly quickly. The bright, blazing frame slumps and collapses into a heap of sodden black rubble. Neither of my neighbors’ houses is damaged. I’m grateful for that. But my house, the house I grew up in, the house where I planned to someday bring up my children, is gone.

The spectators have drifted away. The firefighters have taken care of Francesca. There’s only me and Letty left on the lawn, staring at the smoldering remains of my life. I’m completely exhausted, ready to collapse. But the flames of anger won’t let me rest.

“It was your father who did this.”

“I know. I sneaked back into the house for some of my things, and heard his phone conversation with that cop. That’s how I knew you were here.”

“He’s going to pay. I’m going to make him pay.”

Letty gives me a strange smile. “Listen.”

I hear sirens again, a few blocks away. Against the horizon I notice the blue flashes of a police strobe. I’m puzzled.

“What?”

“It’s my father’s car. I cut his brake lines, while he was downstairs with you and Francesca. Both the primary lines and the backup.”

I realize that the lights are coming from the busy intersection at Forbes. “Letty!”

“He deserves it. Whatever happens to him. I’m hoping he’s dead. Although lifetime paralysis would be good, too.”

“How can you...?”

“Come on, you of all people know how evil he is. Evil deserves to be punished.”

“Still, if anyone finds out...”

“My father has many enemies. Nobody will suspect me. Even he wouldn’t believe that I’d dare to fight back.” Letty spits on the ground in disgust. “Not even after all the obscenely evil things he did to me.”

I should feel shocked. I should feel sympathetic. Perhaps I should have a sense of satisfaction in having been avenged. All I

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feel, though, is sore, and sad, and very, very tired.

“You need to get to the hospital.”

“And you?”

“I’m out of here. Off to California.” Before I realize what’s happening her lips are on mine. Her kiss is sweet and energetic and manages to wake some flicker of desire even in my ravaged body.

It’s over too soon.

“Take care of yourself, Stella. And don’t let the bastards wear you down.”

She slips off into the night, gone before I realize.

I sit there for a while longer, dazed, huddled in my blanket, staring at the hole where my home used to be. The moon rises, ripe and golden, full of empty promises.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### *Encore*

After the fire, I went back to work at the Peacock. What else was I going to do? Make minimum wage waitressing, or do checkout at Giant Eagle? I needed the money. All my clothes, all my possessions, everything was gone. Including the cash from Don Julio, stashed away safely in my desk.

Everything had been taken from me. The family photos, my notebooks of poems from high school, the gold locket my mother gave me on my first communion. All gone up in smoke.

The first week or so wasn't too bad. I was dazed and hurt. They kept me in the hospital overnight. I didn't have the patience to stay longer. There was so much to do: new license, credit card, and checkbook; filling out forms for the insurance company; a trip to Wal-Mart for a few pairs of jeans and a couple of changes of underwear. Talking to the police.

I didn't tell them anything about anything, not about the photos or the attack or the double-crosses. Why bother? I didn't know if I could trust them, and anyway, what was the point? I just let them believe that the fire was accidental. What was it that White had said? Spontaneous combustion.

Mary Ellen urged me to come stay with her and her sister's family in Highland Park, but I couldn't stand being around all those people. All their cheerfulness and unspoken pity. My homeowner's insurance covered emergency accommodation. I checked in to the Hi-Lo Motel in the meat-packing district. It was shabby but clean, and cheap enough that I could stay there for a while.

Once the immediate stuff was dealt with, the situation hit me like a load of bricks. For eight days, I sat on the sagging motel bed in a tee shirt and panties and stared at the TV, seeing nothing. I lived on tonic and cheese puffs from the vending

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machines down the hall. I hardly slept. I didn't look at the newspapers. I didn't shower, or change my clothes, or wash my hair. All I did was replay those last fiery hours, trying to understand if there was some way I could have stopped things. Could have changed my fate.

Eventually I understood that I was making myself crazy. By then, my bruises and cuts were pretty much healed. I cleaned myself up, put on some makeup, and went to see Joey.

"You sure you're ready to come back?" He looked me over critically. "Audience doesn't like a stripper that looks like she's been beat up."

"I'm okay. I wasn't really hurt bad. At least, not physically."

"Yeah, well, I understand. Really bad luck, having your house go up like that. I heard the mayor was in the fire, too."

"Yeah, actually, she was worse off than me." I hadn't seen Francesca since that night. I read later that she had been unconscious for nearly two days. Smoke inhalation, they said. When she finally woke up, though, she seemed to be fine.

"We were, um,—working on a speech—when the fire started. We didn't realize the place was burning until it was almost too late."

"People have been talking about the Candidate's Curse, you know? First Tony Pinelli is shot. Then Graham White's killed in a freak car accident. Then Mrs. Pinelli is nearly roasted alive..."

"Well, she's not a candidate anymore, she's the mayor." With no opponent, Francesca had of course won the election. I didn't want to talk about her. "So, can I have my job back?"

"Of course, Stella, if that's what you want. When do you want to start?"

"Tonight, if that's okay."

"Sure thing. See you tonight."

"Good. My costumes are still here, right?"

"Exactly where you left them. Good thing you didn't have them at home."

I knew Joey was right, but I wasn't really in the mood to feel grateful.

"Yeah. Great. I'll be here usual time."

Joey's irregular features twisted into a smile. "I'm looking

forward to it, Stella. We've missed you."

I turned away, unable to say anything. I didn't want to burst into tears in front of Joey.

"By the way, Stella," he called after me. "In the election? I heard that you got a couple of hundred write-in votes."

In the old days, I would've laughed.

So I went back to stripping, five nights a week. The girls took up a collection and surprised me with a check for two thousand bucks. Ginger insisted on taking me shopping.

I wanted to refuse it all, wanted to tear up the check, run back to my dingy motel and hide. I couldn't though. I could see how much it would hurt them. I let my dark, voluptuous friend shepherd me around Macy's, picking out slacks and suits, silk blouses and a cocktail dress of sky-blue satin. She certainly knew my taste. I had to pretend to be excited and grateful. Ginger's sharp, though. I'm pretty sure she knew my cheer was artificial.

It's been more than a month now. I've got a studio apartment in one of those modern high rises on Forbes Ave. Fourteenth floor. No history, no neighborhood, no associations. It's small, but then these days I don't need much space. It does have a little balcony. On clear days, I can see the tops of the trees in Schenley Park.

Last week, the insurance company gave me a check for \$350,000. I was kind of stunned. I always thought of the house as security but I never realized it was worth so much.

For now, I just put the money in the bank. I don't want another house. I don't want anything, at least not anything that I can actually have.

My phone here is unlisted, but that doesn't seem to stop people from bothering me. In this town, any private information is available, for a price, and it seems that I'm still news. Two tabloids called me, both looking for exclusives on the mayor's "secret life". A local woman's magazine wants to do a feature on the lives of exotic dancers. Finally I just stopped answering the telephone. When it rings, I shut myself in the bathroom until they give up.

It's about four in the afternoon. I'm sitting outside, looking out at the park. Trying not to think. Pretty soon I'll have to head

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over to the Peacock. The thought makes me tired. I'm still a damned good stripper, but these days, it's just a job.

The doorbell buzzes. I ignore it. I'm not at home. The noise continues, though, and I'm curious to see who is so persistent. I do kind of wonder how my caller managed to get through security. Usually the guard will call first to get my okay before letting anyone come up.

I grab my umbrella from the rack as I go to the door. I've learned my lesson. I don't undo the chain.

Francesca Pinelli stands on the threshold. That explains the mystery of the guard. She's as elegant as usual, wearing a dress of beige and auburn silk, gold in her earlobes and at her throat. She tries, halfway successfully, to smile. I can see the effort she's putting into that smile.

"Hello, Stella. Can I come in?"

All the old feelings pour back in a jumble, attraction and suspicion at war inside me.

"I don't know—I don't think..."

"Please, Stella. I need to talk to you. I've called and called, but you never pick up. Please, just give me five minutes."

I should tell her to go away. But I've never been any good at refusing her. I unchain the door. The apartment seems much smaller once she's inside.

She looks around her, evaluating my new place. To her credit, she doesn't try to make any small talk. She's given up any attempt at a smile. Her face shows seemingly real distress.

"I've come to tell you how terribly sorry I am, Stella. It's all my fault. If I only had trusted you more. Or trusted the others less. I always thought that I could was a good judge of character, but obviously I was terribly, fatally, wrong."

I'm silent, waiting to hear more. I'm amazed to realize that I pity her.

"Look, I know that there's no way I can make it up to you. I know you've lost your home, the place you grew up, all your memories." She understands this? Or is she just talking? "There's no possible way any of that can be replaced. Still, I'd like to do something, offer you some kind of compensation." She extracts a checkbook from her purse.

"No!" My exclamation stops her short. "Francesca, the



money doesn't mean anything. You should know that by now. You can't buy my silence. Or my happiness."

Anger sparkles in her hazel eyes, before she suppresses it. "I'm not trying to do either. But clearly your financial circumstances aren't good." She gestures around her.

I straighten my shoulders and stand taller. She seems to shrink in front of me. "I'm fine. I've got a job. And I've got \$350,000 in the bank. I don't need you or your money."

"But I need you, Stella. I need you to forgive me."

"I forgive you," I tell her dully. "You didn't mean to hurt me. You were in the grip of emotions that even you couldn't control. You thought that you were the boss lady, the one making all the plans, calling all the shots. But you were wrong."

"True," she says softly. I notice that there's a crimson scar on her forehead, that's she's tried to cover with a lock of hair. "Very true." She squeezes her eyes closed. Is she fighting tears? There's a liquid shine in her gaze when she looks at me again. "I was wrong about so many things. Things are clearer now. I know what I really want." She raises her face to mine, lets me see the naked pleading in her expression.

"Come back, Stella. Come back to work for me. Come back to be with me."

I can't keep the bitterness out of my laugh. "So you can turn me into your pet? Your exotic slave girl crazy with lust, begging for your touch?" Hysteria edges into my voice.

"What are you talking about? It's you who drives me crazy. Look."

Before I can stop her, she has pulled her dress over her head and tossed it on the floor. Underneath, she's naked. Her usually pale skin is flushed. Her nipples are puckered red buds, tempting my tongue. She grabs my hand and forces it into the damp cleft between her thighs. "See? See what you do to me?"

She's incredibly hot and slippery. Her muskiness floods the small room. I let my fingers play inside her for a moment. I can't resist. She moans. I snatch my hand away.

"Francesca! Please! We're not good for each other. You should realize that by now."

I'm shocked when she falls to her knees in front of me. "I'm begging you. Take me. Do what you want to me. Anything, I'll

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do anything, just touch me, please! I can't stand it anymore." Her breasts are inches away from me. I'm dying to cup them in my palms. I imagine flicking my thumbs across their stiff, rosy tips. An electric charge shoots through my sex, as if she was doing that to me.

She's truly and totally naked, not only in body but in soul. I believe her when she says she'll do anything. I feel outrageously powerful. I can use her, humiliate her, make her scream, make her beg for my touch. Her neat, taut, boyish body is mine for the taking.

I'm so tempted. Her lust kindles answering lust in me. I remember our last desperate kiss among the flames. We're bound together, this woman and me. Bound by death and secrets and fate.

A warm breeze wanders in through the sliding doors of the balcony, full of the green scents of early summer. It sweeps her randy scent away. I turn my back on Francesca's prostrate form and gaze out the window. The faraway elms and oaks dance in the newly-risen wind.

"Get dressed, Francesca. Get out."

"But Stella..."

"You heard what I said. I don't want anything more to do with you. You're dangerous. Dangerous, at least, for me."

I keep my back to her. I don't want the sight of her body to weaken my resolution. I only turn around when I hear her opening the door.

The setting sun glints on her dark hair, giving her a halo. She reaches out for my hand. I let her take it. Her skin is silky against mine. "Goodbye, Stella. For now. You know, if you change your mind..."

"I don't think that I will." Her scent sneaks up on me, melting my iron resolution.

"I never meant to hurt you."

"I know. Passion, ambition, desire, arrogance—we were all fools. You're not to blame for the fact that everything is gone."

"There's still something left, Stella. Something left between us. Can't you feel it?"

I did feel something, touching her, an aching in my chest that was more like grief than lust. "Maybe. I don't know. I can't

help but think, with all this tragedy, that we're not good for each other."

"We could be. I swear we could, if we're just honest with each other."

Honest. What did I want? Honestly?

"I don't know, Francesca. Maybe you're right. But maybe it's too risky."

"Think about it. When you're ready, call me."

"Just don't count on it."

She doesn't answer. Outside in the hall, her hand still on the knob, she just looks at me, her eyes so full of raw need that it's scary.

Firmly, I push the door shut.

\* \* \* \*

Francesca's visit makes me late for work. It's past five thirty when I get to the Peacock Lounge, and we open at six. The costume for my first number is tight red satin with dozens of buttons up the front. It fights me as I try to get it on. It takes me three tries to get my makeup right. Then it seems as though my hair is nothing but snarls.

"Ow, damn!"

"You okay, honey?" Ginger lays an affectionate hand on my shoulder and searches my face in the mirror. "You seem a bit irritable tonight."

"I'll be okay. It's just that my hair is impossible..."

"Here, give me the brush. Close your eyes and relax."

"But I'm on in ten minutes..."

Ginger shakes the brush at me. "I said relax, honey, and I meant it!"

I close my eyes and let my friend ease out the tangles. It's so soothing, feeling her hands on me, listening to her humming the first few bars of her music over and over.

Francesca upset me. I was doing okay, carefully not thinking about her or Tony or White or anybody else. Then she had to come and bring it all back. I was walking in my sleep, dancing in my sleep, going through the motions but dead to the world. Now I was awake again, awake to all the anger and pain.

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I'm the lead act. I'm still the one people come out to see. The mystery, the tragedy, the brush with death—it makes them even more excited.

Joey sticks his head through the door. “Two minutes, Stella.”

I check myself in the mirror. My hair's pulled into a high ponytail. Shiny black curls tumble down my back. The scarlet satin makes my skin look darker and more exotic. The bustier top is so tight it looks painted on. It turns my cleavage into a shadowy cavern. My breasts swell up from their confinement, threatening to spill over. The long skirt shimmers when it catches the light, slides open to reveal glimpses of my thigh that sparkle with the glitter I've dusted on them. My lips are tinted the exact same scarlet as the costume.

If you look closely, you can see paler streaks on my bare shoulders, scars from where the glass sliced my skin. I'm damaged. I always will be.

But I'm still gorgeous.

I step through the curtains and onto the stage just as my music begins. “I would do anything for love; I'd lie for you and that's a fact.” The singer is simultaneously yearning and defiant. I sweep my eyes across the audience as I spin slowly. My chiffon scarf swirls around me like crimson wings.

Even though it's early, the club is full. There are well-dressed businessmen, their cell phones on the table next to their martinis, and construction workers in grimy sweatshirts, stopping in for a beer after work. There's a tall black guy who looks like a basketball player, and two rumpled fellows in thick glasses staring at me like they've never seen a woman before.

A hush takes them all when I appear.

I pull off one of my elbow length gloves, stretching my arms wide and flaunting my tits as I do. I catch the eyes of one man and then another. This is for you, I tell them silently. All for you.

The other glove comes off in a dramatic gesture, my forearm across my brow. The tempo of the music quickens, and I twirl, whipping off my skirt as I do. “Some days I pray for silence, some days I pray for soul...” The skirt joins the gloves in a blood-colored pile on the stage.

I strike a pose, one hip cocked, arms above my head, my tits straining against the fabric of my top. The music shifts again. A voluptuous wave begins at the base of my spine and shimmers up my body to my naked, fluttering fingers. I unfasten the first of the many buttons on the satin corset. Then I see him.

He's at a table by himself, close to the front. Sandy hair and fresh boyish face, wide eyes, hands clutching his drink nervously. Jimmy.

Seasoned cop in a big city, and he's never been to a strip joint! The absurdity turns me on. I smile, a private smile just for him, undo the next button and then the next. The crowd is clapping and whistling, but I'm not paying attention to anyone but Jimmy.

My hands continue to work at the buttons. My hips swerve and my pelvis jerks. I flip my ponytail into a wild circle. Meanwhile, I'm staring into Jimmy's eyes, reading his fantasies.

In his mind, he's the one undressing me, one slow button at a time. I'm bound to a bed, handcuffed. I can't hurry him, can't interfere. Every time his fingers brush against my skin, I writhe and moan, straining for more contact. He's careful, though, barely touching me as he lays me bare. My nipples contract into aching centers of sensation. The slightest touch sets me vibrating.

The last button is released and my breasts tumble lushly out into his hands. He caresses them for a few glorious moments. He licks his lips, and I think, gratefully, that he will bend and suckle on them. But instead he begins work on my lower parts.

My satin thong is soaked through. He tongues the juices off my inner thighs, careful to stay away from my yearning pussy. I'm getting more and more desperate. I thrash in my bonds, jerk my hips back and forth, trying to rub against him.

"Are you ready for me yet, baby?" I hear him say. I'm confused, momentarily blinded by the spotlight. Remembering my dream.

With one movement, he tears away the little triangle of fabric that barely covers my pussy. He grabs my sex with one blunt-fingered hand. His palm cups my damp fur. All four fingers settle deep in my cunt. His thumb strums at my clit. I'm shivering, hovering on the edge. "I think you're ready," I hear,

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and then he pulls his hand away and rams in his cock. I fall away into a pulsing, shattering climax.

"I will do anything for love, but I won't do that." Somehow, I'm on my knees, on the stage. He's behind me, slamming his rigid cock into my depths. He fucks me, hard, in time with the rock and roll. Every thrust sends fiery pleasure raging through me. Dimly I hear the crowd applauding. Jimmy gathers my breasts in his hands, leans over to whisper in my ear. "I love you, Stella. And I love to fuck you."

All at once there's a break in the rhythm. He pulls out and my cunt gapes, lonely and empty. "I want your ass," someone murmurs, "your lush, tight ass." There's a finger, questing, exploring my most private place. No, I try to say, I can't, I'm afraid. Then he pushes in deeper and the original pain shifts and blooms into outrageous, unbelievable pleasure. Anything for love, the music whispers as Jimmy eases his slick, swollen cock into my rear hole.

The audience roars in approval. The music dies away. I'm sprawled on the stage, completely naked. My hair has come loose and is tangled around my face. My hands are damp and sticky. I look up, confused, searching for Jimmy in the crowd. The table where he was sitting is empty.

Damn, what have I done? Am I going crazy? I stand, a bit shaky, and take a bow. A blizzard of dollar bills settles around me. I bow again, and slip back through the curtains, trying desperately to retain some dignity.

I throw on my kimono and race back out to the front of the house, ignoring the wolf whistles and the cheers. Where is he?

Jed's on duty by the front door. "Where did he go? Did you see him?"

"Who?" His eyes narrow. "Did somebody try something with you, Stella?"

"No, I'm fine, nothing like that. I just saw this guy in the audience. An old friend. But now he's gone. Medium height, late twenties, straw-colored hair. Pale skin. Freckles. He was wearing a sport jacket, kind of wrinkled, and a tie."

"Don't recall seeing anybody like that. At least, not recently. I might not have noticed him coming in; it was real busy. But he certainly didn't come out this door."

Was I hallucinating? Am I really going off the deep end? But Jimmy was there, I know he was. We connected. Boy, did we connect! I read his thoughts, his fantasies. The stare, on steroids.

Or were they my fantasies?

I slip back into the darkened club. Gina's on stage, doing splits and backbends, showing off her crotch. Nobody notices me. I slink back to the dressing room, still breathing hard.

I'm surprised to find that the room's empty. There's something on the table in front of my mirror, though. A single red rose, just barely past the bud. And an envelope.

I hesitate before opening the note. What if it's another threat? Something in me knows better, though.

*Dear Stella,*

*I know you probably don't want to see me, but I couldn't keep away. I tried calling but you never answer. I know you've had enough of being followed. So I decided to come see you here.*

*I'm sorry I lied to you. I'm sorry for everything. I should have told you about the mob investigation, but it was supposed to be confidential. We should have been more honest with each other. By the time I realized this, it was too late. Maybe if we'd trusted each other more, we could have avoided some of the damage and the pain.*

*I'll understand if you decide not to see me again. Just in case, though, I'll be waiting for you in my car after you finish work tonight. We've got a lot to talk about.*

*Even if you decide not to meet me, I hope you'll use the enclosed. You deserve them.*

*Love,*

*Jimmy*

I look back at the envelope. Tucked inside are two round-trip tickets on Olympic Airlines.

I sit for a long time in the bright dressing room, blinking back tears. Love, he wrote. Love is dangerous. What you love, you lose. My father. My house. My past.

Joey interrupts my reverie. "Jeez, Stella! What was that all

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about? You're gonna have the police coming down on me with obscenity charges!"

"Sorry, Joey. I got kind of carried away."

"Kind of! I'll say! I don't know what got into you. I've never seen you like that."

"I'm really sorry. It won't happen again..."

"Sure was hot, though. The crowd went crazy." He claps me on the shoulder. "Whatever else I can say about you, Stella, you're good for business. Glad that you decided to come back."

"Thanks, Joey. I'll try to be more careful."

"Okay, girl. But don't be too careful!" He looks me over critically. "Better get ready, though. You're on in fifteen minutes."

"I know, I know. Go away and let me get dressed."

I'm humming as I zip up my black velvet jumpsuit and step into my spiky leather boots. I still have no idea what I'm going to do about Jimmy. Or about Francesca, for that matter.

Maybe I'll just go off to Greece by myself and think about it.

I'm sure of one thing, though. Right now, I'm going to go out and drive the crowd crazy with lust. Just for the fun of it.



LISABET SARAI

## *About the Author*

Lisabet Sarai has written self-help books, plays, and many works of erotic and erotic romance. Please visit her website at [www.LisabetSarai.com](http://www.LisabetSarai.com) to learn more about her work.