

The Secret Trilogy

by FRANCINE SAINT MARIE

THIS E-BOOK EDITION CONTAINS BOOKS :ONE, TWO & THREE: "The Secret Keeping" "Fortune Is a Woman" (AKA "Keeping Mr. Right) and "The Stolen Kiss" in their entirety, complete and unabridged.

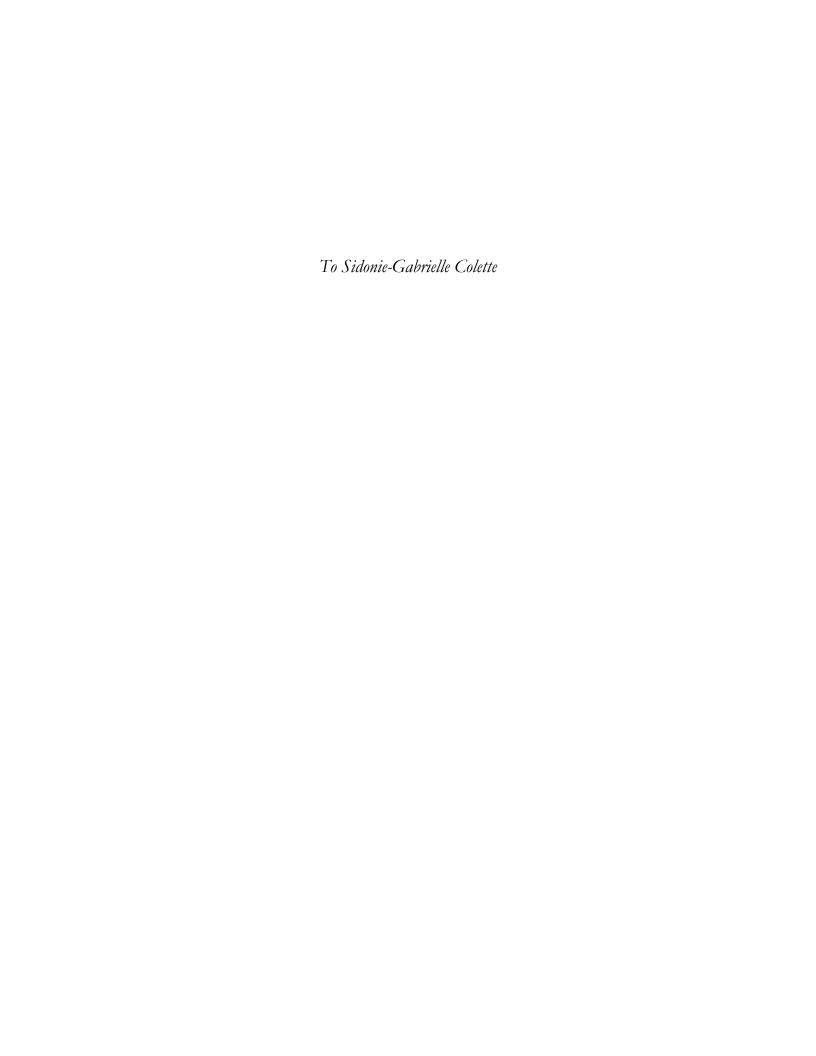
These novels are works of fiction and products of the author's imagination. Any similarity to real persons, places, events or the like is simply a coincidence.

Copyright ©-2009 The Author, Francine Saint Marie All Rights Reserved

> ISBN: 1-4382-4057-0 ISBN: 1-4414-1403-7 and ASIN: B001HBIBNY (Kindle Book)

Cover art and design by Francine Saint Marie © 2008

Questions or comments? Send them to: fifthcolumnpress@gmail.com or francinesaintmarie@yahoo.com



FRANCINE SAINT MARIE

The Secret Trilogy

The Secret Keeping.....Book One Fortune Is a Woman....Book Two The Stolen Kiss....Book Three

The Secret Keeping

"Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall."

William Shakespeare

THE SECRET KEEPING

Part One: *The Waiter*

"It's sexual."

"Sensual, did she say?"

"No, I think she said sexual."

Spring was negligent this year and the irrational exuberance in Frank's Place was undoubtedly a product of its delay.

"I said sexual."

"We thought you said sensual, too."

Friday's happy hour had turned positively muggy.

"Sexual. Sensual. What's the difference, anyway?"

The popular corporate watering hole was swollen to capacity, hot with the heat of a synthetic spring and the dark suits usually found in there seemed finally to bloom, adorned at last in their blossoms of polyester, powdery pastels and paisleys, and polka dots as bright and gay as poppies.

Off in the corner with the rubber tree plants, Lydia Beaumont sat, dressed entirely in black. Still wearing her overcoat, she gripped her half-empty glass and skeptically viewed the display.

"I just had a dream about you," a seersuckered youth suggested in her ear.

"Oooh," she replied, dismissing him with a flick of the wrist, "nice line!"

She was waiting on spring for her second wind and nothing this year could force its entry. Winter, the identical twin to the dreary fall that had just preceded it, continued to grip the city and Lydia couldn't help feeling suspended in a permanent autumn. The balmy air of Frank's tonight, with its harsh perfumes and heavy colognes, only made it feel worse.

True spring. She had fruitlessly searched all week for signs of it, but even the cherry trees seemed to have given up hope.

"Liddy!"

Tonight Lydia's coat felt heavy and made of hair and she was certain she was being choked by the button of her shirt collar.

"You're looking like a tourist, Liddy."

Lydia turned in her chair, smiled obliquely. "Hey, Del," she asked, "what's the difference between misapprehension and mere apprehension?"

"Ms. Apprehension...life's not a spectator sport," Delilah chirped, walking away.

"Hey, what's a four-letter word for love?" someone from their table shouted.

"Laid!" another blurted and the group erupted with predictable guffaws.

It had been another rough week. Lydia was sick of the work crowd and she only felt a little guilty about it. She checked the time and faked a laugh. Her sentiments had somehow slipped beyond volatile this evening. She checked them, too, as she always did.

A four-letter word for love? WORK. She had loved her work. But now the weight of it bore down harder and harder with every passing year and Lydia could no longer recall the reasons why she had pursued her profession. The ever increasingly younger throng she presided over were not like her when she was their age. They were difficult to manage and she hated to see them on her time off. All these revved up self-starters, fancying themselves galloping mavericks in the market place, all of them developing pronounced limps at the slightest hint of regulation. How she longed this year for a bona fide blast of warm spring air.

She glanced around, taking stock of who was there, who to avoid if she could help it. Friday the place was crawling with them. She was pleased to discover the blond reading contentedly at her window seat. Came in often. Obviously from a more civilized tribe, Lydia thought, as she studied the woman's cut of clothes to discern which one.

From...?

Unknown. Mostly rookies tonight, Lydia lamented, looking elsewhere. Lots of rookies from work infesting the place. Everywhere she went these days, every year more of them, each new onslaught more trying than the last. Busy, busy, busy. Shaking things up, knocking things down, fixing things, things that weren't broken. Her rookies, stacking risk upon risk like little toy blocks, scorning her advice as though they weren't obliged to take it, swaggering into happy hour like they owned the place.

Civilization. She sat back in her chair and drank deeply to the concept.

Lydia Beaumont was only thirty-six and still climbing, but she felt obsolete of late, frequently lonely in the new and improved world of international finance. The changes, too, did not impress her. Things were different, that's for sure, but they had gotten worse not better. A whole universe was being driven now on nothing but bald speculation and baby-faced chutzpah.

A breath of fresh air would be so nice. She'd love a breath of fresh air.

Love, loved, loving. She had, on an impulse just yesterday, looked it all up in an old college dictionary: to hold dear, to cherish, a lover's passion, devotion, tenderness, caress, to fondle amorously, like, desire, to thrive in. That one had appealed to her sensibilities the most, the reference to thriving, as in, "the rose loves sunlight." A very nice idea. She drank to that, too, framing the woman at the window seat in the wineglass, her blond head of hair an elegant flower stuck in Frank's bawdy bouquet. Thriving there alone, amidst the dandelions.

Love, loved, loving. All kinds of love in the world. That blond loves her solitude. She loves her book. Perhaps just as a rose does, she loves sunlight, too, sitting in a window on Fridays in the waning afternoon light. Loves. Who knows what else she loves? Is she somebody's long stemmed rose placed in a vase on a sunny windowsill? If so, she's a white rose, all that blond, the creamy skin. What does mom say a white rose represents? Uh-oh. Love and her mother and the mysteries of roses! Lydia laughed at herself and surveyed the working horde.

A barely-thirty crowd again. She was more and more convinced that it may indeed be a world only for the very young. There seemed to be nowhere she could go to get away from them. They dominated her landscape these days, light and shiny and strangely bold beyond their experience, disregarding reality and all its real consequences, always skipping out, just at the right moment, before their wings melted off. She could trust them at least for that much.

Honor and chastity—a white rose represents the faithfulness of its giver, or so her mother claimed. Lydia sipped at the blond in her glass. Perhaps a yellow rose, then. What does yellow mean? She'd have to ask her mother. Why not just plain red? Oh, no. She could guess at the significance of that color. No, not red, for godsakes!

Roses and sunlight. Scant little of either in Lydia's life these days. Seven PM already. She felt stiff in her chair, her neck and her shoulders hunched, sore from months of being cold. She eyed the window seat enviously, the blond still relaxing there with her mysterious book, posed like it was another day at the beach, casual, with just a splash of reservation, enough to ward off intruders.

Stop. Look both ways. Red. Don't go.

It was smart to be cautious, always wise to exercise care, especially when it concerned other people's money. Only punks weren't alarmed to lose people's money. Punks wouldn't mind misleading investors. Punks were unscathed by plummeting debt ratings, by markets fluctuating hundreds of points an hour, by shortfalls rippling across the globe and eventually hitting land with the destructive force of tidal waves. Superstorm economics, no big deal. They were so high above it all. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to read a book, Lydia Beaumont wondered, surrounded by a bunch of savages, to really soar above it all?

But it's the real world, Lydia reminded herself, a newly unsettled one, and savages and their mentors floated above it all. Uncorrected, never uncertain, they rose higher and higher, dirigibles on hydrogen and all those creative numbers. She knew them well. She knew they were addicted to the heights and hooking nearly everyone else they came in contact with; that they were dealers, dealing out highs with their quarterly projections of unsubstantiated growth and their wildly inflated earnings reports. She was always aware of them up there, brash new rulers of an endlessly expanding universe, to which they alone held the secret. Or so they implied in their glossy corporate brochures. They kept her on her toes.

A tangle of wanna-be dancers was putting on the ritz and making a spectacle of themselves. She laughed out loud and then scoffed under her breath. There was no stopping them, no holds barred, she had learned, thinking suddenly of accountants. Good auditors, too, who once knew better worth—they autographed everything that fell from the sky, even if they couldn't read it.

The blond at the window seat was also watching the dance extravaganza, the corners of her mouth turning up as she saw the enthusiasts darting and jerking to a bossanova they knew nothing about. It was a pretty half smile, the mouth poised as if there was something right on the tip of her tongue.

What would she have to say about all this? What do those lips talk about? Art? The book she read? What kind of a voice comes out of a mouth like that one? Something soft, Lydia bet. Soothing and gentle and tender and...sexy? Or was the right word sensual? Lydia caught the blond's glance and was startled to find herself staring at the woman. She shifted her attention outside.

On the other side of the glass was the street patio which had long been exorcised of its spirited revelers by the icy winds. It was nothing but a drab sidewalk in winter. They had all been dispossessed of it, forced to haunt the interior of Frank's Place where they restlessly waited for better weather and the good things that usually accompany heat.

And tonight, Sinatra had the audacity to sing of it...of a summer wind...freshly blowing in...from across a bay...

It was more fun outside, Lydia mused, worrying her collar. Outside she could stand or pace, swing her arms, rise and look around her, and eventually, when the mood struck, as it often did, she could wander off unnoticed, leaving if she wanted to and conveniently forgetting to say goodbye. In here, she couldn't move and if she got up to go, it'd be a big deal. Her eyes came to rest on the table at the window. Its occupant briefly looked up again from her reading and casually scanned the crowd before returning to it.

Beside her a cork popped. A new bottle. Red. That's an acquired look, Lydia concluded. Doesn't want to seem interested. *I do that, too*. More wine? Not interested? Maybe just a splash.

And yet she's always there, always deeply invested in a book, always with a glass of something barely touched, always alone and waiting, apparently for no one. She had become a familiar landmark at the window. At least to Lydia.

"Hey, what's a three letter word for-"

Lydia huffed and cut the speaker off.

Calm was finally descending on the room, but then Sinatra threatened to spoil it all with an urgent song about Peru.

Now that she was thinking about it, there was only one night when Lydia hadn't seen the woman alone there. A couple had joined her one evening.

Couples...Frank was way up in the air now, inviting everyone to join him. Fly, fly, she heard him suddenly singing. Well, why-the-hell not? Let's do it, let's fly, let's fly away—so then, perhaps the blond had a home nearby?

Lydia absently yanked at the thing annoying her throat and it was only when she felt her collar come loose, saw a button pinging free across the tabletop and ricocheting like a tiddlywink off a sea of abandoned glasses that she came out of her trance. She had been thinking of homesickness.

"You're scaring me, Liddy! What in the hell are you thinking?"

"You tell me, Del. I'm thinking I need to go to bed."

"Yeah! But there's not a decent one left," Delilah said, on another trip to the bar. "Joe's here," she added over her shoulder. "Be a big girl."

"Please," Lydia replied, holding up her hand," or I'll leave."

Fly or float your boat to Peru, was Frank's best suggestion yet. Actually, it wasn't a bad idea for a quick get-away. Llamas are grand. So are one-man bands...and flutes that toot for you. Peru's the place, he's saying. Or any place warm and sunny, she thought, draining her wineglass. Yes, yes, yes, then. Let's...fly...fly...fly...fly away.

Her glass was empty. She attempted to land it on the cluttered tabletop.

God, how she loved that man. Sinatra that is. Seemed like he had a song for every season, emptying a heart full of it, floating to Peru for the winter, moving the rubber tree plants, having a very good year,

anywhere, anytime. She shook her head and smiled, drunk for a change, and from the table there came a warning tinkle, glasses clinking as she carelessly deposited her own beside them.

And then, for the sake of falling, he had changed his tune again. Frank was telling everyone to take it nice and easy now. It's going to be so easy, he was bragging, to fall in love.

Yeah. Now wouldn't that be something?

"It's not healthy, you know." (Delilah was back.)

Lydia watched the glass tip over on its side...the problem now of course is...her work...it was insane perhaps...she should probably hold her horses...but she felt like jumping instead. Could it be, she half wondered, watching the glass head steadily for the edge of the table, but making no effort to save it, that she was hoping for something soft to land on? It rolled back slightly and she feared she might have to push it.

An elbow nudged her ribs. "It's not, you know," repeated its owner.

The goblet hesitated then smashed onto the floor.

Absurd, Lydia murmured, grabbing gently at the offending appendage. "What?"

"It's not healthy, I told you."

"Del...what isn't?"

"Oh, geesh, Liddy," Delilah said, taking in the catastrophe. "That's very, very unfortunate. And it saddens me. You shhhall have another."

"I shhhall," Lydia mimicked. She raised her arm and beckoned the waiter.

Table sixteen. The waiter nodded and made his way over. They were an attractive and lively group, regulars who like to sing and dance and never broke anything. Not usually, anyway. He could feel the crunch of glass beneath his shoe, the woman's fingers as she slipped a ten dollar bill in his pocket and whispered, "I'm sorry." He signaled the busboy with a circular motion of his hand. "A glass of merlot," he then said, turning to Lydia with a smile. "Will that be all?" he asked, now addressing the table.

"We're hungry!" the group yelled. "Merlot? Merlot! I want some, too." "Can you bring us menus?" "I need a drink." "I have no idea what time it is." "Me, too." "Bring everyone some merlot." "I don't want merlot, I want a drink." "Do you know what time it is?" "I think you'd better bring us a bottle then." "It's early, I think." "I'm hungry. Can't we order something now, or do we need menus?" "He's bringing us menus." "What are you having?" "C'mon, it's early."

Food. She wasn't really hungry. She watched the blond toying with her dessert.

"It's curious don't you think, Liddy?" asked Delilah, her mouth and hands full, gesturing with a chicken bone in the direction of the window seat.

"She's a spy," interrupted someone from their party, "Is this spicy?" he asked, pointing at Delilah's platter. She ignored him. "C'mon, is this hot?" he demanded. She used a free elbow to push him away.

"She's not a spy, Liddy. She's a-"

"How's everything?" interrupted the waiter, suddenly appearing behind Lydia.

"She's a spy," repeated their persistent friend as he lunged past Delilah's jab.

"It's hot!" she threatened, as he made off with her platter. Those on the other end of the table cheered the chicken's arrival.

"Everything's fine," Lydia said, turning toward the waiter.

"Excellent," he answered and bending closer he whispered, "She's not a spy," and was gone.

Delilah glanced curiously at Lydia. "What?" she demanded.

"What what?" answered Lydia, dipping her finger into the wine.

"What did he say?"

Lydia rubbed the rim of her glass until it began humming. It tingled to the touch. Half past seven. She should just go home. "He said I'm the only civilized person at my table and that I should feel quite proud."

Delilah draped her arm on the back of her chair, crossed her legs, and dabbed at her mouth with a dirty napkin. "Bullshit," she replied, grinning.

"You're doing that thing again," asserted Delilah.

4

```
"What?"
"That, Liddy."
```

Nearby, another one of her friends had noticed it, too. "What...so...yeah...and..." she imitated, sighing dramatically.

Lydia squirmed at the successful impersonation. "It must be time for me to go," she said, checking the clock once more. Eight PM. "I'm speaking in monosyllables."

"Nah, it's early," said the other two in unison. They clustered their chairs around hers to began their weekly critique, starting first with the most-eligibles lined up haplessly at the bar.

On the opposite side of the room a woman sat reading in one of the window seats, her long blond hair done up in a loose knot pierced by a single hairpin to keep it from falling in her eyes. She had a fine shaped face, smart indications across the brow line, bright animated eyes that bore nearly all her expression. The nose and mouth, rendered in sure but delicate strokes, were countered by pronounced cheekbones and a firmly set jaw which dignified her looks and made her seem at once both pretty and handsome. So too, the frailty implied by a pale complexion was juxtaposed with wide disciplined shoulders and a strong, almost unbending quality about the neck. The slender rest of her lounged luxuriously in a chair, her creamy skin complimented by a rich, dark blue dress that began its long-sleeved tour scooped low at the collarbones and continued its travels closely tailored to the torso and hips. In the woman's lap and along the length of her outstretched legs, the fabric collected into sensuous little ripples and its excesses surrounded her in flattering folds. They slipped over her hips and dripped down her sides, cascading to the floor in a waterfall of velvet.

Nine PM. She really should go home now, throw some weights around, the dumbbells.

Ten PM. There was no moon at all. A light drizzle was soaking the city which only served to underscore Lydia's ennui. No umbrella, she walked briskly from Frank's to her apartment, stopping this evening at every crosswalk, finding herself waiting at them much longer than she actually needed to.

She had spent a considerable amount of time in this city, living in it with her friends, those that she had met at university like Delilah and the others she had later met at work. In finance, they were all the same, none of them the type to sit in Frank's with only a book for a companion. She sought to remember the last book she had read. She couldn't. No books. No newspapers.

An aching sensation was beginning to creep in under her coat and clothes. An old feeling, she knew it had nothing to do with the cold, although the cold certainly didn't help. She shivered at the next intersection and set her briefcase down, pulling her gabardine tight to her chest and conferring with an amber light. Yellow means worthy, she suddenly remembered. Yellow roses. Worthy. Didn't it? Or did it mean yield? She grabbed the briefcase and ran to the other side.

The only thing Lydia did read were the financials. Nothing to brag on there. The briefcase felt exceptionally heavy tonight. Her back hurt. She wished for a warm spring rain to make the city misty, to cloud it up. This one was as cold as snow.

Why hadn't she gone on vacation this year?

All night deli coming up on her right. She had a sudden craving for sweets, she realized. All-night deli coming up on her right. Sweets or a cigarette? When was the last time she had a cigarette? She lingered undecided at the entrance. Or sweets for that matter? Her mouth had the aftertaste of wine in it, sour and woody. Bed was calling. No sugar tonight. She walked on.

[&]quot;Liddy? Aren't you going to say anything?" Delilah asked.

[&]quot;No."

[&]quot;Don't you think you'd feel better if you did?"

[&]quot;No."

[&]quot;Wouldn't it at least be better to be on speaking terms?"

[&]quot;No."

[&]quot;But you see him everyday at work. Isn't it awkward for you?

[&]quot;No."

Home. Inside her apartment it was warmer than usual. Downright balmy, like it had gotten at Frank's. She turned the heat off and scanned the bookshelf for something to read and, finding nothing of interest, sighed with disgust.

Why hadn't she gone on vacation this year?

The bookcase. Exactly like her father's with his tight rows of leather bound editions, none of which she had ever seen him read. She dragged her fingers over them. Dusty bindings. Like his, her books never came off the shelf either.

Financial papers on the coffee table. She cleared them with an impatient sweep of her hand and they landed in disarray on an otherwise spotless carpet. That accomplished nothing, she admitted. She stood over the debacle feeling foolish and wrestled down the overwhelming temptation to reorganize it.

Is there a problem, she asked herself. Yes, but nothing she could put her finger on. She contemplated the possibility of a mid-life crisis and did the easy math. Life expectancy, seventy-two. What a frightening sum. You do act like a tourist, she confessed. In any event, you certainly feel like one tonight. Or a spy, spying on whoever I am, on the name on the door.

She glared at her belongings accusingly.

The stainless carpet, the curtained windows, the trophy books, all seemed in tacit agreement. They didn't know her anymore either, or why she would be investigating them.

"She's not a spy," the waiter had said.

Lydia saw herself in the mirror and stopped short. Leaving for work in the dark, coming home in the dark, it was taking a toll on her, she suddenly thought, eyeing the impostor. She was shocked by the woman's disheveled appearance, the missing button on her shirt collar, the rain-soaked coat, the hair wet and dangling in her eyes. She went up to the mirror and inspected her eyes. More than just exhausted, there were shadows beneath them, almost as blue as her irises. Her blue eyes. They had an unusual gleam in them. She was concerned about it. Not cool, she muttered, sitting down in the middle of the room as quiet as a sphinx.

"Excellent," she remembered the waiter saying. "Will that be all?"

Why did I bring this in here? Lydia wondered, accidentally kicking her briefcase as she crossed her legs under the table. Another Friday at Frank's Place and her friends were late.

The blond sat at the window seat, engrossed as ever in her reading. Now and again she seemed to stretch a little, a slight smile appearing and then disappearing from her lips. Lydia immediately thought of a cat reclining on a sunny sofa, about to lick itself.

"May I get you something while you're waiting?"

She jumped in her skin.

The waiter smiled.

She blushed. "I'm sorry?"

"A glass of wine until your friends get here?" he asked.

She nodded and avoided looking at him. He had a funny expression.

"Red?" he suggested.

"What?"

"Red?" he repeated.

"Red?" (Red?) "Red! Yes, please, that will be fine."

Four-thirty already. The girls were supposed to be there at four. With growing annoyance Lydia saw herself stuck alone in a bar and looking available, something which she did not relish.

Regulars were steadily arriving for happy hour. As they checked their coats at the door they scanned the barroom hungrily. She visibly registered discomfort whenever one strutted by and said hello. They all reminded her of Joe.

Only ten more minutes, she promised herself. This is unbearable. She glanced over at the window seat. A book sure would come in handy right now. She raised her arm to signal the waiter and the blond looked over, smiled an acknowledgment and went back to her reading.

"May I see a menu?"

"Certainly," the waiter said. He returned with one a few minutes later.

Whenever she felt irritated she thought of Joe. An unrewarding habit she had just discovered. These past few days she found herself thinking of him a lot.

Joseph Rios. Everyone called him Rio Joe, but she doubted he knew that, not that it would bother him, not someone who spent as much time as Joe did making himself larger than life. He had cultivated that persona.

Rio Joe. The stuff of literature. "Good evening," came a come-on voice from her left. Oh, please, she screamed in her head. She put her face in the menu, pretended to read it. The technique proved surprisingly effective. Talking head gone.

Tall, dark and handsome Joe. Her junior by four years. She had met him at work and instinctively disliked him, detecting something a little too slick and rather illicit in his style. In a way she couldn't then explain, he'd given her the creeps. His interpretation that she was hard to get is what motivated him to pursue her so ardently. And it was nice to be ardently pursued. In the end...well...getting is the fun part for a Rio Joe. The romance left her with the same sick sensation she had after eating too much chocolate.

Love, sex, heartburn, nausea. This was as far as she could venture in her mind whenever she reviewed the matter. But she could see far enough. She knew that he had broken her heart because it stopped in pain whenever she saw him or heard his name mentioned. She knew he was not one of her greatest accomplishments, which is why she refused to discuss the mess with anyone.

Dear Joe. She had ended it months ago but still ran into him at work, still in Frank's Place on Fridays. Only recently had she stopped trembling at the sight of him. Only recently had she stopped wanting to lie down every time he was near. Only recently had she discovered she wasn't thinking of him every moment of the day.

Lydia took a deep breath. Only recently, but thank god!

Another suit strolled by. She put her nose in the menu again—lunch? Wrong menu. Lydia blamed herself for not discovering it sooner. Everything's been out of whack this week, seven days like this, all gone awry in precisely this manner. She hailed the waiter one more time and attempted to disguise her frustration.

"Madam? Ready to order?"

"Yes, but I think you brought me the wrong menu," she said, handing it back to him.

"Oh," he said, taking it from her, "the right menu at the wrong time." He pulled another one out from under his arm and laid it on the table. "Or," he added with a wink, "the wrong menu at the right time."

She felt a tinge in her cheeks again and turned away without speaking. The clock over the bar read five. Swell, she thought. So where are my friends when I need them? Sinatra sang something about being irresponsible, being undependable. The blond at the window seat, reading. Reliable. That waiter was so strange. It's difficult to be alone, Lydia realized. She was sick of waiting. You can forget yourself, what you normally do or what you're supposed to be thinking. Isn't that old waiter kind of crazy? Sinatra sang on, singing about irresponsible madness. Lydia waited.

"I told you she'd still be here! Liddy, you're not mad, are you?"

"No, Del. I just love sitting by myself on a Friday afternoon, drinking by myself on a Friday afternoon, eating by myself on a—"

"Oh, good. You ordered already?" Delilah slid Lydia's bread plate away from her and laughed at her friend's dour expression. "Oh, come on, Liddy" she said, pushing it back again. "I hate it when you pout. We were hoping you might mingle a little. We're not really all that late and you do look marvelous, dear. Arsenic obviously becomes you."

Half past five. The furniture around her scuffed loudly with a life of its own and Lydia was once more absorbed into the dull but comfortable roar of her table. She watched her friends coming and going, the girls falling one by one like flower petals into their chairs, each one exhaling on arrival about a week's worth of office air as they landed, the guys circling like hawks. Happy hour. Another respite. Exquisite nails tapped on

the tabletop to the music. The ladies cooed about that one's sweater, this one's skirt, a new piece of jewelry, who they had recently run into. The guys heckled. It wasn't hard to be distracted—even the blond looked over—at the loud chatter, sordid details of cubicle life, the funny stories and tales of intrigue. Gossip, gossip, gossip.

By six, even the waiter was once again himself, once more the prerequisite aloof that one might reasonably expect a waiter to be.

Fine. Everything would return to normal, Lydia hoped, as she glanced about the room and back to her own busy table. Normal, whatever that is. She turned in her seat to observe a few of her friends who had snatched up partners from the row of men at the bar. They were, as Del fondly called it, "doing their war dance." World War Two. They were all faking it of course. Nobody knew these old steps except from imitating classic movies, but it looked right in the vintage atmosphere of Frank's Place and it belonged there with the old songs and posters and dim light. Warriors dancing.

Things felt right, at last, for the first time in a week. Lydia smiled back at the blond who then looked away. More right than wrong, she added, feeling like a pretty close facsimile of herself again. I am Lydia Beaumont, she said in her head, studying the profile of the reader, whoever she was. I am Lydia Beaumont. Whoever she was, too.

Maybe who you are depends largely on who you're with?

But back in her apartment she discovered, much to her dismay, that the air was still rarefied, as it had been since last Friday. She instantly fell into the strange mood again, the funk that was ruining her, and despaired to think that her evening at Frank's had been only a temporary success.

Standing at the foot of her bed, left unmade for the second time this week, she inspected the solitary impression that remained in the middle of it. It certainly showed how accustomed she was to sleeping alone. And it looked odd. Maybe this was normal, the new normal of her life, regarding normal things as strange. She wasn't too comfortable with that. *I'm not sleeping in this bed tonight*, she told herself, and went to sit on the sofa in the dark instead, avoiding the bedroom mirror as she passed it.

All week Lydia had been distracted by Lydia. At Frank's she had tried to overcome herself by concentrating on the events going on at the table, the free-for-all she usually ignored. She was glad to be able to focus on something other than the hum in her head, on her aching back, but now sitting alone in her apartment like a house guest on the sofa, trying to reflect, she could scarcely remember a thing about the long evening. All she could recollect was her friends showing up late, the silly waiter with his menus, the blond in love with her solitude. In love. In love. Or was it a self-imposed exile?

Reflect. It had to be at least six months ago. Maybe longer. But not a year. No, not quite that long, she doubted. Not more than nine? Could it possibly have been more than nine months ago that I first noticed that woman sitting in there? Could be. Ah, I know why. Because before that, I was out on the patio. Right? I wouldn't even have seen her from out there. Right. For all I know she could've been coming in for years without my knowing, if she only sat inside. All that time on the patio and before then? Ah, well, before then there was that thing with Joe.

She went into the bedroom to look at herself in the mirror. She could be coming down with something, going off into space like this, and her eyes looked funny. She'd see how she felt tomorrow and take it from there she promised.

On the way back to the sofa she bumped into the papers she had piled on the floor in one of her new private compromises. She swore under her breath. I don't have what it takes to be alone anymore. That's the thing.

The thing. That thing with Joe. She stretched herself out.

Is this Joe's fault?

It felt good to get the weight off her shoulders.

Not having what it takes?

Off her back.

Being alone?

She let her eyes adjust to the darkness.

The longer it takes the farther you go—she had seen these words scrawled across the ladies' room wall in Frank's Place.

No. Not his fault, really.

She didn't know who was supposed to have said it.

The farther you go. She sat up uneasy.

He had never offered her anything.

There was a hopelessness at the thought of him. She felt it lodged deep in her womb. That was the ache, a killing consumption.

Ugh. She didn't know when her loneliness had stopped being Joe's fault. She pictured an empty glass falling over the edge of a table and forced herself to remember the last time he was in her apartment, showing up late for her birthday, and he had been with someone else, too. That was no secret, but it was her goddamned birthday she had shouted as he slammed the door behind him. She saw her glass of wine whizzing through the air at him, could hear it smashing against the wall. There was still a slight stain where it had trickled like blood to the floor.

Her blood, she learned too late. He had been after her blood, running her through every time he could. At parties. Behind her back. He even did her wrong in bed. On purpose. Many, many times leaving her there, for no reason, to be cruel, that's all.

The bright light of the kitchen made her eyes water.

It was overblown. A couple of months in bed. She had overrated him.

Lydia rose from the couch. And you never even sent me flowers, you rat. Not one goddamned blessed rose.

She turned on the living room light, feeling suddenly redeemed, and searched the room for her briefcase, then remembering where she had left it and headed into the kitchen.

All week she had been popping in and out of bookstores, spending entire lunch hours peering at racks of paperbacks and on Friday afternoon, unable to determine any subject of interest, she had purchased a Sinatra CD from a street vendor on the way to Frank's Place. She took it out of the briefcase and put it in the player.

The clock on the wall showed midnight, but Lydia was wide awake, opening and closing the cupboards and refrigerator door. There was nothing to eat.

She had brought work home for the weekend with the idea of barricading herself in, but at this rate by Monday morning she knew she would starve to death. There wasn't even half and half for coffee.

"The right menu at the wrong time," she suddenly recalled.

"Or," the refrigerator door slammed shut one last time, an assortment of items clinking inside, "the wrong menu at the right time."

"Excellent," she said in a voice like the waiter's.

The music played.

Lydia worked feverishly all Saturday morning, as if she had an important appointment to keep and might not make it. She did without coffee or breakfast and by noon she was absolutely famished.

Lunch time and not a crumb of food. She grabbed her coat and hurriedly left the apartment.

She entered Frank's Place alone at about half past noon. The waiter saw her before she noticed him. She hesitated at the door. He was waiting on the blond seated with her book at the sunny window.

Alone

Lydia had never been to Frank's for lunch and it struck her as quite different from the raucous environment she was used to on Friday nights, a little more subdued than she had expected.

"Madam," said the waiter, "how nice to see you."

Lydia smiled cautiously. "Thank you," she replied, indicating by pointing that she desired a table at the back of the room.

He held her chair for her, placing the now familiar lunch menu on her plate.

"I don't think you'll be disappointed," he assured her.

She smiled the same at him, careful to remain composed. He had made her feel awkward the night before, almost like a child. She had not fully forgiven him for it. When he subsequently returned with a glass of merlot that she hadn't ordered she gave him an anxious look, which he utterly ignored. After that, through the rest of her meal, he acted virtually oblivious to her presence in the dining room for which she was exceptionally grateful.

That was more or less how he treated the patron at the window seat, Lydia observed, as well as the dozen or so other discreet diners seated in distant places throughout the room.

She liked how the place felt this afternoon, even though it was different than how she knew it. There was the low murmur of contented couples, the muted strands of the music in the background. The same old songs, she recognized, but only softer, seeming instrumentally more civilized this afternoon. Same songs, same lyrics. Maybe a bit more daring.

Warm tones, charming light, peaceful time of the day.

There were others alone at their tables. Like her, they seemed satisfied. They talked, ate, *read*. But one didn't feel alone in this atmosphere. Not exactly. Except if one didn't want to be alone.

"Do you know what you're looking for?"

"No, not yet. I was hoping something would jump out at me."

Lydia's searches had led her to the conclusion that there were basically three topics of fiction: love, war...or love and war. But nothing worth dying for is worth living for, she had determined early in life, so she came up empty-handed.

The nonfiction section held limited allure for her as well. Its shelves were dominated chiefly with how-to instruction manuals that explored the gamut of human interests from abdomens to the zodiac, self-help books that covered a myriad of ailments and complaints whether real or imagined. Self improvement, a big industry. These nearly always occupied an area of their own which was usually located in the front of the store right next to the checkout.

Bookstores overall had changed considerably from the last time Lydia had visited one. Now, with their wall-to-wall carpeting, their quiet reading areas, the out-of-the way-benches and comfy chairs littered with patrons absorbed in their seemingly sacred texts, the places more closely resembled libraries than anything else. Of course, unlike a library, you couldn't take your favorite book out. In the end you had to buy it.

Lydia spent the next week in much the same way as the last and failed to find anything to curl up with. She bought another CD.

Oh, yes, she hated her job. She hated her job. She hated her job. There were too many Joes writing Dear Johns and too many like herself and her girlfriends reading them. Reading. The same letter, a chain letter, a pyramid scheme of lovers, loading the dice, moving from table to table, playing it like the numbers, exchanging commodities, leaving a collection of precious metals on the bedside. Junk bonds.

That's the marketplace, gambling over the limit, like Blackjack. Or Rio Joe.

These are dark thoughts again, Lydia reminded herself, still at her desk on Friday at four o'clock. One more time, the phone. Vice President Treadwell. Lydia groaned into her sleeve. It looked like she would be there a while.

"Hi, Paula. No, not bothering me at all. Oh, cocktails? You know I forgot all about it. I'll put it on my calendar. Nah, I don't want a secretary, I like to be alone in here. A while, maybe another hour or so. Okay, thanks, Paula."

Six(ish). Lydia arrived at Frank's around six. The blond saw her first and smiled. The song on the juke was extra special loud, competing with her thoughts. She stood in the doorway, smiled back and then caught sight of Joe menacing the place with criminal looks and winking at her. She pretended not to see him and searched the room for her friends.

"Lydia!"

Her friends finally saw her and they hooted and howled out unseemly hellos. The seating arrangements had changed. She wondered how it had happened that they were now sitting closer to the center, in the blond's half of the room. Lydia glanced suspiciously toward the waiter, but he seemed to be unaware of her. She doubted the woman would be able to enjoy her book tonight and she grimaced as she made her way through the crowd to the noisiest table on the planet.

"Boo! Hiss!" came a rowdy greeting from her friends.

"Very nice."

"I am shocked, Liddy. Shocked I tell you. I think you did this to get even with us for last Friday. We've got a bottle...here...oh...ask the waiter for a glass...waiter! Waiter!"

Frank's was energized in a way that promised spring was near. Maybe that's why they were moving closer to the windows, anticipating summer on the patio again. For days now warm winds had been blowing in from across the sea. They lingered there, down by the waterfront, where Lydia could be found from time to time lost in her lunch hour searches for a good book. The heat came from down there. She was sure of it. Deep beneath the water it lurked, perhaps all winter, simply waiting for an opportunity. It was finally near.

"I don't know what you're suggesting, Del."

The waiter appeared with a glass and she thanked him.

"Liddy, sit down and drink."

She sat.

"Won't be long now," the waiter said cheerily.

"What won't?" she asked.

"Spring!" he declared, leaving the table with a broad grin.

From there he went directly to the window seat. Lydia observed the two of them lowering their heads together. Not about the menu, their conversation lasted only a few minutes before she saw him leaving again, the blond casting a furtive glance after him. What a busy man, Lydia thought. What's going on? Nothing, he seemed to be saying. She turned back toward the blond. Look up. Look up. Yes, smile. Yes! Green eyes. Smile back at her, fool. Show her you have all your teeth, as daddy would say. Daddy? What in the world am I doing? Is she naturally blond? Yes, naturally blond. Accessories? None. No jewelry at all, save a thin gold watch on the left wrist. Nothing on her fingers, either. No ring. It was warm in the center of the room, cooler by the wall, Lydia suddenly noticed. About my age. Beautiful hands. Writers hands? Lydia studied them wrapped around the book. Can't tell. Or was she a musician? Artist? She squinted but couldn't make out the title. Green eyes, nice. A navy blue tailored pantsuit. Heels. No, definitely not an artist. Probably not a musician, either. Who in the world is this woman? What in the world is she doing here?

There was the waiter again, returning with a drink that had been sent by the guy at the bar pantomiming a toast to the blond. No time for a drink. She had a harried look tonight. Lydia analyzed her face as she paid her bill, collected her things. One last smile?

Yes. And then the blond with no ring was leaving, passing near Lydia's table, the right hip swaying upward, the left shoulder dipping gently down. She moved rather than walked. Or flowed—god, the woman flowed just like water! Thirty fluid steps to the coat check. Lydia trailed her with her eyes until she was gone and then searched for the waiter.

He was mixing drinks.

I'm out of my mind. Would it be improper to ask the waiter for that woman's name? Was there an emergency or something; why was she leaving? She should ask him for that woman's name. Lydia weighed it carefully, contemplating the vacant table with butterflies, trying to understand why the room seemed so empty. Was she planning to meet someone tonight, perhaps? Oh, ask the waiter for her name. But how would I explain it? I don't think I could! What am I thinking?

All this time Delilah had been gabbing away at her. It was when she stopped that Lydia suddenly remembered her friend again. She saw her posed with her legs crossed, her hands clutched around her knees, wearing an insightful smile that Lydia wished to avoid. She smiled weakly back at her.

The music drifted over their heads and they sat eyeing each other, jostled in their chairs by people on missions to the dance floor or the bar. At their own table, their friends, oblivious, continued to shout and dare and cheer themselves on.

"You're being a Neanderthal, Liddy. I really mean it."

"I am?" A nervous laugh. "I don't know what you mean, Del."

"No?" Delilah leaned forward and Lydia felt compelled to do the same.

"Did you know, Dame Beaumont, that here on earth where most of us reside most of the time, that we are all perfectly safe from the destructive power of solar flares?"

"Del, I don-"

"That's because I'm not done. But that if you were actually to be near one, my dear friend, act-u-al-ly near one, Lydia...Neanderthal...Beaumont...you'd be dead in a matter of hours. Huh? I'll bet you didn't know that. I want you to think about it while we both get drunk here. I want you to roll it over in your mind," she said, raising her glass, "and I want you to respond in complete sentences."

Solar flares...Lydia sipped at her wine thoughtfully. The window seat was filled once more, this time with a loud and frolicking foursome. Neanderthal Beaumont, that's kind of funny. How should she respond? Probably best to say nothing, since something clever was out of the question. I'm out of my mind. Is that a complete sentence? She glanced at Delilah as she filled her glass again. Up at the bar she saw Joe trying to make her feel naked. It was easy to ignore him tonight for some reason. Peering back at her from behind the counter Marlene Dietrich looked as cool as a cucumber in a big, black and white poster that boldly declared THE DEVIL IS A WOMAN. The devil a woman? Nah, Lydia doubted it. Pure nonsense. What could they possibly mean by that? She glanced at Delilah sipping her wine, waiting patiently. She'd know the answer. Lydia still had nothing to say. She gazed into Marlene's steely eyes. There was another poster beside that one portraying the actress as BLOND VENUS. Blond Venus. So what's so weird about that? Isn't Venus blond?

The women had met and become friends while finishing their MBAs. Delilah was the senior of the two. Now, over forty and solidly single, she managed her personal affairs much as she handled matters at the bank she ran. Lydia, on the other hand, had never been committed to such a lifestyle. It had simply developed in that direction with the financial markets her primary focus in life.

It was in that capacity that she had met an underling named Joseph Rios, who quickly knocked her out of sorts, as Delilah liked to put it. Before then, no fraternizing. That had always been Lydia's policy in the past. She had made a fatal exception. Prior to that unhappy event, the two women had seemed like philosophical twins, stoics, taking comfort in each other's company whenever things got hairy, discussing and dismissing professional or personal difficulties as they occurred. A problem was a mere conundrum or a ridiculous quandary, never a quagmire like Rio Joe had become, faithless Rio Joe. The relationship had made Lydia different, changing her for the worse and even now it was impossible to be of any assistance to her because she refused Delilah's confidence. She could only guess that Joseph Rios had devastated her friend as months had passed since she had broken it off and she was still not fully recovered yet. And recovery seemed nowhere in sight.

There had never been any secrets between Lydia and Delilah, aside, perhaps, the sticky details of that tortuous romance, which were easy to guess at anyway, judging from its long lasting effects. On Delilah's part, she had shared everything. One night stands, kinky interludes, pathetic lovers, even the unwanted pregnancy. The only thing that Lydia didn't know about Delilah was that she had to color her hair.

Delilah was now of the opinion that Lydia had not only become secretive, but morose and morbidly self reflective, dwelling, undoubtedly, on some supposed personal defects instead of admitting the obvious, that it had simply been an unlucky event, becoming involved with a man who was just a pathological misogynist. It could happen to anyone if you're not careful. Which Ms. Beaumont hadn't been.

The new Lydia Beaumont was troubling to Delilah. It was unhealthy to be so elusive and joyless. It was unhealthy not to date. And there were certain moments when Lydia even appeared tentative, undecided, dangerously suspended in a state of second guessing. This might happen even if she was only buying bread or ordering something in a restaurant. And now speaking in broken sentences. The voice trailing off effect was absolutely maddening. And that perpetually quizzical expression, as if all of life had instantly become curious and overwhelming. She pictured the sudden paralysis that overcame her friend whenever she happened to lay her eyes on that miserable, miserable man. Delilah wanted to see her cured of this and she constantly encouraged Lydia to at least say hi to him, in the hope that being able to do so would break the spell. But no.

Last week in Frank's Place—it was a spell her friend was under and Delilah was sure that she was falling deeper into it. To her way of thinking, Lydia just needed to get laid, that's all, and there were plenty of one-night-easy-overs standing at the bar. You don't throw yourself into the fire to escape a hot pan. Go for the easy conquests. That's how you get yourself back into the game. She'd work on this theme all through Wednesday if necessary. Both of them had taken the day off to go shopping together and to grab some nourishment along the way.

"I ask only that you be articulate and clever. I don't care if you talk with your mouth full, as long as you talk, Liddy." She glanced at her watch. "Go!"

"Okay, Del. Only four more years till I retire."

Delilah counted the words out on her fingers. "Give me at least ten more."

"I hate my fucking job. I hate my fucking job."

"That's lovely, dear, just lovely. Have some water. You must be exhausted."

Lydia grinned. "Del, have you ever...?" her voice trailed off as she set the glass down without drinking anything.

"Try again, Liddy. I probably have."

Probably not, thought Lydia. Or she'd know about it.

"I'm going to be frank with you, Liddy. Ever since that creep dumped-"

"No, no! Please, Del. Not dumped. Come on, Del. Dumped?"

Delilah took a deep breath. "Walked all over you?"

Lydia sucked in her air, too. She stared out the window. "Walked is...well...a little harsh." She paused and looked away. "Okay, I'll admit to walked."

After awhile Delilah said, "Have I ever what?"

Lydia considered the question. She couldn't ask it now.

"Okay, whatever it is, if I haven't I would have. Especially if I were you, okay?"

Lydia laughed and feigned to be counting her words. "How am I doing?"

Delilah rolled her eyes, "I'd really like to know."

It wasn't a huge office, but it had a floor-to-ceiling window which looked down onto the street. If she stood at the far right end of it, she could peer out toward the harbor, midtown if she stood left of center, although there was another office building directly across the street. She liked to stand at the glass sometimes and watch the people below. They never noticed her.

It was a teaser. Sixty-five degrees by three o'clock. The end of the week and Lydia was daydreaming at her window. She was thinking of leaving when she heard the door open and close with a quick click. She turned and was not happy to see Joe standing there.

"Lydia," he crooned.

"I'm not going to endorse it," she said abruptly. "You know better." She grabbed her briefcase and began packing it up for the weekend. She had been surprised Thursday morning to find his paperwork waiting on her desk, complete with a cover letter that smelled like his cologne. The odor had infiltrated her office and it served as a terrible distraction, which, she was sure, he had intended it to do. She made to leave and he grabbed her arm as she passed.

"Not once," he began. He liked her startled look.

She extricated herself and stepped around him. "No, so you know better, I said." She disliked his expression. "I'm leaving now," she added.

He blocked her exit. "Not even when I was screwing you."

He saw the blood rise to her cheeks.

"You approved of that, didn't you, your highness? Screwing your brains ou-"

"Your...these numbers don't add up...you..." she stopped and took a step backwards.

He was pleased to see he could still wound her.

She grabbed the papers from the desk. "You can't make these projections," she said, throwing them at his feet. She watched silently as he picked them up, then sidestepped him and held open the door.

He was wearing his sneer; she had learned to hate it. "You have absolutely no right to speak to me that way," she whispered angrily.

He didn't reply.

"Get out," she finally said in a shaky voice.

He did.

C'mon ta my howz, my howz-ah c'mon...happy hour...I'm gonna give ya candy...c'mon ta my howz...ahhh...my howz-ah c'mon...I'm gonna give ya...everything at Frank's seemed normal.

That was reassuring. Lydia fumbled in the doorway with her jacket, decided at last to keep it on and then left the briefcase at the coat check instead. She then managed to collide with the rubber tree plants that lined the entranceway to the dining room and while her friends watched with bemused expressions she attempted to right them again. After this, she went back to the coat check and deposited her jacket.

Starting the journey all over and aware this time of the hazards, she proceeded stiffly through the aisle of plants to stand at last and rather stupidly at a now hushed table of raised brows. She glanced wordlessly from face to face, and then over to the window seat whose occupant also seemed somewhat stupefied by the performance. At least she had the wherewithal to nod with a smile and go back to her book. Whereas, at her own table, The Land Of Obvious, Lydia's colleagues sat with their jaws agog, gaping at her and expecting an explanation.

C'mon ta my howz, my howz-ah c'mon...someone finally thought to give her a chair...I'm gonna give ya candy...she winked at them and smiled sheepishly...gonna give ya...everything's fine.

"Death to the rubber trees!" declared Delilah.

Everyone clapped and resumed their conversations.

"What," she muttered to Lydia, "you don't get enough attention?"

"I guess not!"

"You're flushed. Is that from your stunning entrance or did something happen today?"

"It was stunning, wasn't it?"

"It was an abomination unto me and I forbid you to do it again."

"I can't make any promises, Del."

"Then we shall have to get you a net." She handed her a glass.

A net? Lydia laughed, sipped her wine and picked at the appetizers. Yah! A net. Wouldn't that be nice? She realized they had all been seated one table closer to the window than they were last week and she searched the room for the usual suspect.

She found the waiter examining the row of plants in the walkway. Evidently he was satisfied that they were unharmed because he grinned when he discovered her watching him and made a rolling motion with his hands as he headed toward the bar. She stared at the row of glistening plants. They seemed to be trembling or laughing. She should ask him, ask him about the blond at the window.

"And now, if Dame Beaumont will kindly pay attention."

"Yes, Del, I am paying attention." She turned around, surprised to see the waiter already at her table.

"This comes to you anonymously," he announced with an empty face.

(Anonymous? Get out.) She took the small glass goblet from his tray and swirled its contents. Yellow-yield.

"Cognac," he said, still holding out his tray.

Cognac? Lydia glanced toward the bar. No one was claiming the gift. (Anonymous, c'mon?) The waiter's face was impregnable, the eyes suggesting only that it would be unthinkable for her to refuse the drink. Friends staring now. She felt conspicuous. She brought the cognac to her lips and swallowed it.

Fire. Fire in her mouth, on her tongue, smoldering in the back of her throat, down into her center. Fiery sweet. The blond was reading. What a delicious way to burn, Lydia was thinking. She smiled nervously and cleared her throat.

"A very good year," the waiter said. He leveled his tray and she placed the emptied glass on it. "Excellent," he whispered, leaving her aflame while anonymous looked on with hidden pleasure.

A clear day...sun's rising with Sinatra...ten o'clock and...morning and...whoa, the phone...oh, it's just Sinatra...Sinatra ringing on a clear day...daylight and...how wondrous and...astounding that...the phone of her being...outshines every wow...she felt part of...every mountain, sea or phone...she could hear...from far and near...the phone she never ever heard before...the phone was ringing...on a clear day...on a clear

day...ten in the morning and...she could see for...ever...the phone...and ever...was ringing...and ever...was ringing...and ever...and eh...ver...more...click.

Lydia rolled over. The sun was streaming into the bedroom. It was ten o'clock and she had overslept. She shot out of bed remembering the work she had brought home for the weekend and with some trepidation searched the apartment for the briefcase which she had a sneaking suspicion she would not find. She was right.

Reflecting back at her in the bathroom mirror she found a sloppy version of herself and she lingered over it awhile finally deciding it was sexy. She went out to the kitchen and loaded up the coffee maker. The briefcase was undoubtedly at the bar. She picked up the phone, thought better of it and reset the receiver. The gurgling sound and the smell of the coffee set her stomach rumbling and she played hide-and-seek with the refrigerator for a few minutes, then slammed the door in resignation.

Passing through the living room she followed the telltale path of drunkenly discarded clothes leading into the bedroom. She snatched them up along her way and quickly threw them into a hamper. It was getting to be a bad habit but it didn't look like she was going to make the bed today, either. She rummaged in the closet for something casual, glancing over her shoulder and out the window to guess at the temperature. Hot, hot, hot. She settled on a light gray angora v-neck and a pair of black slacks.

Good enough, she said, having arranged herself into some semblance of order. She looked at her watch. Eleven. The briefcase.

Probably happens all the time, Lydia thought, hastily gulping a cup of coffee. She got up from the counter and turned the coffee machine off. Her financials had been delivered; she tripped over them on the way out of the apartment. She held open the door and unceremoniously kicked them inside and then locked the door behind her. Waiting for the elevator she stole another look at the time. Half past eleven now. If she walked fast, she could get there before noon. It wasn't that far to go.

She ran, walked, ran the fifteen or so blocks to Frank's Place and when, breathlessly, she stepped inside, she congratulated herself.

The waiter smiled that smile of his and this morning she didn't mind it.

The blond smiled as well, nodding in recognition. Lydia hoped it was a good thing that she was memorable to her, wincing a little at the recollection of her pratfall, the death of a rubber tree ballet's premiere performance of the night before.

She inquired about the briefcase only to learn it had been given to one of her friends for safekeeping. It was no longer in the bar.

"A blond-haired woman?" she pressed, hopefully describing Delilah to the waiter.

"That's the one," the waiter said.

That's all right then, she thought, and when he asked her if she was planning on lunch, she affirmed, once again indicating that she would be most comfortable against the wall.

She found the dining room bathed in sunlight, the window seat aglow in it. Lydia sat shaded in the shelter of her own table for one and breathed a sigh of complete satisfaction. It had been such a long time ago, she couldn't even recall how long since she had felt contentment. It was the wholesomeness of the noonday surroundings, she mused over dessert. It worked like Zen.

In the elevator Delilah asked, "Who'd you leave with? I haven't seen you like this in awhile."

[&]quot;There's someone waiting for you in lobby," said the doorman.

[&]quot;Oh? I bet I know who that is," Lydia replied. She found Delilah there, in good spirits, too.

[&]quot;What'd you fall on your head last night?" Delilah asked, holding up the briefcase with a wry grin.

[&]quot;C'mon, Del. I'll make some coffee."

[&]quot;Don't I wish. I just ate. Are you hungry?"

[&]quot;I brought biscotti. Mmmm-vanilla! Where did you eat?"

Lydia pushed open the apartment door and they both entered.

[&]quot;Oh, just down the block," she lied. "Nothing fancy, you know."

Delilah dropped the briefcase in a chair by the door. "I tried to call you about that this morning." She eyed Lydia. "Jesus, this place is a mess," she said in horror.

Lydia got the coffee going and then stood in the living room next to Delilah.

"It is!" she agreed with a hint of delight. "I've been so busy."

Delilah's eyes narrowed. "Sit down, Liddy. We're gonna talk."

Lydia sat on the couch. She was not exactly opposed to it anymore.

Delilah set herself up with coffee and biscotti on the floor. "Okay. Talk."

"Del? Just like that? About what?"

"Talk."

Lydia went into the kitchen, returning a minute later with her own cup of coffee.

"Out with it, please."

"I'm thinking," she said, positioning herself on the couch. She took a few sips and looked thoughtfully out the window before speaking. "What do you make of someone going into a bar alone and just reading, reading all the time?" she asked without looking.

"Someone going alone?" Delilah knew who. "I don't make anything about it at all. And you?"

"Tell me, Del. What's it mean to you? Objectively. Why would someone do that?"

Delilah whistled and they both laughed.

"Well, if I had to guess, and it's probably a pretty good guess, Liddy, I'd say it meant that someone was fleeing someone else. At least for a few hours, if you catch my drift."

She did. She stared out the window again. That's probably a good guess.

"I'm going to point out something else that's obvious here, Ms. Beaumont."

"What is it, Del?"

"She's a woman."

Lydia scrunched up her face and opened her eyes wide at her. (And?)

"Liddy...?" Delilah got up off the floor and sat on the other end of the couch. She ran her hand through her hair in mild agitation. (Just wide eyes, no words?) Well, she thought, chuckling under her breath and leaning against the armrest.

"Well?" Lydia prompted.

"You did fall on your head," Delilah answered. She waved her empty coffee mug meaningfully and Lydia went out to the kitchen and refilled it.

"Why do you say that?" Lydia shouted from the kitchen. "Tell me why," she repeated, handing Delilah the mug and sitting beside her.

Delilah blew across it and stared at Lydia over its rim. Lydia smiled back.

"Liddy...she's a beautiful woman. But you can bet your life she has someone, a woman like that."

Lydia drummed the pillow with her fingers. "But she doesn't wear a ring."

"Ugh! Wedding rings are not surgically attached, you know?"

Yes, she knew that. "But, Del, she never leaves with anyone. She's never with anyone." She avoided Delilah's eyes.

"Liddy?" came the vexed response. "How do you know all that?"

How did she know all that? She wasn't really sure.

"What are we talking about here, anyway?" Delilah demanded. "Do I understand what we're talking about?"

Lydia threw her arms up in the air. "I don't know."

The pouting lips. Hadn't she seen that look before? "There's easier pickings, Liddy."

Lydia sighed. "I'm not saying that. I simply find her interesting."

"Interesting? Let's try it this way. Have you ever even talked to her? You know. Hi, my name is Lydia Beaumont and I'm eager to ruin my life?"

"Ruin my life?"

"Or, hello my name is Lydia and I will not clean or bathe until you sleep with me." She swung her arm, implicating Lydia by her cluttered rooms.

Lydia clasped her hands together and took in her friend's amused face. "You think?" she asked. The place was a mess. She hadn't bathed today.

"That you want to sleep with her...am I getting this right? Yes, I think you want to sleep with her. Two straight women, for godsakes—you're after the mismatch of the century, Liddy."

Silence.

"Besides, that woman's trouble. I can feel it."

"What do you mean? How can a woman be trouble?"

"How? You're adorable. Trust me, kid, she's trouble."

"I do trust you. I find her attractive, that's all. That's as far as it goes."

"Attractive she is. But if it's a one-nighter you need, then order it from the bar. They'd be happy to oblige you, pardner, and you know it."

She groaned in response.

"That's my learned opinion, Liddy. Upon which, I urge you to rely."

Lydia sighed and went over to the window, her gaze wandering restlessly over the cityscape. Her drive was coming back. Out of commission for so long, she had hardly noticed it was missing till now. Now it was flooding through her veins again, with nowhere to direct it. Unlike Delilah, she had an aversion to picking up strangers, had no real knack for anonymous one-night stands. Even when she was younger she would always back out at the last heated minute. In fact, she was practically famous for that. Or infamous, who cares? Under her own pressure she had found herself reevaluating those apprehensions. She was at times researching the suits lined up eight to the bar. Her studies were, at best, inconclusive.

The sun was warm through the glass and she lifted her face up to it and shut her eyes, the heat of its rays on her lids, holding them down, heavy and almost contented. They glistened in the sun, lustrous. She loved sunshine.

"Del, I can't. I've tried."

It had finally reached that intolerable state where navigating herself through it was as treacherous as a minefield. The place looked like a college dorm instead of a grown woman's apartment and Lydia was too embarrassed to hire a maid.

She stood in the middle of it on a Saturday morning armed with an array of cleaning products and implements and wearing a mildly perplexed expression, blue jeans and an old sweatshirt with faded letters imprinted on the front that read, "I stink therefore I am." It was too late for wondering how it all had happened. She just had to clean it up.

She popped in a CD and began with the living room because it required the most attention, discovering in and around the couch a host of items one might find useful in the kitchen. Forks, knives, a service for twenty, if one didn't mind mismatched plates. She stacked everything that belonged to the kitchen in the sink and continued the treasure hunt, eventually coming across an unopened letter from her mother bearing a three-month-old postmark.

Lydia took off her rubber gloves and ripped it open guiltily. It was the same stuff, a blah-blah written in the flawless penmanship that all the women of that generation seem to have, talking in smooth flowing paragraphs about the sorts of things only those women have time to consider: her lawns, her gardens, the grandchildren she now accepted she would never have, as if it was possibly her own decision to make or accept. Lydia laughed out loud. The woman was relentless. She scanned the rest of it quickly. Not a mention of her dad. Well, he deserved that. She pinned the letter over her computer so she would remember to send the old gadfly an e-mail.

It was amazing how little progress she had made by noon. In some ways, what with the throwaways standing in teetering stacks and all, it actually looked worse.

It was just a temporary *phase* the room was going through, Lydia said, trying to bolster herself by using a favorite expression of her mother's. She stopped in her tracks when she heard it—having it come out of her own mouth was a bit alarming.

Poor mom

It would be wrong to send her an e-mail, she decided then. She retrieved the letter from her office and taped it next to the living room phone instead. She'd try to give her a call this evening, she promised, as she tied her running shoes and grabbed a wool hat, heading off late for lunch.

Outside, the cold grabbed at her and, having forgotten a coat, she thought it best to jog the fifteen blocks to Frank's Place. She showed up hot and sweaty and loitered at the door until the waiter finally recognized her.

"And therefore you are," he said.

She gave him a puzzled look and started for her table.

"Madam?" He gestured meaningfully with his finger at the side of his face and when Lydia failed to comprehend he took her arm and discreetly led her to the mirror.

She laughed self-consciously at a silly reflection and wiped off an unflattering smudge of some unknown substance with the tissue he had offered.

"Do you need a comb?" he suggested benignly.

The hat. She pulled it off and smiled shyly as she took the comb from his hand.

"What's for lunch?" she whispered, excitedly fixing her hair.

"It's a surprise," he said, escorting her to her table. "Like your outfit," he teased.

"Oh, my god," she said, suddenly remembering the sophomoric sweatshirt and spying the blond turning her head toward the window, her amusement palpable. "I was cleaning."

He held the chair for her and she sat down.

"We see that."

When you have nothing, it's easier to see what you need.

In her cleanings on Sunday, Lydia Beaumont came across an abandoned pair of gold cufflinks and a light blue dress shirt, both items belonging to a certain tall-dark-handsome named Rio Joe. She'd be damned before she would ever give them back to him and risk being reminded by one of those awful sneers that he had once been the master of *her* flame. She deposited them in the garbage chute and on Monday morning arranged to have the apartment completely emptied.

Weekdays. Fridays. Saturdays. In "a coupla weeks" the movers had come and emptied her apartment. Had she thought of the blond in Frank's Place in quite the vivid terms that Delilah had expressed? Is empty clean she wondered, bobbing through traffic like a robin in spring, on her way to lunch. Maybe nobody noticed her funny walk. The spring in it. Just Delilah. Crunch. She felt a foot beneath her own and apologized to its owner. When the red, red, robin goes bob, bob, bobbing. Where was spring this year? Lydia thought of Delilah's warnings. Frying pans and fire. She was hungry. Starving. Lunch. Perfectly harmless.

To her credit she had built many a fortune, including her own, on being patient and methodical. She never panicked, she always rode it out. Those were fine attributes for a financial strategist and they served her well at Soloman-Schmitt, but they were not much of an asset in the case where she was dying to meet someone, dying to know their name. In this situation she was out of her field of expertise, in uncharted territory and although the waiter seemed somewhat of an ally, Lydia was too cautious to enlist his aid in such an endeavor. It was prudent to be cautious, general principles of probability and statistics informed her that the chances of the blond reciprocating her affections were slim to none. At least, for the moment, she was in her world, albeit less than an acquaintance. At least, for the moment, the woman acknowledged her existence there, smiling, sometimes even winking, other times mouthing hello over the edge of her book.

Empty. Just a mattress, computer, telephone, answering machine, coffee maker...Lydia cradled her cup and contemplated her empty rooms, her next move. Should probably tell Delilah about this, she thought, smiling at the anticipated reaction. At least it's clean, she might say in response. Is that all she should say?

18

Another cocktail party at the lavish suburban villa of Mr. and Mrs. Paula Treadwell. Paula decided to play cupid with a forty-something divorcee who had the paucity of mind to bring his children along. The unhappy family of three and VP Treadwell hovered tactlessly at Lydia's elbows all night, he with his my-children-need-a-mother eyes, the children with their we-already-have-a-mother eyes, Paula with her he's-so-wonderfully-stable eyes. Lydia found it necessary to excuse herself and hid away for more than an hour in the upstairs library, drinking cognac with a few associates and discussing ad nauseam the consumer pricing index and prime lending rate. Later, when she got the nerve to go back downstairs, Mr. Dad reappeared at her side. This time he told his kids to scram and she spent the rest of her sorry evening dodging his clumsy innuendo and not so subtle proposals for "polite sex." Polite sex? No thanks. Sly Rio Joe had spoiled her for that, she realized, in a cab at ten o'clock, heading for home alone.

Chief financial strategist for Soloman-Schmitt, Lydia Beaumont, kept her eyes open at happy hours, but nothing appealed to her. Nothing in a three-piece suit, that is. She was up on a shelf somewhere waiting to be brought down. She knew that, but so what? Get it up, Delilah urged her. She laughed her off.

The grueling work week seemed somehow shorter now, less demanding. Still the same nonsense, though. She stayed on the sidelines of trouble, keeping VP Treadwell enlightened, monitoring, constantly monitoring illicit things. It was bound to come to a head someday. When it does we'll pop it like a zit, Paula bragged. Fine.

She wasn't depressed about work anymore, didn't mind the empty rooms that greeted her when she came home. Fridays, Saturdays. She searched her catalogues for new furnishings, hoping to be moved by the offerings. Moved. She was moved. But not materially. Move. Moving.

She had been wrongly charmed. This, Lydia frequently suspected, was the case. This should greatly trouble her. It did not greatly trouble her. She was deliberately abandoning herself to a mistaken possibility. That was not good. It was a fantastic mistake. It felt good. It made her feel strangely connected to people. She was making a mistake. She was no different than anyone else. Did it hang off her sleeve? This should greatly trouble her. It was colossal, fantastic, maybe it even hung off her sleeve. She looked to the blond to stop it. It was her fault. No, she didn't stop it. Indeed, her eyes were always warm. Wasn't there a kiss in them? Kisses. Was it real or imagined? Weaker by the day. Unmistakable. Her head was dizzy. Her head swam. She kept all this secret. Jesus, how her head swam. Morning, noon and night. Is this platonic?

She did not know what was possible or impossible anymore. She could not conclusively discount that she may be in love with the occupant of the window seat. She had no idea what to do with her apartment. She couldn't find her CD player now. She must have sent it off with the movers. She could play CD's on her computer. Oh, that's right. That's all right then. She couldn't swear she wasn't in love. Thank god nobody noticed or asked her. She hadn't told Delilah yet about the furniture. That she had no furniture! God! Did she know anymore why she got rid of the furniture? She had no recollection of having possessed that urge. It had been an impulse. She had an impulse now. To scream with joy.

What had first attracted Lydia to her penthouse apartment was its large and airy rooms. She had liked, too, its lack of nooks and crannies, its white undecorated walls, the hard slate-gray flooring throughout, how the click of her heels as she walked on that surface pierced the solemn air of the apartment and traveled into every room. The swift report issuing back, telling her of the vast emptiness that surrounded her was, at that time, pleasant and reassuring. It did not speak of isolation then, but rather of wide open spaces, room to live in, as opposed to the cramped and cluttered accommodations she had been used to before.

It was the vast emptiness she wished to preserve, she had informed her decorator then. He had understood this, furnishing the penthouse with his sharply functional and utilitarian sensibilities, the kitchen completely in stainless steel. Over the large, otherwise sunny living room windows he had hung serious and

industrial looking curtains. Devoid of pattern, their color was consistent with that of the floor and with the overall palette, the mostly cold grays of fabrics and metals that were sparsely arranged throughout her rooms.

That was years ago and Lydia had never disturbed it, except on one occasion, just a few months ago, when she had contacted the decorator again, for the purpose of selecting a rug or "something soft" to put on her hard living room floor. He had selected an industrial weave "inspired" (he said) by the "mood" of the place and the color of the furniture and floor. At least it was soft.

But her interiors had become architecturally undigestable and now Lydia found her penthouse cold and drab. Its repetitive emptiness and its nuanced reminders of emptiness were depressing and uninspiring and she felt on edge there, unable to relax. She had come to hate the uncomfortable couch, was repelled by the cold metals and rough fabrics of her chairs, despised the oversized paintings of polka dots that had been selected to liven the living room. That was all there was to it. The place, she had finally concluded, was simply a mockery of life. Emptiness was not a real life, not what she was after. At least not anymore. She began wondering about real people and how real people furnished real homes.

Lydia's decision to redo the penthouse from the floor up caught Delilah off guard. She had been encouraged to believe by her friend's recent demeanor that the crisis had passed and that she was on the road to recovery from...well, from whatever it was that ailed her. Delilah gasped into the receiver. Lydia had emptied the posh apartment of all her furniture except a mattress.

```
"But, Liddy. Why?"

"I hated it, that's why."

"But you spent a fortune on it."

"I don't care about the money, Del."

"Just a mattress? Liddy! How will you live?"

"Plus I'm having parquet floors installed this week!"

"Floors—Liddy! You can't stay there then. When will they be done?"
```

The line was quiet. It was done. She knew Delilah was accepting it, probably smiling already at the entertaining picture she had created. Lydia Beaumont, interior renovator extraordinaire, covered with paint and—

```
"Liddy, you're nuts. Get some things together. You stay here till it's done." "Okay. Tomorrow, though, Del. I'm leaving for lunch now." "Where are you going? I'll meet you."
```

"A week and a half they say. I'm going to do the rest after that."

Lydia hesitated. "Nah, meet me at the paint store, Del. The one on the corner. Yeah, that's the one. Oh, it's no biggee, wait till you see. I'm picking them out by myself, Del. I'm thinking antiques. I don't know yet. One piece at a time. I don't care. Del...meet me at two. Yes, I have clothes. Two. See ya!"

Empty window seat at Frank's. Lydia stood at the door watching as the waiter sat an older couple there. It instantly put a damper on her spirits and she wondered elaborately over the reason why the woman couldn't lunch today. No clue from the waiter. He was his typical affable self as he escorted her to her regular table where she then lingered indecisively over the menu and unknowingly cast resentful glances over the edge of it and across the room.

```
Presently he returned and handed her a drink. She recognized it immediately.
```

```
"Cognac?"
"Yes, cognac."
"Anonymous?"
"But of course."
```

She grinned and took a small sip. "Mmmmm. And what do you think anonymous would want me to have for lunch today?"

```
"Well," said the waiter, "I can ask for you, if you give me a minute."

Ask?
```

He didn't give her a chance to take it back. She watched in bewilderment as the waiter placed a phone call from behind the bar, watched his amiable facial expressions as he conspired with the unknown party on the

other end of the line. Oh, no, she worried. No time for this. Had she unwittingly made herself the object of romantic subterfuge? She downed the cognac and waited anxiously for him to get off the phone so she could call the whole thing off.

He was in no hurry.

Fun with food. First cognac and now lunch. One missing blond. Lydia suspected a connection. There's a connection. It's obviously connected. She glanced at the waiter. Only he could say. He hung up and with an inscrutable expression went into the kitchen. She laughed to herself then. Forget asking him. What if there's no connection at all? Well. You can't be debauched by a lunch, she told herself, the cognac nestling warm in her empty stomach and slowly going to her head. She settled into her chair and surrendered.

It was not long after exiting for the kitchen that the waiter returned to her side delivering with a satisfied grin a chilled asparagus salad drenched in fresh raspberry vinaigrette. Finger food. Was she drunk or was there something suggestive about this? She blushed at its arrival. He set a fluted glass down beside it and made to leave again.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Champagne."

She smiled and shook her head. In deep. "Thank you," she said, taking a sip and waiting till he was out of sight before nibbling at the asparagus.

The lunch entree arrived and was not to be outdone by a salad. It sat flamboyantly before her. She gulped at the bubbly and tentatively inspected a French pancake overstuffed with creamed oysters, dripping with a butter sauce.

She sighed and whispered, "Impressive. And this is?"

"A crepe, madam."

Mmmmm.

"Enjoy."

She did.

The finale came as a bright, reddish liquid.

"Orange fruit soup."

Oh, sure. She brought a spoon of it to her lips and swallowed. Delicious.

"The check is taken care of," he said later, refusing her card.

"Oh, my god," she said wistfully, "I could get used to this."

He smiled and without a slip said, "I'm sure your benefactor will be glad to know that."

She faltered at the door and he assisted her with her jacket. The question begged but she didn't dare ask it. Instead, she thanked him and stepped outside. It had become spring without her knowing it. She was hot under all her clothes.

"Something warm."

The clerk brought Lydia another batch of color chips and she oohed and aahed over olives and mustards for an hour while Delilah looked on skeptically.

She preferred white or off-white combinations to greens or yellows and warned emphatically that the wrong paint will make the space seem too small.

Lydia wanted that.

"If you're not careful it'll end up looking like a Hungarian whorehouse."

"Hah! I've made worse mistakes!"

They spent the rest of the day walking the waterfront, scoping out the curios and antique shops. In one of them Lydia found a pair of black netted gloves still in their box.

"Now where would you wear these?" she asked Delilah. She was infatuated.

"Ooh, slinky."

"Silk," uttered the blue-haired proprietor. "They are of silk."

Lydia couldn't place the woman's accent. She had a sly, sophisticated face covered with age spots and wrinkles, and the overall patina of wealthier days, albeit faded.

She slipped one of the gloves onto Lydia's hand.

"For the bedroom," the woman said in a sultry tone. "Special."

The universe contracted and then expanded again.

"A gift for the woman he wants in his bed," she added. "You don't wear them too long, I don't think."

"I thought we were looking for furniture, Liddy."

Something for the bedroom...

"I'll take them."

The sun came out and Delilah went to greet it.

"Good luck," said the shopkeeper as Lydia was leaving.

The bell over the shop door tinkled as it closed behind her.

"I couldn't resist, Delilah."

"I see that. Now all you need is a dresser to put them in."

The Dow was barely three thousand when Lydia had started out, and even that, her father had assured her, was astonishing. In those days a four or five-hundred-point fall was considered a collapse and it still made her nervous when it happened.

Work was a rough ride from Monday through Wednesday and she spent most of that time fielding panic calls from jittery investors.

On Thursday afternoon, even though it was against policy, she turned her answering machine on and left work early.

She was staying with Delilah and hadn't been to the apartment since last Sunday. The contractors had begun the floor installation Monday morning as promised and she was as excited as a child for Christmas, even though it was nowhere near completion.

On arrival, she found only the parlor and part of the living room done, but she nevertheless beamed with joy when she saw how it brightened the place.

The foreman kept the men working, though it was clear they would rather have stood around bragging about their techniques. He took that pleasure for himself while he cast predictions about the time schedule and repetitively reminded her that even when they were done with the actual installation there would still remain an extensive cleaning and the expert application of three coats of finish.

"You shouldn't walk on it for a coupla' days," he said.

That was logical but disappointing.

"Specially not with them." He pointed at her heels and grinned.

She thanked him and headed back to Delilah's just a few blocks away.

"Hey! You're in a good mood."

"Del, wait until you see it."

"I can't wait. Come and tell me about it."

She was wearing a mud mask in preparation for a dinner date.

"It's gorgeous."

"The crew or the floor?"

"Oh, it's all beautiful, Del. What's on your face?"

"Nothing. I'm green with envy, Liddy."

"Each room is going to have a different pattern...but I can't walk on it for three days after it's done."

"Oh? Pass me that. Thanks. Can you crawl?"

"I'm just gonna roll on it when it's done."

"Yah! With no furniture to get in the way. That'll be easy."

"Got to paint the place first, Del. Get ready."

"What do you think I'm doing here? Isn't this about the same color?"

Delilah left around six-thirty.

"If all goes according to my plan, Liddy, I'll see you tomorrow."

She gave one last look in the mirror.

"If not, I'll be home later to masturbate."

"Del!"

"Don't wait up!" she shouted gleefully.

The closing door and the now quiet apartment marked the first opportunity for Lydia to be alone in almost a week and she inhaled the moment like a breath of fresh air.

Suppertime.

The unrewarding search in Delilah's refrigerator brought forth the image of her Saturday feast again and she worried anew about the empty window seat and what it all might mean. She opened and closed the cupboard doors searching in vain for something to eat. Nothing in the pantry, either. Delilah Domestic she is not. It was foolish perhaps to go too far with conclusions, she reminded herself about the lunch, as she looked for the freshness date on a box of crackers. Toss it, she said, looking for the garbage can. Hungry and nothing but fungus in the fridge. After all, she really didn't know anything. The benefactor, so identified by the waiter, need not be the blond, in which case it would be smart to stop playing with food and to exercise a bit more caution. Need not be. That blond.

But who else could it be? A man? What man? Ugh, a married man. She hadn't considered that possibility. Would a married man be that discreet? She pondered it, her head in the freezer. Nah, wouldn't a man be confident enough to publicly solicit her, married or not? Of course, she decided, rummaging through frozen lumps of aluminum foil. Whereas a woman...a woman trying to seduce another woman? She thought of the black silk gloves. She would never attempt it, not even with silk. That would take balls. Or tits, she laughed, still reluctant to rule it out. She discovered a triangular shaped wrapper in the back of the icebox and opened it out of curiosity. Pizza. Lydia cringed at the idea of it. Knowing Del, she thought, this could be ten years old. She stuck the slice into the microwave and peered at it through the glass with as much surety as a student performing a science project.

Ding!

The food held up under inspection and she sat down on the couch to eat it. Of course this meal didn't compare to creamed oysters, but that was no surprise.

Del was right, she thought, chewing gingerly and sliding an old movie into the VCR. She must have somebody. The reason why she wasn't there on Saturday could easily be that she was with someone else, somewhere else...

Lydia ruminated slowly.

It was a bit tough and hard to swallow.

And the movie was stupid and the food sucked.

And the bed was uncomfortable and the sheets scratched.

And she hated not knowing what to think anymore.

The week closed high at Soloman-Schmitt. Hopes of a merger. Hopes. Rumors. Fears. And lots and lots of speculation.

Whatever it takes sometimes.

She missed her.

It was proving chancy lately, counting on Frank's for glimpses of the blond. She wasn't there Friday night nor the subsequent Saturday for lunch and Lydia found that the vacuum created by her absence could not be filled with anything else, no matter how exciting it was to see the progress in the apartment, with all the raw wood seeping through it, filling the place like the rising tide, no matter how busy she kept herself so that her mind wouldn't wander after the woman.

There was no substitute for her Saturday ritual and she could not go home yet. That's what she was inclined to do when she felt like this, lock herself in. Soon, she said, trying to reassure herself. Soon she could move back into her penthouse. Soon the woman would return and this time she would speak to her.

Reconstruction was taking longer than projected, however, and Lydia was advised by the foreman that the crew would require another week past the original deadline and that he was terribly sorry for the inconvenience.

This did not help matters any, but it didn't stress Delilah, either, who insisted that she was not put out by the delay and rather enjoyed having a roommate. It made her feel so young, she claimed.

That being the case, Lydia affected the most cheerful impersonation of herself as possible for Delilah, it being successful enough to prevent any skillful probing, but a far cry from an actual cure for what she was coming down with.

She made it to Friday, but the blond was still missing from Frank's Place. Saturday, the same. No more speculation now, she knew without a doubt that she was in love with her because without a doubt she was heartsick.

All throughout the following week a great black shadow hung over Lydia and by that Friday there remained no activity left which could promise any comfort or relief from it. The inexplicable disappearance was worse than anything Joe had put her through. It was almost impossible not to scream out loud. Moreover, she could tell that Delilah suspected her again and was once more growing concerned about her mood. There must be something I can do to get over this, she told herself. Something to alleviate the angst. But she couldn't even bring herself to imagine what it could be.

Twice she approached the waiter, tongue-tied but nevertheless prepared to ask about the woman. Both times she lost her confidence and bailed out without a word, cursing her cowardice all through the subsequent sleepless nights.

She—whoever she was—was gone. And Lydia Beaumont—whoever she was—had been all wrong in judging the matter. She was wrong to have underestimated her feelings, wrong to try to wait out the attraction like it was an affliction she expected to recover from, wrong to hope it would eventually disappear without leaving a mark. There was a disappearance all right. She just hadn't contemplated this kind of vanishing.

As it was impossible in such closed quarters to escape from her friend's oversight, Lydia seriously considered going to a hotel, but in the end was paralyzed by the idea of offending Delilah. And although the work was finally coming to completion there, she additionally berated herself for having disrupted her life by throwing herself out of her own apartment.

This negativity was at last fully palpable. Lydia Beaumont was not herself again and Delilah knew why. She had seen the abandoned window seat the last few Fridays and the pall it had cast over Lydia. You didn't have to be a psychotherapist to decipher the meaning of that.

It was eccentric, not something Delilah would have thought she was capable of, but her tastes in lovers had always bordered on the exotic and she was not impetuous, certainly never fickle. There was, very likely, no way of undoing this.

She pondered the matter in silence as she observed the suffering.

So close on the heels of a broken heart, the last thing her friend needed was a full-blown case of love sickness, yet there it was, as plain as the olive in the martini she was having with Lydia at Frank's Place Friday night. The woman at the window seat still unaccounted for and clearly not forgotten.

Delilah watched Lydia going through the motions and letting workplace neophytes rub at her elbows. She watched her harpooning the olive in her drink, playing catch-and-release with it until it was finally mutilated, and then ordering another one, abandoning the first drink, otherwise untouched. She saw her clamp her teeth when she smiled, talking through them as if they had been wired shut. After about an hour of this performance she grabbed her by the arm and led her outside.

"Let's go home, Dame Beaumont."

They walked a few blocks without speaking.

"I'm sure she's on vacation, that's all," Delilah stated.

Lydia disposed of it with a silent shrug and continued counting the cracks in the sidewalks, thinking of the spring and what on earth had taken it so long. It was nice to not have to walk home alone, she thought, and she shot Delilah a thankful glance, but declined to comment on her remark.

"When I was a little girl-"

"I am not a little girl, Del."

"I know you're not—let's stop in here for some ice cream—you're a woman in love."

She was taken aback. "I don't want any-how do you know?"

"Because I'm not a little girl, either. Who doesn't want ice cream after a martini?" she asked, gently pushing Lydia inside the deli door.

Delilah decided the flavor and they went home to eat it.

"I can't eat. What did you mean, Del? Who goes on vacation now?"

"Yum-oh, you're depriving yourself here-she's obviously on vacation."

"Go on, you have it." She watched Delilah wolf the ice cream.

"Vacation, Liddy. I'm sure of it."

Lydia weighed the possibility. It didn't make sense to her.

"That never occurred to you, did it, Liddy?"

(NO.) "What am I going to do, Del?"

"Last bite?"

Lydia shook her head no.

"You need a plan."

"Plan? How do you plan for this?"

Delilah laughed. "Tell me all that you've done about it."

"Nothing," Lydia admitted.

Delilah threw the empty container and the spoon into her sink. "Oh, really? That much?"

At first, though she had no idea how she got there, it was quite pleasant. It was nice to be alone with just the gentle slapping of the waves against the little boat. Nice, the butterflies in her stomach as she lifted and fell with each wave, the fluttering sound of the solitary sail in the gentle sea breeze.

And it was so sunny.

But then the wind suddenly picked up and the ocean swelled around her. There were huge waves now rocking the boat, each time lifting it a little higher, each wave bringing her closer to the darkened sky and depositing her harder against the water.

The butterflies gave way to sea sickness. The boat jerked from side to side, rising and falling, groaning and listing. She saw the mast nearly touching the surface, felt the craft threatening to capsize. And from under the hull, there came a thud. Once. Twice. At the sides and then below her again. She could hear it through the wind and waves whipping at her, stinging her face and body. She flipped over. There it was behind her. Something was in the water, bashing against her boat, trying to see what the craft was made of, testing its worthiness.

Something big.

The waves crashed violently over the deck. She was tossed to the back and clung to the edge there, face up and drenched. The boat was filling. Over her head the wind tore at the remnants of her sail. She heard the crack of the mast and the rigging as it ripped free and the persistent thud, thud, thud of the thing, something that was circling her beneath the water.

Lydia was damp and inextricably bound up in her bed sheets when she awoke from her nightmare. It was still dark and she was not sure of the date or even what time it was.

But it was five o'clock on a Saturday morning.

And everything was fine.

Just a dream.

It was a morning opulent enough to rouse even the summer gods from hibernation and they woke on such a day no different than the mortals under their dominion, ambitious and edgy, eager to exercise their authority.

They stirred and stretched their powerful arms, reaching far into the brilliant sky around them. They squinted at their clocks, grinned and reset them, time arbitrarily altered just for fun.

Just for fun they tickled the universe in all its sensitive places and made it laugh again. Below them, they lengthened the day.

If humanity suddenly lurched at the whim of these capricious fingers, if its endeavors now moved only in fits and starts, if all its boats rocked free from their moorings, it was just business as usual returning, the industry of fair weather gods determined to rule their kingdom and to test their subjects' mettle. They were going to have fun this year.

The cherry trees were summoned by winged messengers and together they blasted a bright pink alert across the city. Indoors the wallflowers glowed and houseplants bloomed, bursting forth like popcorn. They stretched longingly toward their windows. The high and low places admitted the sun and displayed their finest linens. Decorated tables were sent outdoors and stood at attention on the sidewalks. Silver and gold settings relinquished their tarnish and gleamed on their own accord.

And at Frank's Place the waiter opened the patio.

Lydia Beaumont languished out there Saturday with zero expectations of the hot new spring. Still, she appreciated the sunshine. It was warm on her skin, stimulating to her blood, its heat long awaited. She basked in it, listening without too much resentment to the birds singing their I love you's. She even watched them up in their branches as they flirted and played tag.

Beside her table, on the sidewalk, flowed a multitude of fellow sun worshippers, bedecked, as she was, in their pre-summer best. She admired their flowers, their stripes, all the seersucker suits marching or meandering to similar churches like Frank's or wandering aimlessly, just to show off. She searched their ranks without meaning to, a habit by now. Searching for her favorite blond.

She found her, too, her body reacting first to her discovery, the heart leaping in her chest, the knees going weak with adrenaline, the arms wanting to lift up in the air, to hail the woman or hold her or both, the cords in the neck tense with a restrained yell, a whoop of joy trapped in there. She watched the woman nearing, those green eyes hidden behind sunglasses, her own eyes glistening, dewy with desire, the object of complete desire appearing in the flesh now, in full focus, her image once more in alignment with the one held so long in her mind's eye, emblazoned there. She processed the woman anew, her synapses fantastically tripping with information, her brain's search engine declaring a perfect match.

The blond left the parade and selected the table adjacent to hers.

The waiter came out to greet her and she smiled wearily as he held her chair. He lifted the umbrella and she removed her glasses holding Lydia's gaze longer than usual.

Delilah was mistaken. The woman had not been on vacation, that was clear. She was not rested. Her eyes, typically bright and dancing, didn't have an ounce of joy in them today. Indeed, to Lydia, it looked as if she may have spent a good deal of the past month or so staying up late, crying. She waved with her book and whispered a soft hello. Lydia mouthed it back to her, her body leaning forward in a subconscious display of sympathy. The woman smiled then, laying her book on the table, her glasses on top of it. Something's on the tip of her tongue, Lydia thought. So say it.

The waiter reappeared with his menus and he read off the luncheon specials while the woman listened distracted. He seemed uneasy today as did the blond, Lydia observed. She threw around some scenarios in her mind trying to determine which one she could use to get herself at that table.

Behind her a commotion sounded in the street, squealing tires and honking horns. She turned as did the other patrons to see what was going on.

A yellow sports car screeched up to the curb alongside the patio. It idled a minute in its own exhaust and then finally emitted a long-legged beauty from the passenger side who nonchalantly hung over the open car window as she laughed and chatted with the driver. After a few moments, she stepped away from it, turned and began cutting a path through the tables of curious spectators on the patio. The car exited the same way it arrived.

She didn't need such a grand entrance. She was tall and commanding with exotic good looks, the type of girl they wrote songs about, that got attention even in crowds. Used to being stared at, she was dressed perfectly for it, so that you knew in an instant that her body was as flawless as her twenty-something face.

She was quite the girl, walking in a gliding manner as if her feet didn't actually touch the ground, floating as if she had wings. As she neared her table, Lydia thought she could detect a slight snarl in the girl's smile. It was, she noted, possibly the only defect in all that astonishing perfection.

"Helaine."

And a songster sang, Oh, that shark has...pearly teeth, dear...

Helaine? Out of the corner of her eye, Lydia saw the blond stiffen.

"Helaine," the girl cooed in a spoiled voice, stopping at the table next to Lydia's, bending to whisper in the tired blond's ear, her lips parting into a seductive smile for her audience... and she shows them pearly white...for "Helaine."

Daughter, Lydia hoped. Perhaps just her daughter?

The blond-Helaine-attempted a smile for the girl, failed.

Daughter, niece, sister, whatever, no. No resemblance. Girl too old. Blond too young, too nervous. LOVER. Lydia leaned back in her chair and took them both in, sighing sadly at the picture they made. Lovers. Obviously lovers. She now knew too much about the pretty blond in Frank's Place. Helaine, she repeated inaudibly. It rolled beautifully off the tongue. Helaine, a woman named Helaine, not reading anymore but listening and looking for all the world as if she was being eaten alive. And not fleeing, as Delilah had suggested, but probably waiting the whole time. A beautiful lover, it all made sense. Alone and waiting for her lover, a pretty dangerous looking thing, but young and beautiful nonetheless. Well, why not?

Helaine, Helaine, Helaine so-and-so. That rhymes with Joe, Lydia said, kicking herself. What a beautiful name. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman. And, if at all possible, the beautiful woman had become even more pale than when she first arrived. She put her sunglasses on again, grabbed her purse and glanced briefly in Lydia's direction before allowing herself to be lifted from her chair and escorted to the sidewalk.

Let it be, Lydia told herself as she watched the girl claiming her prize, wrapping her arms around the pale woman's waist, guiding her onto the sidewalk, taking her away, the blond slowly fading from view, never looking to her left or right, not once looking back.

Lovers. The couple stood across the street now, looking like day and night.

Worth waiting for, Lydia forced herself to admit. A perfect ten.

They stood now on the opposite side of the street, waiting. The girl raised a magnificent arm above her head, a cab pulled over, they were gone.

You know when that shark bites...gone...with those teeth there...probably for good, Lydia realized...there's never...never a trace of...gone for good.

For good, she murmured, wishing the stupid song would end. What's so good about it? She followed the cab with her eyes until it was swallowed by traffic.

The waiter-where the hell was the waiter?

The waiter had been missing in action and suddenly appeared stone-faced at the abandoned table. He dropped the umbrella and tucked a forsaken book and menu under his arm. Lydia lifted her hand to get his attention and, neglecting to smile, he acknowledged her, approaching her slowly, as if carrying ten trays.

She nodded quizzically at the book.

"Burns," he said in a flat tone.

"Burns?"

"The poet."

Burns. She smiled bitterly. Yeah, it sure did.

The week dragged her unwillingly along with it and Lydia was relieved Wednesday morning to get the good news that her parquet floors were finally done and ready to walk on. She had not shared her weekend revelations with Delilah and it suddenly seemed she could avoid it altogether, if she could just keep up appearances for a few more hours.

That same afternoon she got word from her antique dealer that the sofa she had been eagerly waiting for would be delivered this week.

The sweet old sofa. That was welcome news, too. Now she could throw herself down in it and cry.

She had been charmed on the spot by it, lying in it while the dealer went on and on about value and importance. Value, fine. But she was more attracted to its worn finish, its threadbare arms and comfortably depressed pillows. There were ancient stains joyously scattered among its fauna and flora that whispered of

good wine and fine food and it made the cheerful piece seem alive to her, that if she poked gently into its soft recesses she could get it to giggle and gossip.

She was in need of its good cheer; it would be there by Thursday afternoon.

For the rest of the day Lydia undertook to tie up the loose ends that had accumulated since winter. She came across Rio Joe's last cover letter, copied it and put the stinky original through the shredder.

He had switched strategies on her and all week she felt him circling again, all week casting her those long looks loaded with old suggestions. The renewed advance was filling her with an unwanted tension. She resented him for it and if he continued she feared an explosion, so she was constantly watching over her shoulder in an effort to evade him. She was not sure that she could make it to the weekend.

With that in mind, she closed her office door, working then without worry or interruption, and mulling things over until five. After that she hung around putting the office in order and at six, just before leaving, sent a brief memo to VP Treadwell. Satisfied, she locked her desk, her files, and her office door and then left to have dinner with Delilah. Somewhere other than Frank's had been Lydia's only stipulation. She hadn't said why.

Armed with the diversion of the floors and couch, Lydia managed to escape her friend's careful analysis, as well as any inquiry concerning her plans for the upcoming Friday night. Even after dinner, as she packed her clothes at Delilah's and chatted, not a single word or emotion betrayed her.

By ten that evening, she was living in her own apartment again, admiring the beautiful floors, checking her answering machine, and filling a garbage bag with the outdated papers that had piled up in her hallway while she was gone.

At eleven-thirty she placed a long distance call and had a friendly discussion with the person on the other end of the line.

At midnight she pulled her mattress out of the walk-in closet where it had been stashed by the workmen. She was going to replace that, too, eventually. She hauled it into the living room, threw some sheets, blankets and a pillow on it and went to bed where she lay wide awake into the wee small hours of the morning.

In the morning she stayed in her bathrobe with no plans to go to work. Instead she waited until afternoon when the promised couch arrived. She had the delivery men place it next to the mattress and they eyed her funny as they left the apartment. After that she showered, dressed and put on her makeup, placing one more call to a midtown address before making herself some toast out of the stale bread left in her refrigerator.

She had not unpacked her bag from the night before so there was no reason to fuss. She slung it over her shoulder, checked to see that the coffee was off and turned her answering machine back on before leaving the apartment and locking the door.

In the hallway she took a deep breath, clutched the map she had drawn and hoped it was accurate. Downstairs in the lobby, she advised her doorman of her plans and tipped him handsomely for his confidence. She then proceeded to walk to a nearby parking lot, stopping to chit chat with a talkative booth attendant who finally handed her the keys to a rental car.

It started fine, everything seemed to be in good working order, there was plenty of gas. She threw her luggage into the back, put the crude map on the passenger seat where she could refer to it when needed, pulled out of the parking lot and hurriedly left town.

She'd send Delilah a postcard when she got there so she wouldn't worry.

Happy hour and everyone wondered where Lydia was. They called her penthouse and left loud messages full of the jubilant sounds of the bar, singing poor versions of well known songs, hoping that if she was there it might entice her to come out. It was odd for their friend to be absent, especially now that the patio had reopened.

The waiter thought so, too. He inquired twice about her.

A blond woman sat inside reading at the window seat, nursing a glass of wine. From time to time the spine of her book fell to the tabletop and roused her from her thoughts. She would then glance hopefully outside and over again toward the entrance, but whoever she was expecting never showed up. She left roughly at nine. Lydia's friends sometime after midnight.

The waiter closed around two in the morning, turning the lights out after him and locking the door.

Done for the day. The chairs had been stacked on the tables. The shades had been drawn. The sign on the door read "closed" once more. In the darkness, the rubber tree plants lining the walls trembled ever so slightly. They were glad to be alone there and proud of their flexibility.

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book One THE SECRET KEEPING

THE SECRET KEEPING

Part Two: *The Cab*

"Everyone is searching for a tall, dark and handsome stranger...such persons are rare and there is simply not enough of them to go around...the real Mr. Right is very likely someone you already know."

Dr. Helaine Kristenson, "Keeping Mr. Right"

Helaine knew precisely the moment when she first laid eyes on her dark-haired stranger and it was not, by happenstance, in Frank's Place. The overnight success of her book the year earlier had proven to be a boon for her private practice and had enabled her to move out of her small downtown offices and to take the lease on the larger and more luxurious ones located midtown in the city's financial district.

She had always been attracted to the youthful vitality of this neighborhood and now enjoyed observing its weekday inhabitants from her twelfth floor window as they flowed in and out of the city's heart and rejuvenated its tired old veins. Weekdays the streets and buildings teemed with their optimistic activities. Even on the weekends when they had all gone home she could still feel their energy pulsing from the empty sidewalks and the high-rise windows.

Helaine had just finished her Friday with one last difficult session and was trying to unwind in a chair beside the window, drinking her tea and making final entries in her journal. The Friday ritual. She had been listening to music as she worked, Ravel launching A Boat At Sea, when she glimpsed the young woman standing and daydreaming in the full-length office window directly across the street from her. She put her pen down and counted up fifteen stories with her finger, guessing by the woman's elevation that she had probably earned the privilege of a few quiet moments there. The woman gazed out at the horizon, downtown, toward the waterfront.

The music played, tranquil in the background. Helaine stopped writing. The boat drifted further and further from the shore, dropping its oars and sails. She could hear the water as it lapped at its sides and feel the cool spray on her face as the craft bobbed gently in the waves. Behind it she saw a wake of brilliant sparkles. It spread like a blanket across the deep blue sea.

The figure on the fifteenth floor was so majestic on her cloud, so serene in her motionless state, so elegant in her black dress, that it struck Helaine that she might have invented her there. She sat stiff in her chair, afraid to look away lest the mirage should suddenly dissipate. The journal slipped from her lap to the floor with an important thud, but she didn't pick it up.

The woman in the clouds. A ghost ship perhaps. She wore a tight black dress, stood like a queen in her window surveying her castle's defenses. Land and sea. Clear skies. The boat floated further. She was far more agreeable to contemplate than the list of irreconcilable differences scattered on the floor–Helaine kicked the journal aside and pushed her chair back so she wouldn't be discovered spying.

On the other side of the world, Dr. Kristenson's lover had disappeared on her again, initially to the catwalks in Paris and from there, according to the rags and dailies that covered such things, to Milan. She had received only one postcard from her, from neither of those locations, a hasty wish-you-were-here scrawled beneath faded red lip prints. Might not even be her own, Helaine reminded herself at the time, though she had saved it anyway, putting it in a secret drawer for safekeeping, safe next to the other similar mementos.

It was not unusual for Helaine to find herself abandoned, but this time Sharon had left her alone for a full six months. She saw the placid figure across the way finally make a move and watched as the woman began to preen herself, using her window as a mirror.

She had unreasonably high hopes that her lover would return soon since there was nothing preventing her from doing so, and she had been making periodic visits to the waterfront flat in search of her—it was not unlike Sharon to slip back without telling her and to lay around for days before calling.

The waterfront. Helaine used to like living there. The woman in the upper window raised her arms behind her head and tugged at her hair until it finally came loose. It fell carelessly into her face and onto her shoulders and she let it hang there for a few seconds before pushing it away with the back of her hand.

Helaine ached to find Sharon, but the quests to the flat produced nothing but disappointment and she had recently resolved to stop going there. She was waiting instead in a kind of self imposed exile for the phone call that never came, checking her messages two, sometimes three times a day. Now and then she even perused the magazines that kept tabs on the super-model and the other stellar creatures that Sharon Chambers circled the earth with. She was stung by those exposés, the lover beyond compare and her tawdry sexual escapades.

On that Friday afternoon Helaine had already thrown some magazines into the wastebasket when the woman on the fifteenth floor decided to comb out her hair, bending at the waist, tilting her head to the left and then to the right as she did it. It was similar to Sharon's, dark and silky, but Helaine didn't think she was quite as tall as she was. And she was slightly fuller in the hips, too, with supple, round breasts, which Sharon didn't have. Older, though by how much she couldn't determine. Helaine had begun to suspect that Sharon wasn't coming back. Worse even, that she might never have existed. The woman in black took her time appraising herself, turning herself around slowly as she examined her reflection. The dress had a cutaway back. She saw the woman lift it up, revealing her legs so she could adjust her stockings, doing each one carefully so as not to rip them. The legs were well toned all the way up the thigh, not like those of the willowy model, but more lithe and athletic, as were her arms and shoulders. And that well conditioned back.

Sharon was a bit of a phantom even when she was around, Helaine mused.

That she could tell from her chair, the dark-haired woman had more color than Sharon, but then Sharon spent most of the daylight hours in bed and didn't get much sun, not unless she had to, say for a swimsuit edition. Even then she preferred lamps in booths over natural light—sunshine was bad for the skin. Helaine doubted that the sky woman had any real significant imperfections.

Behind these considerations, strands of music floated like clouds over a sparkling sea and Ravel's boat wandered aimlessly across its surface. Helaine leaned forward in her chair and felt the sun warm on her lap. In the clouds, the woman dreamily caressed herself. She was under mistaken assumptions. Wrong to suppose that the offices opposite hers had all been vacated for the weekend. Wrong to absently unfastened the side of her dress and reach into it.

There was, Helaine speculated, always the possibility that Sharon Chambers had flown the coop. This time for good. Would that be a nightmare, she found herself wondering, or a self-fulfilling prophesy?

The dark-haired woman studied her own reflection, using her free hand to perform an inspection of her outer garment, running it slowly down the length of her body and smoothing out along the way the small bunches of fabric as she came upon them. She patted them down over her rump and tucked gently around her breasts, her fingers lingering there unconsciously. The music faded softly in the background, deserting the boat, and Helaine couldn't recognize what it had been replaced with. She had thought then, in a new light, of Sharon's bedtime stripteases, and as it usually did, a trill of excitement had gripped her inside. She felt the blood rush to her cheeks and got up from her chair. It was that old feeling. But it was not for Sharon.

If Sharon never came back...she was dissolving in the woman's hands...it would bring an end to the disappearances, to the forever waiting...the woman held up a compact and lifted her face toward the sky as she freshened her lipstick...it would complete the sorry searches on the waterfront...it would put an end to the secret keeping...Helaine sighed...she'd be gone, that's all.

She stood watching the upper window long after the woman had vanished from it. Gone. The idea tossed around in her head like a ship on a turbulent ocean. She smiled without knowing it. Lost at sea.

After a while the woman emerged from the building below and walked out onto the sidewalk. Helaine followed the black dress with her eyes for about a block, pleased to see it stop and enter Frank's Place. Ah, she said, finally dropping the blinds and taking in a deep breath. You must be the one they're all singing about.

When she was not in session counseling her patients, Dr. Kristenson indulged herself with opera and books and love poems and the perpetual springtimes of impressionist painters. She delighted in the likes of

Bisét, Colette, Burns, the Brontés, Monêt, Manét and Sinatra. Sinatra, because he frequently sang about the weather and about flowers and the sky and the sea and his songs about women were generally so jubilant.

She was prone to idealism and to romantic notions that at inopportune moments would sweep her up and leave her weak inside. Almost forty, she was skeptical of ever conquering either of those tendencies.

She possessed a tolerant and generous disposition, was fascinated with people, wanted to see them happy with the world and personally satisfied. She rarely met a person she didn't like. People found her fascinating, too, with her casual elegance, the warmth in her voice when she spoke to them, her easy to traverse and sometimes porous boundaries. And her green eyes. People were always spoiling her about her green eyes.

She had charismatic features, especially the eyes and, as she discovered early in life, the kind of good looks that attract both sexes. That was fortunate, she quickly determined, since the feeling was nearly always mutual. In love, it was not a matter of preference to Helaine Kristenson. It was simply that all beautiful things were persuasive. That was the case whether they were women or men.

Not so long ago she had loved sex, loved everything about loving. She believed that she had been made for it, that she had been created for the purpose of intimacy, to love and be loved in return. She had not been designed a mere object to own and admire in secret, to fondle in a hidden pocket somewhere or to neglect after a time and forget someplace on a shelf. She was meant to be taken up, to be held frequently to the light and hung intimately around the neck. Her arms and legs were not there simply for begging. They were intended for grasping and wrapping tightly about the waist, to be worn around it like a satin ribbon. The soft thighs were to be slipped between, her sex coaxed and entered like a glove on a hand.

Suppertime. Time to sit at a table at Frank's. Helaine would eat dinner there once in a while. Lunch every Saturday. It wasn't very far from where she worked and no one but the waiter ever recognized her.

The stranger was flawless, having her wine outside with her friends. Helaine watched her from inside in awe of the low-backed summertime dress. She had treated herself that Friday, followed the woman into Frank's. Why not, she had debated, take her mind off Sharon? It was a most successful distraction.

Nothing is more revealing than the arch of a woman's back, Helaine thought, tracing the woman's spine with her eyes to where it curved into the backside. This one was quite rare in that it didn't easily bend. But that's not what the young man circling her believed. Helaine watched as he invited himself into the woman's personal space. How he held her captive with his hand on her waist as she tried to step away from him. He touched her lightly on her cheek and relentlessly whispered suggestions in her ear. He was, as Helaine's friends might say, drop-trow gorgeous and good-for-the-go. He was, she could see, intent on wearing down the woman's resistance. She saw her smile weakly at him and accept the glass of wine he was soliciting.

Dr. Kristenson knew that the woman was in conflict over his attentions. The muscles in her shoulders flexed anxiously at his touch. She was visibly taken aback by his propositions yet she stood in place where he held her, lost in a state of uncertainty. An expert, he had dedicated himself to those ends, had gone to great lengths to create her current confusion. Helaine knew his type. The woman was a challenge for him and he was going to conquer her, to prove to himself that he could bend her. He was going to get that girl, just for the fun of it.

The shoulders, the arms, the back. She looked strong enough to take it. It would be a shame if he broke her though, a shame to cast even one cloud over the life of a woman with stars like that for eyes. Such beautiful eyes.

Her eyes were...?

"How's everything?" the waiter asked.

Helaine hadn't realized he was standing there. He smiled patiently. She picked up her book again. "Delicious. Could you wrap it for me?"

"I certainly can."

Eight months and only a postcard. Typical her friends told her. She is after your blue blood. Her blue blood. How blue it was now. "I made my blood blue, Robert."

"True," he replied, "and Sharon makes it red."

They laughed together. A swell dinner.

"Be quiet," chided his wife. She was relieved to see Helaine smiling. "Why don't you sleep over tonight? You look like you could use a rubdown with velvet gloves."

Couldn't she? Helaine glanced from Robert to Kay and then at her plate. Out of the question. Such pretty people though, smooth as velvet. She studied their almond shaped eyes. Both hazel. They could be brother and sister. But blue eyes. Blue were the eyes of a perfect stranger. She looked at her watch. It was late and she simply smiled back at them.

Two months had passed since Helaine had been to Frank's Place for dinner. The dark-haired woman had made her ail. She didn't want to see her again. "Stop feeling sorry for me. I'm a big girl and I ought to know what I'm doing."

"We don't feel sorry for you. We're just worried-"

"Don't worry then. Please."

"Don't worry?" Robert snorted. "Look at yourself. You're wasting away!" Kay put her hand on his arm to silence him.

It was the truth anyway. So did they think that she was slipping? Well, wasn't she? Everyone exchanged glances. "So you think that I'm only half the woman I used to be?" she asked, offering a smile in case they took the question too seriously.

They were silent.

These three had known each other for more than twenty years. Something was different with Helaine and it certainly didn't seem to be age that was killing her.

"Of course not," Kay answered. "You're as beautiful as ever."

Robert agreed. "If not more."

Mmmmm. "Well that's good to hear!" She wanted to cry. A few years ago, as a friend, she had counseled them out of their crisis. Robert and Kay falling out of bed, only that time it wasn't funny. She had saved them, they said, saved their marriage.

"But eight months?" Kay's face contorted with pain and Helaine looked away.

"Isn't there anyone? Someone you could at least, uh, you know?" Robert poured her another glass of wine as he spoke. "You know what I mean?"

A dark-haired stranger. Helaine stared into her wine. "You know," she began, "I like it better when we don't talk about this."

Naturally. They knew that.

"Might there be someone?" Kay asked, hopefully. "Is there, Helaine?"

"No."

"No?"

"Of course not."

They knew she wasn't lying.

"That's ridiculous, doctor." Robert never liked Sharon.

"Robert-" But neither did Kay.

"Read the last chapter, Helaine. You wrote it."

"Robert...you're ruining the evening," Kay warned.

Helaine clenched her teeth, biting the inside of her mouth and the tip of her tongue—ouch!—the glass fell from her hand. They watched as it came down awkwardly to the table, teetered on its base and then set itself right again without spilling a drop.

It was possibly a good sign, Robert and Kay were thinking. Not a drop!

Not a drop, thought Helaine. What a bad sign.

"So then throw it," Robert said.

"Ooh, throw it, Helaine. You know you want to."

"Seriously?" An old college game. Lots of broken glass. They nodded enthusiastically. Why not? "Where do you want it?" She picked the goblet up by its stem and rose from the table, gripping the back of her chair.

"There," Robert pointed.

Kay cheered her decision. This was more like Helaine. "You're lying you know?" she said as she moved away from the table.

"There," Robert repeated.

Helaine eyed the spot and glanced at Kay. "About what?"

"Against the wall," Robert ordered excitedly. "Throw it, Helaine."

"That there's no one else," Kay pursued.

Helaine laughed, trying to dodge her. Well, there is no one else. "You're sure?" she asked, preparing to throw a curve.

Robert nodded, grinning in anticipation.

"I'm sure," Kay said.

Against the wall. "You'll have to clean up after me, Robert. I hate a mess."

"We'll clean up, Helaine. Throw it."

It was their glass. It was their wall. It smashed against the whitewashed brick, a shower of glass and burgundy red settling in little gleaming puddles on the hardwood floor. What do you see, she asked herself as she took in the red-spattered wall like an ink blot. Robert and Kay cheered themselves on like the old days.

What did she see? The wine trickled along the edge of the bricks on its way down the wall. Something incriminating, she suddenly thought, stepping up to it. Something sinister. The bright shards of glass glittered forbiddingly at her feet, bloodied. She saw a menacing shape on the wall, a pile of bloody diamonds on the floor.

"Helaine?" Kay said, noticing her pallor. "You're so pale. Sit down."

She took a deep breath. "Too much excitement for this old gal," Helaine offered. "Will you call me a cab, Robert? I'd better go home or we'll be drinking from paper cups next time."

He left the room. Kay scrutinized her as she primped in the mirror.

"Maybe you're pushing yourself too hard. A little fun, you know?"

"I know," she answered. She did look pale. She turned and smiled one of her emptiest smiles. "There is no one, Kay. I'm sorry. There just isn't."

"How did you like it, Jon?" An evening with an old flame.

"It's really just a lot of screaming to me. All those conflicting emotions!" He smiled wryly, tapping his knife on the salad plate. He hated the opera.

"It's like that sometimes. The microphones, I think. No star power."

"Star power. A must, heh?"

She avoided that. "It really doesn't hurt sometimes."

"I wouldn't know, Helaine. I'll wait till I hear it from you."

She fixed her gaze on his forehead. "Well, thanks for coming anyway."

"Would you have gone alone if I said no, Helaine?"

She thought to spare him but was too tired. "Yes, probably."

He leaned across the table. "Then thanks for asking me," he said. He reached with his leg under the tablecloth and she pulled hers away. "Come back to my place and seduce me, Helaine."

She gave a throaty laugh at his dare. "I wouldn't want to make a fool of myself."

"Okay." He resumed his tapping. "That bad?"

Dr. Jon! She regretted the direction of the conversation. It was too late to change it.

"That bad, Helaine? Can't have a little fun with an old friend?"

He had gotten old. Around the eyes. She smiled. "Am I too oppressive, Jon?"

He plunged his fork into a tomato. "Hardly!"

"Okay." He was qualified to say so. She waited for the rest of his opinion.

"That's your problem, Helaine. You're willing to give too much space." He diverted his eyes when he said this.

"Oh?" She smiled weakly. "Is that what it is?"

He was sorry he mentioned it. "Yes," was all he managed then. He could feel her foot tapping against the table leg and he squirmed around in his chair to search for the waitress.

Too much space, wasn't that was interesting? "But, Jon..." she completely despised the discussion, "you asked for more space." She had his attention once more. So now they were stuck with the subject.

More space. Yes, he had. "But I didn't expect you to give it to me, Helaine."

Mmmm. She saw him smile sheepishly at his confession. There was something charming about it, albeit sad. "You have such a strange way of complimenting me," she finally said. She would have liked to wring his neck and did her best to hide the notion from him.

He was relieved to have gotten away with it. "Some of us want our lovers to put up a fight, dear. I would have thought by now you would have tried that."

He was implicating her again. Love and war. She never believed in it and he knew that.

"I doubt it's what Sharon's asking for," she said at last. "I truly doubt it."

"You never know," he said, "seems pretty classic."

Gothic really, Helaine thought then. Bad opera. Maybe there's too much romance, too many little self-helpers, lonely hearts and talking heads. Dr. Jon and Dr. Helaine. We're all making a pretty good living at it with our hypocritical oaths and half truths, our little confidences. Helping? Maybe. But was anyone being saved? She would have liked to know that for sure. Was it right to profit from this brand new religion? She eyed Dr. Jon. He seemed pretty content. Obviously he didn't feel it was a grim reaping.

"Then what would Dr. Jon advise a sorry case like myself to do?" The food arrived as a form of salvation, but she was committed to an answer. "In your own words, not mine," she added slyly.

They laughed, uncomfortable with their new positions.

"Well, you broke all the rules when you first asked out your tall-dark-handsome," he said serving up her words anyway.

"Ugh. So I'm hopeless?"

He jabbed at his food absently. "No, I couldn't say that, but it may prove difficult to establish your boundaries now."

She smirked at that. "I have no boundaries. Remember?"

"That's right," he said, grinning and swallowing more than he could chew. "I'd get free of her then."

"Not 'work it out'?" she said, this time eating her own words.

He shrugged. "What's to work out, Helaine? Sharon wants everything and you give it to her. Does she even know what you want?"

She does. "Yes, she knows what I want."

He chewed pensively. "Well, has she ever promised to provide it for you?"

He was pretty good. Helaine looked out the window at nothing in particular. "All the time," she answered without turning her head.

Jon fell silent. He blew air through his nose. "Then you're a hopeless case."

They laughed at the diagnosis.

"Good enough. Let's change the subject, Jon."

"A fine idea. You want to talk about my love life instead?"

(No, not really.) "Okay. And how is your young wife?"

"Ex-wife, please." He smiled pleasantly at her, knowing he had it coming.

"Ex. That's what I meant," was all she said about it. She let him go on.

"Expensive." He sighed, laying his silverware on the plate and casting her his puppy dog eyes. "Very expensive."

"You should have taken my advice." She emitted a quick laugh, but he scarcely smiled in return. She regretted saying it, afraid of his expression.

"Really? But, my love, you never said a word about it. Not one word. In fact, you acted as if you didn't mind at all."

Is that right? It sounded sort of like her. She offered a thin smile back to him. It was over with, what difference does it make anyway? She pursed her lips, looking through him. Didn't mind? How could anyone have come to that conclusion? She raised her arm to signal the waitress, speaking in a constricted voice as she did.

"Well, Jon, you only told me you needed more space. You never said you intended to marry her." The waitress arrived. She faced her. "Water, please."

"That would have made a difference, Helaine?" He had revived, seeming to be enjoy this part of the discussion. "You would have fought then, Helaine?"

Fight, oh brother. Her lovers always seemed to be after more than love. The waitress came back with the water and she gulped it. She was thankful Jon was not her lover anymore and set her glass down with relief. "I only bring it up now because you asked." She smiled sweetly hoping to end it there.

"Flatter me, darling," Jon pressed, "tell me that you minded." His eyes twinkled at her discomfort.

She ignored him and pushed her food around awhile. A half hour later he asked her again, the corners of his mouth turning up as he pursued her answer. Helaine chuckled nervously.

The waitress came back with the bill and they split it. She heard Helaine whisper through her teeth, "If you hadn't been lying, Jon, then you would have known the truth," but the girl wasn't quite sure what it meant. The man only grinned at the blond. He looked like a cat with a mouse.

After the waitress left the table Helaine extricated herself from the sticky conversation. "I don't mind anymore, Jon. Can you be satisfied with that?"

He drove her home and held her at the door. He had been an affectionate lover and had wasted himself on a gold digger. She wondered if she couldn't let him in.

"She is a disease," he whispered into her hair, "highly infectious."

She let him caress her hips without commenting. He had hands as soft as a woman's.

"You're safer in a leper colony," he said, kissing her neck.

Lips as soft as a woman's. "I don't want to discuss this," Helaine said. She toyed with the idea of letting him come in. "Seduce me, Jon."

Her perfume was intoxicating. "What are you wearing?"

She tried to remember. "Obsession, I think."

He laughed and held her at the waist, abandoning his plan. "I wouldn't want to embarrass you, Helaine."

Obsession. She saw the humor in it and though the idea had left her now she let him kiss her mouth, press into her body.

He was excited. "Ask me again."

But she didn't. It was as hopeless as he had said.

"I'll sing at your funeral," he taunted, leaving her at the unopened door.

"Hah!" She watched him drive away. Above her there was no moon at all.

None of her friends knew about the waterfront flat, only that she had once lived there, but not that she still kept the lease on it or that she had furnished it for Sharon, to Sharon's liking, to be used as a home for the wayward companion.

Helaine stood in the dark of it on a Saturday evening, once again breaking her promise to not go there. My friends might be right, she thought. I am terminal. She flicked on the lights.

It looked the same as the last time, Sharon's clothes strewn about it like flotsam after a shipwreck and as usual the girl had neglected to make arrangements for the place to be cleaned in her absence.

Helaine clung to the door and sighed. She had been wanting to cry for days and now she did. It was nothing but a flophouse, the once beautiful waterfront flat with its spectacular views. She had redecorated it for Sharon, but this is how the creature really liked it. An absolute wasteland. She made her way to the couch. She didn't know why she bothered to keep the place. For a lover who was never there?

"I don't really live anywhere," Sharon had told her over dinner, when they first met. "I have lots of friends and I work for months at a time."

She modeled. That explained it.

"Then how can I get in touch with you again?"

"I'll call you," Sharon said coyly.

Helaine gave the girl her number. "When?"

"When would you like me to, Helaine?"

Helaine had hesitated. She didn't know why. "Anytime," she finally replied. It was her first mistake.

Sharon grinned fabulously, pleased with herself. "I have to go now. I'm late for an appointment."

"You work nights, too?"

Sharon slipped on her coat. "Sometimes." And then she was gone. Helaine paid the tab.

Sharon called late that very evening. "I was thinking of you," she purred.

She had roused the doctor from her sleep, out of her senses. "Ah. And what were you thinking about?" Helaine foolishly asked. She listened, moved and captivated by the speaker on the other end of her line, recklessly flirting with her, slipping under the spell of an obscene call and the power of all those suggestions. When the girl asked to come over Helaine drew in her air and said yes. Rules are made to be broken. Her second mistake.

Sharon came quickly, pleasured quickly and was ready to leave quickly. Record timing. "When will I see you again?" asked a tousled blond already in over her head.

"When do you want to see me?"

"Now. Stay for the night."

Sharon smiled provocatively. But it wasn't going to be that easy.

"I'm sorry," she purred again, "I can't, Helaine. I'll be back."

"When?"

"Soon," Sharon answered, pulling on her hose, buttoning her dress and admiring herself in the mirror as she put on her lipstick. She turned to face Helaine. "Soon," she repeated, stepping into her heels ready to start walking, wearing a satisfied expression.

"Tomorrow night?"

Sharon's eyes narrowed with calculation. She sat down beside her and stroked her breasts until the nipples went erect, holding them in her mouth, leaving them covered with her lipstick. "Pretty name. Helaine Kristenson."

"Thank you. Tomorrow?"

Tomorrow. Sharon leaned against the blond and closed her eyes, her hands teasing, traveling her creamy flesh, her tongue tempting the moist mouth, licking her lips. She felt long legs drawing her in. They might never refuse her, she suddenly realized, letting them enfold her, lying between them once more. The blond sighed and Sharon took a quick breath. She was quite a catch, she told herself. She heard the woman breathing excitedly, swaying gently beneath her and she wanted to make her come again. The mouth, the lips, the tongue requested it of her. She felt between her legs and was stricken by the sound of the woman's low cry, her urgent whispers. Her breath tickled her insides, moving them in ripples of excitement, with a bang bigger and better than cocaine. Oh, when she moaned like that—it felt just like falling!

Falling?

She pinned the blond to the bed and quickly entered her again. It was no big deal to tell the doctor she thought she might be in love with her. She could take it back tomorrow. She opened her mouth to speak but the clock beside the bed informed her she was late for her date and saved her from it. The blond would therefore never know this.

"No," Sharon stated when she had finished. "Not tomorrow." And then she left.

All Helaine ever knew after that was that her arms were always empty.

The beautiful waterfront flat, when it was her place, before Sharon moved in, when it was not yet haunted by anything. She wept recalling it and fell asleep.

The next morning she cleaned the hellhole, from time to time stopping in her labors to wonder over a miscellaneous tie or a checked cotton button-down, a man's sock, tie clip, the like. No accounting for the hosiery. She threw them all in the trash where they belonged and tried not to bother herself about it. It was quite a way to stay on top, Sharon Chambers!

Now, alone in the newly clean space, Helaine weighed the possibility that she might be punishing herself. In the mirror she saw the puffy eyes, the creases which every year became more and more important to her features. They were unhappy lines. Picking up after a messy lover, accepting sloppy seconds, thirds, fourths. Who kept count? Feeling trashed all the time. Perhaps she was too old at last. Grays were hiding amongst the blond. She left them alone.

She had only vaguely considered it before. The age difference. Over a decade. All their differences. She picked up the phone and called a cab. It was not a relationship. It had not become one. It was a series of episodes, but not a relationship. Mere episodes. Some breathtaking, others, many others, just too shabby to dwell on. A relationship to some, but not the one Helaine had hoped for, not the one that had been

promised, not the one which she felt entitled to have by now. It had all gone into free fall. She heard the cab honking below and locked the door behind her.

The "heart specialist." The "Love Doc." That's what the public called Dr. Kristenson. She didn't need her practice anymore. She could live off reprints and royalties and lecture fees if she wanted to. Or write another book. There were offers for that, as well.

But everything she practiced and preached had gone into *Keeping Mr. Right*. So far nothing new could be added. Besides, there might come the day when the book would fall from the best-seller list. There would still be her private practice should that happen.

Rainy days. She was always prepared for them. She had worked hard and enjoyed doing it, but maybe Kay was right. Maybe she had pushed herself too hard. Six days a week since, oh, forever. She was tired.

And in a certain sense the book she authored made her feel like a hypocrite now. Now that she had reached the chasm of forty. Mid-life, the hormonal peak, and she hadn't had sex in months. Who knew when Sharon might get around to it? A great abyss spread before her and it grew wider by the day. The great abyss, at the bottom of it the bracken pool of her love life. She had written the bible on this. Take your time. Work it out. Fidelity. Mutual Respect. What a hypocrite! And she was always eating her own words over it. That didn't help to restore her either.

How is it possible to be an expert and still end up with the same big nothing that drove others to seek her advice? Shouldn't she be prefacing everything she said these days with an I-dunno-but?

Or was it worse than that? After all, she did help her clients. At least fifty percent of them saved their relationships. Fifty percent wasn't bad. Could it be that she didn't practice what she preached? Was she in denial? Was she too laissez-faire about her own needs?

The final chapter, putting your lover on notice. Hadn't she done that the last time? Sharon had been gone then five months without a word and had slithered back to the waterfront without calling her. Helaine had discovered her there on one of her midnight searches.

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"I was going to. I just got here."

The flat was already in shambles and Helaine realized it had taken more than a few hours to accomplish that. But no, she had not pursued it with her. No, she remembered that she hadn't. Instead she had struggled not to cry in frustration.

"Five months, Sharon?" Her voice was squeezed tight. "Why? Why didn't you call? Or write?"

"Helaine...I was working." Sharon paced around her. "I have to work harder than the younger ones. My career is on borrowed time."

Oh, we're on that again, Helaine thought. Once more she had bit her lip. Wasn't it right at that point she had warned her, put her on notice? "But five months Sharon? Who would wait for you that long? Without a word?"

She would. Even longer.

They locked eyes.

"You would. Even longer."

She didn't respond. Helaine watched Sharon stripping off her clothes.

"How badly did you miss me, Dr. Kristenson?"

There was a bruise on the perfect skin, on the back of the arm. It worried Helaine and she forgot to be angry. She relinquished her position, let the naked woman lead her by the arm to the bedroom. "Are you all right?" she asked, fingering the bruise, her clothes coming undone, falling to the floor like autumn leaves.

"I fell, that's all. Some of these shoes." She licked at Helaine's throat. "If men had to wear them we'd all be running around in really sexy high-tops."

A joke? Sharon had made her laugh. She didn't believe her though. The model was too graceful to trip and it would have been newsworthy if she had. "That's a pretty nasty fall." She said, kissing it gingerly. "Does it hurt?"

Sharon flipped Helaine onto her stomach. "No," she whispered into the blond hair. "Where does it hurt you, doctor?"

Helaine spread her legs and Sharon quickly satisfied her from behind. Nothing of substance was discussed after that. Oh, that's right.

Dr. Kristenson sat in her office, the blinds drawn, thinking, thinking, thinking. It wouldn't be against the rules to grab a bite to eat on a Friday evening. It wouldn't be against the rules to have dinner at Frank's Place.

"She's back?" Robert asked as he set the table.

"No. Why would you think that?"

"I can usually tell, Helaine. You get that look."

He got the girl. The one at Frank's Place. Helaine knew it by the desperate look in her blue eyes. Desperate because he was already playing hard to keep. She smiled grimly. "Oh? What look is that?"

"You know. The one Caesar had." The silver clattered beside the plates. "When he said eh you brute."

"Hah!" She wished her well, hoped she'd survive her mistake.

"You know what happened to him, Helaine?"

"Please. You tell me, Robert."

"He died."

"Very funny," interrupted Kay. "You forgot the knives, Robert."

"What makes you think I forgot them?" he said with an affected voice.

They laughed as he headed for the kitchen.

"How is work?" Kay inquired as she counted the place settings. "Robert, you forgot a plate, too!"

"The same. Always the same. You wouldn't believe the *lies* that people lead, Kay." She circled the table, absently pulling at the backs of the chairs and pushing them in again.

"You're so lucky to hear them, though. It must be great fun keeping all those secrets."

Helaine agreed. "I love my work."

"Did I hear Sharon's back?"

"No."

"I invited Jon," Kay said. "I didn't think you'd mind."

The phone rang in the kitchen.

"He's been very depressed lately," she added. "She gets almost half of what he makes, you know."

Helaine nodded. She knew.

"And I think he's unhappy with his work, too."

Well, that's because he's a liar, Helaine thought. "I'll talk to him, Kay."

"I guess it's all the more reason not to get married," Kay said wistfully.

"Or to stay that way if you are," Helaine responded.

"I guess that's right, too. Robert! We need another plate!"

"Two more," he announced as he entered the dining room. He added the extra plates and silverware.

"Who else?" Kay asked.

"Anna called. She changed her mind when she heard you came alone, Helaine." He was amused by her expression.

"Anna?" Helaine repeated, raising her brows inquisitively.

"Yes. Anna."

"But Robert, that makes thirteen!" Kay complained. She didn't like him meddling and doubted his strategy.

Helaine took the news in stride and smiled graciously. "Well, that's nice. I haven't seen Anna in years."

"I know. That does make thirteen, doesn't it?"

"It's like the last supper, honey," Kay worried.

"Uh-oh." He wore an especially irreverent grin. "You know what happened to him, don't you?"

"You're going to hell, Bob," Kay reproached with a smirk.

The doorbell rang and he headed in that direction. "But you can call me Robert," he said, over his shoulder.

They watched expectantly.

"It's God, Kay, and he's really hungry!"

"She!" the ladies corrected in unison.

"Ugh!" he replied, yanking at the door, "can you imagine?"

"Happy birthday!" came voices from the hall.

"Welcome to the resurrection!" he shouted back. "Shall I hold your coats?"

"He loves these occasions," Kay said. "We're one knife short!"

"I'll get it," Helaine offered. She heard him introducing her as Dr. Kristenson and it was a good excuse to hide in the kitchen.

"This is Joan and Michael," he called out after her. "And that was Dr. Kristenson," he said turning to the young couple. They laughed identically, already.

"Please," Helaine said, returning, "call me Helaine." So they did. Kay called for her from the living room and she excused herself.

"That is Dr. Kristenson?"

"That's her!" replied Robert.

The door again.

Kay and Helaine had rounded up more chairs. "Get the door, Robert," said Kay between breaths.

"Okay. Get the wine, then."

A buzzer went off in the kitchen.

"I think the meat's done, Kay!"

"We've both read your book, Dr. Kristenson." Another couple, middle twenties, newlyweds. "Please call me, Helaine." There was Jon. He didn't seem too depressed. "Excuse me," she said with a pleasant smile which Jon thought was meant for him. "Kay," she said, "I think you should check the meat. The buzzer went off." The doorbell rang. "Kay," Robert called, "did you check the meat?" Kay was pouring the wine. "It's not done yet. Can you get the door?" "White or red, Helaine?" Robert went to the door. "There's dark beer in the kitchen, Jon." Jon headed for the kitchen. "Red," someone answered behind her. "White, Kay." A couple more couples. "Guess who's here," Kay quizzed as she poured a glass of red for Helaine. "Hello, Helaine..." The world's most impossibly sexy voice. Helaine knew it anywhere. The door again. She felt a hand touch her elbow. "Excuse me," she said to the newest couple. She couldn't remember their names. "Hello, Anna," she said, wishing this wasn't happening, "you're looking quite well," she added. Anna smiled, "you look wonderful, Helaine." "I can't find any beer," Jon complained. "Oh, wonderful," Kay replied, "ask Robert where he put it." "Wonderful?" Helaine repeated, "I haven't heard that in a long time." She reached out to stop Kay. "I think there's beer in the crisper, Kay." Kay nodded. "In the crisper, Jon," Robert shouted over his shoulder. "Happy Birthday!" "Gee, I didn't think to look there." Helaine laughed nervously and sidestepped Anna, off to the kitchen again. Kay cracked open the oven and the room filled with the smell of lamb. "Mmmmm," said Robert, "did you see Anna?" "Mmmmm," said Jon as he cracked open a beer. "Mmmmm. Yes, I saw Anna," Helaine answered. Jon shot her a glance and she ignored it. "God, you look wonderful," he said. She smiled gratefully. That's twice tonight. She should go while she's still ahead? "Thank you." "Helaine, can you help me with the oven?" She didn't want to get burned and hesitated. "I'll do it," Jon volunteered. "You know Stan, don't you Helaine?" Robert reintroduced the hush-it-up attorney. "Yes, of course, we've met." She held out her hand and he took it. "It's nice to see you again, doctor." "Please, call me Helaine." He nodded politely. "I see you're doing very well with your book." She reclaimed her hand with a smile. "I've been very, very lucky," she replied. "Indeed," he said in return. "Excuse me," she heard herself saying again. It was too hot in the kitchen. "Beer or wine, Stan?" "There's dark beer in the crisper," said Jon. "Beer," she heard Stan decide as she left the kitchen. She passed through the crowded dining room into the empty living room and took a deep breath of the quiet. "You're back." She was not alone. "Anna?" She was tired and hungry, a little drunk. Not up to this right now. "Where's your cover girl?" Anna asked. Helaine sighed wearily. "I don't know. Have you seen her?" she replied. She really didn't know where the woman was. Anna laughed. "Actually, I did," she said, setting her glass down. "In a recent centerfold." Her hand rested on Helaine's shoulder. "Is that right?" Helaine answered. She wanted to beg out of this one. "How was she?" she retorted. Anna felt her slipping away and tugged at her sleeve. "I wouldn't know that." Helaine felt caught and blamed Robert for it. She attempted to laugh the woman off. Anna kissed her. "What are you

after, Anna?" she asked, casting a glance toward the dining room. "Why don't you return my calls, Helaine?" Helaine exhaled. Impossibly sexy. Impossibly stupid question, too. "Because I wasn't sure what you wanted," she lied. Stupid answer. Anna grinned and leaned close to whisper what she wanted. Helaine cleared her throat and stepped back. "Is there anyone else?" Kay shouted to Robert. "No. Everyone's here, Kay. Put the food out." Helaine was starving and thankful for a reason to leave the room. "No, Anna, I can't." She made to leave. "Couldn't hurt," Anna teased. "Just for fun?" The food was being served. Fun. "I'm sorry, Anna. I couldn't." She left the living room and took her seat at the table, dismissing the proposition out of hand.

```
"Happy birthday, Robert. Thank you, Kay. I had a wonderful time tonight."
```

Only a woman knows what it takes to be a man.

There are a lot of theories about her client's type of problem. Complex ideas that she can't agree with. The question as to whether he has a physical condition has been disposed of. He does not. What he does have, Dr. Kristenson has determined, is a very bad attitude. He is a brute and his wife is beginning to understand that. The idea that he prematurely ejaculates to deprive a woman of satisfaction is absurd. It would imply a self discipline that he simply doesn't own. She privately believes he is an unsophisticated savage with no self control whatsoever, that he has always had sex like that and he always will because he is an inconsiderate misogynist with the mentality of a thirteen-year-old boy.

His various efforts to "rehabilitate" himself through extramarital affairs, with prostitutes, herbal remedies, ancient rituals, vitamins, cock rings, visualization...and now the exhaustive psychotherapy sessions, have produced no positive gains, either for him or, more importantly, for his wife.

He's had a blast. His wife is almost suicidal. They have been through five therapists including Dr. Kristenson. No more sessions for these two.

"But I'm going to continue sessions with your wife," she assured the man. That didn't trouble him. He smiled like a buffoon. The wife welcomed private counseling as the doctor had suspected she would and she recommended Dr. Jon to the husband. Jon had been an everlasting kind of man. Perhaps at the very least he could give the guy a couple of pointers. She didn't say any of that, of course. She simply handed him his card and concluded the tedious Friday session.

She sat for a moment after they had left. Beyond the closed blinds of the quiet office she knew a woman stared out at the horizon. She could practically feel her there. Sadder probably then she was ever meant to be. Helaine could not stop thinking about her. Even working with blindfolds hadn't helped.

She was alarmed by how much she looked forward to dinner with Robert and Kay at Frank's Place tonight. All just to peek at something she knew she couldn't have. She couldn't believe how jittery she felt inside! The gloom that had been left from the last appointment shed from her like an old skin and as she freshened her makeup in the waiting room mirror she thought she saw a familiar glint in her eye. Ah! She laughed at herself then. This was the harmless part of an infatuation. She promised, as she locked up the offices, to keep it that way. She rode the elevator down to the street and aimed herself for Frank's Place.

[&]quot;Goodnight, Helaine."

[&]quot;Don't forget dinner, Friday."

[&]quot;That's right, Kay."

[&]quot;You pick the restaurant," Robert prompted. "Surprise us."

[&]quot;Okay. Friday. Goodnight."

[&]quot;I love it! Like Casablanca in here," Robert declared.

They had been waiting for her. "Sorry I'm so late."

[&]quot;Roll out the barrel," he said, "great place. Does everyone have a gun?" She laughed.

[&]quot;No," said Kay, "they're just really happy to see you, Robert."

It was raucous tonight. "Overjoyed," Helaine added with a wink.

"Better keep an eye on those rubber tree plants, Robert," Kay teased. "They're moving."

"Rubber tree plants? You're kidding? Where?"

"Against the wall," Kay pointed with a chuckle.

They all shifted in their chairs.

"Oh yeah. Very nice," he said. "That one has eyes for you, Helaine."

"Which one?" Kay asked.

"There."

It was the blue-eyed woman.

"Which one?" Kay asked again. "I can't see without my glasses."

Helaine groaned as Robert pointed conspicuously.

"The pretty one with dark hair."

"Robert, please..."

"Classy. Do you know her, Helaine?"

Helaine hid in the menu. "Of course not. I don't know anybody here. That's why I like it. Please leave the poor woman be, Robert."

They laughed at themselves. They were still a bad influence on each other. The waiter brought a bottle of rosé and they ordered dinner.

"Why were you late, Helaine?"

"Oh, just a problem case."

"There's a lot of those," Kay said.

Robert nodded. "Yep. That's what the courts are for." He gulped his wine. "To get at the truth, if it can be got at. To throw justice at the infidels."

Helaine chuckled. "Like Christians to the lions, eh?" That woman was indeed watching them. How nice! "Well, but only if they're lying!" He was pleased with that one.

"You two are so clever, a couple of cynics." Kay mocked. "You know her Helaine? She's lovely."

Helaine shook her head. "I thought you can't see?"

"I can see she's a professional of some kind. Smart."

"Who?"

"The dark-haired woman over there."

"Are you being obvious enough?" Helaine laughed. "I don't think you're being obvious enough."

"Nah," said Robert, twisting his neck. "We're like you. Discreet."

"Yah!"

"You'll scare her away, Kay," he teased.

Kay had her reading glasses on. Helaine pretended to not be there with them. They were unpredictable goofs sometimes. She grinned at their reflection in the window. Their bobbing heads.

"No. That one doesn't scare easily. Look how she holds her head. A real queen," Kay declared. "She's definitely staring at you, Helaine."

Is that right? Helaine shot a glance toward her. Didn't scare easily? "Nonsense, Kay. Everybody looks at everybody here. If I had a dollar for every look I got at this table I'd be rich."

"You're already rich," piped in Robert. "So you've seen her before?"

The salads came to the rescue. "You can't be too rich, they say."

"Or too thin," he replied. "Eat. I'm wasting away."

"Me too," Helaine said, with a mouth full.

Plink. Plank. Plink.

Helaine fingered the keys of her baby grand, her one hand wandering peripatetic across the black and white...all...or noth...ing...at...plink...plank...plink...the other holding her head up...half...a...love...never...appealed...to...plink, plank...oh, if your heart...plink, plink...never...could...yield to...as she sat slumped on the bench against the piano.

She rarely got the chance to play anymore. She knew this song, though it didn't sound it. She was lost in her journey...than I'd...rather...have...unaware that the tune was escaping from her...nothing at all...it had been in her head for weeks.

Must have heard it at Frank's Place.

After an eternity of foreplay Sharon still wouldn't penetrate her and Helaine's womb had begun to hurt from aching for it. The excitement in her chest had turned against her, too, and she felt a sadness there instead, a desire to weep. She sighed miserably into her lover's neck and upon hearing it Sharon stopped what she was doing, rested her weight on Helaine so she couldn't get up from the bed.

"Don't want to play, doctor?"

"Sharon..." Helaine let go of her back and tried to slide out from underneath her, but Sharon went rigid and wouldn't permit it. "Sharon, please," she said in frustration. Her breasts were tender and the weight on them was unpleasant. She shifted her body to throw her off and Sharon grabbed her by the wrists and pinned her to the pillow. She tongued her stomach, pushing hard into the belly button and Helaine arched her back and sighed again.

"Make love to me, Sharon," she urged. She felt her biting at her nipples again and defensively jerked them away from her mouth. "Don't. Just make love to me."

"I hate that word," Sharon warned, biting at her neck.

"Don't do this. Why are you doing this?" Teasing, teasing. She groaned in exasperation. "Make love to me, Sharon."

Sharon laughed into the pillow. "That word. You know I-"

That's right. Forgot. It had been so long. "Then fuck me-fuck me, if that's what you like."

Sharon let her wrists go. "Like? What I like?"

"Like. Want. I don't know," Helaine murmured, rolling onto her stomach. "Whatever."

Every part of her ached. She lay still, thoughts churning, searching for something better to say. Nothing came to mind. Between her legs she was quite swollen. She closed her eyes tight. The brilliant lights. She wanted them off now. Perhaps she could sleep, sleep away the fog that had settled on her soul tonight. Beside her Sharon had fallen ungodly quiet. She could feel the woman's malice and wasn't sure where it had come from. Tonight was bad. It was as if she had been watching herself all evening. Nothing seemed natural. She put her hand over her eyes. She hated being speechless.

"How long have I been gone, Helaine?"

"Sharon?"

It had been nine months. Helaine desperately needed sex. Playing games all night had made it an impossibility, too awkward. The woman beside her felt like a stranger, an immovable stranger in her bed, laying motionless and hostile. Why, she didn't know. "Sharon? What is wrong?"

No response. Perhaps because she hadn't gone to the flat to look for her? Sharon hated coming uptown. Not her set. Too quiet. "Sharon...?" She listened to the sound of Sharon's body snaking across the sheets toward her. The touch of a stranger. She jumped at the feel of it and waited for her to speak, trying to interpret her silence.

"Masturbate for me," Sharon finally said, lying heavy on Helaine's back and probing along her sides.

Helaine tried to turn over. "Sharon...no." A police hold, or something like it. "Don't be rough with me. I don't like it."

"Don't? How long have I been gone, I asked."

"Shar-" Harsh hands. "Nine months."

"Like? Want?" She pushed Helaine's face into the pillow. "Whatever?"

"Sharon, you're hurting me. I can't breathe."

"Love," Sharon teased as she leaned into her, "masturbate for me, I said."

"Sharon..."

"Or else."

"I don't like this. I really don't."

Sharon felt between Helaine's legs. "Liar."

Helaine brought her legs together. It was difficult to breathe.

"Call me darling. You haven't-open your legs-called me darling all night."

Darling? Was that true? All night? Helaine lay quiet and still.

"Against your will then, doctor. What do you say to that?"

"I would never forgive you for it."

Sharon attempted to pry her legs apart. "Open, darling," she whispered, jabbing her chin into Helaine's shoulder blade.

"If you don't want to you don't have to. Leave me be, Sharon."

"That would be darling, Dr. Kristenson."

Helaine felt her legs giving. "Please...I said forget it."

"Spread your legs for me."

"Listen to-"

"Do it."

"Sharon, I don't-" her legs were open now.

The women lay locked in an ugly silence.

Helaine could hear her Sharon's rapid breathing. Hot breath on her back. "Sharon?" She strained to see her, but couldn't maneuver it. Sharon pressed down harder. "For godsakes, Sharon," she said through her teeth. "Let me go!"

Sharon released her arms. Helaine tried propping herself up on her elbows and was pushed down again. She listened behind her. "Darling...?" There she said it. The sound of breathing, more weight on her back. "Talk to me, Sharon. Tell me what I've done."

"I don't want to talk. I'm concentrating."

"Concentrating? Please! On what?"

"Fucking you."

Helaine took a quick breath, exhaled. "Then at least let me turn over." More weight. She laid her face back into the pillow.

"You have such a perfect ass, Dr. Kristenson."

Sharon fondled her, running her hand up her sex. Helaine felt moist on her backside.

"The nicest I've had in months," Sharon drawled, feeling Helaine's body stiffen at the offense. She pushed against her anus.

"Sha_"

"You heard about all that, didn't you?"

Helaine tried once more to get up and failed.

"Easy," Sharon warned, tightening her grip.

Helaine froze.

"Perfect, Helaine Kristenson." She licked the small of her back and entered her in the rectum.

Helaine gasped and tried to fight her off.

Sharon withdrew and held her down again.

"Sharon, don't do this to me. Please."

"We'll just take a little ride, Helaine." She dragged the blond kicking across the bed and bent her over the edge of it.

They were both out of breath, the sheets massed around them.

"You're ruining me, you know? I can only do blonds now."

Ruined. Helaine was silent, her hair sticking to her neck and shoulders, stuck to her face. She tried to raise herself. Sharon leaned against her damp body and entered her once more. She stifled a scream.

"Where are you when I'm not fucking you, Dr. Kristenson?"

"I'm-this is-I'm-" Sharon had been hostile ever since she stepped through the door. Helaine tightened. "I'm not ready for thi-"

"Because you're too tense. Relax doctor."

A flash of pain. Helaine groaned. "You're being too—" Sharon pushed deeper inside and Helaine moaned low in distress.

"When I'm not fucking your gorgeous ass, Helaine, where do you go?"

There was nothing to grab onto. It was pointless to answer. Sharon pushed into her and pulled out suddenly. In, then out again. Helaine put her hand over her eyes. They were wet.

"Relax your legs for me."

"Christ-" Her feet barely touched the floor. She grabbed for the sides of the bed but couldn't reach them. "Chill, I said."

Her arms were falling asleep. "Give me...a second. I'm—" Her rectum felt full. She felt it begin to move in spasms. Pleasure for the first time in months. She hated herself for it. Sharon pressed against her stomach with her free hand and raised her up slightly from the bed. She clutched at the sheets around her in protest.

"Did I keep you waiting, doctor?"

"Wai-"

"Did I?"

Helaine's insides rippled in waves, giving out without her consent. "What-what do you mean?"

"Waiting for me. I kept you waiting?"

"Waiting," she repeated. "I-" spasms. Pleasure and pain. "Yes." And hatred, coming in waves. Tidal. She couldn't prevent it. "Jesus..." Cries filled her throat, slipping off her tongue and falling from her lips into the bed sheets. She put her face into the pillow to smother them. Moans, sighs, cries, Sharon's favorite. She hadn't earned them tonight. "You're hurt-"

"Then relax for me."

The pillow was wet. "I...slower...can't."

"Call me darling then."

"Slower. Slower then...darling."

Slower. Helaine relaxed her legs. Slow. She clamped her hand over her mouth. Slow, slow, slow, slow, slow, slow, slow, slow.

"Love," Sharon whispered. "God, I missed you."

Pleasure. Nine months. Helaine moaned.

"Ahh...you're a slut, Dr. Kristenson," Sharon murmured, kissing her shoulders and neck. "Do it for me. Masturbate."

Helaine shook her head.

"Pretend I'm someone else."

She would not. "Let go of me, Sharon."

"Never. Did you miss me?"

Her legs were closing once more. They were forced open again.

"Want to hear some highlights from my trip, Dr. Kristenson?"

Helaine winced.

No reply. Sharon pushed deeper inside her. "Lift," she demanded.

"I...my feet."

Sharon inched her further down. "Bend, Helaine."

"I can't."

"There," Sharon urged, placing a pillow under her stomach. "Now bend."

"You're going to hurt me...?"

"No. Bend for me. Put your knee here."

Helaine lifted her knee. Sharon pushed. "You didn't answer me."

"You're-why are you-"

"Say more, like you missed me. More, darling."

NO.

"More, Helaine. Then I'll be gentle."

"I'm-I'm...more."

"More, darling."

"Shar-"

Sharon dropped her weight.

Pressure. Too much pressure. "More, darling," Helaine finally whispered, "gentle."

"Gentle what?" Sharon nudged.

"Gentle, darling...."

Slow and gentle and more.

"Say it, Helaine."

Her legs ached. "What-more?" She regretted letting Sharon in tonight.

"Fuck me-say it."

Helaine buried her face into the sheets. Pain more than pleasure now. Sharon's face was close to her own. She turned away from it. "Fuck me," she muttered, clenching her fists.

"Italy. Beautiful country, Helaine."

Helaine sucked in sharply.

"Italy, dear doctor."

Pressure. Helaine cried out.

Such a beautiful count—"

"Shar-"

"Warm. Affectionate blonds," Sharon teased, now stroking Helaine's sex.

Helaine let out an anguished sigh, a series of muffled sobs. Then silence. Sharon held her closer. "So fucking beautiful. Such a beautiful little—" she backed her body into hers. "You're so w—"

"Sharon, Jesus...please...please, don't talk to me anymore." Her arms and legs felt broken. She let them fall slack.

"Dr. Kristenson?"

Helaine pressed her mouth into her arm and made a sound in her throat.

"Beautiful," Sharon murmured into the blond hair. "Beautiful," she said again, removing her hand from Helaine's stomach and stroking between her own legs. "Helaine," she called softly.

When Sharon finally rolled off of her, Helaine lay for a moment where she was left, no sound, no movement, then, nauseous and shivering, she crawled back to the center of the bed and lay there on her stomach, the sheets bunched at her sides and in her face. On the floor she could see her rumpled clothes, left where Sharon had dropped them. In a minute she would be able to stand again, she hoped, and she seriously considered getting dressed and leaving. Behind her she could sense Sharon hovering, but she didn't have the energy to face her. She felt her hands closing her legs together. She shut her eyes, hid her face in a dampened pillow and listened to her heart beating in her eardrums. It sounded like the ocean. The deep blue sea. Maybe she could sleep. Her sentiments were irreparable though she may not have known it yet. She hoped that Sharon wouldn't dare make love to her now. She throbbed with discomfort. Her clitoris hurt, the desire to be satisfied there completely gone. Maybe Sharon would leave instead.

Sharon sat down next to her, waiting for her to say something. Helaine lifted herself silently from the bed and stood beside it in a torpor, her color washed out by the harsh light of the room. She squinted. The goddamned lights. They always had to be on for this, she thought, avoiding eye contact. Spotlights for these few-and-far-betweens, these...whatevers. Sharon slid to the edge of the bed, studying her, and Helaine turned from her view although from the corner of her eye she could still see her, watching, grinning indecently, waiting, Helaine was sure, to make her next move.

All these miserable games, Helaine thought, measuring the distance to the bathroom. Ten feet. She steadied herself and started walking.

Sharon stood up, her interest renewed. She left the bed and followed in after Helaine, washing her hands at the sink and then blocking the doorway while Helaine quietly examined her own reflection and avoided her gaze.

The air was thick with bad energy and the sight of the toppled blond in the mirror made Helaine feel fainter. She shuddered. There was something sinister about the red traces of lipstick around the woman's nipples. Disassociated from her, there seemed to be three women in the small bathroom and Helaine suddenly felt trapped and claustrophobic in there, ashamed of her own silence, threatened by the figure looming in the doorway.

"That was awful, Sharon. What in the world is the matter with you?" Sharon shifted in agitation. She looked poisonous, but said nothing.

"Are you this rough with-"

"Oh, c'mon. Who the fuck is it, Helaine?"

"Who is-?"

"Don't give me that shit. Who the fuck is it?"

Helaine was still dazed and it took her a moment to fully understand. She stood dumbfounded. How ridiculous she felt. An image darted into her mind and feeling scandalized by the suggestion she put it out hurriedly while the specter of a double standard glared at her from the doorway.

"Sharon," she said incredulously, "you must be joking."

Sharon scoffed. "No, I don't joke, Helaine. Is it a man or a woman?"

"A-why would you think that?" Helaine was eager to get dressed again. She eyed Sharon anxiously. "You know me better than that."

"Two hours, Helaine? Two hours before asking me to fuck you?"

Helaine attempted to pass through the doorway without commenting, but Sharon stopped her with her arm. She distrusted her now, stepped backwards. "Why should I have to ask you, Sharon? Why do I need to?"

Sharon smiled a ruthless grin. "Because I like it that way."

"You like it that way? Watching the clock for two hours and...?" Helaine felt vulnerable in the doorway. Sharon grabbed her around the waist and she covered her breasts to protect them.

"He, Dr. Kristenson?" She pushed the hair from Helaine's eyes. "Or she?"

Helaine stared back in disbelief. She had no desire to pursue it. She extricated herself and slipped past Sharon, back into the bedroom for her clothes.

Sharon was not about to drop the subject. "Why didn't you come, Helaine?"

Why didn't she? Playing all evening, trying to counterfeit her orgasm, trying to get her to come without penetration, brutalizing her—"Why the hell are you here?"

"Why didn't you look for me at the flat?" Sharon demanded.

Helaine snatched a robe from the closet. "Why aren't you ever there when I need you?" She didn't like the sound of her own voice anymore.

Sharon looked triumphant. "I'm here now," she said defiantly.

Indeed. Helaine clutched the robe to her chest and sat down on the end of the bed, wrapping it around her shoulders. She studied Sharon Chambers, her magazine grin, her million dollar smile. It was a caricature of the intelligent one she used to have when they had first met. Sharon had changed it, enhancing her lips, improving her teeth, fixing everything she thought was wrong about her. In reality, she had no character left. It was gone. In its place was now a terrible perfection, the look of an exotic orchid cultivated indoors artificially, perishable out of its own glass house and incapable of thriving in a garden. The sly smile was now just a bit of a snarl. Her smart looks reduced to nothing more than raw animal cunning.

Character. It seemed Ms. Chambers couldn't even distinguish right from wrong anymore. Never apologized. Helaine stared at her, wondering if it might occur to her to do so, but Sharon just smiled that crass magazine grin back at her. The most-beautiful-girl-in-the-world grin.

Tonight Sharon seemed to be wearing that title with a sort of tired pride. There was something dark lurking in those beautiful eyes, a look of chilling introspection. Helaine shivered. She could feel sorrow creeping up in her again. It came from a heavy womb and flowed into her heart.

"Sharon, I-"

The phone rang in the adjoining room. Sharon glanced over her shoulder and back and her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Shame on you, Dr. Kristenson. You were expecting someone?"

"Of course not." Three rings. Helaine rose from the bed to answer it.

"Why isn't the machine on?" Sharon snapped.

"Because I'm here." Sharon was blocking her exit. "I have to answer it."

Sharon beat her there. "Hello," she said brusquely, holding Helaine off with her hand.

"Sharon, give it to me."

"Helaine?"

"She's a little tied up right now. Who's calling?"

"Sharon, give me my phone!"

"Oh, really? Does she need me to call the police?"

"Who the hell is this?" Sharon demanded.

"Robert Keagan. That would be esquire to you. Put Helaine on, please."

Sharon handed over the phone. "Keagan Esquire," she muttered.

"Good evening?" Helaine answered, aware it came out strained.

"Helaine? Robert here. I see your prodigal brute has returned."

"Yes. How are you?" She kept one eye on Sharon.

"We wanted to invite you out for dinner. Kay loved Frank's. But I guess you'll be in hiding for awhile?"

She could not discuss this now. "You'll have to call me at the office Monday. I don't have my appointment book in front of me," she said in a hollow tone. She watched Sharon pacing like a warrior.

"Uh, I see. Okay. I should call on Monday?"

"Yes. That will be fine." She had lost sight of Sharon. "Yes, Monday then. Monday, Robert. I'll talk to you then."

"I hate that woman. You should see what she does to you."

She glanced into the mirror beside the desk. Yes, she saw it.

"We're in the middle of something here," Sharon interrupted.

"Thanks for calling, Robert. Say hi to Kay for me."

"Monday. I will. Talk to you then."

She put the phone down and turned on the answering machine.

"He hates me, doctor. Why is that? Are you having an affair with him?"

Helaine sighed. "He's my lawyer, that's all. And an old friend. I have them you know." Her taut voice. She pulled the robe on the rest of the way and tied it. "You cannot answer my phone. If it was a client—we agreed on that. I do not interfere in your life. Why are you bullying me tonight?"

Sharon smirked. "You do not have the right to fuck around while I'm away. I will interfere with that. You can count on it."

Helaine was taken aback. "I do not *fuck* around. What about you, Sharon?" She was not herself. "Weren't you going to brag to me about your Italian excursions?"

"I did Italy, Dr. Kristenson. How does that feel? You know about it, I hope?"

Yes, she had heard all about Italy. Yes, she had caught wind of it and even her friends were talking. She knew it all anyway, without having to be told or reminded, without having it thrown in her face. She folded her arms and stared at her feet.

"You better not be fucking around on me, Helaine."

"Sharon? How is it that you can but I can't?"

Sharon shook her head and laughed.

"That is what you're telling me, right?" Helaine asked. "That I shouldn't even think of it?"

"I can because I am the Sharon Chambers. You can't because you are the Dr. Kristenson."

Helaine saw her grin again and looked away. It was a sad confrontation, a poor substitute for what she had been longing. *The* Sharon Chambers. She searched the woman's face for her lover, the one that had somehow gotten away, eluded the both of them. Could she still be in there, behind that animal grin? Did she love that animal? Did that animal love her or did it just like the taste of her? It smiled back inscrutably.

Demons and skeletons, Helaine was thinking. That's her real essence. And ghosts that haunted the creature by day and night. Here's a ghost: her father, leaving a wife and a little one to fend for themselves. Here's another one: a beautiful mother. And a beautiful daughter. The Chambers women. They were estranged. How long now, fifteen years? A mother banishing her daughter.

Two beauties in the same house, in an unholy battle for the illicit affections of the same man. It was not the oddest scenario the good doctor had ever heard about, but it was still quite tragic. Mother and daughter in a battle, youth gaining the upper hand, for a suitor who was taking his pleasure at the expense of both of them. That was Sharon's cross, an ugly secret that the press would never hear about. No, not that Sharon Chambers' first paramour belonged to her mother, but rather her broken heart over the resulting loss of her mother's affections. Probably the only thing her heart would break over. Ugly secrets, everybody had them, but here was a secret so secret that even Sharon didn't know about it.

A shudder again. Sharon grinned like a skull does. Involuntary. Of course she did, like a skull hidden by skin, she was hiding from herself and her secret, masked in a brand new smile, disguised in a stranger's face. A smile or a snarl or a sneer. Who cares as long as it's different than the real one, the one she was born with? Couldn't she be happy now, now that she no longer bore any resemblance to anyone, now that she wouldn't have to see her mother's face always glaring back at her in the mirror?

Sure she could, if happiness, like beauty, was only skin deep.

Sharon's expression had softened somewhat. Helaine tried to smile for her. "There is no one, darling. Believe me. I wouldn't do that to you," she assured. "Please," she said, signaling for her to sit beside her. "Take this off for me."

Sharon slipped the robe off, pushed her backwards into the sheets and pillows. Warily the legs opened again and Sharon lay between them. Weak from struggling, Helaine draped her arms around her lover's neck and, as was customary, whispered her name to her, sighing it gently into the silky dark hair, sighing with relief when, without hesitation, Sharon finally entered her.

It took over an hour for Helaine to orgasm. Her lover left shortly after that.

It was a terminally ill relationship. No saving it. The middle-aged couple seated before her quarreled as if Dr. Kristenson wasn't even there, each adamantly digging deeper into their positions. She gazed over their heads at the woman who had just appeared on the fifteenth floor. She was holding herself as she was prone to do this time of day, standing heroically and staring off toward the harbor. Helaine sighed with happiness at the sight of her up there and the sound of it contrasted so sharply with that of the grumbling couple that they ceased their discourse and looked at her quizzically. She smiled back as if she had been with them the whole while and they glanced accusingly at each other and then waited for the good doctor to speak.

She had written the book on all this, which they both claimed to have read. If so, then surely they knew they were in the final chapter. She instructed them to continue their conversation, avoiding, if they could, the use of the word "you" all the time. "Say, 'I feel' or 'I think.' It's less accusing." They tried that for a few seconds.

Their issues were not too exceptional, the usual garden variety stuff. His wife was his infidel. Her husband just needed to get over it. Both of them were heavily entrenched and in serious denial about the unfavorable future disposition of their marriage. In a way, Dr. Kristenson mused as they picked up their debate where they had left off, his wife was more right than he was. He probably should just get over it since she was unlikely to sacrifice her extramarital meanderings, counseling or not. She wondered how the woman would feel if he actually did, if he actually woke up one clear day and took a look around him and saw her at last, who she really was, and quietly walked away.

Dr. Kristenson kept one eye on the woman up in the window across the street. Her name, she had learned last Friday night at Frank's Place, was Lydia.

She overheard the couple attempting to discuss some of her theories about "working it out" but, in truth, it was rather too late for that. He had the right to quit on her anytime if he could find the strength to do it. She watched Lydia and listened to their pitched voices, nodding encouragingly at all the right times, urging them to continue whenever they halted their discussion and glanced in her direction.

Lydia.

It was the husband who persisted with these sessions. His perfidious mate only attended in order to placate him, to bury him alive in false hopes and deceive him into believing she was trying to reform. It was clear that this would never happen. She had already wasted a great deal of his time and good faith in this effort to suspend his disbelief. And his money. His money was probably the only thing about the man that his wife still found attractive.

Dr. Kristenson lamented her decision to follow Lydia to Frank's Place. Not only because it was undisciplined and against the rules to do so, but because seeing the dark-haired woman up close had caused a kind of crisis in her which had yet to subside.

She rose up with the conclusion of the couple's session and booked them for another one the following week. In her journal beside the entry concerning them she wrote "impassioned" when what she really meant was "impasse."

She was Lydia. That was all she knew of her. She was Lydia in the fifteenth floor window of the huge investment firm of Soloman-Schmitt. Lydia applying her lipstick. Lydia at happy hour. Lydia with blue eyes. Lydia at Frank's Place just down the block where, by coincidence, Helaine liked to eat anyway.

Dr. Kristenson's day had ended and she was unsure of what to do next.

She was fabulous in bed. If she wanted to be. But even at the start it was in a distinctly mannered way, technical and adept, as if she didn't actually care to touch or be touched, except in appraisal. Foreplay, too, was a bit of a performance. She kissed very little, almost never held hands, and didn't have the patience for sweet nothings. At times she emoted so little warmth during the act that it seemed likely she had left her body completely, was floating somewhere above the two of them, hanging up there to get a better view of herself, to see how good she looked at it, or how good she was doing. It was, if Helaine thought about it too much, unnerving to have Sharon always watching like that. There was something strangely voyeuristic about it, a perfidy that went beyond her chronic unfaithfulness.

Still, there was nothing implicitly wrong with the lovemaking and Helaine was never left dissatisfied. It did not usually pay off well to criticize a lover so she never did. Besides every lover was different. It was wrong to compare them. She was optimistic that Sharon's quirks would eventually be cured, was willing to overlook the minor shortcomings.

But in her silent consent their love life developed into a practiced ritual with Sharon Chambers performing the rites, a consummate priestess in the bedroom. Lots of bedrooms, unfortunately. Sex, it's just sex, she insisted, a necessary evil, a tool for achievement. Helaine's objection to her persistent infidelities was always rebuked with that argument. He means nothing. She means nothing. Career, career, career. As if Sharon was the only woman who ever had to work. Helaine had grown tired of debating it. It was something she was expected to grin and bear.

Fate smiled on Sharon in much the same way, permitting her to succeed over it, as well. Her career skyrocketed; there was now, as far as Helaine could see, no reason for the promiscuous behavior to continue. Yet it did, as if by a sick compulsion.

The legendary over-sexed Sharon Chambers. Her new position: She was simply maintaining her mythical reputation.

Myth then she would be.

In their bedroom, however, Sharon no longer desired to be made love to. She only wanted to fuck Helaine. This version of lovemaking claimed the rest of their sex life and by the time that Helaine finally came to grips with what had happened to them it was impossible to change it. As impossible as getting Sharon to be faithful. Helaine saw herself immobilized, standing in a falling rock zone, her lover wandering recklessly on a path to disaster.

Sharon had had a fine day in the sun, better and longer than most people get out of living. All too soon, Helaine tried to counsel, it would be over and at the rate the model was going she would be destroyed by it in the end. She gently advised her to settle down. But Sharon Chambers did just as she pleased even when it was unpleasant and regarded every near miss as the proof of her indestructibility.

The fiasco in Italy had hit all the international papers even before Sharon had thought to return. Her off-color comments about the controversy as she was departing from Rome, suggesting derisively that her critics were guilty of being "too Catholic," had bristled a great many shoulders, and, unfortunately for Sharon, many great shoulders as well. There were plenty in the industry who didn't care for the super-model as it was and she had already begun to stretch her friendships within it a bit too thin.

Sharon lay low for months before leaving town again. During that time Helaine watched as she further alienated herself from the people she needed with her angry long distance diatribes and equally bizarre conspiratorial accusations. To make matters worse, she impulsively fired her longtime agent and she did not know nor trust his replacement. Her extracurricular activities had earned her the added attention she coveted, but the press did not drool over her in quite the same way as they used to and she had frequent run-ins with

the paparazzi that now and then trailed after her. She resented the declassé treatment, offended not so much by the ugly coverage, but how it hindered her lifestyle.

That was a surprisingly good excuse for Helaine to keep a low profile, too. She refrained from visiting the waterfront flat since she did, after all, have her own reputation to consider. The handful of clandestine visits that Sharon made to her place did not accomplish much in alleviating the hostilities between them and by the time that Sharon had left for California, Helaine was so fatigued and unhappy that she really didn't miss her lover for weeks.

"I'll call you," Sharon had lied. "Don't go frigid on me, Dr. Kristenson."

"Don't worry, darling. It'll never happen."

With a prurient expression the good doctor watched Lydia through the blinds walking to Frank's Place. She was shocked to see herself doing this all the time, concerned by Sharon's insinuations and the methods she had employed against a mere suspicion. In the past few months she had gradually come to the alarming conclusion that, no matter what the circumstances were between them, Sharon would never permit herself to be replaced. There would never be a successor. This had been both implied and expressed in a number of horrifying ways. So it was with great apprehension that Helaine observed herself observing. And in her observations this Friday afternoon she had to finally accept that her heart was not her own anymore. That she did not recognize it as belonging to Sharon, either. That a foolish thing had happened to further complicate her life. Something she must run from or reckon with somehow.

She saw Lydia disappear into Frank's and her stomach growled. She laughed out loud at the sound of it. It actually growled! She was clinical. The hunger was obviously psychological. Great, and now she was even thirsty! She had to admit that her throat felt dry. She laughed at herself. It was almost funny, finding oneself at the mercy of an unheard bell, seeing herself like Pavlov's dogs, panting.

It wouldn't be funny if she fell in love with that stranger, she warned. Her heart leapt at the thought of it, stimulated by its own dilemma.

Another book signing, another lecture, another month. And then another. And another. There was every indication this was the rest of her life. That damn book! Someone wanted her to write a weekly column. She turned it down. She did not want to become a household word, her face in every kitchen like some popular detergent, making the whites whiter or the colors brighter, getting the spots out of all the glasses. She liked things as they were, somewhat confidential.

The rest of her life. It could be spent just like this. Waiting for Sharon Chambers, leering after Lydia so and so, whoever she was. That could go on forever, she worried. Or perhaps in a year it would be someone else. Worse, she could take up the offers of ex-lovers. Go back in time instead of forward. Or hang in the now, in emotional limbo, until her friends desert her.

The future. She wanted that to be a woman named Lydia, as unlikely as that seemed.

Lydia. It had yet to set in with her tall-dark-handsome that the blue-eyed woman had thrown him off. Helaine watched smugly as he relentlessly tugged at her chain. She still wore it, of course, but she didn't want to be taken prisoner by him anymore, watching as he flirted with her friends and took lesser women home, waiting until he got the idea to satisfy her. It was over before he knew it. He tugged at the chain in disbelief, pushed at all her buttons, but the woman no longer responded to him. He had lost her.

Good for you, Helaine thought, watching the woman struggle with her broken heart. It probably didn't feel like it to her, but that was the healthy thing to do. She shouldn't begrudge him for the heartbreak, though. A broken heart can make a woman out of you. If you're well meaning, it makes you a tender lover. If you're not, like poor Sharon Chambers, it makes you hard and cruel.

But it was a sorry thing to see nonetheless. It had taken some of the wind out of the queen's sails. She sat cheerless with her friends or sometimes stared off into the distance. Helaine felt her eyes on her sometimes when she sat reading in the window seat. Just as Kay had said, she was staring at her, with eyes of a sleepwalker, roaming eyes, something undefined beneath all that preoccupation.

Fleeting fantasies, Dr. Kristenson realized, humanity's cheapest narcotic. Everyone fell victim to them at some point. Romeo had put the woman up on shelf and in her current state of mind she felt most comfortable there. She was keeping herself from him and a world of similar suspects. That was understandable. She mistrusted her desires now and in repressing them they bubbled up in unexpected places. If she had too much to drink, she dropped her guard and there they were popping up in a fantasy. It was, after all, the safest place to keep them at the moment. Safe excursions, mental joyrides. Helaine had no objection to being her vehicle. She let her look as long as she liked.

Dr. Helaine Kristenson, not only watching but being watched, the sleepwalker from time to time searching her, undressing her with her eyes. Again and again she was stripped bare by her, until her conscience was hardwired for it, until she could feel it happening without even looking. She knew by the flustered expression that appeared on Lydia's face whenever she looked at her that she was shocked by what she saw herself thinking, so Helaine feigned to be unaware. Yes, it was opportunistic, but she was not going to discourage it. She wanted to be accessible, to pull the woman under a spell as deep as the ocean, to be as warm and comforting as a favorite blanket.

Witchcraft. Those fingers through the hair and subconscious come-hither stares. The young man had left a charm on Lydia. Dr. Kristenson bet the woman hadn't expected that to happen, that he would leave a spell on her, make her wander restless, leave her heart swollen and ripe for the taking. If she would ever let herself be taken again. IF. But not by him, though. That was obvious.

What an unlucky guy to be born such a fool! Helaine reveled in his misfortune.

"Fatal exception? What's that mean?"

(Computer problems.)

"That's the third time this week. We should update this, Dr. Kristenson."

Four o'clock. Her secretary was hoping to leave early this Friday. She glanced at her watch.

"Leave it until Monday, Jen." Helaine was hoping, too.

"It doesn't seem to be having any negative affect," Jenny offered as she put on her coat. "I'll look at it Monday." She was about to leave when the phone rang.

Exceptions? Yes, Helaine was thinking, they could be fatal sometimes.

"Good afternoon. Dr. Kristenson's." Jenny shot a look at the doctor. "One moment, please. I'm not sure if she's still here...it's a Sharon Eddlebaum?" she whispered.

Sharon? "I'll take it in the office. You can go, Jen." She waited for the sound of a closing door. "Sharon?" "Is the doctor in?"

"Is everything all right?" Gone four months and a phone call? Helaine had heard very little about Sharon's forays this time.

"Calling to see if you miss me, Helaine. So there."

Missed her? A little. She swiveled the chair around and lifted the blinds. Lydia. She spun back, put her elbows on the desk. "Of course. Where are you?"

"LA. On contract. Trying to behave myself. How's my favorite blond?"

Helaine hesitated, fighting the urge to look over her shoulder.

"That would be you, Helaine. I said how are you?"

(How am I?) Helaine coughed. (Horny.) "What's your itinerary, Sharon? When do you return?" she asked, casting a guilty look over her shoulder.

"Don't know yet. My agent and all. Busy, busy."

Helaine overheard voices in the background. "Working?"

There was a brief pause. "Yeah."

A painfully dissatisfying conversation. She wished she would come out with it. A phone call. Was she trying to prove something?

"You going to be home tonight?"

(NO.) "What time?"

"Late."

Late? Of course, where else? "I'll be there."

"I'll try to call then."

Try? How unnerving! Helaine's hands trembled in acute rage.

"Helaine?"

"Okay."

"T've got to run, Dr. Kristenson."

"Where are you staying, Sharon? Don't you have a number?"

"I'm leaving here tomorrow night. I've got to go. Be home tonight, Helaine."

Be home? "Okay." She loathed herself for agreeing to it. Where would she go anyway? She heard the click and a dial tone and slammed the receiver.

Lydia, up on her throne. Helaine dropped the blinds again. It was becoming a ridiculous battle. Up and then down. Up. Down.

She took a deep breath. Friday. Hungry. Thirsty. Etceteras.

If she had to guess she'd say it was her smell she had fallen in love with. The inebriating bittersweet of her. On her skin. In her hair. Like the flowering plum trees of her childhood. Childhood in her mother's garden. Before she was cast out of it.

And it was the sound of the beautiful blond. The reckless surrender in her voice, the bedroom voice, her pretty moans, the helpless orgasms, the drawn out dying when she was made love to. The resurrection. It was easy to love Helaine Kristenson. She was a goddess.

Snagging her was, as far as Sharon was concerned, her greatest conquest.

But Helaine was different last time. Cool. She suspected her, though she hadn't discovered a reason for it. She was not the type for affairs, Sharon knew, but still something had changed to make her doubt the woman. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. Perhaps she had left her too long? That had been a long time. And of course the coverage. Endless. The blond was very sensitive to that. Some people were about such things. She was glad she wasn't one of them.

It was two in the morning, Helaine's time. Sharon dialed her home. It rang once. Twice. Three times. Four? Five? Where was she? Six? Seven times?

"Hello?"

A sleepy sexy voice. Sharon's insides jumped. She listened quietly as Helaine repeated the greeting and then, without speaking a word herself, hung up.

Good. Her lover was where she told her to be.

Saturday. Half a day at the office. The damn computer. Something wasn't working right. Helaine hoped that Jenny could fix it or the week ahead would be a mess. She attempted to shut it off. Another fatal exception. What exactly is a fatal exception?

Maybe a fatal exception is what happened to spring this year, Helaine mused along the way to Frank's Place for lunch. It certainly was negligent. Rain. Snow. Cold. Not a bloody sign of it. She stepped into the fover and took her coat off.

"Ah! Dr. Kristenson."

She smiled at the waiter, holding her finger to her lips.

He read lips, she had learned from him. "Trust me," he said.

She did.

"This weather–I've left something warm at your table."

"A body?" she teased.

He laughed. "I'm sorry, no." He pulled out the chair for her. "We'll have to work on that."

She sipped the brandy he had set out for her and scanned the menu.

He was taking her order when Lydia walked in. "Ooh," he said to Helaine under his breath, "here's your warm body."

Lydia. "You're bad," she scolded into the menu.

"Let's make her ladyship feel welcome then." He tucked the menu under his arm and went to greet her.

Helaine grabbed her book and pretended to be engrossed with it, sending the woman her most casual smile as the waiter escorted her to a table on the other side of the room.

Oh, he was sharp. Son-of-a-gun, Helaine lipped in admiration. He grinned back, pleased with himself, his silver hair and spectacles gleaming with a fantastic light. She wondered how far he could go with this and sat back into her chair, watching from the corner of one eye as Lydia relaxed and sipped at a glass of red wine, compliments, no doubt, of the patient waiter.

Lydia on a Saturday, hiding all the way across the room, against the wall. Helaine cursed herself for the cable knit and baggy woolen trousers. It was so cold though and she hadn't expected her. She waited to see if it would make a difference.

It did not.

Why was she hiding in the shadows then? Why not say something to me for godsakes? She sighed inaudibly and stared out the window without changing her pose. Was it too late to stop this?

Her food came, served with a wry smile which she ignored. A fabulous dish of seafood, she eyed it hungrily but barely touched it. Her stomach was over-stimulated and she felt strangely self-conscious bringing anything near her lips. She couldn't trust herself to that sensation. She felt compelled instead to lie down and Frank's was hardly the place for this. The waiter came back later and she asked him to wrap it up for her, putting her face into her book, back into chapter whatever. She must have read it fifteen times today, dumbly dragging her eyes over the words as if she were suddenly an idiot. What did she really know anyway? Stupid books. Case studies.

Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, and a few under-aged prostitutes. Guess who's in the thick of it?

"Whoweee. Some people sure know how to live!"

Helaine eavesdropped, cringing as a blond-haired woman explained it all to Lydia. The story was on everyone's lips. Everywhere.

"The super-model, Liddy. What planet are you from anyway?"

"I wouldn't know the woman if I fell over her, Del."

Helaine was glad to hear that. She sat back in her chair in relief. She was pressed for time tonight, a book signing and then later cocktails at the Keagans.

Lydia's table. They seemed to be moving in on Helaine lately. She bet that was no accident and searched the room for the waiter. He acknowledged her and started for her table.

Lydia. Helaine saw her smile and drop her head. She was glad the woman had never heard of *the* Sharon Chambers. It reflected well on her. She wished she had never heard of her, either. She smiled demurely and looked away.

Seven o'clock. Helaine paid the bill, collected her things, and made her way through the crowded bar. She was going to have to hear about Ms. Chambers all night, she was sure. The model and her colleagues had created quite a mess for themselves and, as for Sharon herself, she had outdone even her own reputation. It was time to make some long overdue decisions.

Beep. "Helaine? Where are you? (impatient sigh) I'll try back later." Beep. "I'm coming back briefly. I've got to return in thirty days for—I'm sure you heard. Helaine? If you're there pick up. (pause) Shit. Where the hell are you?" Beep. "I'll be at the flat by Tuesday (noise in the background). Call me there."

Worrisome messages from Sharon. Helaine erased them and threw herself down on the couch. Sharon, it's over. Sharon, I don't want to see you anymore. Sharon, we need to break it off. Sharon, I can't do this anymore. Sharon, I don't love you anymore. Sharon, you're on your own now. Sharon.

The sleepwalker in Frank's Place was emerging from her trance. Soon she would be wide awake. Helaine had worried that when Lydia did come to she might be horrified by how far she had strayed, but that did not

seem to be the case. She blushed a lot about it, that's all. At this point Helaine knew it was simply inexperience holding the woman back. And the lack of encouragement.

Sharon Chambers loomed like a dark shadow over her happiness. Helaine realized that she had mismanaged the entire situation. Had underestimated everyone and everything in it. Especially herself.

On the couch and off the couch again. Contemplating the future was proving to be strenuous exercise. Helaine paced from room to room. There was a mountain of duties she had shirked or set aside. Doing so had led to a complicated turning point, a turn which she was in danger of missing if she didn't handle the moment right.

She could seduce Lydia, that seemed possible now, but she didn't want a backdoor affair with the woman. She very much doubted Lydia would tolerate being someone's other woman in any event. Especially another woman's other woman. No, not likely. Ugh! It was a complicated folly and Helaine didn't relish having to explain it to anyone. Oh, good faith-one of her own tenets-it was a lot easier said than done!

She lay on her bed in the darkened bedroom, listening to the horns and bells and yells of the world just outside her window. It was as if they had decided to throw a party and everyone was invited. She wanted to run outdoors and join them. Shout at the moon and count the stars in the sky. Fall down.

Falling, just like children in the damp, night grass. Sixteen, she fell like this. Eighteen, she fell. Twenty. Thirty. Forty and falling. Falling in love to the ground, or in a back seat. She remembered the sensation, love with boys so young their bodies were still as smooth as girls. Girls. Pure love without hesitation, without a contract, rolling in love in the grass and all around her the starry skies of youth to hide and seek in. Joy without prescription, before her body hardened to the natural feel of it. Seventeen's joy. Lifting herself up in the brand new night and day. And twenty-one again. Wandering in yesterday's dawn, peering from it unafraid at green, cloudless horizons, the twists and folds of them looking just like unmade beds. Forty. A blue moon was recalling morning and playfully tugging at her night sheets. Forty. Her life lit up like a torch, burning the darkness away.

We all fall down. Helaine Kristenson knew she had fallen like that again. She could smell the grass around her, feel the dew on it where she lay staring up at the moon. Forty and the moon was blue. She couldn't change it back even if she wanted.

It was necessary to face Sharon. She had to confront them both with reality. She would, of course, omit any mention of Lydia. There was no point in it. Lydia was exactly the type that Sharon Chambers would want to eat alive. That had to be avoided at all costs. The tiger and the lady. Helaine smiled grimly at the prospect.

Tuesday. That would be the day. She was resolved to it. She would never again have to see herself searching the waterfront. Never.

She undressed and studied her body in the mirror. Not much had changed since she was last in love. She couldn't remember when that was. The gods had treated her well in the meantime, she acknowledged gratefully. Her face? Well, it seemed to have gone a bit sallow. Some wrinkles. Tired eyes. The skin was no longer perfect. Perhaps Lydia hadn't noticed these things. She stared apprehensively into the looking glass, straining to see what the blue eyes saw, no longer worrying about anything else.

```
"No, I really need to talk to you."
"Helaine, not now."
"When?"
"I just got a message—I wasn't supposed to leave jurisdiction. We can't talk about this now. I've got to go back to LA."
"LA? When, Sharon?"
"ASAP, they said. I've retained an attorney. Helaine...I don't know when I'll be back. My new agent quit."
"I'm too old for this."
"Helaine..."
```

"We have to talk."

"It's no big deal, Helaine. It's not true anyway. I don't do children."

[&]quot;Do you understand what I'm saying?" "Helaine, I know you're upset...it's a mess...I'll talk with you when I get back."

[&]quot;Sharon, it's more than that. We need to talk now."

```
"More than what?"
   "I can't do this anymore. I simply can't. Do you know how old I am?"
    "How-No, actually I don't."
   "I just turned forty, Sharon. FORTY."
   "Forty? Listen to me. I did not have sex with minors. I know how you are about tha-"
   "Listen to me. I don't care anymore and I don't want to hear about it. Not from you. Not from the press.
Certainly not from my friends."
    "I see...so you're having a mid-life crisis on me. Is that it?"
   "At least, Sharon."
   "Let me come over. I'll make it better."
   "I don't think so."
    "Helaine?"
   "It's too late for that now."
   "You're seeing someone!"
   "No."
    "We'll work it out. Your words. When I come back."
   "I want to see-if you can see people, I can."
    "No, Helaine, you can't. I need to know you're waiting. You can't."
   Silence.
   "I'll be back in less than two months."
   Two more months? "What do you want from me, Sharon?"
    "That's simple. You."
    "This relationship is not acceptable to me."
   "We'll work it out I said."
   "I don't want to." Helaine's voice cracked. "It's too late."
   "Helaine...let me come over."
   "Seven years of this nonsense. I don't want to see you, Sharon." She sobbed it.
    "Helaine...Hel-aine..."
    "Don't! Don't do that to me."
    "Helaine, I have to catch my plane soon. If I don't then they'll say I'm a flight risk. I'll be living in the LA county jail if
that happens."
   (Where you belong.)
    "Helaine? Helaine, we'll talk about this when I get back."
   Silence.
    "Please...I can't do this now, Helaine. When I get back, we'll fix it."
   "Sharon..."
    "I've got to go. Everything will be fine. I'll call you from LA." (click)
   "Sharon?"
```

There was no end in sight to the scandal. No word from Sharon in LA.

"She's a contagion. They should quarantine her."

Neither Helaine nor Kay disagreed. They glanced at each other and back to Robert.

"I still have the floor?" They usually stopped him from venturing too far with this subject. "Okay...you should give her the boot and send her walking down some other Joe's runway. They say she owns a place in LA County." He raised his eyebrows skeptically. "Did you know that, Helaine?"

No she did not. "Is that right?"

"Robert." Kay was ready to intercept but Helaine urged him to continue.

"Go on. Where else?"

"It's not clear. They'll find out though. It all comes out."

Helaine was visibly disturbed at this idea. "Let's hope not," she said.

Kay and Robert looked identically concerned.

"What's she worth?" Robert asked. "Do you know?"

Helaine shrugged. "She's a spendthrift and she's always got legal problems. I wouldn't know."

"And she's probably got a house and a lover in every port, like a good little sailor." He watched his friend's face but there was no reaction.

"A place in LA," Helaine murmured. "I should have guessed it. I really need my head examined, see if everything's working all right."

Robert was surprised by her declaration. "Helaine, I swear you look radiant tonight," he said. "How can that be amidst all this nonsense?"

"She's in love," Kay blurted.

Helaine laughed.

"Don't laugh. I'd recognize that look anywhere. You're in love."

"No more Sharon?" Robert asked.

"Wait a minute. I think we're ahead of ourselves a bit. I merely suggested that I need my head examined. Now I'm in love?"

"You need a professional," Kay teased.

Mmmmm. She heard her pulse in her ears. "Who do you recommend?"

Robert was catching on. "Someone you don't know."

"A perfect stranger?" Helaine pressed.

"Know any?" asked Robert.

She did.

"Why not a perfect stranger?" Kay answered. "Everybody does it."

"Cheat, you mean?"

They fell quiet.

"Guys?"

"Well, how could it be cheating?" Robert asked. "Don't you read the papers? Could there be anyone who hasn't heard about this crap?"

"Robert's right. Who could blame you?"

"Sharon."

"You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not. She'll never let me go."

"Have you even asked?"

Helaine fidgeted in her chair. "Yes."

"Is that it? Is that why you're still with her?"

"She wants to work it out she says. You know, I'm uncomfortable spilling my guts like this."

"Yeah, but Sharon's not. Your guts anyway," Robert added.

"What am I saving? I have no guts."

"Helaine! Don't say that."

"You've got guts all right, but their filled with a worm. One that stretches from here to California."

"Okay, Robert. That's enough. Let 'em spill, Helaine."

"There's nothing to spill, believe me."

Robert snorted impatiently. Kay nudged his arm with her elbow.

"Then how's sex?"

"Rough, Kay, I hate it."

Robert fell silent.

"Helaine? You owe it to yourself then. There's nothing to work out."

"Kay...I know."

"And what about the other person? Do they know how you feel?"

"I never said there was another person."

"But there is, I can see it. They don't know?"

Helaine chuckled low. "Kay..." She couldn't finish it.

Robert grinned.

"Go on," Kay urged.

"They...umm...they don't know. No...I don't think so. I am in no position for them to know. How I feel, I mean. You know?"

They laughed out loud.

"Boy, I'd never want to see you on a witness stand. You'd ruin yourself," Robert said with relief. "You are in love, Helaine Kristenson? Yes or no, please."

"I don't know how it happened."

"There you go again. Your witness, Kay. She's in love. With whom, we don't know, except that it is no longer Sharon."

"That's all there is, I'm telling you. That's all," Helaine repeated.

"I'm assuming they feel the same way when I ask, do they know about Sharon?"

"You're good, Kay. I can only guess that they feel the same way. We do not speak. No, they don't know about Sharon. She hasn't even heard of her." She regretted that last bit of information.

"Your witness, Robert."

"No, no. You're doing much better than you think."

"I don't know why you can't trust your old friends-"

"No, it's not that, Kay. I'm forty now. It's not the same. There's no guarantee the woman would...uhh...she's straight anyway."

"So you'll stay with Sharon instead of taking a chance. Besides, straight?" Kay rolled her eyes. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Dr. Kristenson is afraid of looking like a hypocrite I think," Robert offered.

"That is true. I admit it."

"So Sharon says she wants to work it out-which is absolute bullshit you know-and you have no say?" Robert asked. "I don't understand this."

"It's complicated. I can't explain it."

He didn't like the sounds of that.

Neither did his wife. "What are you afraid of?" Kay asked.

Afraid? Yes, afraid. Of everything. "I don't know. Maybe I don't want to be alone."

"Right," Robert muttered, "that would be so different than now."

"How long?" Kay asked.

"Sorry?"

"How long have you been in love with her?"

Helaine smiled. She was tired.

"Your witness, counselor."

Robert took over. "Let me get this right. You're in love with someone who doesn't talk...neither of you have spoken to each other...Sharon knows?"

"No."

"Hmmm." He shifted in his chair. "Would there be something if Sharon would relinquish the throne?"

"I think so, but she won't."

"Helaine, I can't stand it! Who is this person?" Kay was frantic.

Helaine held up her hand. "It's a mistake I made...with a little help. But it's impossible now. Sharon insists on working it out."

"You don't owe her that."

She sighed. "I can't do both."

"So you tried to tell her it was over. That's when she said all this?" Robert asked.

"Yes, before she returned to LA. My little flight risk."

"Look, I can tell you right now she's going to be tied up with that matter for quite some time. She could even get time. She's in no bargaining position, Helaine. Let her go, don't even discuss it. She's defending a criminal record now."

"What does it make me if I do that?"

"An honorable woman throwing in the towel. Give someone else a chance."

"But it won't look that way, Robert."

"Who cares?"

"She does," Kay interrupted. "Helaine, this woman...not like Ms. Chambers?"

"Not a bit."

"Tell me more."

"There is no more. It went too far as it is."

"How far?" Kay pressed.

"We're following each other like a couple of school children." Helaine was surprised she had said it like that. It felt good.

"Oh!" Kay gasped. "How fun!"

"It's not fun. It's exasperating. My gonads are swollen."

"Hers too I'll bet," Robert said. "Straight. Best kind, my dear."

Helaine groaned. "I wouldn't know."

"Maybe Sharon will go to jail," Kay said dreamily.

"Prison," Robert corrected.

"I don't want her to go to prison. I really just want her to go away."

"You've got to rethink this affair thing, Helaine."

"Tread lightly," Kay warned him, "and remember who you're talking to here."

Helaine went to rescue him. "This woman...she's not...it couldn't be an affair. She's isn't the type. If she found out about Sharon Chambers—"

"Well, we're not trying to be wily, but people do feel differently after they've been, you know, seduced. More amenable, if you catch my drift."

She caught his drift. "That would not be the case here, I can assure you." She put her hands on her knees. "Sharon will not let me go, so that's the end of it."

"There's something you're not telling us, Helaine," Kay said. "You're being so secretive."

Not telling? That Sharon is hostile, aggressive and by now quite desperate? That she was afraid of how she would react? "Robert, the situation has become a complicated mess. I don't know how it got this way. The woman I've—her existence is making it worse. It's my fault and I'll have to fix it, but I'm not going to have an affair. I'm not going to let Sharon turn me into a liar and a cheat."

The lease on the waterfront flat. If it wasn't still in her name Helaine could be technically free of Sharon. But what was the right thing to do about it? It was not possible to transfer title, management had informed her, and they would not consider leasing to Sharon Chambers on her own application in light of her current circumstances.

The lease. It looked bad from a legal standpoint. She knew that much. That's why it was a secret. Robert would be furious. Saying it just evolved like that would not be an adequate explanation to an attorney unless you qualified it by saying that you were on drugs, or you had a low IQ or you just had a frontal lobotomy.

The waterfront flat. A real nightmare. She brooded over it at Frank's on Saturday and–god!–Lydia appeared in the entranceway.

They exchanged glances as the waiter seated her in the middle of the room.

Helaine felt a come-on expression taking over her smile and put her book up to her face to hide it. *I'm in trouble here*, she realized. LYDIA. And the goddamned waterfront flat. And a way too flamboyant albatross around her neck. She felt eyes all over her and gave in with an aching sigh. It was hers to lose now. A once-in-a-lifetime offer. With strings.

It was clear that Lydia had made up her mind, was anxiously waiting for a sign from Helaine. Someone had finally made a decision in the matter.

Helaine saw how it had transformed her from an otherwise cautious and reserved woman into a funny valentine, one that tripped over herself and wore dopey expressions and a chronic hapless grin. Neither

woman knew what to make of this reaction. They exchanged looks of bewilderment over it, but neither said a word.

They sat on their fences senselessly, as far as the waiter was concerned.

```
"You do that, Dr. Kristenson, and I'll ruin you."
   "Sharon-" (Sharon's back and she's mad.)
   "Ruin you! Do you understand me?"
   Yes, she did. "You're threatening-"
   "Not threatening. Promising, Dr. Kristenson. I promise you I will make your life an absolute fucking nightmare."
   This was worse than imagined. Helaine took the nearest chair and collapsed in it. "Sharon, my god, you
can't keep me this way."
    "You don't think so? I'll bet I can!"
   Couldn't she? It probably happens to people like me all the time, she suddenly realized. Blackmail. She
didn't know what to say.
    "Feeling enlightened, darling?"
   "Sharon...do you want...you need money?"
    "No, Helaine, that's not it." (Long pause.) "I'm coming over and you're letting me in."
   This was getting even uglier. "I'm...even though I...Sharon...what I said...?"
   That's your problem. I'll be there in twenty minutes, MY LOVE." (click)
   "Harry, is anything wrong?" She had just spoken with the head waiter an hour ago.
    "No, Dr. Kristenson. Her ladyship is enjoying your cognac and wonders what she should have for lunch today."
   "Oh, Harry." She put her head in her hands. "Harry, do I do evil?"
   "No evil can dwell in a temple as fair as your own, my dear."
   No? She felt under a great weight of it though.
   "Aren't your intentions honorable?"
   They were. But what good was that?
    "Oh...see how she hungers. What should she eat?"
   She laughed into the receiver. "I feel certain you're going to suggest oysters. I just know it."
   "You're right. The works then?"
   "Harry, don't let me do wrong here. I'd hate myself forever."
    "You do wrong to leave her hanging. You'll anger the gods, Dr. Kristenson. Not to mention all the other obvious
consequences."
   "I've explained this as best as I can. Surely they see my plight and will show mercy."
   "Any sign of it yet?"
   "Of what?"
    "Mercy?"
   "No."
    "Then what does that tell you?"
```

Ego is the harshest taskmaster.

Dr. Helaine Kristenson is a self-made woman. Technically that should mean that only she can destroy herself. She has just faked another orgasm to get her lover off her back and lies in the prison of her bed. Of her room. Her jailhouse. Her keeper is getting dressed, closing the door behind her with a loud satisfied click. There seems to be no escape from this and time, though appearing to stand still, is actually flying.

Helaine is letting it all slip through her hands and she knows it. The gods aren't angry yet, but they fast grow frustrated. The mirror on the wall looks back unhappily and is dissatisfied with her choices. Her values are appalling it says. A woman has been left hanging, suspended in limbo without a sign. Soon she will realize this.

A reputation is spared. A private life shattered. What does it add up to?

The sheets on the bed cling to her body like ropes and chains. They smell of misplaced passion, of defeat, even fear. And the mind is not at peace reclining there. It throws itself at the walls and wails like a caged beast.

Aw, there was someone else. Of course there was. What else could explain the difference in Helaine? When had she ever complained of being too sore to have sex? When had she ever lain limp in her arms, a dead fish in bed? When had she ever been unable to orgasm? When had she ever been anything but thrilled to see her?

"I can assure you there is no one."

"That's impossible."

"Ms. Chambers, I've been tailing your blond now for months and I've never seen her with anyone. She goes to work, goes home, now and then eats out. Even the theater—alone, I'm telling you. She's a real bore if you ask me. Works all the time."

"Don't you believe it. How about her patients? Could it be a patient?"

"What, in her office? I'd have to bug it. She doesn't seem the type anyway." The detective eyed Sharon curiously. "Classy broad, you know?"

She nodded. Probably not in the office. But where then?

"I have to tell ya' I've never seen anyone cleaner. Usually, you know, it's right out there. Not too secret. Not as secret as people think, that is. A couple days and bang, you got 'em. Shoot some photos. Run to the bank." He fell silent while he pondered the super-model's motives. "Or whatever," he finally added with a blank expression.

"Where does she eat?"

"Different places, but usually down the street from her offices. A place called Frank's."

"Usually? How usual?"

"Well, she hasn't been in awhile but it used to be Fridays and Saturdays. Dinner or lunch thing. Alone."

"Why did she stop going?"

He laughed. "What am I supposed to do, go up and ask her?"

Sharon was flustered. He had nothing. He was a jerk. "You're telling me that Dr. Kristenson has no life? You're saying that she works, eats and sleeps? That's it?"

"Alone," he emphasized.

"Well, that's just bullshit," Sharon blurted. "You keep your eye on her. There's something going on and I know it. You keep watching. You'll see." She rose from the chair and glared at the man behind his desk. The shabby digs he called an office. The cheap suit. She despised the operation, but she was certain that her blond had strayed. She threw him a wad of cash and headed for the door. "Call me when you find out. I want to know everything about him." She hesitated at the door. "Or her," she added with a snarl. "It could just as likely be a her."

The detective whistled under his breath as she slammed the door. "You're probably her only dirt," he said, once he was sure his client was out of earshot. He took out the file photo of a smiling Helaine Kristenson and propped it up against a coffee mug. She was easy on the eye at least, if boring. Respectable. He didn't expect to find a thing. Actually, he privately hoped he wouldn't. He didn't like Sharon Chambers. She was much prettier in pictures. A little too lean and mean in person. And there was a predatory look in her eyes he didn't care for. He wondered about the blond as he looked over his notes and poured over the slim contents of her file. It struck him as odd, the super-model's exploits on the front page news and yet her obsession over the private doings, if you could even call them that, of her upstanding lover.

Upstanding broad. Had he missed something? He truly doubted it. How could something be going on if you're always alone? He had gone into Frank's for a look-see and saw nothing amiss. The good doctor reading a book with her dinner, close by to work. A gal's gotta eat for Pete's sake. Only ever spoke with the waiter, a man about sixty with a wedding ring. Oh really, c'mon! Maybe she's having a platonic affair with the waiter! What kind of trouble could that get her in?

Trouble. That's what everyone who came into his office was making. What kind of trouble could this woman get into? How'd she get involved with the likes of Sharon Chambers anyway? That's a good question. He had not been able to figure her out. A bookworm? A prude? He leaned forward to study her photo. Was there something in the eyes? He rarely saw them, the woman always hiding her face in a book. He brought the photograph to his face. Is it in the eyes? Is that's why she hides her face, less trouble that way? He made a mental note to take a closer look at Dr. Kristenson next time. Maybe even sit nearby.

Jealous Sharon Chambers. He grinned, squeezing her wad of money in his hands. Must be a good reason for it. We'll see, maybe it wouldn't be so dull after all, hunting the smiling blond in Frank's Place, just to see if she really does stray, hunting her like a dog for Sharon Chambers who was so sure she had or would. He took the photo from the file and threw the rest into a drawer.

Dr. Helaine Kristenson, if you're so hot to trot, it ain't gonna do you any good to hide your face now. You're already in trouble. He stashed the money in his coat, took one last look at the smiling photo and tucked it into his breast pocket. Yeah, you're probably up to something. Don't let me catch you at it, though, or that Chambers dame'll eat you alive.

"Sharon Eddlebaum, Dr. Kristenson."

Helaine turned abruptly from the window. "Here?" she asked.

"No, on the phone. That's twice today. You didn't call her back?"

"Tell her I'm with a client."

Jenny started for the door.

"Jen?"

"Yes?"

"How does she sound?"

"Irritated, I'd say." She took in Helaine's worried expression. "Is there anything I can do, Dr. Kristenson?"

Helaine glanced toward the window. Lydia stood up in the clouds across the way, staring this time at the sky instead of the favored waterfront. She paced slowly, vexed it would seem. Helaine had an idea as to why. She hid behind the blinds and watched her on yet another hopeless Friday.

I was a machine once, she was thinking. Absolutely humming. A creature like that one I could have had three, four, five times in a night and never be tired. Now I stand here sore and old. A rusty machine driven into the ground. Out of fuel. No steam. She saw the woman adjusting her hose. You beautiful thing. I wouldn't know what to do with you if I had a book showing me how.

"Dr. Kristenson?"

Helaine stepped back from the window, her hand over her heart. That was the truth of it. She was breaking down.

"Thank you, Jen, but I don't think so. It's nothing you should be bothered with." She sat at the desk wearily, Jenny still standing at the door with her puzzled face.

"You'd be surprised what I can get accomplished," Jenny offered again.

Helaine smiled. "Just tell her I'm too tied up right now."

She woke the next morning on her consultation couch, the white silk pantsuit an ocean of wrinkles. It was a clear day and she rose up and looked around her in dismay. The sun streamed into the office and she knew it was late morning. No Saturday appointments, she remembered that much.

In the waiting room mirror she got a good look at herself. She could see just who she was now, the pale imitation of what she used to be. She was a mere pelt thrown on a floor for someone to walk on, stretched across a bed, something luxurious for them to lay against. A floor length. She fixed her hair, wiped off yesterday's lipstick. A pelt like the one she had purchased seven years ago with the once and to be Sharon Chambers wrapped inside it, soliciting her from the catwalk with bedroom eyes, the girl in the fur, nude beneath it, asking her to dinner and leaving her with the bill. Wasn't that just like Sharon, leaving her hanging

all the time until now when she knew it was over she couldn't keep her hands off? Wouldn't give her a moment's peace.

She hated the woman in the mirror. What had she done with that coat? She had put it in a closet, another secret keeping, because she was afraid to wear it in public. Didn't want to be spit on. She laughed an awful laugh. It had been perverse from the start. These past few months worse than anything. Afraid to be seen in public, to be spit on. She had allowed herself to be converted into a toy in order to preserve her reputation. Now she was being mauled to death by a shark! That's certainly what she felt like, a plaything for a dangerous animal. She would be ruined either way.

Sharon had been called back to LA. She was to leave this afternoon with her entourage of lawyers. Plea bargain if they could. Otherwise she was destined the status of a sex offender with all the limitations that came with such an undesirable title.

Another awful laugh. She was a sex offender as far as Helaine was concerned. How she came to be that way even Dr. Kristenson didn't know for sure. A lack of self discipline perhaps. A spoiled lifestyle.

She was supposed to meet her before she left, but she had no plans to be her sendoff. She wanted to see Lydia instead. Just to look. She was in no condition to do more than that.

Helaine Kristenson and Sharon Chambers were rarely seen in public together, if at all. They sat quietly in a cab headed for the airport on Saturday afternoon. Helaine's lunch at Frank's had been interrupted. She hadn't expected Sharon to go there and wasn't even sure how she knew about the place. She silently reviewed the devastation.

Lydia had gone pale at the sight of Sharon. Obviously she hadn't contemplated that possibility, the possibility of a Sharon. That would most likely be the end of it, Helaine realized grimly. The finality of it was like a weight on her chest. In her mind she played out alternative interpretations, but they all ended with the same reasonable conclusion. It was pretty clear who Sharon Chambers was to her. Sharon had played it to the hilt for the onlookers and Helaine knew by Lydia's mortified expression that she understood what she was seeing.

Strangers, who cares, but Lydia? Helaine had to keep herself from screaming. It was a nightmare come true. What a miserable ending.

"Do you have any idea what kind of stress I'm under?" Sharon complained.

"I was working late. I fell asleep on the couch in my office. It happens sometimes, Sharon." She stared out the window.

"Why haven't you returned any of my calls?"

Why? "My work is backing up on me. Anyway...you know how I feel."

"I know how you feel and it doesn't matter to me."

Helaine shot a look at the cabby. He didn't seem interested in their conversation.

"I can find you anywhere, Helaine. What are you up to?"

Helaine sighed. "Working, that's all. Where are your bags?"

"I've sent them ahead. Along with the attorneys."

"Can you drop me off at my place?" Helaine asked.

"No, ride with me there. Talk to me."

Talk? She couldn't think of a thing to say. She felt Sharon's eyes on her, on her face, her body. It was an unpleasant cruise. "When is your flight?" Small talk.

"Two."

Helaine glanced at her watch. A quarter past one. "I'm not going in with you."

Sharon laughed. "The esteemed Doctor Kristenson." She slid her hand between Helaine's legs. "Slumming?"

"Sharon...it was your idea to hide...this is not appropriate."

"No?" She pulled her hand back and grinned. "Was it ever?"

"I don't know."

They fell silent again. Helaine watched the cab pass her street. She threw her head back and closed her eyes.

"I don't know what to expect this time," Sharon said, out of the blue. "My lawyers are going to try to bargain community service. First time offense. We're hopeful. Lots of celebrities get off that way." She waited for a response but the blond just sat with her eyes shut. "I've...you know I've got a place out there. Did you hear about that?"

Helaine nodded.

"But I don't know what to expect."

Silence. Sharon sighed. "And I'm pregnant again."

Pregnant again. Helaine had nothing to say about any of it. Lydia had seen her with this woman. It was probably true that she wouldn't know her if she fell over her, but that was hardly the point. She had seen her with a lover, a beautiful young woman. It was over. She knew it.

"I'll never let you go," Sharon stated as if reading her mind. "Never."

Helaine sat up and folded her hands. "Am I suppose to be flattered by that?"

"I don't care if you are or aren't. I want you to know, that's all."

"You want-what do want from me, Sharon Chambers. The Sharon Chambers? Don't you get enough jollies without me?"

"I certainly try. How do you get your jollies without me?"

Helaine let out an impatient breath. I long after strangers.

"All of this is about my career. I've told you that before."

"All of this?" Helaine faced her now. "This is good for business, Sharon? All of this? I'll tell you what all of this is about. It's about my blood, which you have acquired an appetite for."

Sharon leaned into her face and kissed her hard on the mouth. Helaine pushed her away and wiped her lips off with the back of her hand. She saw the cabby's eyes in the mirror and looked away without speaking.

"Appetite...I like that," Sharon said.

Helaine ignored her.

"You are fuckin' gorgeous, doctor."

"There are other gorgeous women in the world, as you know."

"None like you."

"You know, I'm...I'm not your...you really need to grow up. That's your biggest problem. You're not twenty-three anymore, I'm not thirty-three. We're—"

"Who is it, Helaine? Who do you want to fuck so bad?"

Helaine glanced at the cabby again, saw only the back of his head.

"Hmm? Who's after you? I'm not stupid you know."

Helaine wanted to stop the cab. "Nobody's after me," she replied weakly.

"You're lying. I know it. I wonder if they'd feel the same about you if they knew about me."

There was no reply.

"Hmm? Would they think you were so fucking sweet then?" She saw the blond tremble. Was it rage or was she going to cry? "I'll squash you both. I swear it, Dr. Kristenson."

Helaine banged at the glass divider. "Let me out," she ordered the cabby and he pulled over to the curb. Sharon watched silently as Helaine handed the fare through the slot. "I'll walk," was all the blond said as she slammed the taxi door.

Sharon checked the time. "The airport. I can't miss my plane."

It was the sudden heat that had tipped him off to the potential of the day. The waiter had felt trouble blowing in the air all morning and had braced himself for it. The arrival of Dr. Kristenson after a long and notable absence, Lydia diligently waiting for her outside on the street patio. He was sure it would have something to do with them. He hesitated and stood poised inside the doorway, alerted by the sound of squealing tires and honking horns, and waited to see what trouble would look like.

He recognized the leggy woman right away. Magazines and billboards. And front page gossip. He had a bad feeling about that paper doll. He strained to read her lips as she spoke with the driver of the yellow sports car she had just emerged from, but he was only able to catch bits and scraps of her salacious remarks. She was putting on a show, building up the audience. The main attraction.

He was quite sure whose table she would be heading for. He studied the blond, waiting for her response. Out of the corner of his eye he observed Lydia. She looked on the unfolding event completely clueless, oblivious to what was just about to hit her. In fact, trouble slithered to within ten feet of her table before she actually saw it.

Fortunately it was all over before it began. Sharon Chambers simply threatened through her teeth to make a scene and the discreet Dr. Kristenson got up instantly and left with her, leaving everything behind but her purse.

Standing on the sidewalk, twenty blocks from home, Helaine stood trembling with rage and an indescribable pain filled her chest. She hoped it was a heart attack but didn't feel lucky enough for such a prognosis.

It was a warm day and she was dressed for it so she decided to walk back to her brownstone instead of being stuck in another cab. What she would do when she got there she didn't know.

She would return to Frank's next Friday and explain her situation. What's to explain? There was no explanation needed. It is what it appears to be. Even worse than that.

She thought of Sharon's threats. She thought of Harry's warning. She thought of a disappointed face.

The afternoon passed into night, the night into another day. Day after day the same agonizing, until it was yet another weekend. Friday, but the woman was not there. Not across the way, either. A week and then another week. No way to explain. No setting things right again. No return to status quo. No Lydia.

Harry spoke very little about it and it was better that way. Helaine knew she had screwed up. There was no remedy for the pain.

Lydia had wandered off the beaten path into a lightly wooded area on the private side of the pond. She sat against a young birch, hidden from view in the ferns and cattails, and stared longingly at the water. She had no suit but it was eighty degrees and she was toying with the idea to skinny dip. Above her on the path she had just heard voices but they soon faded away. She was just about to strip when she suddenly heard the unmistakable sound of lovemaking coming from an area not far to the left of her. She froze against the tree, afraid to be discovered, and then slumped to the ground and lay there, hoping it would end quickly and quietly considering her options if it didn't.

After more than ten minutes of this, curiosity got the better of her and she raised her head and peered across a sea of ferns. Two women in the thick of it, not more than fifteen feet from her hiding place. If she got up to leave now they would know she had seen them. If she stayed any longer she was a peeping tom. She put her head down on her arms and closed her eyes. She would have to wait them out, it would be too difficult to explain otherwise.

Two hundred miles. Lydia had driven that far to get away from something like this, away from thinking of it all the time, but even here in the wilderness...she heard the frenzied sobs and gasps of orgasm and glanced at her watch. Fifteen minutes. She lifted her head and studied the woman's motions, resting her face on her arms again. It was genuine. She was close enough to them to see their glistening skin, the patches of sunlight that camouflaged their nakedness.

Three weeks in retreat and now this bringing it all back to her. Two women. The baths, the wraps, the massages, the peaceful walks. Lydia's troubles had seemed to peel away from her, one by one, like dead skin. The trouble with work, with—she had put it all out of her mind, she thought. Now here she was, lying face down in the woods, ambushed, the problem assaulting her, descending on her through the music of another woman's pleasure, the song of it rippling across her spine, the weight of it heavy on her shoulders, holding her in her place, bending her down beneath it, into the soft earth, ferns, moss. Into a bed of moss she went lonely, terribly lonely, only half of something she wanted to be, maybe because of it, only half of what she used to be. She felt the ground give gently under her and the scent of moss and of bittersweet filled her nostrils. She could hear the woman call out her lover's name, crying low when answered, could feel the tickle of her own hair against her cheek. It was an unbearable sensation. She pushed a lock of it away from her eyes and exhaled a long and unhappy breath.

Above them sounded the shrill protest of woodland tenants. Disturbed from their routine, they abandoned their perches and screamed warnings and epithets at the intruders. Unrequited! Unrequited! Unrequited! Lydia was convinced that's what they yelled. The lovers obviously heard nothing of the sort. She cursed them and checked the time—thirty minutes—debating whether or not she could crawl the twenty or so yards to the footpath without being noticed.

Ten, perhaps, but not twenty she realized. It was too far to go. She turned over on her back, inconsolable, and stared up at the sky through the canopy of birches.

It was a perfectly clear day. She still wanted her. A sigh of frustration slipped free from her and she put a hand to her mouth to prevent another.

"Yes, there," an excited lover instructed. The next words were choked.

Lydia heard a muffled response from the other woman.

"Mmmmm," came a quick approval.

She felt her heart jump and scolded herself for it.

The woman's voice raised up and then died down once more, settling into a seductive whisper of encouragement. It was followed by a low moan that drifted skyward to the treetops, which was soon chased by another. She could imagine Helaine here. Standing in the hot sun. Sitting in a window seat. Lying in the woods. Making love with her lover. Oh, it had not gone away at all. She shut her eyes and brought her hands to her ears, but it was too late for that.

She was a hopeless case. She saw this perfectly. That she was running, hiding, trying to block out anything that might remind her of Helaine. Moans and cries carried on the wind and taunted her. She wished to become numb again, impervious to the inspiration they sparked in her and castigated herself for wandering so far from the trail. Why the ladies had to pick this spot she hadn't a clue. She checked the time, sighed into her hands, closed her eyes.

She was at the beginning once more, the genesis, and once more trapped in the void, hopelessly lost now between an elusive heaven and an immovable earth. The depth of who she had been, Lydia Beaumont, was gone forever she realized, staring up at the sky. She admitted that something dark and formless had taken her place, as dark and formless as a body of water and on that water she could see the spirit of a goddess moving, her wake disturbing the surface, rippling on it, like goose bumps on skin. She could see the light, a reflection.

Shouldn't she just say it was good? Shouldn't she divide herself from this darkness? Call it a day? Call it a night? Yes, but then what of the morning? What of evening? She groaned low. Her heart was a firmament. She wanted to throw it across the water like a skipping stone, a shooting star, let her flame divide the water, gather it all in one place, that she might have dry land. Safe land, fertile and yielding.

Wouldn't that be good? And then the only darkness would be the sky above her at night, full of stars for wishing and for the signs of the zodiac, or to happily mark the seasons, the days, the years. Darkness then would be good, too, simply a place for the sun to sleep at night or for the creatures of the earth to rest in until morning. Creatures like her. And a goddess. A goddess must have sleep, too.

Another scream. Lydia felt she should applaud the lovers at this point. Wood nymphs. Lydia marveled at their stamina and listened for the climax.

Listening, she thought maybe it was just as well the blond was not available. How could she have made her happy like that? A minute or an hour, it's probably a question of experience. Perhaps she had been spared by the gods at the last minute. What did she know about such things anyway? There's no book on that, she bet. (Sobs and gasps through the ferns again.) Is there?

Ten minutes, maybe fifteen. One orgasm, that was all Lydia was used to getting, even from Joe. Clever Joe. She rolled over on her stomach and stared through the greenery at the two women, now kissing, now embracing, their stomachs touching. Breasts, lips, arms, palms, thighs. Cognac? Oysters? How exactly do you make love to a woman?

The lovers were trying to stand. Whoops. They were kneeling again. Lydia was finally able to see their faces. That one she had met last week. She had noticed that she wore a wedding band. The other one had just arrived. Both about forty-something, good shape. They had either known each other before or...? Lydia scoffed ruefully. Nah, they had just met. She dropped her head down and undertook to memorize the patterns of moss as she rested on her elbows, contemplated her mistakes.

She who hesitates. It should be our tryst in the woods she thought grudgingly. Us scaring the birds off their nests. She had hesitated, that's for sure. More than hesitated, she had lollygagged, as if she had all the time in the world. She could at last admit it, ridiculously stranded as she now found herself to be. Out of her league, an entirely new experience: incompetence. Why, she had never even spoken to Helaine, didn't even know her last name. Was there a whole universe of ready-wear women simply for the asking? Could she possibly be the only woman in the world who hesitated?

It seemed possible. She couldn't imagine Delilah being so inhibited. She should have confided in her sooner, told her what really she wanted. Why hadn't she? Because I don't know what I'm doing—I've never pursued anyone, let alone a woman. She took stock of the last six months. Look how I screwed the whole thing up, she lamented silently.

She pictured the twenty-something living doll that had materialized as Helaine's lover. That woman would never hesitate. Which is why she has her and I don't. Which is why I'm stuck out here in the woods like a sex-starved maniac watching other women have a good time. She thought about that, her thirty-six-year-old heart sinking like a wrecked ship to the bottom of an ocean. No, being bold wasn't the only reason. Helaine's lover was also young and beautiful, a perfect ten.

Then why do you make eyes at me? Why were you always alone? Why were you so miserable the last time I saw you, acting like you wanted to be near me?

Laughter in the woods.

The ladies were finally getting dressed, doing that clumsy dance that people do when putting their clothes on hastily. There was the sound of clinking belts and zipping zippers. The final touches. Licks and promises. Just for the record Lydia glanced at the time. They were heading her way. She lay low in the underbrush and made herself as small as possible as they cut across the ferns, passing within six feet of her on their way back to the path.

"I'm walking funny," the married one announced.

Lydia held her breath as they walked by giggling and whispering.

"That's because you're greedy."

"You're so right."

"I hope we weren't in any poison ivy."

"Wouldn't that be something to explain?"

"Imagine what Charles would say. Isn't that his name?"

"Charles!" They squealed at the mention of Charles.

"What are you doing for dinner?"

"You."

"And what's for dessert?"

"Me."

They reached the top of the knoll near the path, their voices trailing off at last. Lydia lay quietly for a few minutes before sitting up. Eventually even the birds were still once more.

Lydia stood up, brushed herself off and considered the water. It was hard to gauge the distance to the other side of the pond, but it was certainly quicker than the trail and it would rule out running into the ladies who were sure to be taking their time, strolling leisurely, being satisfied with each other. She tied her sneakers to her waist and waded in.

Back in her room, Lydia changed for dinner and scheduled a facial. It was nice at the spa, but she should think about leaving soon. She regarded the rendezvous in the woods as a setback of sorts and it made it seem rather pointless to continue hiding out.

She sat in the dining hall trying to formulate a better plan and reddened when the wood nymphs appeared in the doorway, looking a lot less casual in their evening attire, yet nonetheless interested in each other. She would never have guessed just by looking at them, but then she was willing to admit that she was a neophyte at these things. She would never have guessed it of Helaine, either.

Helaine so and so. Yeah, it was time to go home. Lydia had a life to live.

"In love there is no east and west; no North and south. And there are no distinct borders or boundaries for dispute. Rather there are comfort zones and these must at all times be respected."

Dr. Helaine Kristenson, "Keeping Mr. Right"

Check this out, observed Dr. Kristenson. The way he's sitting, she could tell he was wearing one of his wife's things under his clothes. Look how stricken the woman seems today.

Dr. Kristenson selected a benign expression. Best to be diplomatic about it.

Dr. K: (clears her throat) How would you like to begin today's discussion?

S: Don't ask me. I am not the one having the problem.

Dr. K: Okay...?

M: (deep drawn out sigh) Dr. Kristenson, I just want a normal life. Like it was before. I want him to be (long pause; he is glaring at her; she is trying not to look at him) to be a normal husband. A normal man.

Dr. K: We seem to be backsliding on this. Can you each describe what has happened since we last met? (She looks from one to the other.)

S: Nothing, doctor. Nothing at all! She's got too many hang-ups. You know what you are, M? You're a rigid fundamentalist. And you're oppressing me with your hang-ups. (crosses, uncrosses his legs; he has recently taken to wearing her undergarments and wants her to have intercourse with him when he is in drag)

Dr. K: Let's bring it down a bit, S. Would you like to respond to that, M?

M: I'm sorry Dr. Kristenson, I've tried. (she is obviously depressed) I feel ridiculous. I can't help it. (she won't look at him at all now) I feel (long pregnant pause) ugly.

Dr. K: (passes on that one, waits for the husband's response)

S: If she loved me and respected my needs there wouldn't be a problem with it.

M: If you loved and respected me then you wouldn't need to wear my things!

S: See what I mean, doctor? My, my, my, all the time my! You are so selfish, M. You are ruining everything with this shit.

Dr. Kristenson held up her hands in the shape of a T and they quieted down. Eight sessions and the wife was still in extreme discomfort over this issue. She had tried it his new way and didn't like it. For her own reasons, Dr. Kristenson was inclined to identify with the plight of the wife. The woman felt ridiculous in bed with him, enough so that she couldn't feel romantic anymore. He had pushed her too far with his fetish, a fetish she had never even known about until a few months ago, which is why they were in counseling to begin with. Now the woman was experiencing a kind of female impotence with her husband. She couldn't have sex with him at all. Their love life was simply not elastic enough to accommodate the kind of bedtime antics he had in mind and by forcing the issue on her, wearing her things and playing a blame game, he had crippled her feminine pride. The doctor sighed sympathetically without meaning to. She wondered why he hadn't at least had the courage to buy his own fancy underwear.

They waited gloomy-faced for her to speak, their bodies posed in the manner of those who are prepared to wait forever, if need be, for the right answer.

Dr. Kristenson wanted to say, look mister, here's your wife's core issue: If you are not a real man then she must not be a real woman. But how could it help? She masked her annoyance and indicated with her pencil that they should continue their dialogue.

M: Dr. Kristenson, you're a woman. Can you understand how I feel?

Dr. K: (Ummm.)

S: She doesn't have the hang-ups you have! She knows it's perfectly natural.

Dr. K: (holds up her hand again; they are silent once more; she folds her hands around her knee and smiles bleakly) I am not here to take sides. I am here to help you work this out, if that's what you both want. An issue like this is only a problem if the marriage cannot withstand it. If that is the case, the behavior remains right for one partner, but wrong for the other, and thereby wrong for the health of your relationship. (she paused to see if they comprehended her meaning) Do you feel that this might be the case?

M: Yes.

S: No.

"Del Lewiston," Delilah shouted, pointing at the empty chair. "May I?"

"Please do." Helaine was surprised she had come over. She shook the extended hand, "Helaine," was all she volunteered, "How do you do? Can I get you anything from the bar?"

"Oh, no! I'm already three sheets-how's that go?"

Helaine smiled. "Three sheets to the wind-it's a sailing metaphor!"

"That's it!" She wasn't really drunk. "You look awfully familiar!"

It was a crowded, noisy night at Frank's. Helaine pretended not to understand her.

Delilah leaned forward and yelled above the room. "You know I've got a friend who's just gaga over you!"

Gaga? Helaine looked over her shoulder and back again. She nodded.

"Do you know which friend I mean?"

Helaine nodded again. "The feeling is-"

"What?"

Helaine grinned and leaned across the table. "I said the feeling is mutual!"

"Mutual? Oh, MUTUAL! Good! Wonderful! Then what's the problem?"

Good question. "Where is she?" Helaine asked.

"Where?"

"Yes!"

"Moping somewhere."

"Oh? I'm very sorry to hear that. Do you know why?"

"Because-I'm not exactly sure how to put it! What's the problem, I asked?"

Helaine waited for the room to quiet down before answering. "There are complications."

Delilah indicated she understood. "Husband?"

Helaine laughed. "Uh...no. Just as bad, I'm afraid."

"Does my friend know this?"

Helaine coughed nervously. "She does now."

Delilah's eyes brightened with insight. "I see." She rolled the information over in her head. "You know ladies, it's a modern world out there. This would not be a 'complication' for the rest of us."

"But your friend?"

Delilah wanted to lie for Lydia but she was reluctant to misrepresent her. "Nah, she wouldn't go for it, I think. Not knowingly." She rose from the table seeing that the waiter was delivering Helaine's food.

Helaine liked her. "You're a good friend, Del."

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Helaine whoever you are, incognito. We've never had this conversation. S'aright?"

Helaine smiled confidentially. "Of course."

Delilah headed for the bar.

"News?" the waiter asked hopefully. He set a dessert down that Helaine hadn't ordered. "Eat," he prompted. "So where is she?"

She shrugged. "Didn't say."

He handed her a fork and knife. "Is she coming back?"

"She didn't say that either."

He grimaced. "What then?" His movements were drawn out, unnatural.

Helaine laughed at his expense and cut into the black forest. "She's 'gaga'," she replied.

The waiter slowly loaded his tray, bending low as he did it. "Gaga?"

"Mmmm."

He hoisted up the tray and winked. "Gosh!"

She laughed. It was a relief to smile again even if she didn't know where Lydia was.

"Gaga," the waiter said, finally turning to leave. "Isn't that French?"

71

The city was hotter than Lydia expected it to be. The trees along the avenues stood brooding and indignant, unhappy with the heat and their isolation. They seemed to resent the shaded walks beneath their limbs and the scorched humans who intermittently took refuge there. Here and there, at a taxi stand or bus stop, a blistering bench shone empty and forlorn in the full mid-day sun, the hardwood beside it deliberately refusing to provide any comfort.

She had a week left of her vacation. Summer in metropolis. Lydia had forgotten how sticky it could be. She plodded back from the car rental, the sidewalks burning through her sandals, and sighed with relief when she finally entered the air conditioned lobby of her building. The doorman smiled his familiar greeting but even he looked hot and bothered. She should have stayed in the woods with the happy vegetation, she mused as she stepped into the elevator.

A pile of newspapers blocked the entrance to the penthouse. She climbed over them and unlocked the door, flicking the overheads on and tossing her bag in before her.

She smiled with delight at the blast of cool air that greeted her, the sight of the glorious wood floors. No more dingy welcome-homes. The place was inviting even without furniture. In the living room the old sofa stood as a lone sentinel and it beckoned her to come and tell her all about her trip. Beside it, the answering machine blinked like a Christmas tree and she plopped into the waiting pillows and hit the play button with her thumb.

Ooh, what's that? A din from the club: the girls singing. Mom. Del. Mom. Hang-up. Paint's here? The paint! Mom. Mom again (oh, brother). Dad? Del. Another hang-up.

She rewound it. Better call Mom first. Then Del. Daddy can wait.

```
"Well, how are you?"

"A hundred percent and declining."

"Really?"

"Mmhmm, any day now I expect to start dying."
```

"Liddy! We start dying the day we're born."

"No, c'mon, Del. I don't see how that could be. When you're young you're growing and growing. That's the epitome of life."

"Dying and dying. I'm sure of it. It just looks like growth. I can see we're still morbidly preoccupied. So what's a vacation for anyway?"

```
"You won't believe!"
"You got anything to eat there?"
"Your good."
"Sounds good."
"It does?"
```

[&]quot;You did this? It's beautiful, Liddy. Look at those floors!"

[&]quot;Sponge on the walls. Out of a book, of course. I'm going to have wood trim installed. What do you think?"

[&]quot;It looks like you know what you're doing. Ooh, Liddy, that table and chairs. Claw and ball. I like it. Ooh, what are those?" Delilah asked, pointing out two charcoal drawings hanging in the area Lydia now referred to as the sun-room.

[&]quot;Master studies. Manet. Student's work from the forties. That's from Luncheon in the Grass."

[&]quot;Yah! Some lunch. How come the men aren't nude?"

[&]quot;You don't think it's funny? I thought of Frank's the minute I saw it."

"I think it's a riot! Who's that babe?"

"That's Olympia. A courtesan most likely, though. At least that's what the dealer says."

"Lydia Beaumont, she almost looks like you. Maybe you were a courtesan in your past life. That would explain why you're so cautious now." Delilah stepped back from the piece. "I swear she looks just like you."

Lydia laughed self-consciously. "You think so?" Perhaps that's why she had been attracted to it. Odd that the dealer hadn't mentioned the likeness, or maybe he thought it rude to point it out. Nice gentleman. Very polite. She'd ask his opinion about it next time. Curious she hadn't noticed it herself.

"And what does a courtesan sleep on these days?" Delilah inquired from the hallway.

"Getting there, getting there. Just an old mattress for now."

"Liddy, how you gonna get any action on that thing? It's shockingly Spartan of you, you know. Hey, but that dresser looks nice in here. Why didn't you polish it?"

A pair of black silk fishnet gloves hung from one of the drawers. Delilah recognized them. The women eyed each other in the mirror, Lydia frozen in the doorway.

"When are you going to ask her, my friend?"

"Del..." She wanted to put an end to it before they began. "I don't know."

"That is why you fled, am I right?" She placed the gloves where she had found them and turned to face her friend. "Ask the woman, Liddy. The very worse she can say is no."

"Ask her what, Del? Would she have an affair with me? I don't want an affair. Would she get rid of her perfect ten for me? Her beautiful, young girlfriend? Huh? What are the odds of that, Del? I wasn't born yesterday, you know." She headed for the living room, Delilah following after her.

"A perfect ten? Get real. There's no such thing."

"Oh, yes there is, Delilah, and I've seen her." Lydia spun around and they stood face to face. "So what do you say to that?"

"What do I say? I say go look in the mirror, for godsakes. If that's not perfect then what is?"

Lydia was silenced by the compliment. She sat down on the couch, Delilah standing over her.

"It's just a little competition, Dame Beaumont, you can deal with that." She sat down beside her. "You deal with it every day. They're all the same punks. Spoiled. Arrogant. Stupid."

Stupid. Lydia doubted the shark was stupid. "I don't know. Besides I've never really asked someone out before. How do you go about it with a woman?"

"Well, how did Joe ask you out?"

Ugh, Joe. How did he? She thought back to it. It didn't seem that he actually had. No. He was just always circling her, his pretty manicured hands constantly reaching for her erogenous zones. She cringed at the thought of it. He had seduced her.

"All right," Delilah interrupted. "Forget it. How about before Joe?"

That was easier. "Flowers. Dinner. Love poems."

"And you can't afford flowers?"

Lydia chuckled. "I could buy her the Hanging Gardens of Babylon if she wanted them, but how would I get them to her? I don't even know her last name. And it doesn't matter anyhow. I don't like to share lovers, Del. You know that."

"So, obviously you think she'd say yes if you asked?"

Did she think that? "I don't want to share, that's all I meant."

"So you'll break your own heart? Like you did with Joe."

"He did me wrong, Del. Right from the start. I don't want that again. Why begin and then cry for something that might have been—you know that song?"

Yeah, but she didn't share the sentiment. It was fun to fall. "You are in love, Dame Beaumont?" It was a gimmee, a setup for an if-this-then-that. Hypothetical hyperbole. Delilah knew her friend would dodge it.

"I've made up my mind, Del."

"Oh, c'mon. Love at first sight?" Delilah pressed. "LUV?"

Lydia smiled despite her unease. No, definitely not at first sight. It had been a slow awakening. Couldn't she gradually go back to sleep now? That's what she was hoping for. "I can't remember how it started. It just crept over me. Like a pox. LUV. Christ, Del, with a woman. I can't believe this has happened to me." She hesitated there waiting to be rescued, her head humming like a bees' nest.

Delilah offered nothing but an expectant expression.

"A womanizer like my father. Del, say something."

"Lydia Beaumont, have you ever slept with a woman?"

"No, of course not."

"Then you're hardly a womanizer. Besides, at this rate?"

"Have you?"

"Slept with your father?"

"Del! You know what I'm asking."

"Liddy, please stay focused here. You're going off on a tangent."

"Del?"

"I have never been in love with a woman. There, are you satisfied?"

"Is that a yes?"

(Oh, geesh.) "It was a long time ago. I was drunk. In all places, Shanghai. Erotic and impractical. Mmmm. Quite impractical for a conservative investment banker like me."

"Solar flare?"

"That's right, a solar flare. Not quite the blond bomb as your Helaine is, but an entire month of electrical interference anyway."

Helaine? Lydia gulped. Delilah knew the blond's name? "How do you know-? Oh, Del, tell me that you didn't talk to her. Tell me you didn't make me look like a child!" She moved closer to her on the couch; Delilah's lips moved like a fish gulping for air. "Delilah Lewiston, you didn't!"

"Liddy, I only-"

"What did you tell her?"

"Liddy..."

"You didn't tell her anything! Oh, Del, what did you fucking say to her?"

Delilah sighed and stood up. "Liddy, I was only trying to get you laid. You are a child sometimes."

"What did she say? Tell me what she said to you."

Delilah walked toward the kitchen without answering. Lydia chased after her. She saw her going through the refrigerator.

"Del...please?"

"Why isn't there anything to drink in here?"

"Delilah Lewiston-"

"The feeling is mutual, Lydia Beaumont. Now get your act together."

"The feeling is mutual?"

Delilah was annoyed. "Your feelings. Hers. MUTUAL. You're making yourself look like a child. I'm at least trying to get you laid."

She went back to the couch empty-handed and threw herself in it with a loud sound of disgust, so loud it almost seemed to come from the furniture itself. Lydia stood over her speechless.

"Get some paper and a pen, Dame Beaumont."

"Paper and pen? What for?"

"A love poem."

"A poem? I don't know how to write a poem. What about—"

"Liddy, it is not a happy union, that's what I can tell. You've seen them together, not me. Get over how beautiful her girlfriend is. Do they look happy together?"

No.

"Paper and pen."

She vacillated over the request. "Is this what you would do, little Miss Shanghai?"

That prompted a throaty laugh from Delilah. "You wouldn't do what I would do!"

There was paper in the briefcase. A pen. Lydia rummaged for the items, one eye studying Delilah as she sat with an arm over her eyes, her head nearly lost in the pillows. Her friend had slept with a woman. "Here."

"Not me. I'm not courting the woman, you are."

"Delilah, tell me. Describe what it's like. I've got fears about it."

There was no response from the pillows.

"You understand, Del?"

"Veni, vidi, vici," said the sofa.

"Del, that's you, not me."

"You think too much, my friend. You're being impossible. And you're making it impossible." She rolled over on her side and stared at Lydia. "Liddy, don't make me pity you. Start writing, please."

"I can't do this. I'm not a poet."

"Then get a book. You don't think all the poems you got were written by the men who sent them, do you?"

"They weren't?"

"I doubt it very much. What, you think they grew the flowers, too?"

"What a bunch of frauds," Lydia exclaimed.

"Us too-what kind of poetry do you think she reads?"

Poetry? "Burns! She was reading Burns the last time I saw her."

"Robert Burns?"

"I guess so. You've heard of him?"

A helpless laugh emptied from Delilah. "This is going to be so much easier than you think, Liddy. Grab some Burns on one of your excursions. You'll see what I mean."

Sherlock Holmes had nothing substantial to report to Sharon Chambers about the Love Doc. He had begun to think that title a bit specious since the doctor apparently had no love life of her own, unless you factored in the insanely possessive super-model who was paying a mint to have her followed while she plea bargained in LA.

Casing out Frank's was an act of futility, though she had resumed her original habit of Friday dinners and Saturday lunches. But she still ate there alone.

He had discovered that she looked very nice in navy blue, striped linens and flowing silks. Privately he would have liked to see her step out a bit, something more flashy now and then. She could pull it off, he thought. A bright red dress, mid-thigh, cut low in the front, way down in the back. Liven things up a bit. Course she might not look so much like a doctor then. Or a bookworm.

"Altho' my bed were in yon muir,
Amang the heather, in my plaidie;
Yet happy, happy would I be,
had I dear Montgomerie's Peggy.
When o'er the hill beat surly storms,
And winter nights were dark and rainy;
I'd seek some dell, and in my arms
I'd shelter dear Montgomerie's Peggy.
Were I a baron proud and high,
And horse and servants waiting ready;
Then a' 'twad gie o' joy to me—
The sharin't with Montgomerie's Peggy."

Except for the two of them seated at their separate tables (and the ghost of Robert Burns), the dining room was finally empty, the bar vacated. Outside, only a few lunch stragglers still sat on the patio, apparently immune to the wilting heat.

The worst she could say is no.

Lydia watched Helaine take the slip of paper from the waiter's tray, the long fingers anxiously unfolding it. The blond had clearly not expected to see her again, let alone the love note. She cast curious sideways glances in Lydia's direction and then a long and pensive look out the window after she had read it.

The feeling is mutual, get over how beautiful her girlfriend is. Lydia was trying. The blond bomb. Electrical interference. Short circuits. Solar flares.

She was more rested than the last time Lydia had seen her, although at present the woman had lost some of her normal composure and appeared to be considering a hasty retreat in an effort to regain it again. Lydia watched her slip the note inside her blouse and gather her other things into a purse. Despite her obvious confusion, the blond looked quite well. Beautiful. It was too much to hope that the source of her recovery was due to that she had not been with her lover for awhile. She hoped for it anyway as Helaine filled out her bill, handed it to the waiter and without a word swished past her table in a whisper of fine fabrics, her soft silks billowing like the sails of a tall ship, the scent of sandalwood wafting on her breeze and descending like a cloud all around Lydia, in her hair, on her skin. Lydia lowered her eyes and drew the intoxicating air deep into her lungs.

Running away? Now, is that supposed to happen? Lydia rested her chin on her hand and watched out the window as the woman evaporated into traffic.

That was a waste of courage, she told herself, wishing she had never been born.

"Congratulations," whispered the waiter. He deposited a napkin beside her plate and disappeared without further ado. "Lydia", it said on the outside. Dear John, she bet, waiting till he was out of sight before reading it.

"Her flowing locks, the raven's wing, adown her neck and bosom hing: How sweet unto that breast to cling, and round that neck entwine her! Her lips are roses wat wi' dew, O, what a feast her bonie mou'! Her cheeks a mair celestial hue, A crimson still diviner!"

Signed simply, "Helaine." The waiter returned with Lydia's bill.

"What is your name?" she asked him.

"Harry."

Harry. A fine name. A wonderful, uncomplicated name. Easy to remember. She smiled like a child. A perfect name in a perfect world. Harry. Just as light as a kite in her cloudless sky. "I really don't know what I'd do without you, Harry."

He grinned impishly. "You'd better figure it out soon."

The first week back and everything she touched turned to gold. No conundrums, no hassles. Corporate governance at its best. Lydia could almost stand leading the tribe again. Rumors abounded concerning an inside trading scandal and all of Rio Joe's activities were suddenly under scrutiny. It shouldn't surprise anyone, she wanted to say. He was likely the mastermind.

He acted like a hunted animal these days, sending her beseeching looks as if she was his only salvation. She ducked them, allowing them to drift past her without interception. He had sought to become a lone wolf in the firm, alone he really was.

At free moments she studied Helaine's handwriting. She wished the blond had given her number, but then what? Forget her beautiful girlfriend. Think of the sensuous "L" in Lydia, that elegant scrawl. Maybe the blond was a writer. That would explain her interest in books. Lydia couldn't recall seeing her with one last Saturday. Had she dashed off this poem from memory?

Friday morning a dozen red roses arrived at her office. She feared them at first, almost certain that Rio Joe was resorting to different tactics, but when she saw and recognized the handwriting on the envelope her heart jumped out of its normal place and hid all day in her throat, disguised there as a suppressed scream of joy. (Our Mr. Burns again.)

"By night, by day, a-field, at hame,
The thoughts o' thee my breast inflame:
And aye I muse and sing thy name—
I only live to love thee.
Tho' I were doom'd to wander on,
Beyond the sea, beyond the sun,
Till my last weary sand was run;
Till then—and then—I'd love thee!"

She placed the flowers on a stand in the window, speculating over them all day. That Helaine knew her name had not surprised Lydia. At Frank's her friends yelled it all night. It would be odd considering how loud they were not to have heard it at least once. But where she worked? Too titillating. It cast a bit of intrigue over the affair. She pondered it at the window standing beside her bouquet.

She had already made plans to meet her father at the club this afternoon or she would have sought the blond out at happy hour. Discreetly, of course, in case she wasn't alone. The red, red roses...what in the hell am I thinking?

One more day, is what she was thinking, preparing herself for dinner with her father. She was just going to get her feet wet, test the waters as Delilah had suggested she should do. She would ask Helaine to join her for lunch tomorrow and take it from there. One more day.

She put her lipstick on and adjusted herself for her father's inspection, in a low grade dread over the inevitable inquisition which had become so routine in their relationship. She hoped this time he would not have the gall to set up a double date with her as he had done the last time. She had very nearly walked out on dinner that night, hooked up without advanced warning to the son of his most recent squeeze, the three of them waiting for her to arrive like cats would for a mouse. Poor Mom. Why she wouldn't divorce him, Lydia didn't know. Maybe just not living with him anymore was enough. She often wished her father was as smooth and debonair as he actually looked.

Stepping out on the sidewalk fifteen flights below, the heat was high, burning away the last weeks of summer. Suffocating humidity. It sat heavy on her shoulders shocking her air conditioned body. She was not going to struggle with it today. She stood on the corner and hailed a cab.

Above her, across the street, Dr. Helaine Kristenson stood at the blinds again. She had been engaged in that activity all day, ever since the roses she had sent first appeared in Lydia's window. She had a great deal of apprehension now and it mingled with elation to create quite a potent poison to her nerves. For the moment, she was not going to struggle with it. She wouldn't have to. Lydia was not going to Frank's tonight.

A strange sense of relief claimed Dr. Kristenson once she realized this. She watched the taxi pull into the traffic and disappear around the corner without fear as to where it was going. It was not Lydia's whereabouts that worried her anymore. It was Sharon's.

It is Saturday. Two women stand in the entranceway of Frank's Place. They aren't aware of each other yet, or the similarity of their missions. A blond woman older than both of them, and the object of their desire, is seated at her usual table for lunch. She has noticed them up there. Her eyes flash red lights, green lights, even yellow, without her knowing it. Different signals to both of them which get crossed in the air. If the three ladies were dots on a piece of paper and you drew lines connecting them, you'd be drawing a triangle, the blond of course at the apex. Both women are equally beautiful in their own right and although the last thing the blond wants to see today is the two of them in the same place at the same time thinking the same thing, it provides for an unusually good opportunity to compare them with each other, which she is also doing without meaning to. Both are young, but one is older than the other. How much older? You can't tell. Both have dark hair, the older one's is more brown than black. The younger woman is taller than the other, perhaps by three or four inches. She is an exotic thing with an animal's grace and snarl. The defending champion, she wears a spoiled expression and is on a constant prowl, this very second admiring the strapless back and legs of her unknown rival. Her rival is a fine physical specimen with an elegance that borders on

regal. She is armed in this contest with lofty ambitions and with unassuming good looks that come from deep beneath her skin. And she has blue eyes, Helaine's favorite color. Her instincts are good. This second she senses someone behind her and is turning around to see who it is. At the same moment a hand expertly brushes against her bare back and a bedroom voice offers a disingenuous apology for the trespass as its owner passes too close to her on the way into the dining room. This woman seems oddly familiar and she follows her with her eye, glimpsing a cautionary glance from the blond as she does it. In her eyes she sees a yellow light flashing, then the light turns suddenly red and she balks. On the periphery the waiter finally appears heading for the entrance with a look of stupefaction. The seat Lydia wants, the one next to the blond is now occupied and the sight of those two women together again instantly jogs her recollection. She goes pale, and turns to leave.

"Madam, wait," says the waiter.

"Harry?"

"Please. Let me seat you for lunch."

"Harry, I-"

"Please. This is just the tricky part, believe me."

Lydia gazed past him, sized up Helaine's tortured expression, her panicked body language. The dining room was less than half filled. She could be seated inconspicuously if she consented to it. "Three's a crowd," she whispered.

"Of course."

Lydia was silent, her face darkened with disappointment.

"She really wasn't expecting her," the waiter assured.

What does that mean? "I can't do this, Harry. I'm not the type."

It was pride talking. All that pride. "It's too late for a' that," he said.

She let go a bitter laugh. "For a' that, an' a' that, our toils obscure, an' a' that...?"

"Yes, but 'the man o' independent mind, he looks and laughs at a' that. You should, too."

She considered those words. What was happening to her, quoting poets? Courting Venus? Letting herself be boondoggled again, this time by a woman?

"The course of true love never did run smooth," he began again.

"Okay, okay." She could not outdo him, nor did she want to try. "Sit me there," she said, pointing at a location close to the unhappy couple. She saw a look of relief come over Helaine's face as the waiter led her to the table, but short of that the blond refused to acknowledge her.

The menu. Lydia put her face in it, listening for the voice she had hoped to hear today, but she heard only sliced and muffled responses, nothing to go on.

They had been together, she realized, staring over the top of her menu. She knew it by the younger woman's eyes, eyes fresh with a conquest, like a shark's. She knew it by the way Helaine tried to hide it, by the way she checked her movements so it wouldn't show. Yesterday or even today, Lydia thought, trying to discern the topic of their discussion. You are mine, the young woman seemed to be asserting to the beleaguered blond. Not a pleasant conversation. Under their table she could see the shark stretching her legs out to entwine Helaine's in them. She wanted to kick them herself and willed Helaine to do it for her, but the blond merely mumbled something and hid her face with her hand. It was the first time she had ever seen her flushed.

Oh, god, Lydia thought, hailing the waiter, what am I doing here? He blocked her view as he took her order.

How good they looked together, she admitted, after he had gone, the sparks still flying between them, smoldering, though she could tell they were igniting something far more flammable than sexual passion, something quite a bit more adulterated than true love. Corrupted, but it was easy to envision how it must have been before that, before whatever it was had happened to ruin them. It was easy to see how darkness once complimented the light, posing no more harm to it than a cloud would by covering the summer sun in a breezy afternoon sky. Easy. Too easy.

There was a quick glance from Helaine. Bear with me, it said, I'm sorry. Lydia looked guiltily away. Wasn't she hoping to benefit by their catastrophe? Wasn't she guilty here of opportunism?

Lunch was ruined. Appetizers. Lydia pushed them around her plate, eyeing the blond fatale who just yesterday had sent her roses and today mere helpless glances. Strained, apologetic glances full of half-formed explanations and unspoken promises. Lies, probably. Lydia watched with dismay as the shark's hand disappeared under the table cloth and Helaine's face drained once more of its color. She saw the blond discreetly push her chair back from the table and send a warning look toward her lover, with lips blood red and hostile. The shark grinned insolently at her, removed her hand, and scoured the room instead.

As if things weren't complicated enough, Sharon Chambers was searching for the woman she had run into at the coat check. To her delight she found her conveniently seated only a few tables away. She liked the looks of the woman, her cut of clothes, the strong back and legs, and she was thinking that, if she got the chance, she'd proposition her, that she'd make a fine dessert. She sent those intentions her way, indifferent that Helaine was suddenly aware of them.

And now, thoroughly flustered, Lydia threw her fork down and headed for the ladies' lounge, a hapless move that both Helaine and the waiter simultaneously recognized for the huge mistake it was. Only Sharon Chambers mistook it for meaning something else. She waited an appropriate minute or two and nonchalantly followed after her, licking her chops all the way to the bathroom.

The waiter rolled his eyes heavenward and stepped behind the bar, scribbling on a piece of paper as he eyed Dr. Kristenson. She rubbed her forehead wearily and ran her hands through her hair, her agitated fingers displacing her hairpin and sending it flying across the tabletop. There was little he could do for her at this point. He watched a proverbial straw falling in slow motion from the sky and waited for the distinctive sound of a breaking back.

Eight. Nine. Ten minutes.

Helaine shot a volley of anxious looks toward the ladies' lounge, reclaimed the hairpin and scooped her hair back before rising from her chair and aiming herself in that direction. The waiter intercepted her before she got that far, handing her a note with a piece of tape attached to it.

"Best I can do," he said, sheepishly. The note read "Out of Order".

"Indeed," she said, appreciating his tact. "Thank you." She taped it to the bathroom door and pushed herself inside, standing quietly in a dim hallway before deciding how to proceed.

She had never been in this room, was not familiar with the layout. She moved cautiously along the length of a long wooden partition until she glimpsed Sharon and then Lydia in the mirror around the bend. Their voices floated over the divide, taut and flat. Water was pouring from a faucet. Clearly they had not heard her enter.

"Decency?" That was Sharon. "Decency's not much of an asset in the bedroom, darling."

Darling. Helaine cringed.

"No? Well, maybe you ought to try it sometime."

Lydia's lipstick was smeared. So was Sharon's. You're a misery, Helaine thought, glaring at Sharon's reflection.

"Let's," Sharon pursued. "I'm an excellent student."

"Look...I don't need a student. Now give me my lipstick."

Helaine heard the sound of plastic hitting the floor, pieces of it scattering. What she couldn't see was Sharon grinding Lydia's lipstick into the floor with her sandal.

"Do you have any idea who you're talking to?" Sharon hissed, indignant.

She wouldn't know you if she fell over you, Helaine screamed in her head.

Lydia sighed impatiently and turned the water off. "Oh, please. You're not going to try to impress me, I hope, because you're already operating on a deficit."

Helaine smiled. She wasn't sure how Sharon Chambers was going to take that one. This was probably her very first NO. A deadly quiet filled the lounge and it hung heavy and toxic around the two women. Helaine could see Sharon's face in the mirror and didn't care for her expression. She thought fast and retraced her steps to the door, reaching behind her to open it and then closing it loudly again.

Sharon came sailing around the bend. "I'm out of here," she said hotly. "Meet me at the flat, Helaine."

"At the flat, Dr. Kristenson!" She slammed the door behind her, oblivious to the consequences, or to the sign that was taped on the other side of it.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Lydia replied. She turned to the mirror, took out a tissue, wiped off her mouth.

Helaine observed her from behind.

"Doctor?" Lydia asked in the mirror.

"Yes. A doctor." She hesitated before confessing her name. "Dr. Helaine Kristenson." There was nothing in Lydia's face to indicate that she recognized it.

"Medical?" Lydia asked. She faced her again, leaning against the counter, grasping the edge of it in her hands. They were about the same height, her and the doctor. She smiled again. A doctor. In a gray tailored tunic with a heart shaped front, linen lined with satin, just a splash of lace, tapered in above the knees, gathered at the waist, hugging the hips, the sleeves nothing more than wide straps dangling over the tips of the shoulders as if they would fall down her arms if she wanted them to. Full breasts, wide shoulders, long neck, a blond halo of hair, eyes afire, more than a little something to get burned in.

"No," Helaine answered. "Just a psychotherapist."

"Oh." Lydia smiled self-consciously. A pleasant voice, exactly what she had expected her to sound like. "Can you read minds then–I hope not?"

Helaine chuckled. "Sometimes."

Sometimes. Lydia nodded and averted her eyes. At her feet lay the remains of her lipstick dispenser, smeared and tracked across the floor. It made the bathroom look like the scene of an accident. Helaine saw it, too, and frowned.

"Please tell me she's just one of your patients," Lydia said, trying to effect a laugh.

Helaine grabbed some paper towels and bent to the floor. "She's not," she said without looking up. "I'm sorry to say."

Lydia watched her clean in silence. It was probably a ritual between them, she thought, noticing the gray dress slowly riding up Helaine's thighs, the tops of stockings, clips holding them in place. Down. She could see down the front of it now. She took a step forward and then stopped, embarrassed.

Helaine looked up then glanced at herself. "Lydia," she said, as she cleaned the mess. "Lydia *what?*" She had put a corset on this morning, mostly to remember what it was like to be Helaine Kristenson. She had instantly regretted it when she saw Sharon come in, but she was not in the least bit sorry now.

Lydia what? "Helaine..."

Helaine laughed low, stopped what she was doing. "No, dear. I'm Helaine. And you are...?" She watched the blood rise to the woman's cheeks and smiled. "Lydia, what is your last name?"

"Beaumont-I'm Lydia Beaumont."

Beaumont? That's a familiar name. "Well," Helaine answered, shifting so the dress could slide higher up her thigh. "Ms. Beaumont, if you keep blushing like that, I'm going to have to kiss you."

Lydia glanced in the mirror, laughed shyly. "You sent the cognac, I hope?"

"I did."

"And the ovsters?"

Helaine knelt on one knee and set the paper towels down. "And the oysters. And the roses." She leaned forward, but didn't rise. "You like?" she asked.

One more step. Lydia put her hand on Helaine's shoulder. The dress strap fell down. "Like? Yes. Absolutely," she answered. "Love."

Helaine took a quick breath. "Good," she heard herself say, "I'm glad." Lydia's hands were at her neck. She let her lift her face, closed her eyes. She rested her cheek against a firm stomach. "Ms. Beaumont, how did you get a body like this?"

How? "I...work in finance." Lydia said, placing both her hands on Helaine's shoulders. "It's, uh, sort of an extreme sport." Down went the other strap.

"Extreme," Helaine repeated. "May I?" she asked, taking Lydia's right hand and bringing it to her lips. A sigh. "I'm extremely in love with Lydia Beaumont," she whispered, kissing the palm with her tongue. She felt Lydia jump. "What does Lydia Beaumont think I should do about it?"

"What...you should..." behind them, to their sides was a bank of mirrors, a pretty portrait of two women in every one of them. One blond. One brunette. What she should do about it? They looked good together. She should—Lydia stroked the blond head below her, reached for the hairpin and removed it. A yellow wave cascaded onto her legs, a soft face pressed gently into her stomach. "Am I still blushing?"

Helaine opened her eyes, took in Lydia's face. "You are."

She was. She could feel it. "Then do what you have to," Lydia dared.

There was unfinished business at the flat. She had planned to buy her freedom today, say fare-thee-well to Sharon Chambers. Making out with Lydia wasn't supposed to have happened yet.

Making out!

Helaine walked slowly toward the harbor. Life has a force all its own, she mused, so we're never too early or too late. She could add that new observation to her book. What else, she wondered, could it do? Could it handle Sharon Chambers' wrath, provide the antidote for her poison, prevent whatever harm would come of today's confrontation? Wouldn't that be nice? She floated, propelled by an unseen force, the touch of a new lover still on her lips, her perfume lingering, without her knowing it, in her hair. Tomorrow or the next day, she promised herself, everything will be fine again. As for today...she floated away from her body, watched it with apprehension as it moved closer and closer toward Sharon.

"Ya know, Frank, you sure have some nice looking broads in here!" the man said, appraising a dark-haired woman as she left the dining room, the last of the lunch customers to go. He swiveled his barstool around to beam at the waiter. Harry grimaced and placed the bill at the side of his glass.

Three times during the course of this guy's liquid lunch he had been required to inform him that his name was not Frank. He refused to correct him again. The checkered suits, the beady eyes, the stupid grin, the bald patch on the back of his fat speckled head...Harry had been wondering for months what a guy like that was doing hanging out in a place like Frank's and the simple truth was that he didn't trust him.

Today "Checkers" (which is what he privately had nicknamed him) had abandoned his table and come up to the bar for his lunch, not long after Sharon Chambers had crashed the party. Harry wasn't sure, having been distracted, but it almost seemed the two of them knew each other, that they had acknowledged each other in a brief exchange. It was curious and Harry was troubled by it.

"See ya, Frank," Checkers drawled, nearly dragging the stool with him as he tottered away from the bar.

Harry smiled with disdain. Well, he thought, watching the big guy stagger through the patio doors and teetering on the sidewalk, if he's spying he won't remember what he saw today. He laughed as he wiped the bar down. Poor Checkers! He had served him drinks in triples. Four triples for lunch today!

She calls him "Daddy." He calls her "Queenie." It's an improvement over "Princess," what he called her for the first two decades of her life. He calls her mother "The Grim Weeper."

"Daddy, please. That's not nice."

"Then why do you laugh with me?" Edward Beaumont teased his daughter.

"I'm not laughing with you. I'm laughing at you."

Lydia was thinking of her last conversation with her father as she walked from Frank's to her apartment. She didn't know why, possibly because it took her mind off Helaine, heading right then to her lover's apartment for a little heart to heart.

"Negotiation's the name of the game, Queenie. It's the only way to get what you want in this world. Otherwise, you've just got to steal it."

Negotiating. Negotiating. Lydia had negotiated a soft option and a hairpin curve. It was now about twenty blocks away from her, engaged in thought, with its blond hair flowing on its very own breeze. That's too far away for Lydia to see the woman halt in her tracks, search her hair, and suddenly remember the missing

hairpin lying on the floor of the ladies' lounge at Frank's. Also too far away for Helaine to go back and retrieve it. She was just a few blocks from the waterfront.

A missing hairpin, life under a magnifying glass, her hair flowing in a golden wave of liberation, incriminating her somehow. Helaine rarely wore it down. She stood at the corner by the basketball park, rummaging in her purse for something, anything to tie it back with.

The boom boxes blared, the basketballs thumped against their backboards, rubber squeaked against the court, glistening bodies danced and groaned with joy in the bristling heat, with a rhythmic fivack, fivack, fivack of an orange rubber ball and a blur of arms and legs, the jubilant clink of men throwing themselves into the chain-linked fence, calling yeah and yo to the boom, boom, boom of a tireless bass. Twoong! Rim shot. Swish! Basket. There was music everywhere Helaine turned. The tick, tack, tick of speed chess with the subsequent murmurs of disappointed tourists finding themselves caught in split second checkmates. Honking horns and tweeting cell phones were the birds of this jungle. No one paid them any mind. They didn't trouble her today either. They blended nicely with the sizzle of the hot dog vendor, the twang of helium balloons that bounced over the heads of meandering pedestrians. She closed her purse...click...let the hair hang down on her shoulders...whenever I'm near you...I hear a symphony...she recognized strands of songs coming through the chain linked fence, and that one, too...your body is a wonderland...descending on her from one of those balconies; all the vaguely familiar tunes drifting happily toward her, delaying her, staying her, as they emanated from the sidewalk cases, from the dark pubs with their rich blue notes... I cover the waterfront...she passed the T-shirt and tattoo parlors... are you strong enough to be my man... the sluggish crowd swallowing her up and keeping her presence there a secret. Helaine was lost in it... zip, zip, zip,...the only one really moving, a brown beauty on roller skates with sleek muscular thighs, well toned biceps. She wove in and out of the street, onto the sidewalk, arms wide open, a strong back, like Lydia's. With arms wide open...zip, zip, zip...arms wide open. At a standstill now, Helaine longed to be kept there, stuck with music and strangers until Sharon had no right to expect her anymore, till it was all over, till it was too late. Lydia's phone number. She had committed Lydia's phone number to memory in the bathroom. She didn't dare write it down someplace where it...swish...swish...tick...fwack...fwack...ssssssst...oh...Sharon had no right...no right...sssst...twang...baby, baby...boom...boom...boom...she had absolutely no right to expect her anymore...I symphony...zip...zip...zip...ssssssssst...twooong...oh, hear yes...Lydia's telephone yo...yo...hey...rrrring...yeah...rrring...Lydia...tick, tack, tick, tick...tack, tick...checkmate...she wanted to call her right now...fwack...fwack...fwack...and swim in a big sea of blankets...twang...boom...boom...sssst...oh, baby, baby,...your wonderland...uunnh...clang...rrring...fwack...thud...rrring...yo...yo... uunnh...boom...boom...sssssst...zip...zip...swish!

Lydia walked slowly, feeling heavily compromised. ("The name of the game, Queenie.") For the very first time she had solicited her father's advice, albeit he didn't know it, nor how she intended to use it. With his words in mind, she gave Helaine a week to tell her lover goodbye, making an exception for her, for the tender mouth, the soft lips swollen from all those kisses. She regretted parting with her and was actively hoping beyond hope that something wonderful would happen to prevent her from reaching her current destination, the flat where her lover lived, whose name she had forbidden her to speak. No, she didn't want to know a thing about the creature. She never wanted to see her face again. And she didn't trust her alone with Helaine and prayed to the powers that be for intervention.

The powers that be didn't think her request was unreasonable. In fact, they wondered why it had taken her so long to make it. They had just scheduled a month of Indian summer simply because enough people had asked for it. After all, some people like it really hot. So hot, hot, hot it would be, well into autumn. As to the Kristenson-Chambers-Beaumont affair, they had already decided on a victor, so from here on in it was the winner's to lose. Small favors for the contestants were definitely in the offing, they agreed, after only five minutes of deliberations. It was nice to be needed.

"Helaine!"

Who can that be? She turned, her hand raised to block the sun from her eyes.

"Helaine! Helaine!"

That sounded like Kay. Helaine squinted in the noonday sun. It was Kay! It was Robert and Kay crossing the street toward her.

"I didn't recognize you with your hair down," Robert said.

"I told you it was Helaine. You look fabulous. Have you eaten yet?"

"Yes-I mean no! What brings you two down here?"

"Such a nice day, that's all."

Kay groaned. "He loves it hot like this. I wilt. Let's eat then, or are you heading somewhere?"

"No, no, just walking," she lied. Let's," she urged. "There's a lovely place down by the water." She glanced at her watch. "We won't need reservations now. It's almost two o'clock."

"Seafood I hope? I'm in the mood for fish," Robert said. "I'm hungry enough to eat a shark."

Helaine laughed, glancing down Sharon's street as they passed it. It must be a good omen running into them when she did, she mused. Fate. Destiny.

Lydia was only a few blocks from home by now. She had meandered the whole way, stopping at the vegetable stands and chitchatting with the sidewalk vendors. She stopped at a brilliant flower stall, bought some red gladiolas. She didn't mind the heat. It seemed to bring the people out and she needed to see people right now. The idea of being alone made her feel sad and lonely and she knew once inside...she hesitated at her building. Oh, it would be cool inside. There was work to be done. That could take her mind off of things for awhile. The flowers were dripping wet leaving her skin and clothes misty where she held them. Her nerves tingled and she was convinced that somehow she would feel it if it happened—she would know the minute that someone else was making love to the woman.

The doorman pushed open the door and held it for her. "Ms. Beaumont," he greeted, steaming in his uniform.

A cold breeze rushed at her. Nah. She did not want to be alone.

"You have a visitor," he said, pointing toward the lobby.

She peered cautiously inside. "Del! Thank god."

"Look at you, Liddy. You look fabulous. Why thank god?"

"Just thank god. Boy am I glad to see you. Tell me, why did we never marry?"

"I was waiting for you to lose your cherry."

Lydia gasped and grinned. "Oh, my gosh, you're fresh," she said, shoving the wet bouquet into her friend's arms. "There's probably a law against you."

"At least one! Have you eaten, yet?"

"No-ves-I mean no!"

"No. Yes. Here, let's try this again. Have you eaten yet-you've done something haven't you? And don't tell me no. I always know when you're fibbing."

"No. Eaten, I mean." The elevator doors opened at the penthouse and she fumbled at her door. "I've done something? It shows?"

"Yah! Let me put these in water and we'll go eat then. Yes, something. Something blond methinks."

"Oh, Del. I am in love with that woman."

"Is that Love, L-U-V?"

"Oh," she said, losing the smile. "At least that. Yes, I'd say so. At the very least."

In her dream, Helaine half lay, half sat on the couch in her consultation room. She was spilling her guts to Dr. Kristenson who sat poised and neutral in the red leather armchair, her penetrating eyes focused on something just behind Helaine's head, her lips fixed with a Mona Lisa smile. The inimitable Dr. Kristensonherself.

"Oh, come on, Helaine," she said cheerfully, her lips never moving as she spoke, "You know what an archetype is."

83

In his dream, Joseph Rios leisurely ate breakfast on a sunny patio with Lydia Beaumont. They sat at a wrought iron table with matching chairs, between them a large vase of long stem roses, as red as her lips. She was pregnant. His wife.

In her dream, Sharon Chambers caught Helaine and the blue-eyed woman at Frank's making out in the ladies' lounge. There was something written on the bathroom mirror, but she couldn't read it. It was impossible to pull the two of them apart. She glimpsed herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red from crying.

In his dream, Harold D'Angello, the maitre de at Frank's Place, made love to his wife, dead of cancer these long five years. With her red hair hanging on her naked shoulders, she was just as beautiful as ever.

In her dream, Lydia Beaumont wrote "I love Helaine Kristenson" in red lipstick on a bright blue sky, the letters floating dreamily over the city, looking just like an advertisement left by a skywriter.

In his dream, Lawrence Taft, the balding private eye, saw Helaine Kristenson wearing the tight red dress and stiletto heels he had apparently bought for her. He was afraid to lose sight of the blond so he held her about the waist as they crossed the street together. He tried to concentrate on the traffic, but he couldn't keep his eyes off those legs.

In her dream, Delilah Lewiston was in a sailboat with her best friend, Lydia, drinking red wine and breaking bread when she noticed a storm coming up fast on the horizon, the shore a mere pencil line, so far away from them that there simply wasn't enough time to get the vessel back to safety.

In his dream, Robert Keagan was on a sailboat with his best friend, Helaine, drinking red wine and breaking bread when he noticed a storm coming up fast on the horizon, the shore a mere pencil line, so far away from them that he wasn't certain there was enough time to get the vessel back to safety.

In her dream, Kay Keagan was on a sailboat with her best friend, Helaine, drinking red wine and breaking bread. A brief storm had just passed over them and it had forced the vessel somewhat further inland than they had wanted to be.

He was in love with Lydia Beaumont. But, unlike most people in love, he didn't know it. And, unlike most people in love, it was having a deleterious effect on his life, compounded by the fact that the woman abhorred him and refused to even look his way. He could put his head in her paper shredder and he doubted she would even call an ambulance.

Rio Joe sat downcast in the sauna of the men's club examining himself after an unsatisfactory game of squash. He was convinced that his penis was smaller, that the testicles, too, had mysteriously shrunken, were more flaccid than they ought to be, or than he remembered. The night before he had mistakenly called his date "Lydia" as he screwed her. Worse, she knew who Lydia was. His cheek was still stinging this morning when he woke up. And the bed, of course, was empty. For weeks now he had been wrestling a sickening sensation in his stomach. Nothing—not sex, not masturbation, not playing squash, not boiling the woman out of his system in a sauna—seemed to bring him any relief. He was so distracted by his condition that he had even fucked up at work. Papers were flying at him now like he was caught in a hurricane and the demands for

his explanation were piled sky high on his desk. He was drowning in bullshit. And the bitch queen–still wearing his bracelet, the snake one, with its tail in its mouth–acting like it's no big deal, with her red roses from some dickhead. Some dickhead reaping all the benefits of *his* expertise. Shit! Now she won't even say hello. Aw, baby! If he could get his hands on her. If he could be inside her just one more time, hear her moaning, whispering his name to him, dying in his arms. If he could snatch just a few more I-love-you's from her fabulous mouth, her lips, her tongue. Smell her. Everything would be sweet again. Jesus, to hear those dying breaths! Mmm...mmm. How he missed them. Nobody, but nobody, fucked like Lydia Beaumont did. She was absolutely made for it. He smiled without realizing, his penis standing at attention and waiting for an order, the tip of it glistening with futility. Another false alarm.

Her flight was at seven. Helaine was a no-show at the flat. Sharon felt more than a little jilted when she woke up from her nap at half past five. She had told the doctor over lunch that she had to fly back to LA and had looked forward to a little physical therapy before leaving. That bitch queen in the bathroom—had no fucking clue who she was talking to—kiss my ass!

The stress of all this crap was beginning to show in the mirror. She saw the cheerless face in the looking glass, the bleary eyes, bloodshot and veined with a bluish tint beneath them. So? It's the strung-out look all the young ones are wearing. She threw some things in a bag and called a cab, dialing Helaine's place after that to leave a message. It rang and rang and rang...

An archetype? Of course Dr. Kristenson knows what an archetype is. It was the statement that plagued her so much and the unanswerable question that remained upon waking: Who is the archetype in question? Lydia? Sharon?

What were her archetypes anyway? It would have to be father and mother. No brothers, no sisters. A few aunts and uncles she rarely saw. Neither grandparents were alive when she was born. It had always been the three of them: her elderly parents and she their little miracle.

She was an only child, born in the autumn of her parents' years, her happy people, happily married till death did they part...within six months of each other. Happy, but not rich, although surely not poor. At least not dirt poor. These original models, her prototypes, they never prepared her for anything but happiness. So why unhappiness then? Why Sharon?

She had run free as a child. Nothing displeased her parents, nothing tarnished their parental pride in their blessed offspring and she never disappointed them. Not "Lana." Lana, the happy baby, the golden child, the homecoming queen, the college grad, the doctor, the author, the millionaire, the self-made woman going into the Twenty-first Century, her parents gone now, friendly apparitions housed in the landscape of her mind, sheltered in a home on that landscape, but without hidden rooms or locked doors or skeletons, a happy house filled with happy exchanges. Nothing had ever been left unsaid, no dark secrets kept from her parents. For that she was eternally grateful.

Lana. Lana had died with them. No one called her that anymore. She was Dr. K. or the Luv Doc. So who was Lana now?

Who's Lana? Dr. Kristenson asked herself, coming from the office of property management for the waterfront flat. There had been a year and a half left on her lease. She paid it out, including a rather hefty maintenance fee, all nonrefundable. Sharon could stay there then until the lease expired, provided that no activities of the sort they were reading about lately took place on the premises. If they did, she would be evicted. She would also face eviction if she was convicted of the current criminal charges against her, as several tenants had already expressed concerns about the super-model's questionable reputation. Fine, that was their business, Helaine cordially advised, as she was no longer an interested party as far as Sharon Chambers was concerned. Considering the recent revelations about Sharon's real estate holdings, none of which she had known of before, she doubted that the model would ever find herself without a roof over her head.

Shouldn't there be a dark specter from her past, some long gone demon whose empty shoes a Sharon Chambers had so nicely stepped into? But there isn't one, Helaine concluded at one o'clock in the office of the real estate broker who she planned would handle the sale of her townhouse.

"It would be quicker to rent it, Dr. Kristenson. Perhaps with an option to buy."

"You can manage that for me?"

"Of course."

"How long will it take you to find what I'm looking for?"

The agent glanced at the computer and across the desk at Helaine. "A week? Two?" She scrolled the screen. "Unless you want to rent. I've got a lovely place midtown. Isn't that near your offices?"

"I hate modern. It isn't one of those?"

"No. I know what you need. It's only seven stories. Penthouse." She tapped earnestly at the keyboard as she talked. "Six big rooms. Patio and garden. Private elevator. Parking. Central air. Skylights in bedroom, bath. Eat-in gourmet. No maintenance. Blah, blah, blah. Let's see. Yup, available...now." She flipped the screen around, displaying a few interior photos provided by the owner. "Ready now," she repeated hopefully. "You want to see it?"

"Any ghosts?"

"No," the agent giggled. "None listed. Young executives relocating. San Francisco. Want to see it?"

Helaine didn't have time for that. Sharon had left last Saturday, the day she had stood her up. She would be back soon. Helaine was sure of it. And there was a phone number bouncing around her brain like a rubber ball. She hoped to dial that number by Friday. Or else. "No, it sounds perfect. I'll take it."

Helaine left, content with her selection. She felt she was operating at a hundred percent for a change. Tomorrow she'd call the movers and get her things out. Tonight perhaps she'd stay with friends, if that was all right with Robert and Kay. She went back to the office and called them without telling them too much. In fact, she lied altogether. The townhouse was being painted, was what she actually said. It was only a half truth. She'd correct it next week.

Archetypes: Generally, we're looking for real people here. Larger-than-life people. Sadly, these are usually scary types or extreme types—Mommy Dearest, Mary Poppins, Henry the Eighth, Atilla the Hun—memorable and influential people that loomed over us, most likely when we were no bigger than bread baskets. At their core—at our core—they are real people, completely indispensable to us. They die or disappear, we replace them...with a close facsimile thereof.

She was so preoccupied with her inquiry that she sat dazed through her afternoon sessions and even felt obliged to apologize to one bemused couple.

Lana. She had liked the nickname, enjoyed being her, yet no one but her parents ever called her that. After they died four years ago, she never heard the name again.

The Kristensons' daughter, Lana, for as long as she existed, was infallible, never made any goofs in her life, never failed at anything. When she disappeared, she was survived by Helaine who did make some mistakes. Sharon Chambers was certainly the proof of that. The years of misery...there was so much distance between who she was now and who she had been seven years ago that her former self seemed to have taken on a mythical shape of its own. Lana had become to her a *perfect* stranger. She could see that from the red leather chair, see the trap that she had set for herself as a result. Lana doesn't err, therefore, somehow, Helaine couldn't either.

And Sharon Chambers? A mistake—but it couldn't be a mistake. Oh, but it was, it was. She had spent years denying it, disguising it every day of her failed and sorry romance, converting Sharon's lies into promises she would wait for.

There was something scary about that, about being in denial. She stared through the couple on her couch as if they weren't there. For how long had she been in denial? Four years? That could be. The loss of her parents had thrown her. But hadn't it been bad before that? Wasn't it really more like seven years of misery? In fact, to be perfectly honest, hadn't she been dissatisfied with the relationship since the moment she first

took the model to bed with her? She nodded to herself. The couple nodded back, encouraged to continue their conversation. Yes. She admitted it. But, if that was the case, and of course she could see that it was, then she was still Lana Kristenson when she had first met Sharon.

Lana, Lana, Lana. Dr. Kristenson weighed the implications, still nodding her head after her clients had left. Back at her desk she saw the light on her phone blinking as if concurring with her conclusion: Lana was an archetype.

"Yes, Jen?"

"There's an awfully pretty box here with your name on it. Looks like a love letter attached to the ribbon. Shall I tell the messenger to send it back?"

A box! "Jenny, don't you dare!"

"You'll have to come and sign for it then. Your signature is required."

Monday, eight in the morning.

"How long, if I can ask?"

The guard sized the woman up before answering. Her looks didn't trouble him. "I'd say she's had her offices in here about three years."

Three years, Lydia repeated in her head. She stared at the white lettering of the professional directory, a strange exhilaration coursing through her veins. There was a story here, an erotic bedtime tale she wished to be told. Right this minute!

Dr. Helaine Kristenson, twelfth floor, the plaque read. So the telephone operator had been correct about the address! It was no mistake. Helaine's offices were practically across from her own.

Lydia could think of nothing else. She stood back from her own window, all day trying to catch sight of the blond head on the twelfth floor without being seen, all day resisting the urge to phone her there. Across the street, you scoundrel! The discovery that Helaine was less than a stone's throw away from her, and had been all this time, aroused in Lydia an excitement that surpassed all others known to date and as she tried to work she grew more and more preoccupied with the dozen roses still in a vase by her window. There were as well other obvious and sensually distracting features about the situation to be considered. She did, until it was necessary for her to go home early.

Tuesday was a repeat of the day before and so on until, with the end of the week nearing and feeling professionally impaired by her sensations, she decided to work with her back to the window, stoically refusing to take any breaks. She was on a fixed timetable now. Helaine was to call by Friday to inform her that the mission had been accomplished. But since their Saturday meeting, Lydia had fallen into a state of readiness, heightened by Monday's revelation, and she had wished to hear from the blond much sooner than that.

As the days slipped by without word, she caught her attention entirely missing from her work, saw her imagination running amok with disturbing visions. Her emotional deluge had begun to drown her and she bobbed up and down in an endless stream of unhappy possibilities. Twice she battled her hand from the phone.

By three o'clock Thursday, no word, her spirits sinking, Lydia gloomily packed her briefcase and once more headed for the solitude and safety of her penthouse, this time overloaded with misgivings. They trailed behind her like tin cans after the wedding.

She could practically hear them clanking as she rode the elevator down, her state of mind in such commotion that by the time she noticed herself stuck alone in there with Rio Joe it was too late to do anything about it.

And before she could prevent it he had her cornered and was interrogating her about the roses. She dropped the briefcase and he kicked it aside.

"Who is he?" he whispered into her hair, his hand groping her.

She reached for the switchboard. He grabbed her arm.

"Joe. Let me go or I'll scream." His chest heaved against hers. She could taste and smell his thoughts. "Let me go or I'll scream."

He pressed his cheek against hers and pushed her into the corner. "Scream then, Lydia. You know I love it when you scream."

She felt her skirt hiking up. "Joseph..." The elevator stopped. *Ding!* The doors opened revealing them to a group of surprised executives.

"Oh! Sorry!" Lydia heard from the hallway. "We'll get the next one." The doors closed again. The bell tolled.

"Scream for me, your highness."

She fell silent. Overhead the floor numbers glowed in a slow motion countdown as the elevator descended toward the lobby. By the tenth floor he had worked the skirt up past her thighs.

"Who sent you the flowers, Lydia?"

"Joe, for Christ's sake! Are you out of your mind?" She was wet-always wet now-and didn't want him to know it.

He knew it. The elevator stopped. Ding! She glimpsed people waiting and hid her face in his shirt.

"Use the other one," he snarled over his shoulder.

"Excuse us," someone quipped humorously. The doors closed. *Ding!* She heard laughter through the floor and saw the elevator ascending this time. He reached into her blouse.

"Joe, let me out of here."

"Lydia," he murmured in an unusually tender tone. He was breathing heavily, his hand caressing her between her legs. "You want it."

"Shit..." she swore under her breath, "oh, shit." She did. Her nipples were hard. "It's over Jos—" She gasped, as he slid his fingers inside her. Too late. She let him stroke her, one and...two and...three...until she slumped back into the corner. Four...five...six...seven...eight...nine...ding! The doors opened wide and she came to him, so fast he lifted his face to hers in surprise.

"Whoa, sorry!" someone shouted.

Joe regained himself and fumbled furiously with the front of his pants, pulling her close as he did.

She quickly pushed him back again. The elevator bucked before heading downward. "It's over Joe," she repeated, her eyes issuing a warning as she managed to free herself from him.

He took her by the wrists. "Then why are you wearing my bracelet?" he asked, lifting it to her face.

She looked from it to him, wide-eyed and dumbfounded. There was no explanation to offer the man. Just a foolhardy choice in accessories, she guessed. She had utterly forgotten he had given it to her. Over him she saw they were finally approaching the lobby. She could tell by his face that he was no longer mindful of the elevator. *Ding!* He turned, startled by the bell, and she fixed her rumpled skirt, grabbed her briefcase and breezed past him.

"Lydia?" he called, as she stepped out of the elevator.

Such a strange sound in his voice. It filled her suddenly with a sense of pathos. She glanced back at the elevator, past the crowd waiting to board it, and saw him as they might, a desperate man, his zipper down, his suit coat abandoned on the floor, his shirttails partially hanging out of his pants. She took the bracelet off her wrist and tossed it to him, a consolation prize perhaps. He made to catch it and missed, diving for it as it bounced off the wall behind him and fell unceremoniously at his feet.

The doors started to close again and someone moved forward tentatively and stopped them, the others filed in after him like sheep. A woman ran by Lydia who had not yet seen the spectacle at the elevator.

"Hey! Hold that elevator!" she yelled.

Lydia walked away, her face blank, the tension in it gone for the moment.

"Ms. Beaumont?"

She turned to find a young security guard wearing a concerned expression and somewhat out of breath. She didn't know he had witnessed the scene on a video monitor, that he had recognized the female VIP being molested in the elevator, and that he had run from floor to floor in an effort to rescue her from her assailant.

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?" he asked breathlessly, "I've got her," he reported into his wireless.

She listened to the static filled response and gave him a puzzled look.

He pointed at the cameras hanging from the ceiling. "Security," he stated, "in the elevators, too. I saw-do you want to file a complaint?"

She hesitated. Joe was getting in deep with the firm. She couldn't bring herself to sick security on him as well. "Thank you," she said at length, "but I don't think it will happen again."

He looked bashfully at his shoes. "I'll make a record of it just in case."

"I appreciate that. Thank you. I mean it." She left him standing there with his radio buzzing, a pencil poised for taking notes.

"Wait!" she overheard as she was exiting through the revolving doors. "Hold that-" Ding!

Lawrence Taft woke with a splitting headache and no memory of how he had earned it. He had had a couple of drinks at Frank's after Sharon Chambers made her surprise appearance there, but the events that followed that were shrouded in a haze.

But the bottom line was NOTHING. There was nothing going down at all, not at all. He popped some aspirin. This is it, he decided. Friday would be the last stakeout. He was becoming too attached to his pigeon. He could feel it under his skin. The way she wore her hair, the way she sipped her tea. And his memory? Not remembering an entire day. Friday was it, and then he was out of there.

Helaine held the small box to her nose and sniffed it.

"What are you doing, Dr. Kristenson?"

The envelope attached to it smelled like Lydia's perfume.

"Savoring, Jen." She took it back to her office over the objections of her curious secretary.

"As fair art thou, my bonie lass, so deep in love am I; And I will luve thee still, my dear, till a' the seas gang dry..."

Helaine set the envelope next to her phone and ripped open the box. Fish net. Was it lingerie, her favorite? She preciously removed a pair of evening gloves from the blue tissue paper. Black silk. *Mmmmmmmmmmmm*. She slipped them on and went to the window to raise the blinds, glancing at the time. Four o'clock.

Lydia wasn't there.

Lydia got out of the shower around four-thirty. She dawdled at the bedroom mirror for awhile, then lay on her brand new mattress, her wet hair done up in a towel wrapped like a turban around her head. She had settled for something new to sleep on, was the proud new owner of an extra plush queen size mattress and box spring, a brand new solid brass headboard and frame. She liked the golden shine of it. It matched Helaine's hair. And the floors, of course.

She took a power nap to rid herself completely of the thoughts regarding Rio Joe and twenty minutes later rose up refreshed and hungry, her thoughts returning instead to the question of dinner which she decided she would eat by the window in the sun-room, once she figured out what she was going to have. She threw on a silk kimono and went back into the bathroom to do her hair, considering food stuffs as she put on a little makeup. It was her intent to be positive until Friday. Then, if the call didn't come, she would take it from there.

She saw the answering machine winking at her on the way to the kitchen. She hit play and kept walking.

"Darling...?"

Lydia froze, balanced tenuously on legs of gelatin.

"I hope you don't mind...they're just so beautiful...thank you..."

Lydia smiled as she listened.

"I'm settling into a new apartment Thursday...I'll see you Friday."

Friday! What time? Where? Lydia ran and picked up the phone and heard only the dial tone. The voice on her machine was signing off.

"I love you." (beep)

Love you! The dial-tone? Right, it's just a message. Friday! She whooped with joy and slam dunked the receiver.

"Hey, Liddy...it's Del...tried your office...you weren't there. Heard you left one Mr. Rios with two blue balls in the elevator...hah! I wouldn't have left him with any! Call me...I'm home now." (beep)

Oh, my god. Lydia hung over the machine, hit save. How many people were discussing that elevator ride? She went out to the kitchen and rattled some pots and pans. An hour later she chewed thoughtfully on her dinner, staring out at the cityscape from the divan in her sun room.

The buildings looked exactly like boxes on a grocery shelf. She marveled at her observations. It really is a small world.

```
"I need to walk. Meet me?"
```

Delilah was dressed in a brand new jogging suit, a wind-breaker made of silk.

"Liddy, slow down. I don't want to get all sweaty. It's brand new."

Lydia grinned in her dingy sweats. "Really?"

"What's on your mind, smart ass? Is this about Joe? You haven't said ten words. You know I'd rather talk than walk." They were passing a deli. "Let's go in here and sit."

"Not about Joe. Don't want to sit."

"Ugh! Heap big broken English. Slow down then!"

They slowed down.

"She looks like Catherine Deneuve," Delilah said after she caught her breath.

"Who does?"

"Your blond Venus, Helaine. That's who she reminded me of. Stacked like her, too."

"Del! Are we going to talk like men now?"

Delilah swung around. "Which men? I knew there'd be something in this for me. Where are they?"

Lydia laughed despite herself. "You know, there really is more to life than just sex."

"There is? Oh, my god! Liddy, what is it? What have I been overlooking all this time?"

"Del...very funny."

"Oh, okay, Dame Beaumont. So you're in love with Helaine's mind, right?"

"Her mind?"

"You know, a higher love that you arrived at through all the numerous intellectual exchanges you've had with her. Isn't that right? Could we slow down or are we expected somewhere?"

"I..." Lydia balked and then laughed.

"You can tell me, Liddy. You're feelings for that sexy blond. Why, it's really just a mental thing. You don't get wet, your loins don't ache, your tits don't lunge through your bra whenever you see the woman."

"Hah! Point taken."

They walked a half a block without speaking.

"Things finally moving, Liddy?"

"Indeed."

"When do you see her?"

"Friday."

"I see. And you've got cold feet?"

"Yes."

"Sweaty palms? Dizziness?"

"Del?"

"Chest pains? Palpitations? Swelling in the joints?"

"What? No!"

[&]quot;Walk or talk?"

[&]quot;Both."

[&]quot;I'll meet you on the corner by the paint store. Don't bathe."

[&]quot;What?"

[&]quot;Forget it, Liddy. You're so obtuse."

"Memory loss, loose bowels, blood in the stools and or cramping?"

"Del! Don't make me laugh. This is very, very serious. Why is everything always so funny to you?"

"Why are you laughing?"

"I'm nervous. It's nervous laughter. And you're supposed to help me. You've done this before, I haven't."

"That was a long time ago, I told you. Besides, all that exotic booze...you don't really want to know."

"Why didn't you ever tell me about it?"

"Liddy, why do you think? You're so proper, so...straight." She flashed a Buddha grin at the idea. "Anyway! It was just one of those things."

"A trip to the moon on gossamer wings?"

"A fling, like the song says. You on the other hand, go and figure. You're in love." She put her arm through Lydia's and they strolled up the block. "And because of that you have cold little feet."

Lydia cleared her throat. "I want to, you know, please her. You know?" She cleared it again and barely squeezed out, "In bed."

"In bed?"

"Mmmm."

"Oh, that does sound serious, Liddy."

"HELP."

"Okay, okay. In bed. You want pointers I presume?"

"Please."

"Well, let's see. What if it's not in bed?"

"Not in bed? Del...I don't know."

"Well, never mind. We'll say it's in bed."

"But, Del, what if it's not?"

"Liddy! I think you're holding back on me."

"No, no, no, it's in bed. Bed, Del."

Delilah arched her brows. "Okay. Well, the rules are simple, Dame Beaumont. You probably already know them. Numero uno, don't call her somebody else's name in bed."

"C'mon, I wouldn't do that."

"Number two, don't call her someone else's name in the grass."

"Delilah Lewiston."

"Number three, don't call her someone else's name in the back seat."

"All right then, forget it. You're being wise."

"Number four-and this is very important so listen up-don't get her pregnant."

"Del, please. I was counting on you."

"Well, what's there to know? It's going to feel perfectly natural, Liddy. No one knows better how to satisfy a woman than another woman. Dwell on that. You'll figure it out. Besides—here let's sit down—you can always ask her for instructions."

They sat on a bench at a bus stop.

"You think?"

"She knows that you've never...you know?"

"Look at me. What do you think?"

Delilah chuckled. "Yeah, she probably knows. So be as cool as possible and simply ask her how she likes it then, for a little guidance. You'll be fine."

"And I won't seem like a...a dork doing that?"

"A dork? You will seem like a dork if you try to screw her the way she doesn't like."

Lydia groaned and put her head in her hand, contorting her body in an exaggerated show of discomfort. "Why, why, why? Why is it you can't just say *make love* or something polite like that? *Screw* makes me...anxious."

"Well, I'm just trying to be helpful. I'm not really focusing on semantics here. Let me rephrase it. A dork? You will seem like a dork if you try to *make love* to her the way she doesn't like."

Lydia sat back, quietly watching the traffic go by.

"Liddy?"

```
"Yes, Del?"
```

"You're not thinking of wearing *that* on Friday, are you?" A smile was creeping over her friend's face. "Cause it's really gross. A big turnoff." She saw Lydia getting up, laughing. "Really, Liddy, I've been so embarrassed tonight to be seen with you in those sweats. I feel just like—"

"C'mon, Del, let's go. I'm hungry."

"I feel just like...oh, god...just like...like a dork."

"You've been such a big help."

"Worse than a dork. A dink. I feel like a dink!"

"I'm going to fall flat on my face, I'll have you know."

"You won't. Besides, it could be worse." Delilah made a wry expression. "What if you were a man? Think how obvious that would be."

They stopped outside a donut shop.

"I hadn't thought of that," Lydia whispered. "We can't be limp."

"Nope. Gotta fuck us out of our brains first."

Lydia giggled. "You're irreverent."

"Irreverent. Yeah? Well then, let's be reverent. It time for us to give praise, Lydia. Here, repeat after me. Thank you, dear lord, for making me a woman."

Lydia grinned and joined in. "Thank you, dear lord, for making me a woman."

A few customers eyed them curiously on their way into the shop. The ladies ignored them, chanting and raising their arms skyward.

"Thank you dear lord for making me a woman. Thank you dear lord for making me a woman. Thank you dear lord for making me a woman..."

```
Thursday morning. "A Lydia Beaumont, Dr. Kristenson?"
```

"No, on the phone."

"Put her through." She dropped everything. "Hello, gorgeous."

"I-gorgeous yourself, thank you."

"Where are you?"

"Look out your window."

Helaine turned in her chair and looked across the way where Lydia stood hand on one hip the other with a phone to her ear.

Helaine laughed self-consciously. "I can explain this. I really can."

"And I want you to. I'm eager to hear all about it. Friday?"

"Friday. I'll pick you up at Frank's, if that's all right. Sevenish?"

"I'll be drunk by then. Is that all right?"

"You will not. I want to seduce you sober."

"Mmmm...looks like you've already done that."

"Not mad about it, are you?"

"Mad about you. It's just that I thought this was all my idea."

"Hah!" Helaine placed her hand on the window. "Say it, Lydia. I want to hear you say it."

"I love you, Helaine Kristenson."

They stared at each other through their windows.

"And it's all your fault."

"Mm-hmm. I'll make it up to you then."

"When?"

"Friday night."

"Sharon...Sharon Chambers, Dr. Kristenson?"

Helaine stiffened at her desk. "Put her on, Jen," she said tautly.

[&]quot;Here?"

"Uhh...she's here, doctor."

"Here?" Helaine dropped her chin to her chest and swore inaudibly. "In the consultation room, Jen." She hesitated before hanging up. "If we're not out of there in a half hour please call security."

Jenny escorted Sharon to the consultation room, worry clouding her face. "Dr. Kristenson will be with you shortly, Ms. Chambers," she said without looking at the woman. The door slammed as she closed it behind her, the sound filling her with a sense of dread. She listened for the familiar thud of Helaine's adjoining door signifying she had entered the room, and, hearing it at last, glanced at the clock on the wall to time the proceedings. It was quarter past ten.

Sharon had reclined on the couch, one long leg draped down the front of it, a high-heeled shoe discarded on the floor nearby. It's mate dangled precariously from an agitated foot propped up on the armrest. Helaine stood awkwardly in the center of the room and quickly evaluated the woman's posture: insolent, defiant. Normally she would seat herself in the chair opposite, but this was not normal. Sharon never came to the office. This will be the last time she does, Helaine promised herself, as she walked to the window and lowered the blinds.

"Doctor. How very nice to see you," Sharon said, putting her arm behind her head and dropping the other shoe. "Please," she said, indicating with a sweep of her arm that the doctor should sit. "You don't look happy to see me."

Helaine reluctantly sat down. "Sharon...didn't you get my letter?"

"I did."

Helaine nodded and looked away.

"And I went to your townhouse this morning to check things out. But..."

(The movers! Her furniture!)

"Top secret, huh? Couldn't even fuck it out of them. You must pay well."

Helaine sighed with relief. They had done as instructed, said nothing. She sat back, checked the time.

"My session almost up, my love? But I just got here."

"Sharon...what brings you here? It's rather early for you, isn't it?"

Sharon ignored the remark and caressed the couch. She watched Helaine from the corner of her eye and grinned at her discomfort. "Lots of confessions on this baby, I'll bet."

No reply.

"Lots and lots of secrets. Hmm, Dr. Kristenson?"

Helaine leaned forward in her chair and placed her hands on the armrests as if to rise, then thought better of it and sat back into the chair. "What is this about?"

Sharon flashed one of her smiles. "Secrets. It's all about secrets. I'll show you mine, doctor," she unzipped her blouse, "if you show me yours."

Helaine looked away. "I wasn't aware that you had any secrets. Or certainly none anymore."

"Oh, but I do."

"Sharon. My note...is there something you don't understand? I have an appointment in a few minutes. I work here, you know, not entertain."

"My time is not up, doctor."

"Yes, Sharon, it is. You will need to accept that."

Sharon sat up suddenly. "Is it? Well you're hot shit aren't you, dear Dr. Kristenson? My time is up! You want to step out on me? And how will you do that, hmm? When's the last time you actually screwed a woman, Helaine?"

Helaine winced.

"Huh, Love Doc, hot shit? When?"

"You ought to know the answer to that."

"And it is a woman, isn't it?"

"Sharon..." Helaine glanced at her watch again.

"Say two years?" Sharon waited but there was no response. "Three years?" She stood up and walked to where Helaine sat rigid in her chair.

Yes, Helaine thought. Two, three years. "I get your point. Please go now."

Sharon circled her. "Doesn't that make you a bit rusty?"

Helaine rose up from the chair. Sharon stepped around it and blocked her escape.

"Was that your aim, Sharon? To make me rusty?" She turned her face away. "Sharon...your shirt."

"Need a little practice before you take the plunge, Dr. Kristenson?"

They stood silently for a moment.

Helaine shook and hoped it didn't show. "This, as you know, Ms. Chambers, is a very unbecoming way to-"

"Ms. Chambers? Bullshit! You're mine, Helaine. I have a right to know what-"

"It's over, Sharon. That's all you need to know." She held the door open and waited.

Sharon put her shoes on, looking up at her as she did it, with a smirk. "No, Dr. Kristenson," Sharon replied, as she finally stepped into the hallway, "it's only just begun."

"If you come again you will be greeted by security. I'm sorry, but you've given me no choice."

Jenny listened to the hushed voices in the hallway. They were moving toward her. She heard Sharon Chambers as clear as day.

"I love you, Helaine Kristenson, and that is all you need to know."

"That is of no consequence to me now. That was something I needed to know before. Please, Sharon. I'm asking you to go or I'll have you removed."

Jenny then heard only silence. She picked up the receiver of the telephone just as the model was turning the corner and paused to take a good look at her as she flew by. She had never seen the woman before except in magazines, but she didn't like her at all. She waited till she was sure she was gone before checking in on Helaine.

"Dr. Kristenson?"

Helaine had her back against the wall, her hand on her forehead. "It's fine, Jen. Don't worry."

"She told me she knew you very well, or I wouldn't have-"

"It's true, Jen." She averted her eyes. "Knew, if you understand me."

"Let me get you some water. You don't look so good."

"Thank you. I don't feel so good."

"I've never seen you so pale," Jenny declared as she returned with a glass. "It's a good thing that woman's in the past tense, if you don't mind my saying."

Helaine shot her a worried glance and took the glass from her. "We hope," was her cautious reply. She swirled the water in her mouth. She doubted water was strong enough to settle her nerves.

"Drink that," Jenny said, her voice laden with concern. "And I've ordered lunch for you. It should be here in about fifteen minutes and maybe after that you should rest. You don't have another appointment until this afternoon."

"What time?"

"One o'clock."

"Thanks, Jen. I need to make a phone call. Let me know when the food arrives."

```
"Dr. Kristenson here. Is the doctor in?"
```

[&]quot;Hey, how are you? Long time no see."

[&]quot;Jon...good...you have five minutes?"

[&]quot;I'll see your five and raise you ten, as long as it's strip poker."

[&]quot;Oh, good. I'm glad I called already."

[&]quot;Anything wrong?"

[&]quot;Yeeahhhuhh...not really. Pep talk. Up to it?"

[&]quot;Anytime. Shoot."

[&]quot;Have a date. Anxiety."

[&]quot;A date? Congratulations! Anxiety...you?"

[&]quot;Happens to everyone?"

[&]quot;Well...no. Thoughts of?"

[&]quot;Fear. Failure. Mortality."

[&]quot;Oh, is that all? What about sex or love?"

```
"Those, too."
   "List them in order of importance, please."
   "Let's see. Love, sex, fear, failure, mortality."
    "Hmmmph. Sounds healthy to me...except maybe the love."
   "You're funny."
    "Take two thrills and call me in the morning."
   She laughed in her throat. "No, really, Jon."
   "It's like riding a bike, Helaine. You just get on the saddle and pump your legs and it all comes back to you."
   "Boy, you're blunt sometimes."
    "Whew! I even stunned myself on that one. You do know how to ride a bike?"
   "Of course."
    "You don't sound convinced. It can't be that serious?"
   "Is."
   "Is? Well, that's the problem."
   "What do you mean?"
    "Love. No see long time. Emotional amnesia. Sexual paralysis."
   "Sounds fatal."
    "Nah, it's just a bug. You'll get over it. LOVE is what Helaine Kristenson does. You understand me, Helaine
Kristenson?"
   "Thank you, Jon. You're very kind. Jenny's buzzing, I think my lunch just got here. I better let you go."
   "Yeah. I got people waiting with real problems. Hey, see you tomorrow night? I've got tickets."
   "Tomorrow?"
   "Friday, your lecture? Eight o'clock, Dr. Kristenson. Wow! I see what you mean. Let me hear that list again."
   She opened her date book. There it was. (Oh, no, no, Lydia.) "I see it. You're right, Jon. Eight o'clock.
Lecture at eight thirty. I'll talk to you tomorrow night then."
    "Good luck, Helaine. See you then. And hey..."
   "Yes?"
   "You know where to find me if...well...you know?"
   "Thanks, Jon."
   Morally supported by Delilah, Lydia waited outside on the patio at Frank's on Friday. It was almost seven
```

o'clock. They were drinking their martinis and making small talk when a cab pulled up to the curb and Helaine stepped out. Delilah nudged sharply with her elbow.

"Ouch," Lydia blurted, not having seen Helaine yet.

"Ouch," Delilah said, "hot dress, over there."

Lydia turned in that direction.

Dressed in dinner black, her hair down, a coat slung over her arm, a happy blond held the car door open as she searched the crowd for her date, returning the waiter's wave with a discreet wink and smiling broadly when she finally saw Lydia approaching.

"Ah, here is my enchantress."

They got in the cab.

"Enchantress? Did you know that's a boat that disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle?"

"Goodness, no. Are you a ghost ship, Lydia Beaumont?"

"Where to now?" inquired the cabby. She turned her radio down.

"No," Lydia whispered, "I'm real."

The cabby's question floated past them. "Lydia..."

"Where to, ladies?"

"Oh, uptown. Drive uptown, please."

The cab pulled away from the curb and darted into the late day traffic.

Lawrence Taft, armed with his digital camera, watched with ambivalence as the cab left Frank's Place. It was kind of a pity to see Sharon Chambers right about the doctor. And by the looks of the other woman, the model had good reason to be concerned.

He studied the image of them in his view screen, a strong sense of nostalgia creeping into his bones. He missed the finality that the *whir* and *clack* of a 35mm shutter could lend to these kind of affairs. *Whirrrrrrrrr...clack!* It was as conclusive as the sound of the guillotine. It said "Gotcha!" in a way that modern technology just couldn't.

"Lydia Beaumont, I have made a gaff, tonight. I have a prior speaking engagement. At the convention center." Helaine leaned forward and spoke to the cabby again. "The convention center by eight. And please drive slowly. Lydia? May I see you after that?"

"See me-of course. When?"

"Nine-thirty? I've been out of my mind this week. I couldn't blame you if-"

"My place," Lydia interrupted. "I'm sorry...my place, Helaine," she repeated, reaching into her breast pocket and producing her calling card. "Show that to the doorman. He'll let you go right up. Unless...if you don't want to...would you want to do that?"

Helaine took the card. "Elegant," she whispered as she slid it inside her dress. "I would want to do that," she assured, laying the coat between them and sitting back. "That's exactly what I would want to do."

"Me, too, by the way."

"You?"

"Out of my mind this week."

"Oh...I apologize. I made you worry. I didn't see Sha—" She stopped herself. "I didn't go to the flat." She squeezed Lydia's hand and let it go quickly.

"But you told her? I mean, she knows?"

"She knows it's over. It's been that way a long time."

They sat back quietly, allowing the cab to toss them toward each other and away again as the vehicle wove gently through the traffic. The cabby sized them up in the mirror and confident she understood the situation, selected a CD, popping it in and turning the volume up. Good choice, she thought. (Sinatra.)

It was still hot, late summer, but the days were getting short once more, the nights long and cool. Through the windshield the ladies could see the sun dropping on the city like a bomb. A bright red sunset spread across the horizon, reflecting off the skyscrapers and glowing in hot pink squares from every window.

"Tour it?" the cabby suggested.

Helaine gave her a puzzled look.

"Yes," Lydia said quickly, "tour it, please."

The cab took a side street. Helaine smiled to herself. Lydia leaned across the jacket and kissed her.

"What is your speech about?" she asked.

Helaine slipped her finger between Lydia's lips and quickly withdrew it. "You. For ten minutes I shall speak of nothing but Lydia Beaumont. About her eyes. For another twenty I will tell them about her lips." She folded her hands in her lap and rested her head against the back of the seat. "And I mustn't forget to mention those arms and those legs." She closed her eyes. Lydia lay against her, kissed her neck. "Or your fabulous back," Helaine continued softly. "What would you say to that speech?"

"I'd say, you better not, Helaine. I value my anonymity. How do you feel about yours?"

Helaine reached out and adjusted an errant strand of dark hair. "I've enjoyed mine."

The sun was gone now, the last of its flame settling into an orange mist around the city, the last rays bouncing off the walls and casting long shadows in their retreat. In a few moments they would surrender completely, relinquishing their glory to that of lamp lights and neon.

It was already dark in the cab. Lydia kissed a bare shoulder, a long arm, a perfumed wrist, tongued the soft palm of an outstretched hand as it lay like jewel on a slippery, satin lap. Black satin. Her cheek brushed against the slick fabric. It was as cool as the night, descending on the city like a blanket.

THE SECRET KEEPING

Part Three: *The Catch*

The dark-haired woman disappeared from the rearview mirror and the experienced cabby, seeing the park looming ahead on the right, pulled out of traffic and idled curbside, taking a place behind a caravan of other taxicabs. Sinatra sang unfettered by propriety.

Helaine took stock of the situation. The cavalcade stretched nearly the entire length of the block. She must have passed this scene a thousand times and never recognized it for what it was.

The driver made herself invisible, eyes vanishing from the mirror.

Discretion, Helaine mused, Lydia's head in her lap...one hand resting on her thigh, the other at her hip...her lips at her fingertips...her lips...it was not necessary to discuss this, Helaine understood...the cabby would wait for hours if told to...these polite hands...this woman's card in her bra... you can call me, Sinatra promised...a wet palm...Helaine bent over her and combed the dark hair with her fingers. She had to be somewhere soon. Remember? "Lydia?"

Lydia didn't answer.

"Lydia, Lydia." The dark head turned in her hand and partially faced her. Helaine stroked the woman's mouth with her thumb. "What are you thinking?"

"Thinking-something primal, I'm afraid. Where are we?"

"At the park. It seems we're part of a posse," Helaine joked, looking back again. "Have you...have you ever been here before? Like this, I mean?"

Lydia grinned. "No." She wet her lips and kissed the finger. "You?"

"No, not me," Helaine said, smiling at the thought of it. She parted Lydia's lips with her thumb. "First time for everything-tell me *primal*."

"What time is it?"

Helaine checked her watch. "Quarter past."

Lydia gripped the tip of Helaine's finger and let it go when she felt her jump. "Tell me about the building across from my office, specifically the twelfth floor."

Helaine chuckled. "Ummm...what do you want to know about it?"

"Oh, everything."

"Hmmm. Across from me, on the fifteenth floor. There's a beautiful woman up there in the window sometimes. Quite beautiful. I happened to notice her one day."

"Uh-oh, I'm fond of my window. When was that, Helaine?" She licked at the fingertip once more, pressed her mouth into a trembling palm.

Helaine took a deep breath. "That was...I'm not too sure now...ummmmm...I'd have to...say...two years ago?" Her other hand went to the back of Lydia's head, into the silky hair. "Do you know what you do in your window?"

"No, but I'm going to guess that you like it." She bit gently at Helaine's hand, licked between each finger, grabbing the thumb between her teeth and teasing it inside her mouth.

Helaine gasped.

Lydia released and looked up. "Do you?"

"Like it...I like it...yes," she replied as she ran her hand along Lydia's shoulders and slid downward in the seat. "Very much."

"Go on. Frank's Place. Helaine followed me there?"

"I followed you."

Lydia sighed and rested her forehead on Helaine's abdomen. "You followed me for two years?" She kissed the black satin folds and hid her face in them. They felt like bed sheets to her now, the stomach, a pillow. "Why on earth didn't you say something to me?"

"On earth? On earth you and I were with other people."

Lydia thought about that for awhile. Helaine's hand lay beneath her. She lifted herself and brushed her body against it as she rose. "Kiss me," she finally said.

They kissed.

"Let me see you, Lydia Beaumont. My girl next door." She touched her cheek. "Most beautiful girl in the world."

Lydia leaned back.

With the lights of night shining in them the blue eyes glistened like pools of water, cool, refreshing, limpid. In the heat of summer, of the moment, in all those dog days gone by with their scorching fires, with their arid landscapes, roaming thirsty, depleted, navigating across a bed of coal, burning coals on tender feet, blistered, crawling on hands and knees, in a seven-year drought with no relief, that burnt her to ashes, incinerated her senses, melted her soul, drained her vitality, her life fluids, leaving her hotter than hot, day and night, night and day, hotter than hell all the time, and dehydrated, and now this warm spring to refresh in–how could she live without water?

"Had you ever been to Frank's before?"

Helaine shifted her body. "Just for lunch. Saturdays. Dinner once in awhile."

Lydia processed that. "So Friday's? Dr. Kristenson reading me like a book?"

"Oh, no. Not at first, anyway."

"But later? Then Lydia Beaumont was as transparent as water?"

Water. "There is nothing wrong with that. Being transparent."

They kissed again.

"You went away. Where did Lydia go?"

"I had to get away...distract myself."

"Were you successful? Did you find yourself a distraction?"

"No. Impossible. Swam most of the time." She laughed. "Took cold showers."

Helaine smiled. "So Lydia Beaumont is a swimmer. Are you good at that?"

"Treading water?"

They were cheek to cheek.

"I'm sorry," Helaine whispered.

"And you, Venus? What did you find for distraction?"

Helaine hung her head on Lydia's shoulder, kissed her neck, her mouth, her neck again. "But I missed you," she whispered.

Lydia shut her eyes. There was that scent again. Bittersweet. Coming at her from everywhere. From the blond hair. The blond at Frank's Place. In the woods where she first had smelled it. She took a deep breath and held it. How she had missed her. How lonely she had been in the woods. And every hour before and since. "I missed you," she said, her voice a stone dropping through the ocean. Then she let her jacket be removed, let her dress be opened. She was straps and buttons being undone like the ribbons of a present. In her ears a woman sang her praises. She let the music surround her.

"Soon, Lydia Beaumont."

"When?"

"Tonight," Helaine promised with her fingers at her lips again. "Can you wait till then?"

Lydia took them in her mouth, motioning with her throat as if she meant to swallow them.

Helaine moaned out loud.

Lydia released her.

The cabdriver looked back.

"Around it," Helaine instructed the cabby. "Go," she urged.

The cabby was puzzled. It wasn't immediately obvious to her which woman the blond was addressing or what exactly *go* might mean under the circumstances.

Helaine moaned again, louder this time. Lydia was in the palm of her hand. She felt the blood rising to her face, heat in her lap. She clasped the back of Lydia's neck and rubbed her shoulders. "Mmmm..." she uttered, temporarily forgetting herself and then remembering the driver again, seeing her expectant expression. "Around it," she muttered in exasperation.

A sound came from Lydia, laughter escaping through the nose.

Helaine half laughed, half groaned.

The cabby grinned and faced forward, convinced that the blond was instructing her lover.

Lydia moistened her lips.

Helaine caressed them with her thumb.

Lydia put her mouth around it and a suppressed gasp came from above her. More pressure on her neck, fingers in her hair. She flicked at the tip of the finger with her tongue and gently nipped at it. Satin thighs arched gently toward her face. Rapid breaths. She repeated the motions all over again.

Behind them, a cab with its lights off fell into position and yet another vehicle pulled in after that one.

"Lydia, I-"

"It's all right," Lydia whispered without raising her head or lifting her hands. "Drive around the park," she ordered in a voice just loud enough for the driver to hear.

The cabby glanced in the mirror to be sure she had heard correctly this time.

"Yes," Helaine affirmed. "Go around it," she said, throwing her head back with a sigh and pulling her dress out from under Lydia, slipping it up past the hips.

The cab began to circle the park.

Stockings, mid-thigh. Lydia kissed the white skin above them.

Helaine clutched Lydia's hands. "I'm in trouble here," she warned.

"No, no, no. You're fine. I won't muss you."

"We can't," Helaine cautioned, twisting in frustration as she held Lydia's hands tightly to her hips to stop her. A quickie in a cab. She moaned and held her legs together. They came apart again. "Lydia...I'm...have you ever—?"

"You can show me."

Helaine heaved her lap toward Lydia's mouth. "Oh, Lydia," she said in a strained voice. "There isn't time."

No answer. The music played.

"Lydia..." Pressed for time.

"Helaine."

"I need you."

"Show me how."

"I mean-in my bed." She held her tight between her legs. "In bed, Lydia."

The swish of satin.

"Not here," Helaine murmured.

"Okay."

Okay. Helaine instantly regretted it. "I'm sorry."

"That's okay. It's okay."

Helaine let her pull the dress down around her hips.

Whoa, thought the cabby, making yet another revolution around the park. She glanced at the blond in the mirror. She had seemed vaguely familiar to her when she had first gotten into the cab. The cabby watched her discreetly as the woman adjusted her clothes and it suddenly came to her. She checked the meter, checked her watch.

"Lydia? I'm out of my-"

"No, no, no. You're fine. Hold me."

They held each other quietly, listening to the sound of their breathing. The cab rolled gently and they could hear the traffic as it raced by the vehicle. They listened together to the voices of passersby on their evening strolls, conversing in the hushed tones peculiar to those who walk in darkness. The breezy strands of their conversations drifted into the ladies' hideaway and hypnotically blended with the cabby's music.

Lydia sighed. "My bed," she whispered as she put her head down. "In my bed."

Helaine caressed her mouth again. "Yours." The lips parted. The throat swallowed. The blood flowed from her heart, straight down into her fingertips.

"I know you. You're the Love Doc," the cabby declared, after depositing Lydia Beaumont safely at her doorstep.

Helaine responded cautiously. "That's right," she said, peering over the seat at the ID tag hanging beneath the meter, "Lucille."

"Lu, they call me. Thought I recognized you. I've got your book!"

"I'm glad. Did it help any?"

"You bet. Got my Mr. Right."

Helaine smiled at that. "Good for you."

Dr. Kristenson arrived at the convention center with only ten minutes remaining to pore over her notes before she was to take the podium. Kay and Robert greeted her inside and chatted idly at her as she organized her index cards. She was supposed to join them for cocktails afterwards. They'd understand.

It was an energetic crowd and the doctor knew by experience that she would be expected to mingle and socialize after the question and answer. No dice.

"I meant to call you both earlier but I got hung up with things. Tonight—oh, how do you do? Thank you. Thank you for coming—there's a scheduling conflict. What about tomorrow? Lunch say?"

"Jon already told us, Helaine," Robert said with a chuckle. "A date is not a scheduling conflict."

She smiled, relieved that they knew. "It's been a hectic week. Uh-oh, got to get up there—Hey. Well, thank you. Nice to see you here—talk to you two afterwards?"

"Go, go. It's time."

"Look for us at the punchbowl," Kay added.

The speech was shortened, only thirty-five minutes long. Then she answered questions in the light and airy manner she had acquired from doing so many of these events, resorting to humor, which she had learned was the appropriate escape from certain questions that she knew better than to entertain.

She was right about the crowd's expectations though and despite her efforts to break away, after the applause died down, she quickly found herself cornered at the punchbowl where she had met up with Robert and Kay. There was then no easy egress available. She pressed the flesh till her hands felt grimy and smiled vacuously as she tried to back away toward the exit, her savvy friends acting as accomplices in this sadly unsuccessful endeavor.

"I don't know, Helaine. Looks like you're here awhile," Robert said.

"I hope not. I've got a car waiting."

"You finally hired a driver?"

"A driver-it's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for coming-no, don't be ridiculous."

"Maybe the bathroom window?" Kay suggested.

"We did that once-Thank you. Oh, I'm flattered. Thank you-didn't we?"

"Yeah, when we were kids. Look at us now," Robert said.

"C'mon, she looks stunning tonight. Where are you taking your date?"

"I'm-hello. Oh, I'm glad you enjoyed it. Well, thank you-to bed I hope!"

"Dr. Kristenson? Helaine Kristenson?"

The three of them glanced at a young man carrying a manila envelope under his arm. The hairs on Robert Keagan's head bristled with alarm. Kay fell mute.

"Yes?"

"You are Dr. Helaine Kristenson?" he asked again, fiddling with the package.

Robert moved toward Helaine. "Helaine! Don't-"

"Of course I am."

The process server handed her the envelope. "Dr. Kristenson," he declared, "you've been served," and then he cut through the crowd in a quick getaway.

"Served? What does this mean?" Helaine asked, turning to Kay.

Kay declined to answer.

"Shit!" Robert muttered. It was something he had always feared.

The party of three exited the building before anyone else was the wiser.

"Lu? Hi. Change of plans, I'm afraid."

"Where to, doctor?"

"I don't want you to see her. Do you understand?"

(Yah.)

Robert Keagan was beside himself. "Helaine?"

Kay grabbed his elbow. "Calm down. Helaine, can I make you some tea?"

"No. Thank you." The clock in their kitchen read half past ten.

"Robert, tea?"

"No, Kay-speak to me, Helaine. Tell me about the flat."

When she was seventeen, what a very good year. When she was twenty-one, also a very good year. When she was thirty-five she lived with Sharon at the waterfront flat. "We lived there together," she said numbly. "I redid the place for Sharon. Moved out after two years. Menage à trois bullshit all the time. I got sick of walking in on it. Paid the rent till now. Someone has to call—"

"Jane Doe?" he interrupted. "Who's this Jane Doe they're referencing?"

"How can I not see her, Robert? She's expecting me. I'm late already."

"Do I get to know her name?"

She thought on it and gave in. "Lydia."

"She has a last name?"

"Beaumont, Robert."

"Beaumont-the attorney's daughter?"

"I wouldn't know that. She didn't say."

Kay joined Helaine at the table and Robert sat down. "This is the woman?" she asked. "The one you mentioned?"

"A little diversion or something serious?" Robert inserted.

"Serious. I need to go, Robert."

"Oh sure. They're after her, Helaine. You plan on leading them to the woman?"

"I can't tell her I'm not coming. I can't tell her about this."

Kay gulped her tea and looked over her cup at Robert. So many times he had told her that he didn't trust Sharon Chambers, so many times worrying over Helaine's mistake. Palimony. It was nonsense of course, just something to harass Helaine with. By the looks of things, Sharon might even be able to shake off her replacement. Who'd want this crap to contend with? "I wonder if it is Edward Beaumont's daughter?" she suddenly asked. "Wouldn't that be interesting?"

"It's all interesting," Robert snorted. "The papers will eat you alive, Dr. Kristenson. And what does Sharon care? How about Lydia Beaumont? She'll care I bet, or is she prepared to be dragged through the mud for you?"

"Robert, you don't know," Kay interjected. "Let's stick to what we do know."

"I do know that we should settle this quickly. And I do know that won't happen if they get to Lydia Beaumont first." He studied Helaine's face. "She'll be dragged through the mud, Helaine. Be sure of it. That's the motive."

"Such a charismatic man, Edward Beaumont," Kay offered to anyone who was listening. "So handsome."

"Yeah, and Mister Controversy himself. If it is his daughter, he won't want her to go through all that. He'll advise her to run, mark my words."

Helaine took it all in. "Womanizer?"

"Sir Womanizer, to you."

Helaine smiled for the first time in hours and then her face dropped again. "How long will it take? To settle, I mean?"

"A few weeks, a few months, but it's better than the alternative, I can assure you that. You'd lose your girl for certain if that happens." He paused and she nodded for him to continue. "She got a reputation to protect, as well, or is she just a pampered courtesan?" His humor was returning to him. He pushed the legal complaint away and settled into his chair.

"She works at Soloman-Schmitt, across from my offices."

"Oh, shit." He tucked his pencil behind his ear. "She'll be thrilled. And, I'm sure, so will her bosses."

Kay rose to freshen her tea. "Does she know about Sharon Chambers?" she asked over her shoulder.

"She's seen her. Sharon tried to pick her up in the bathroom at Frank's."

Robert raised his brow. "Really? That oblivious?"

"Yes. Lydia doesn't know her from Adam, either." Helaine smiled again and checked the time. "It's sort of funny."

"Frank's Place?" Kay inquired sitting down beside Helaine. "Oh, I guess that would be in the financial district." (Curious.) "But Sharon's in all the rags. How couldn't she know her?"

Robert laughed. "Probably only gets the financials. That way she doesn't have to read about her dad."

"You don't know that Edward Beaumont is her father," Kay objected.

"I know he's got a daughter. She'd be in her mid-thirties. A son, too. Just like his old man, I hear."

"Where do you know this from?" Kay asked.

Helaine listened quietly. Someone had to tell Lydia the news. Soon.

"From the club."

"The club!" Kay mocked. "You're all a bunch of women. Gossips, I swear."

"Is she in her mid-thirties, Helaine?"

"Early, I'd say. Maybe mid."

"It's her. I just have a feeling."

"What difference does that make?" Kay asked.

"It's a small world, that's all. And it means she definitely has what Sharon's after."

"Yes," Helaine interrupted. "She certainly does."

They mulled that in silence for a few minutes.

"Helaine's right, Robert. Sharon's not really after money here. She's trying to control Helaine, chase her Jane Doe off in the process. Why should Sharon want to settle? She's not afraid of bad publicity."

The ladies waited for him to respond.

"Look, lawyers change everything. Her lawyers—and I know these guys—they're not going to let their client make them work harder than they have to. It just isn't done like that. We make a decent offer right now and that'll be end of it. Goodbye Sharon Chambers riffraff, hello Lydia Beaumont straight lace." He put his hand over the papers and waited on Helaine's reaction.

"No more than a few months?" she asked. "Are you sure?"

"I do this for a living, Helaine. You think you're the only victim of this kind of scam? Happens every week in our fair city. Everyday all over our great land people are parting with cold hard cash for a little bit of privacy with something warm and soft. Facts of life. And some of those defendants are no more guilty of the allegations against them than you are."

She considered his words with a sullen expression.

"Lawyers, Helaine. We know what we're doing when we write stuff like this. Edward Beaumont sent his little girl to all the best universities he could instituting lawsuits no different than the one we got right here. Be sure of that. It's the name of the game. Sharon's not in charge of it. The lawyers are. We call all the shots."

She nodded grimly. "Lydia needs to know about this, Robert. I don't know how to tell her, but she needs to know tonight. Right now."

"I'll tell her. I wouldn't mind speaking with her, see what she's made of, you know. Just in case."

"Call her," Kay urged. "It's almost eleven. She must know something's wrong, anyway."

"What's the number, Helaine?"

She rattled it off.

"You know it by heart?" he asked suspiciously.

"By heart. Lest she be discovered otherwise."

"Helaine, I sincerely hope you've told me everything. I'm trying to defend your interests."

"I know and I thank you, Robert." She repeated the number as he dialed. "I want to hear how she reacts," she quickly added.

"I can talk on speaker. Willing to take that risk?"

Have her friends hear Lydia tell her to go jump in a lake? It was nothing she looked forward to, but... "I guess so," she said.

He put the call through on intercom and Helaine held her breath.

"Hello?"

It was a pretty voice. Expectant. Robert Keagan hated to disappoint it.

"I'd like to speak to Lydia Beaumont, please. It's very important."

There was silence on the other line as the woman sized up the caller's voice. "This is she," she answered in a controlled voice. "To whom am I speaking?"

Robert turned to Kay and Helaine, then smiled. "I am Robert Keagan, Esquire. I represent Dr. Helaine Kristenson. You know her, I understand."

Silence. Crackling. "Doctor-yes, I know her, Mr. Keagan." Quiet again while she tried to guess at the nature of the call. "My number's unlisted. How did you get it?"

Helaine pointed at herself and he nodded. "Dr. Kristenson has asked me to call."

"Indeed? What is this about Mr. Keagan? I'm in suspense."

He cocked his head at the ladies. "Ms. Beaumont, do you know Sharon Chambers?"

"Sharon Chambers? No."

"The super-model? You-"

"Oh, the one in the news? Yes, I've heard of her...what is this about, please?"

Robert coughed. The color drained from Helaine's face. Kay signaled for him to get it over with.

"Mr. Keagan?"

"Ms. Chambers is Helaine Kristenson's lover."

The line fell silent once more.

"Was," Helaine whispered.

"Was," Kay whispered.

He held up his finger to his lips.

"I see. She was, Mr. Keagan. Past tense, I believe."

"Was," he repeated. "I stand corrected, Ms. Beaumont. So you do know her?"

"No I don't—I didn't know she was Sharon Chambers. I don't know her. Personally, I mean. Look, Mr. Keagan, you'll have to forgive me. It's late and I'm tired. Please cut to the chase."

"Ms. Chambers is apparently unhappy to be a past tense. She has filed a lawsuit against Dr. Kristenson. Palimony. You understand such things?"

A pensive moment elapsed before Lydia spoke again. "And when did this happen?"

"Tonight."

"Oh. I see. Was that before or after Helaine's speech?"

"After."

"Wasn't that good of Ms. Chambers? To let Helaine finish her speech."

"She has named you a Jane Doe defendant in the action."

He waited as she measured her response to that information. Behind him Helaine and Kay had seated themselves around the table. Helaine rested her head in her hands.

"That's obscene, Mr. Keagan. Is Helaine there? I need to talk to her."

Helaine motioned for the phone and he held his hand out to stop her. "Ms. Beaumont, is your father Edward Beaumont, the attorney?" He heard her scoff.

"Please. Has she named my father, too?"

He grimaced then smiled victoriously at his audience. "I only wondered if you understood the seriousness of the matter, having your name dragged into this? But I guess Edward Beaumont's daughter would know about those kinds of things."

"Mister Keagan, I would prefer my father's name be kept out of this, for reasons I suspect I don't have to list. What is Sharon Chambers suing me for, I'd like to know?"

"A half a million." There was the sound of a throat clearing then nothing. "Ms. Beaumont?"

"Thank you. I meant why? What does she allege Jane Doe has done to her?"

```
"You have emotionally distressed her."
   "Emo-may I speak with Helaine please?"
   "I have advised my client to lay low for awhile. I would appreciate your cooperation with that."
   "Robert, please let me talk to her. We'll be brief."
    "Helaine?"
   "Robert, please...let me talk to her."
    "Mr. Keagan? Please. Put her on for just a second."
    "How did your speech go?"
   "My speech? Very well, thank you. Lydia, I-"
    "Standing room only?"
   "Actually, yes. How did you know?"
   "So, my celebrated friend. You're famous, too?"
   Helaine laughed. "I didn't expect it would impress you very much." She watched Kay and Robert out of
the corner of her eve.
    "Looks like I've made some trouble for you, Dr. Kristenson."
   "You?"
    "What's your plan?"
   Helaine hesitated. "What would you think if I settled the matter?"
   "I'd say that seems prudent. Of course, I'm only a humble investment strategist. Are you going to do that, Helaine?"
   "That is our strategy. You know...I'm so sorry—"
   "Don't worry about me. The worst has happened, that's all. We'll get it over with."
   We-Helaine sat in the nearest chair, kicked off her shoes.
    "Okay?"
   "Okay. But what about you, Jane Doe?"
    "T've been called worse."
   There was light laughter from the table. Helaine chuckled, too.
   "Really, I'll be fine. You should get over here though. Make certain you're getting your money's worth."
   Kay grinned and Helaine sent Robert a pleading expression. He smiled but shook his head, rising from
the table with the complaint tucked under his arm.
   "Better get her a private line, Kay. Where's that cordless?"
   Kay left the kitchen to help search for it.
   "Helaine?"
   "Lydia, wait, please. I'm going to switch phones."
    "Okay."
   "Here, Helaine. It's running low, though. He always forgets to recharge it." Kay handed her the cordless
   "Kay. Thank you. Where?"
   "You can take it to the guest room. That's where you're sleeping tonight. Go on. I'll hang this up for
   The guest room was cozy and private. She stood in the doorway and exhaled. "Can you hear me?"
   "Loud and clear."
   "You know I'm not coming tonight?"
    "Is that what you want?"
   "No."
    "Come then."
   "Lydia...I can't."
   "Can't. Lots of can'ts."
   "I'm sorry." There was static on the line. Helaine went to the bed and sat down. It cleared.
    "I want to make love to you."
```

Helaine lay back on the pillows, cradled the phone, turned the lights off. "I know."

```
"I want you to show—" Static. Nothing but static. "Helaine?"
   "I don't know what to do. It could make things worse for us. For you." She paused. "They're looking for
vou."
   "It isn't going to scare me off. That's all it's supposed to do."
   "Rob-my lawyer says he'll take care of this quickly. No more than a few months." She stopped there. Did
she believe it? "Can you wait, Lydia? It isn't that long if you think about it." Her voice was out there, lost in
the universe.
   "No. Show me now, Helaine. Come here and show me."
   Helaine took a quick breath, let it go. "Robert feels sure they've been tailing me. I don't think we can risk
it."
   "They can't have much, Helaine. Essentially we've just met."
   "Nothing substantial. Not yet, anyway."
   They silently pondered the implications together.
   "Then tell me. Tell me how."
   Helaine turned over on her side. "Tell you?"
   "Tell me."
   "Now?"
   "Are you lying down?"
   "Yes."
   "Dressed?"
   "Yes."
   "Satin?"
   "Satin...did you like that?"
   "Love."
   "Love. I'm glad. Hoped you would."
   "Am I undoing it?"
   Helaine reached behind her without speaking.
   "Helaine?"
   "Lydia..."
   "Is it undone?"
   Helaine fumbled with the catch and pulled the zipper down. "Undone," she whispered, dropping her
dress. The air of the apartment was cool and she had a sudden chill. Goose bumps. She pulled the pillows
close to her, unfastened her bra. "Lydia?"
   "Tell me, Helaine."
   "Hurry..."
   "What should I-"
   "Take it off."
   "Good morning."
   Lydia recognized the voice on the other end of the phone. She rolled over and laughed nervously. "Good
morning," she mumbled, squinting at her clock. Ten. Saturday, she reminded herself, shaking the sleep away.
   "May I speak with Helaine? I'm guessing she's there since she's not where I last left her."
   A shock of blond hair lay across the neighboring pillow. Its owner peeked out from under the sheets and
smiled sleepily, green eyes watering in the sunlight.
   "Good morning," Helaine said to Lydia, as she wrapped herself around her.
   "Morning," Lydia repeated with a smile. "It's your lawyer."
   "No!"
   "Yes!"
   "Ms. Beaumont?"
   The ladies gathered the sheets and sat up.
```

"Yes, Mr. Keagan. One moment, please," Lydia answered, passing the phone to Helaine.

"Robert," Helaine sang in a morning voice, "I can explain everything."

"Go ahead."

"Uh-oh, I see you're not amused. What's wrong, besides the obvious?"

"Besides the obvious—that you won't let me help you—there is a troubling new development I'd like to bring to your attention. Are you prepared for this now or would you like to crawl back here in an hour?"

"Umm...tell me now."

"Well, let's see. We'll start like this. Lydia Beaumont. Dark hair, blue eyes, about your height, drop-trow gorgeous. How do you think I know all that?"

"Good guess?"

"Good photo, Helaine. Of both of you. Together. Now isn't that convenient for the bad guys?"

Lydia sent her a questioning look.

"Photo," Helaine whispered. "Us."

Lydia shrugged and slid Helaine's hand between her legs.

Robert heard an unintelligible remark. "What?"

"I said, how do we look together?"

"Hand in glove, I'd say. That's not really the point, is it?"

Hand in- "How did you come by it, Robert?"

"Messenger, I presume. Lawyers must have sent it as an anonymous heads-up. They want her name, Helaine. Clearly they mean business."

She felt Lydia shudder. "They haven't gotten it yet, Robert."

"That won't last, especially with your wanton—I've got another call. I'll call you right back. Don't go anywhere!"

Lydia was coaxing with her hips, with quick breaths. "I need you," she murmured into the blond hair.

"Okay," Helaine said, consenting to both of them.

Riiiinng...riiiinng...riiiinng...

"Oh...for Pete's sake..." Lydia groaned.

"Oh, no. That's probably Robert calling back. Hello?"

Lydia rolled onto her side and put her face under the pillow.

"Hello?" Helaine repeated.

"Oueenie, is that you?"

"I'm sorry. I suspect you have the wrong-"

"Is this Del? Put Queenie on."

"Oueenie?"

"Oh, my god, it's my father-don't hang up."

Helaine handed Lydia the phone with a sly smile.

"Daddy?" Lydia said, her face crimson.

"Good morning, Queenie. Say, who's that? Great voice."

Lydia was rounding up bathrobes when the phone rang again. "For you," she laughed. "It's got to be for you this time."

Helaine answered it. "Hello?"

"Good morning! Liddy?"

Helaine shook her head. "Just a moment, please."

Lydia rolled her eyes. "Who?"

Helaine grinned, threw up her hands. "Your mommy?"

Lydia laughed and took the phone. Hah," she whispered, sitting beside her on the bed. "Good morning?" "Whoa, Liddy. Is she as good as she sounds?"

"Del...uhh..." she cast Helaine a sheepish look and lowered her voice, "can you believe even better?"

Helaine smiled and put on a terry robe. "Thank you, darling," she said, heading for the bathroom.

"Con-fuckin-gratu-relations, Lydia Beaumont! Call me first chance you get."

Phone again.

"You better get that," Helaine said. "I'm making waves, I think."

"Sure are-good morning?"

"Helaine?"

"Uh...just a moment, please."

"Is it Robert?"

"No. A woman."

Helaine hesitated. Lydia brought the phone to her ear again, "Who's calling, please?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Tell her it's Kay."

"It's Kay. Of course it is."

"You're quite a good sport, Ms. Beaumont. Good morning, Kay."

"Good morning! Well, is she as good as she looks?"

"Hah! Even better. Good photo?"

"That's the woman in Frank's Place, isn't it?"

"That's her."

"I want the both of you for lunch."

"Kay, that's greedy."

"Did I say that? Well now, that's a Freudian slip. Lunch then?"

"What does Robert think?"

"Robert the worrier. I sent him out to pick up lunch. He tried to call you back but the phone was busy. Suggests you both leave separately."

Lydia was getting dressed. Helaine motioned for her to stop. She did.

"What time is lunch, Kay?"

"One?"

Helaine reached for her watch. Eleven thirty already. "We'll see you then."

"Come separately, Helaine."

Lydia stood by the bed, half dressed and waiting.

"Don't worry. We will."

"First things first. Tech stocks?"

"Robert, let her in!"

Lydia stood bewildered outside the Keagans' apartment door. Helaine was right about the trek. It only took a few minutes to get there. They were practically neighbors. Five minutes away at the most, it was hardly enough time for her body to get used to standing and walking, let alone the idea of delivering something clever at her host's doorstep. She floundered there, prodding her brain cells for a response and caught sight of Helaine in the background with a woman who she presumed was Kay Keagan. She smiled anxiously at the two of them and waved.

"Buy or sell?" Robert pressed, pretending she could not gain admittance without an answer.

"Excuse him. I'm Kay."

"Pleased to meet you, Kay." Lydia said. "Do you own any?" she asked Robert.

"Yeah, some."

"Lydia Beaumont," she said offering him her hand. "Sell."

"Robert Keagan, a pleasure to meet you Ms. Beaumont," he grinned. "May I take your clothes?"

"Clothes?" (Oh, okay.) "What do you plan to do with them?"

"Robert, really. You make us seem like opportunists," Kay said.

"Seem? Hello, Ms. Beaumont," Helaine whispered as she kissed Lydia's cheek. "Did I tell you yet how beautiful you look today?"

"I believe so," Lydia whispered back, her face suddenly warm.

"Ah, look at that, a crimson still diviner. Don't let us frighten you," Helaine said. "We don't get out much."

"Hungry or thirsty?" Kay asked, leading Lydia by the arm to the kitchen.

Lydia glanced back at Helaine.

"Both," Helaine answered. "Lydia Beaumont has a very robust appetite."

"Oh no," Lydia responded. "You're trying to embarrass me."

"Now you're boasting, Helaine," Kay chided. "You'll make us jealous."

"Kay, where are you going with that gorgeous woman?" Robert asked.

"I'm undertaking to satisfy her robust appetite. Red or white, Lydia?"

"Don't even dream of it. Red?" Helaine asked.

Lydia nodded, coming to a standstill at the photograph of the two of them pinned with a magnet to the refrigerator. Who took this, she wondered. Why hadn't she noticed them?

"Nice looking couple. Here you go, dear."

Lydia took the wineglass from Kay with a tentative smile. "Thank you."

"Do you have a sister, we hope?" Robert asked with an impudent smile.

"We're overwhelming, we know," Kay said.

"Sister?" Lydia repeated. "Oh, I see. No. A brother, though."

"Sit, everybody," Robert ordered. "You ladies across from each other."

"You're scaring me," Kay chimed. "That's where I was going to put them." Lids off their platters. "Eat what you want," she urged, "it's a smorgasbord."

"Does your brother look like you?" Robert asked picking up where he left off.

Lydia took a deep sip of wine. She guessed she would be needing it. "I suppose he must," she replied with a chuckle.

"A brother." He winked at Kay. "What do you think, willing to compromise?"

Helaine laughed. Her friends were in great form considering, enchanted by bashful Lydia Beaumont. She stretched her legs under the table and gripped Lydia's between them, mouthing I love you. She felt her relax then.

"Well, I don't know," said Kay. "Do you think we're his type, Lydia?"

Helaine scoffed. "Better drink the wine, Lydia. It'll dull the pain."

Lydia toyed with a grape before popping it her mouth. "No, I don't think he's your type," she teased. "He's more like my father, if you know what I mean."

"I know your father. A fine rogue," Robert added. "Your brother's name?"

"Eddie." A boy's name. He was a man now. "Edward, I mean."

"Oh, that would make sense," Robert replied. "Edward the second?"

"Actually the third," Lydia replied. "Nobody's counting, though."

"The third," he repeated. "Your father retire?"

"He did. Last year."

"How'd that little glitch resolve itself, you know?" He couldn't resist asking.

"That glitch." Lydia squirmed. "Like all the others. In his defense, he really did think that was a woman. The dress. Poor excuse in the big picture, I realize."

"Ooh," Helaine uttered in interest.

"You know all this stuff, right?" Robert asked her. "Or are you only on a first name basis with Edward Beaumont's progeny?"

No, Helaine did not know this stuff. "I love Mr. Beaumont's progeny. A toast to Edward the second. For his beautiful daughter."

"I'll drink to that," Robert said.

They all did.

"I'm dying to know what your father had to say about that matter," Kay persisted. "A fabulous romp like that and not a word about it?"

The wine made its way fast. Lydia was actually tempted to repeat what Daddy had said. It was the kind of colorful commentary he was famous for, although this one he had imparted on Eddie's ears alone. Eddie the third.

"She wants to tell us," Robert said. "You can see it in her eyes."

"No," Lydia protested. "I don't usually even discuss those things."

"Those things? Uh-oh, Dr. Kristenson. Better get your notebook out."

Dr. Kristenson smiled. "I find Ms. Beaumont's modesty hopelessly sexy. It makes me weak. What did your father privately say about his glitch, Lydia?"

Lydia laughed uncomfortably. "He didn't say anything to me personally."

Robert adjusted himself in his chair. "But he told your brother...what?"

"Oh my gosh," she answered. "Peer pressure?"

"Tell," Kay urged, smiling agreeably.

Tell them. "He told my brother it was the best blow job he ever had."

All but Lydia burst into laughter. She waited for them to regain themselves and stifled a smirk of her own. The subject was not generally amusing to her although in the present company she was willing to allow that there was something darkly funny about it all.

"He's qualified to say that," Robert finally said.

"Oh, I know," Lydia replied. She felt Helaine's eyes on her and avoided them. "It doesn't typically inspire mirth," she explained. "It's funnier if you're not related to him, I suppose. Or married," she added with a quick laugh.

Kay elbowed Robert.

"Have you forgiven your father?" Dr. Kristenson inquired. No notebook.

Lydia swirled the contents of her glass and held it to the light. "Oh yes, doctor. At least once a week." She set the glass down. "Or as needed."

Dr. Kristenson liked that answer. "Good. And your mother?"

Her mother? "Forgiven him?" She had to answer her lover. "My father?"

Dr. Kristenson nodded.

"No, never. But she stills wears his ring. That's what he wants from her."

"That's not so unusual," Helaine said.

"What's your mother's name?" Kay asked.

"Oh, my goodness—Marilyn. Marilyn Sanders-Beaumont. Age sixty-four. Past menopause. Past hoping for grandchildren. Past golfing, hates it. Walks five miles a day. Formally, an over-educated housewife, now part-time gardener, Sunday painter, full time philanthropist. Active but prone to melancholy." Lydia dropped two fingers in the air signifying quotations. "As opposed to depression. A dying breed. Last of the stay-at-home moms. Last of the bleeding heart, dyed-in-the-wool, yellow dog liberals. Last of the money can't buy you love. Last of the do unto others as you would have done unto you. Last of the one-man-women roaming the wilderness for thirty-eight years, starving and parched." She pushed four grapes to the center of her plate, pulled them apart, pushed them back together again and glanced warily at Helaine. "I am not like Edward Beaumont. I just happen to be his daughter."

Helaine sat up in her chair. "Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont have a very lovely daughter and that's a fine reflection on them."

Kay agreed.

"Indeed," Robert added. "So tell me, what about pharmaceuticals? Buy, sell, or hold?"

"Oh, Robert," Kay whined. "That isn't a proper segue."

Lydia smiled gratefully. "Hold, until further notice. Don't you have a broker, Robert?"

"I do, but I don't trust him."

"Oh, I see. Well, thank you."

"What are some of the warning signs to look for?"

"Buzzwords." Lydia stretched her legs under the table and grabbed Helaine's in them.

"Like?"

"Like price fixing, medical ethics, humanitarian crises-those kinds of things."

"Yikes. Which ones do you own?"

Kay sighed impatiently. "Please be certain to leave a bill, Lydia."

Lydia smiled. "None anymore."

"Why not?"

"Oh...price fixing, medical ethics...you know."

"Yuck," Kay said. "Sell."

"Now wait a minute. You can't get rich on those concerns, Ms. Beaumont."

"But you can get what you need," she replied. "And sleep at night, too."

"Sleep," Helaine said. "To sleep. Perchance to dream. Ay, that is the rub. What do you think, Robert? Sleeping all right?"

"I was. Until I met Marilyn Beaumont's little girl."

"Hah," Helaine replied, "I know exactly how you feel!"

"I understand you've met Sharon Chambers," Robert declared, switching subjects again.

Lydia was confused by the assertion. Oh, in the ladies lounge, she suddenly remembered. Indeed, she had. "I didn't know it was Sharon Chambers, per se."

"It?" Robert smirked at the mistake.

"Naturally, I meant she." She glanced apologetically at Helaine who appeared indifferent to the remark.

"More wine, everyone?"

"Thanks, Kay."

"Yes, please."

"What if Sharon finds out Jane Doe's true identity?" Robert inquired.

"She's bound to someday," Lydia replied. "Isn't she?"

"As pertains to this suit today. Would you care to read this?" He slid the papers across the table at her.

"As and for the first cause of action..." she broke off and scanned the document before looking up at Helaine. "No," she said, "I don't care to read it. You're going to resolve this, I understand. Before she finds out my name."

"I'll do my best, but it'll require your assistance. As well as Helaine's, if you catch my drift. By the way, you're very photogenic."

Helaine held up her glass with both hands and rested her elbows on the table.

"You'll have to postpone the honeymoon until this storm blows over." He glanced from one to the other. It was going to be tricky to impress them with this tiny detail. "Don't underestimate Sharon Chambers. She never saw a scandal she didn't like and there's no such thing as bad press unless her name's not in it."

There was, at last, a face to the shadowy image that had been haunting Sharon Chambers night and day for the past two years. And although she had acted on her hunch the minute she felt it, and had done everything she knew to do in order to block her, Dr. Kristenson had finally taken a lover.

For months Sharon had suspected Helaine's love interest was a woman. She couldn't say why she thought that. Just female intuition. She was stunned senseless by Lawrence Taft's photo exposé of her favorite blond with a swank brunette, not merely because the private eye had captured the couple's apparent bliss, but because she instantly recognized the woman in the photos as the haughty virgin queen she had unsuccessfully cornered in Frank's Place.

Up until she held those photos in her hand, she had believed the phantom relationship one-sided, that Helaine was stretched too thin to act on infatuation, or that if she did she would fail to consummate it and that would be the end of the matter. After all, the blond was not the same woman she had met seven years ago and ever since turning forty she had been in a slump. Now she couldn't even achieve an orgasm, a midlife crisis had consumed her sexual appetite.

Because of that, the threat the dark specter presented at first had seemed far off of late. Held at a safe distance, it only lurked impotently in the background of their relationship, posing nothing more than a nuisance to Sharon, or a mirage on the horizon that would disappear if she satisfied Helaine's thirst. Nothing more than that. Helaine was a reasonable woman; she would never leave her for a mirage.

Glaring at the photographs of the two women getting into a cab, Sharon was forced to accept otherwise. The private eye had done his work and it had taken months, but a real lover, not a mirage, had finally materialized. Just when they both had begun to doubt the mission.

The ladies had at least been together Friday night and Sharon's instincts informed her, without a doubt, that it was probably *the* night. Helaine sleeping with someone else. The very idea of it made her blanch.

She had not just picked her up at a bar, Sharon screamed before she fired Lawrence Taft. That's not her style she assured, slamming the phone in his ear. She was angry at the entire incompetent world. He should have discovered what was going on well before Friday. Then the lawyers could have served the photos up, too. For that matter, why had the lawyers dawdled? She had seen them Wednesday afternoon. Paid them enough. If they had gotten their shit together like they promised to, they could have served the legal papers on Thursday. Then, photo or no photo, that would have stopped Helaine cold in her tracks. Stopped her before Friday. Before...

Sharon festered all weekend, the photographs rendering her virtually apoplectic. Dazed, she carried them from room to room. It was that one's first time, she concluded over and over again, as if it mattered. Yeah, because Sharon knew her types and she could tell by the naive look in those eyes. Warm, wide and willing. With a little skilled guidance that woman would become a excellent replacement. Blue eyes, red hot for the Love Doc. They were ice when Sharon had looked into them. They had despised her repletely and now she understood why.

What a difference a day would have made, she lamented. Just twenty-four little hours and she could have put the whole affair on ice, permanently. Now, when she got Helaine Kristenson back—and get her back she would—she'd have to live forever with the knowledge that she had slept with someone else.

Monday morning Sharon was still not prepared to make a public appearance. She sent a few choice photos by messenger to her lawyers and they called her back around noon to say that while the blue-eyed woman looked vaguely familiar somehow, they still needed more than that to go on, although they did not think it wise for Sharon to continue her illegal surveillance and wasn't even sure the current pictures would be admissible as evidence in a trial. In the end, they advised her again, she would, most likely, find that part of her claim dismissed, as the mystery woman had no duty owed to her to which she could be found and held in breach of. Still, for the purposes of an out of court settlement, two rich defendants are always more fun than one. Could she come in on Wednesday for a strategy session?

No, she could not. Actually she had to be in LA by Tuesday for an AM court appointment on Wednesday, hopefully her last if she could just keep her mouth shut during the proceedings. She didn't share that little tidbit with them, although she thought it unlikely they hadn't heard about the case. She simply told them to keep her apprised and left them with the phone number of the condo she owned in LA county. She expected to be returning in a week, sooner if they learned anything.

"I want you to nail this Jane Doe for me. I don't care what it takes."

"We understand that."

The rest of Monday she dedicated to restoring order to the waterfront flat. Yes, in reality Sharon Chambers was quite tidy, all her homes spotless. The mess at the waterfront flat was the exception, merely calculated for affect, to manipulate Helaine, keep things lively between them.

She made an assessment of the damages as she went along. The place was in the height of neglect, a sign which she attempted to ignore as she set about straightening it. It needed things, that was apparent, and more attention than she could give it at the moment, as preoccupied as she was and—dare she think it?—as depressed as she was feeling. The best she had to offer it for the time being was some organization.

She applied herself to that task, by evening having made enough progress to call it a day. By then there were a only few piles left in the hallway, personal items that didn't belong to either her or Helaine. These had clearly outlived their usefulness, she admitted without remorse, and she threw them into the trash along with the entire contents of the refrigerator.

She had come across very few of Helaine's things. That didn't surprise her too much. It had been a long time since the woman had actually lived there. She dwelt on that for the very first time as she wondered what she was supposed to do with them.

Her memory of the events that led up to Helaine moving out lay shrouded in dusty cobwebs she wasn't too anxious to disturb. There was a cedar closet in the back room, she remembered instead, that Helaine had once used for storage. She could stash the stuff in there for safekeeping, get it out of her sight until she could stand to see them again.

It was in the closet that Sharon Chambers had her breakdown. It happened in the darkness when her hand brushed against something soft and sleek, a sensation she recognized immediately.

She had worn that coat the day she had met Helaine Kristenson. A floor-length mink. Helaine had worn it, too, with nothing on underneath. That was the first time Sharon had made love to her. Seven years ago. That's like a lifetime when you're only thirty. She pulled the string on the overhead light and stared at it in disbelief. It hung like a dark ghost in the corner, as shiny as the day Helaine had bought it, as perfect as that perfect first night when she had lay her down in it. Here in the waterfront flat. Where Helaine had lived. Where they both had lived till...oh yes, she remembered it now and felt it in her heart.

In her heart there was a tearing sensation. That had to be her heart, she thought, or perhaps even her stomach. There was a taste in her mouth. Old blood. Bitter. No, it wasn't her stomach. It was her heart. She had the sense that it was being ripped from where it belonged. It felt pulled like a muscle. She had pulled a muscle once on the runway. The heart is a muscle that has to be exercised. That's what Dr. Kristenson used to say. Or what? Was she dying? There was a hard lump in her throat. She put her hand to her chest and with the other gripped the fur coat by the collar. She could picture the woman in it. The creamy soft flesh, the beautiful body. This was the precious skin she had left behind. She was gone. The pain was moving up into her jaws. She felt them trembling uncontrollably and she knew she was going to cry. The empty coat hanging there like brand new. She had left Helaine here beside it, but she was gone. If she cried it would ruin her eyes, not just her makeup. Her eyes. Her eyes. She could remember that night so vividly. Those green eyes. How could this coat be so precious? How could it be of so little value to Helaine that she would leave it, leave it hanging like a spirit from the past for her to find? There were tears now, hot as blood. That's what Sharon believed they were. Must be her blood she tasted in her mouth, must be her blood running out of her eyes, must be her blood gushing down her face onto her clothes and dampening the coat she clung to like a child. Must be all of her blood, judging from how much of it there was. And from the terrible pain in her heart.

It wasn't because he was a fan of the super-model that prompted Robert Keagan to keep a Sharon Chambers scrapbook. And it wasn't because he was sentimental.

He added the recent headliner concerning the resolution of the LA county affair and thumbed through the prior entries with a scowl. Indiscretion. The woman had made a career of it. He closed the book with a thud and put it back on the shelf with his other reference guides. Now she expected to collect fringe benefits.

If necessary, he would present the file to Helaine and force her to pen her thoughts in it. Submit the tragic "diary" to the jury. Exhibit A, ladies and gentlemen: one broken heart. She'd have to go along with it.

He had allowed two weeks to pass without notifying the prosecuting attorneys that he would be the attorney of record for the defendant. Let the bad guys sweat it, he reasoned. No use in the good guys coming off panicked, even if they were. Besides, he was in no rush to join the issue, knowing from years of experience that there were hungry reporters hiding under their rocks, eagerly waiting to sink their teeth into the doctor's official response to Ms. Chambers' tasty allegations. It would be a feeding frenzy. Intermeddlers. They were insatiable. Robert had decided not to delve too deeply with Helaine about that phase of litigation. He didn't want to trouble her with its inevitability.

His first priority had been to pinpoint and quash all the peek-a-boo crap taking place on the sidelines and get some eyes of his own watching the streets. And while he felt like a cad doing it, nevertheless, he felt obliged to assign some peepers to the newlyweds as well, mostly because he hated surprises. Word now was that the coast was clear and all's quiet on the waterfront. While waiting on that determination he had used his time to compile a shopping list of do's and don'ts. Every one of those items had to be crossed off before he would consider himself ready to spar with Sharon's attorneys. It was a long list, most everything on it routine.

Hollisen, Hollisen and Goetz. All dead, but still raising hell in the legal world. And representing supermodel Sharon Chambers. Willard Hathaway Esq., chief counsel for the plaintiff.

"Hi, Willie, Robert Keagan here, Chambers V. Kristenson et al. What? Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Nah, I haven't had time to go through it all. Need more time to respond. I know, but I'm busy. No, not really, Willie. Oh, I'm sure she is. What? Nope, don't know who Jane Doe is–probably a figment of the plaintiff's

imagination judging by this work of fiction I got in front of me. Yes, I really believe that. Pure fiction, as difficult reading as Mein Kempf, Willie. No, I truly doubt that. Uh, it's neither love nor war, I can assure you. What I think? It's pathetic is what it is. Well, you don't have to say you agree with me, we're both reasonable men. Huh? That she knows her very well? We neither admit nor deny that. I think we have a bad line. No, we neither admit nor deny that, too. No, I'm not calling her a liar. Yes, generally. It's all specious, Willie. Ten more days. No, five's not enough, I just got it this morning. At first blush? Well, it fails to state a cause of action for starters. Mm-hmm. Lack of jurisdiction, no merit, the works. Oh, I disagree. Yah, delusional and incoherent. We just can't make any sense of it, Willie. What? Oh, you wrote it? Well, what do you want from me? The substance? Yeah, we understand the substance. Clever but bald, Willie. So? So? And your client is no Snow White, I'm sure you know. Nah, you can't say that, wait till the jury sees my client. What do you mean by that? That's a bald-faced lie and you know it. Of course. Why don't you ask her about Italy? Oh, really? And what about the stuff going down in LA? Is that ancient history, too? Yah! I think it's all relevant and I'm sure the jury will, too. Hmm? Infidelity? That's very funny, Willie. You hear me laughing, right? Yeah, yeah, yeah, still laughing and that's what the whole wide world will be doing when they hear about this. What, gave her permission? I doubt my client would do that. Yeeaauh...also a bit too kinky to be believed. She did? Gave her permission? I said, I don't think so. Well, like I said before, delusional. What? Well, that's going to be hard for your client to prove. No, I'm not saying that at all. Judging from all this, looks like you've got a psychopath on your hands. Yeah, I really do. Well, you say loose cannon and I say psychopath, let's call the whole thing off. No, I wouldn't expect that you would. The point? Actually I was just calling for more time to answer and to tell you to stop following my client. Oh, c'mon Willie...what about the photograph? Yeah, we did. I think it's unethical. For real? Well, then who did? Okay, so then I'll have to put it this way: If ANYONE bothers my client, her friends, family, colleagues, associates, employees, agents, representatives, or subsidiaries thereof...we'll throw their asses in jail quicker than you can say but. Good, I'm glad to hear it. Oh, is that right? You better watch her then. Sure. Understandable, but it can't happen again or I'll move for an order of protection and run straight to the six o'clock news with it. Who? I've already said I don't know the woman. Theory? Probably passed in front of the lens by accident. No. Sorry. I don't know that, either. I'm sorry if you don't, it saddens me to think you don't find me credible anymore. A friend of my client? Well, you'll have to ask that when the time comes, because as far as I know she doesn't know her. She's not a liar, Willie. Yah! Oh, I object! Yah! Look here, your client has a criminal record, now. Well, we're very concerned about that. No, no, no, I'm just saying keep her away from mine. Oh, yes I do. Very good cause for concern and you know it. Well, that's fine and we send our thank yous in advance. Yup. No problem. Uum...I don't think so. I think we've covered just about everything. Yeah? Oh, don't worry, Willie. Sure. Sure. Yep, you'll be hearing from us. What? You betcha. And say hi to Martha. Very well, thank you. Oh, not too bad, busy these days, never see you at the club anymore. Just Thursdays? I guess that explains it. Sounds it, like two ships that cross in the night. Yep. I sure will. Hey...thanks for the ten days. (click)

"Sonofabitch," Willard Hathaway muttered under his breath. He choked off the team's laughter with a virulent expression. Ms. Chambers had informed him Robert Keagan was a close friend of Dr. Kristenson. "She's got that purebred pitbull defending her," he announced, standing up and walking to the door. Keagan was bad luck. He hadn't won a single case against him. "Someone get a hold of our talented client and tell her to call off her ball-breakers or he'll have us all in the slammer by week's end. Wouldn't that be pretty?" he said to his shoes. He grasped the door handle like a grenade. "Try to impress upon Ms. Chambers that she is not a free agent in this matter," he added, preparing to slam the door. Nobody dared to move while there was a chance he hadn't finished speaking. "Do it now, I said!"

Attorney Stanley Kandinsky is sharp. If compared to an animal, as people are wont to do sometimes, he looks just like a hawk. It's his lean physique and chiseled features, the low hairline, the dark and permanently scrutinizing eyebrows, a pair of piercing and unblinking brown eyes, almost black really. He's one of those people you can't imagine sleeping. Not that he ever seems sleepless or tired, but rather that he doesn't need to sleep at all. He is constantly alert.

They say "Stan can" when they recommend him to someone who needs something hushed up. They call him Mr. Hush-it-up. That's what he does.

Robert Keagan says that Stanley Kandinsky is the most important lawyer who ever lived, next to Abraham Lincoln. Nobody really knows what he means by that, but everyone agrees that Stanley's indispensable, whereas the same consensus, unfortunately, did not exist for Mr. Lincoln.

```
"Heads up, Stan."
```

"I've already heard the buzz. Who's Jane Doe?"

"Nah, skip that detail for now. But make a reservation for her just in case."

"Important?"

"Yeeaaaauhh...yes."

"Someone I know?"

"Mmmm-maybe."

"Enough, Robert. You sound like you're choking to death. When will I hear from her?"

"T've got a bad feeling. Very soon, I'd say."

"Oh, that's too bad. There's no merit to the suit, from what I know."

"None, across the board. It's legalized blackmail. We'll tag-team this like those other ones. I'll speak to her father if necessary. That'll guarantee it."

"And that's someone I know?"

"Afraid so. We'll get to that when we have to."

"You've piqued my interest now."

"Good. There's just one catch, Stan."

"What could that be?"

"The gravamen. It's not exactly about money."

"Not about money? What then?"

"Erruhhh...some people like to call it love. I call it revenge."

"That's going to complicate things, I'm afraid."

"Always does. Talk to you soon, Mr. Kandinsky."

"Goodbye, Mr. Keagan. I hope you feel better."

"It's Mr. Keagan, Dr. Kristenson. You want to take it in the office?"

"Yes. Switch it there, Jen."

"Helaine?"

"Good afternoon, Robert. How are things going?"

"Going. Weekly update. It would appear that Sharon sent the photograph. So it's not her lawyers tailing you. I've warned them to put an end to it anyway, so we'll see. Being good?"

"This is unbearable. How much longer will it take?"

"When's the last time you talked?"

"I don't want to just talk."

"When, Helaine?"

"Yesterday, briefly."

"Is anyone following her, did she say?"

"She didn't, no. I don't think she would tell me anyway. Wouldn't want to worry me, I suspect. I need to see her, Robert. What's the point of all this if I lose the woman?"

"I don't think you're going to lose her. Of course, you might if Sharon smears her name all over the dailies. It's going to be fine. Things are moving nicely. Trust me."

"Robert...I already knew that Sharon had sent the photo."

"How'd you know that?"

"I received one just like it a few days after you got yours. Half of one, I should say. The other half, the part with Lydia's face, was ripped off. Gone."

"Okay. Not good. You should have told me right away, but hopefully I've taken care of all that. If they can't control their client they'll drop suit. That's the way it works. So, how's the new place, got yourself settled in yet?"

"No, still living out of boxes. Piano's in the hallway waiting for an inspiration. The bed's together, though. Plenty of inspiration there."

"Atta girl. We'll send the bad guys an answer next week that would scare flies from carrion...sharks from chum...vultures from roadkill...shall I continue, or are you going to make your selection?"

"Do I have to?"

"Want to see the dinner menu, instead?"

"Is this really worth it, Robert? Hiding?"

"Helaine? You want this settled, right?"

"I want it to go away. I want... I know you know what I'm going to say so I won't bother to be repetitive."

"You need your batteries recharged, I know."

"It feels like Sharon's winning already. Got out of that other thing pretty easy. Community service?"

"Every dog has his day. She won't win in the long run, I can assure you. Not if I can help it."

There was nothing Helaine could think of to say to that.

"Beautiful weather for late September. Looking forward to the weekend. We'll have some fun in the country, okay, Helaine? *Just the three of us.*"

Dr. Kristenson gone. Lydia gone. Checkers gone-not that the waiter missed him. Harry scanned the room. Still plenty of others to serve.

Work. Work. Work. And no play. Lydia was worried she was becoming a dull girl. She looked over her shoulder a lot these days and avoided her windows. She avoided being alone in the elevators. She avoided her father and his invitations to the club or for lunch at a nearby restaurant. She visited with Delilah but avoided her inquiries. She avoided Frank's Place like the plague and stayed away from all the other gin joints in town. As agreed, she avoided seeing Helaine. She avoided calling Helaine. She avoided writing Helaine. She avoided thinking of Helaine. Of her eyes. Of her lips. Of her limbs. Of the scent of her hair. The feel of it on her skin. The feel of her body next to hers. The sound of her laughter. Her voice. Sharon.

"You're in love, I just know it."

"Mom, why would you say that?"

"Because you never call otherwise."

"That can't be true. Is that true or are you just trying to make me feel guilty?"

"Why would I bother trying to do that, honey? Making you guilty has had no beneficial effect on my life. Tell me what's

"Nothing special. I just called to say hello to my dear sweet mom whom I miss and haven't seen in ages and haven't talked to in months and who I just felt terribly lonesome for. That is, if she doesn't mind." She listened to the long distance buzz on the line as her mother quietly digested the compliment. It seemed to be taking her an awfully long time to get it all down. A crackling noise filled the receiver, a scoff.

"No, really. Why are you calling?"

Lydia blew air back. "Okay, I'm in love, Marilyn."

"There. You see how you are? So tell me about him."

Lydia switched the phone to her other ear. "Uum...well...are you sitting down?"

He didn't give a rip if the Chambers witch fired him since he was going to terminate her case anyway. No, he had never noticed the blue-eyed woman before, no they had never been together on any other occasion, no he had not been able to learn the woman's name. The model had howled at him like a demon from hell. She was more than he had bargained for. And now word on the street was that someone important was hunting down the major asshole who had taken the pictures of Dr. Kristenson with her new lover. He didn't know much but he knew he was the major asshole they were looking for. Trouble. Major trouble. He had recognized its face the moment it had first slinked into his office and should have taken heed. Thank

116

goodness it had all been cash transactions. I'm out of here, Lawrence Taft, decided. He took the money and ran.

Just the three of them in a brand new foreign luxury sedan, tolling down the highway at seventy miles an hour, happily heading for a taste of the simple life. A weekend in the country. Woods, lakes, wildlife. Wild so to speak. Nobody was to say the word lawsuit, nobody permitted to mention Sharon. It was a pretty quiet ride.

Helaine watched the cityscape gradually disappear from her back window, saw it replaced instead with sprawling neighborhoods and commercial strips. An hour passed and still no one had spoken and there were only clusters of houses left on the landscape. After that the trees took over, miles and miles of trees, some of them hinting at turning color. She didn't mind the silence. She watched the trees as they began to merge with each other, until the view from her window consisted entirely of hills and valleys and then mountains.

The monotony got the better of her and eventually she fell asleep.

"Helaine, wake up, we're here. Helaine?"

It was dark by the time they reached their destination. Helaine had slept through the dramatic approach and had no idea how steep an ascent they had made into the wilderness. The car was parked before a modern log cabin and the automatic spot lights flooded the driveway, revealing the outline of a smaller building behind it.

"What time is it?" she asked, disoriented.

"It's nine," Robert said, helping her out of the back seat and collecting her bags for her. "You've got the guest house all to yourself. Come, I'll get you situated."

"I'll put our stuff in the house," Kay shouted from the car.

Robert and Helaine headed for the guest house along a narrow stone path, the stones clicking together under their feet. She was exhausted and not wearing appropriate shoes and lost her footing twice as she stumbled after him.

"We're out there, aren't we?" she asked.

"It seems more remote at night, but yes, we're out there." He stopped at the door and waited for the sensors to react to their presence. A night-light over the door flickered before coming on. "A little slow, this one. You all right?"

"Long day," she said, "long week, for that matter."

He pushed open the door for her and they stepped gingerly inside.

"Oh, that light's out again. I'll have to replace it in the morning. Too late now." He set the bags down by the entrance and turned to leave. "Don't feel beholden to us. Sleep as late as you want."

Helaine hesitated in the darkened entranceway beside him. "Robert, wait!" Across the main room she saw the silhouetted figure of a woman posed in one of the interior doorways. A soft light shone from the room behind the stranger distinguishing the shape of her body but leaving the rest of her features in shadow. Helaine could make out a form fitted dress, cut above the knees, sleeveless, black perhaps, heels. She squinted in the darkness but couldn't make out the face. "Robert," she repeated nervously, "who's that?"

Robert placed his hand on the doorknob. "Oh, her?" he laughed. "Consider her a gift from your friends, Dr. Kristenson. Enjoy," he said, attempting to leave.

"What?"

"A pick-me-up, Helaine. Someone to keep you company this weekend." He opened the front door.

"Robert!" She grabbed his sleeve. "You're joking." She looked over her shoulder. The woman stood motionless in the doorway, leaning against it with one arm, the other on her hip. "Oh, Robert, you can't be serious. This is...she's a...? You're joking, right?"

"No joke. Just relax. It's no big deal."

"Relax? Robert?" Helaine let go of his shirt and shot another anxious glance at the lit doorway. "No, Robert. You-you make her go. I can't do this. I'm not-she has to go." She saw him only grin. "Please, I'm very uncomfortable."

"Don't be. She's a professional."

"Take her out of here, Robert Keagan!"

"I can't do that, Helaine. We're in the middle of nowhere, after dark-"

"Robert—" She looked back again. The woman was clearly not inclined to leave on her own and he was not going to make her. "Then give me the car keys, please. I'll drive her somewhere."

"Drive her? She's not a local girl, Helaine. Where do you plan to leave the woman? At the bottom of the hill?"

She stared at him in disbelief. He slipped past her and stood outside on the path.

"Give me the keys, Mr. Keagan. I'm taking her home."

"Dr. Kristenson...she's the cream of the crop."

"That is not the problem-the keys."

"Helaine, you don't even know where you are, and *I'm* not going anywhere. I'm too pooped." He started for the house, jingling his keys in his pocket as he walked.

"Robert!" Helaine yelled. "What am I going to do?" She listened to his footsteps fading in the dark, the chorus of peepers serenading the darkness. The light flickered over her door and fizzled out.

"You don't have to do anything," he called back to her. "Play cards if you want."

"I'll sleep outdoors," she threatened. She heard him laugh at that.

"With the bears and covotes?" he taunted.

She searched the blackness around her and fearfully stepped backwards into the entranceway. He was between buildings now. She could no longer see his shape and could barely hear him walking. In the distance the cabin lights shone warm and comforting. She was tempted to run toward them. But bears and coyotes? What else might be out there? Trees, she thought grimly.

"Goodnight, Helaine," Robert yelled, finally at his front door.

She watched him disappearing into the cabin. The flood lights in the front of it blinked like sleepy sentinels as one by one they nodded off, the rooms all went dark again, the small piece of civilization belonged once more to the wilderness and to the pitch black night.

Helaine swore under her breath. Bears and coyotes. And snakes, and skunks, and bats? She solemnly closed the door and leaned her back against it, studying the woman in the distance as she tried to organize her thoughts. The woman hadn't moved an inch.

Helaine sighed. She definitely couldn't do this. "I'm sorry, but I just can't do this." Her friends had meant well. "My friends meant well, but..." It was misguided. "It was misguided of them."

The woman said nothing.

She had no doubt she was attractive. A nice physique. The dress was similar to one Lydia had worn once. The woman's body, also similar, same body type. She still couldn't see her face. Helaine reached for the light switch. Nothing. He probably had the bulbs removed, she thought, ruefully.

The woman in the doorway dropped her arms and began to peel off the dress.

(Oh, no.) "No, don't do that." Helaine saw her walking slowly toward her. "Please, you have to stop. This is not going to happen." The woman halted in her tracks and let the dress fall to the floor around her feet. Undergarments. A white bustier glowing like a beacon in the dark. She was absolutely lovely. (Oh, nuts.) It was not her fault. "Look, you are obviously...this is not your fault...this is my fault."

No reply.

Why didn't she say something for godsakes? "Say something, please."

"Talk?" the woman asked in a sleepy alto.

Alto, like Lydia. "You're definitely going. I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting this." There was no protest, no motion at all. "How did you get here?"

"Drove."

Drove? Well, that was possible, she guessed. She hadn't noticed a car, but perhaps she had been sleeping and missed it. Nice voice. Very nice. Helaine stood free of the door. "I can pay you for your trouble," she said, taking her eyes off her to scout around for her purse. There it was over there. The woman began walking toward her again.

"Can you?" the woman asked, now only a few feet away.

She was a dead ringer. Robert and Kay must have put their backs into it, Helaine thought. "That's close enough—please." The woman stopped short. "I can't do this with you," Helaine explained one more time.

"Why?"

"I can't. I have someone."

The woman dropped her arms to her side. "Where are they?"

Where? (Good question.) "How much?" Helaine asked, wallet in hand, butterflies in stomach.

The woman put her hands on her hips. "For what?"

"For...?"

"What?"

"For your trouble?"

The woman laughed gently. "No trouble, darling."

Darl- "Say that again?"

The woman pushed her hair from her eyes. "No trouble."

Helaine moved closer to see her face, but the light was still directly behind the woman and there was no other light source in the guest house. "I'm not-I-how much should I pay for you? To go, I mean?" The woman was an arm's length away, close enough to touch.

"Whatever you like."

Helaine withdrew all the cash from her billfold and offered it to her. "Go. Please."

The woman put her hand to her breast. "Slip it in here...please."

There? Helaine could see that. She exhaled. "And then you'll go?"

"Yes."

Helaine rolled up the bills and hesitated. She shouldn't touch this woman. She shouldn't let their skin meet. She shouldn't even be standing in the same room with her. The money was poised in her hand. She shouldn't be negotiating anything in the dark with this woman who reminded her of someone she missed. She inched closer. "Let me see your face."

The woman lightly clucked her tongue. "Why?"

"What is your name?"

The woman sighed provocatively. "It matters?"

Helaine fell silent. This was Robert's fault, weak knees and that she was wondering where Lydia Beaumont actually was this moment and why they were not together and how similar their separation was to her last dissatisfying relationship, the one biting her ass now like a rabid dog, keeping them apart for too long, so that a woman like this one, someone masked in Lydia's likeness—

"Does it?" the woman repeated.

Does it matter? That they look the same? Sound the same? Helaine felt herself leaning forward.

"Hmmm?"

She should not ask or answer anymore questions. She should not get any closer to that mouth or those breasts. She should not entertain anymore conversation. She should go and find a light bulb, leave the money by the door. She should unpack her bags. And take a shower. And go to bed. She was tired. She should sleep. Sleep instead of standing there like a dope, face to face with this woman, the money dropping from her fingertips.

The woman bent slightly toward her. The money disappeared between her breasts. Behind her Helaine saw the discarded dress lying in the middle of the floor. She brought her face close to the woman's cheek. Even the perfumed hair smelled familiar.

Her hand was on her hand. Her lips were near her lips. "Darling," she whispered, as they dropped to the floor.

"Ah...you're a very difficult customer, Dr. Kristenson. You had me worried. Should I stay or should I go?"

Helaine kissed her and she opened her legs.

"That was very risky behavior, Ms. Beaumont."

"Risqué. You're shaking."

"Pleased with yourself?"

"Very. Make love to me-quickly."

"Let me breathe a minute first or it won't be love you'll be getting."

Lydia turned her face into Helaine's neck. "What would it be instead?"

"Something akin to it-did I pay you enough for your trouble?"

Lydia bent her legs and held her tight between them. "Akin to love? Am I in trouble here, I hope?"

"Indeed, you might be. Have I paid my lovely courtesan enough for her trouble?"

Lydia held her closer. "Yes-trouble me."

Helaine was awake by nine with a note on her pillow. Her courtesan was taking a morning swim. She threw on a pair of khakis, a turtleneck and loafers, grabbed a heavy bathrobe and waited for Lydia on the deck with Kay and Robert.

"You told her to jump in the lake? I hope she knows that's only a pond."

"Robert, that was terrifying last night, I'll have you know."

"Coward."

"You figured it out by morning, I hope," Kay asked, suddenly alarmed by the other possibilities.

"I figured it out soon enough." She held her hand to shield her eyes and watched the woman on the water. "Do you think she makes a habit of this?"

"Prostitution?" Robert asked.

"NO. Grueling exercise?"

"Same difference. I'm making steak and eggs. That'll get her hormone levels back up for tonight." He left them smiling.

"What kind of lover is she, Helaine? I'm just being nosy, I know."

How is Lydia in the sack? "It would be rude of me to answer that. What do you think?"

Kay looked thoughtfully at the water. "Straight, right?"

Helaine laughed. "Not anymore she's not."

"Well, but before she was. So I'm going to say careful. How's that description?"

How's careful? Lydia was heading back to them, slicing through the water and leaving a glittering wake behind her. It was a crisp morning on the mountain and the water was as bright blue as the sky, as blue as the eyes of the woman swimming in it. Helaine wished the weekend would last forever. She needed more time with her new lover, more than just the few moments they had been together. They needed a month in bed.

How was she in bed? Routine question. Helaine stared out into the water. Shy Lydia Beaumont. Thankfully not anywhere near as shy in bed, although somewhat cautious on top. Helaine smiled at the thought of it, forgetting Kay for the moment.

It was clear Lydia was in love with her. She could hear it in her breathing, in the soft whispers and sighs. She could taste it in her mouth, on her tongue. It was always on her lips, when they talked, when they kissed. Always in her eyes. Deep sexual love.

"Where did you get a body like this?" Lydia murmured last night.

"Hah...you like my dimensions?"

"You are a goddess."

"Mmmmm...thank you. Which one?"

"All of them. All of them."

That voice.

"Come for me, Helaine."

The long forgotten orgasm. Love in her bed once more. Getting lucky with Lydia. She came for her.

"More. One more time for me."

Coming in soft focus. Helaine watched Lydia swim, her steady even strokes hitting the water and propelling her back to the shore. Her back, her arms, her legs, every motion executed with an eye toward perfection. Out there was the woman who sucked at her nipples this morning like they were sweet hard candies, who played with her body like it was fine finger food and then held her as she slept. She was a careful woman, parting the water carefully with her hands, everything under control, perfectly disciplined. But there was more and Helaine wanted it all. She held her breath; Lydia swam.

"Share, Helaine. You should see your face right now!"

They needed more time together. Hiding and being hunted like a dog was hardly conducive to a developing romance. She thought about Sharon Chambers then and rued the day she had met her. "Careful is appropriate," she finally answered. "That's a very good word."

"Must be nice," Kay said in return. "Especially after—" she put her hand over her mouth and stopped herself from saying it.

Lydia was almost to the pond's edge. Helaine held up her robe. "How's the water?"

"Absolutely perfect!"

"I need to—can you do it like this?" Lydia straddled her on the chair and thrust her hips forward, pushing Helaine inside her and emitting a small gasp.

"I can try," Helaine said, readjusting herself. "Need to what, darling?"

Lydia pumped her hips and sighed. "To talk," she said and fell silent for awhile, her head resting against Helaine's, her body shuddering. "There," she whispered urgently, "There."

"I have it?"

"Mmmm..."

Helaine felt her tighten. "About?"

Lydia moaned and grasped the back of the chair.

Helaine shifted her weight. "You're doing all the work, I fear."

"Mmmm."

"Is this all right?"

Lydia sighed. "You're a miracle. But...then...you probably know that."

Helaine pulled her closer and let her finish. She could feel her fingers pressing into the flesh of her shoulders, hear the sound of an orgasm hidden amongst the short gasps. When she was done she lifted her head up and Helaine held her in her arms, her mouth at her breasts. "Tell me."

Lydia leaned into the moist mouth and pulled away again. "I don't think I can do this."

"This?"

"Uh, no, Helaine. Not this."

"Hide, you're saying?"

"I can't be with you and then without. When will I see you again?"

Helaine quietly ran her hands down the strong thighs. The complaint was overdue.

"I spoke to my mother this week. About you, Helaine."

"Oh?" Inevitable. "And she thinks I've led you astray?"

Lydia scoffed behind her. "She would really like to meet the woman who seduced her daughter."

"That's all she said? You told her everything?"

"Most of it."

Helaine frowned. It was unlikely to impress Mrs. Beaumont, considering what she had learned about the woman. She could suddenly see herself in a different light. Quite an unflattering one. "What else did she say, Lydia?"

Lydia sat up and put her hands through the blond hair, her mouth against a concerned brow. "She has her opinions. She's entitled to them, I'd say."

"What do you think? Is Marilyn right?"

Lydia sighed. "You look quite smart in that black turtleneck, Dr. Kristenson. Like a spy. Makes me weak for some reason. How would a therapist interpret that?"

Helaine smiled. "I love you. You believe me?"

"I do."

"She said what that makes you wonder? Do you want to discuss it?"

Lydia toyed thoughtfully with the turtleneck. Rolled it up. Rolled it down. "Will you go back to your super-model, Helaine? Is that ultimately how a situation like this gets resolved?"

"Lydia? You have to believe me. The more I'm with you-"

"Tell me when I'll see you again. Tell me what we're doing. That's what I need to know. I need to know when I can freely see you. When will that be, Helaine? When can I ask you how your day went, meet you for dinner, that kind of boring stuff?"

"Boring?"

"Boring, I suppose, compared to the charismatic Sharon Chambers."

"Lydia. Which do you want me to answer? You ought to know you're fabulous in bed. I've never been happier." She held her by the arms. "How was your week? When do you want to have dinner? Nothing about those things could bore me. Tell me now how your week went, Lydia. Tell me that this was the best part of it." She could hear the panic in her voice and fell silent.

"I have no intention of being the other woman, Dr. Kristenson. Is that what I am here?"

"Oh, Lvdia."

"Okay. But do we know what we're doing, Helaine? It wasn't easy for me to—I hate to see myself hiding like this. It makes me doubt myself. And I hate to make mistakes. I don't think you know that about me, but it's relevant. I don't want this to be a mistake I can't live with."

"Is it?"

"No. Not yet."

Helaine studied her face. "What do you want out of this?"

Lydia laughed acidly. "Out of this? You need me to say it?"

"I do."

"I want Sharon-fucking-Chambers out of this. Right now."

"I thought she was, Lydia, or I wouldn't-is this why you're leaving so soon?"

Lydia left her lap and started dressing. "I promised Mom I'd make Sunday brunch today," she said hastily buttoning herself. "She's on my way home." She threw her bag on the bed, tossed her clothes into it, and tried to force the catch. "You don't have to worry about my mother. I can't remember the last time she had an influence on me."

(Yah.) Helaine stood in the doorway and smiled bleakly. The Beaumont women having a little get together. There was something frightening in the prospect. "Let me help," she said, without commenting. She closed the bag and set it on the floor.

Lydia stood beside her luggage, her jaw suddenly hard.

Helaine leaned into her, weightless. "You can if you want, Lydia-throw me down. I don't mind. Just don't leave me unsure."

"Throw you...?" Lydia brought her hands to her forehead and dropped them to her sides again, turning her face away. "I just love you, Helaine. Come. It's all right. Walk me to the car. I have to say goodbye to Robert and Kay."

Neither one made a move.

"Lydia...Robert is very competent, I can assure you. He'll take care of this as quickly as possible. Tell her that for me, Lydia. Look at me."

Lydia turned to face her.

"Things aren't always as they appear. Tell your mother that, too."

"Okay. I will. And you tell me, when will I see you again?" She slid her arm around Helaine's waist, unzipped her pants and slipped her hand inside them. "Ah...you like me. When?"

Helaine took a deep breath and shut her eyes. She was falling. Lydia prevented her from lying down.

"I don't know," Helaine murmured.

"Say soon then."

Helaine leaned against her. "Soon."

Lydia zipped her up and grabbed the suitcase.

"Slow," Lydia said, as she was pulling out of the Keagans' driveway.

"What?" Helaine asked.

"My week. You asked how it went."

Helaine nodded and waved.

"This was the best part of it," Lydia called. She honked the horn just before her descent and Helaine crossed her arms and smiled, content for the moment.

Back in the guest house Lydia had left another note on the pillow. This time it was stuffed with money. Helaine's.

"Thought you might be needing this. She sounds rather expensive. Love you, L."

"It's called a general denial, Helaine. Standard procedure. Trust me."

"It's called a lie, Robert. I won't sign it."

"Look. Have you ever supported the woman? Do you think you owe her half your life's earnings? It's the substance of the complaint that we're denying. It's not a lie."

"Not a lie? This I-know-thee-not isn't a lie? We lived together, Robert. We were lovers. She was my only lover, even after I moved out. No, I didn't support her—she's lying—but essentially I did provide for her. I asked her to take the lease over, she refused, probably with this in mind, who knows? But the fact is that I didn't force the issue on her and the lease remained in my name. I paid the rent. My mistake. I admit it. I had no idea that she had those other properties and I firmly believed the waterfront was her only home. Where does our answer say any of those things?"

Kay listened quietly. They say that a lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client. She wondered what they might say of one who represents an old friend.

Robert paced. "Helaine, this Jane Doe allegation, that you cheated on Sharon. You're going to qualify that, too? I mean, we're going to go into explanations here?"

"No, that's a lie, an excuse to suck Lydia into it. We deny that, of course. But this answer here will prevent me from sleeping at night and I don't believe it will serve me well in the long run."

"You're sleeping well now?"

"A lot better than I expected to. Besides, that's not that point. What will Lydia think if I deny something she already knows is true? And how could I defend it later when Sharon proves it?"

"So you admit that a relationship such as the one the plaintiff describes existed and that you provided for her domestic needs to a limited extent?"

"I will be satisfied with that, Robert, and deny the rest."

"Dr. Kristenson, you're giving them half their case!"

"If they have a case, it's my fault. I'm not going to lie about it. Personally, I don't agree with you. I did not support her as she claims and she manipulated me about the flat—and other things, as well, but they're not worth going into."

"But they will go into it if we have to go to trial. It's likely to happen even before then. You've heard of oral depositions?"

Helaine's voice softened. "Robert, I'm not trying to be difficult, a client from hell or whatever you call them. For the past year, maybe longer than that, Sharon has threatened to ruin me if I leave her. I left her. If she can ruin me now by exploiting our relationship, so be it, but I will not ruin myself by denying one existed. That is plainly the trap that has been set here."

"You're right."

She had braced herself for more argument. "What?"

"He said you're right."

Helaine relaxed into her chair.

"We'll modify it and you'll sign it and Sharon will have her day in court."

"I don't want to fight her. I want to settle this. When can we begin to do that, Robert?"

"We'll send them our answer and take it from there. After that we'll drown them in discovery demands until they say uncle. They'll settle, Helaine. She has no case and they know it."

She had no case and they knew it. Willard Hathaway was not pleased when he got the defendant's reply. Yes, Dr. Kristenson had an "on-again-off-again" relationship with Sharon Chambers. Who hadn't? Yes, she

had even allowed the model to stay at her waterfront flat whenever she was in town, which was, as a matter of record, very infrequently. The rest was a denial with no specific reference to Jane Doe.

It was important to bolster the plaintiff's position somehow because at this rate there was no impetus for the defendant to compromise and she obviously wasn't worrying about the affects of a public disclosure of her private acts as it was apparently not a big secret that the well-known sex therapist was bisexual. The general public's reaction to that information would be too unpredictable, Hathaway reasoned. She was, after all, not the head of state or some other high ranking public official where it might matter. She was not married and never had been, not running for public office, not a member of the clergy. The firm had made a bundle on those kinds of guys, on low crimes, indiscretions and misdemeanors. And lies, lies, lies.

Everybody lies a little in these disputes and in the end it's the lie they buy that really counts and while he couldn't be sure what the actual truth was in this case, it was still Sharon Chambers' version that Willard Hathaway gave the most credence to. After all, she may have had a reputation as a bad girl, but it didn't include lying. That she was clearly obsessed with Helaine Kristenson and that the doctor admitted having had a relationship with her, supported his hunch. Moreover, that relationship had spanned nearly a decade. An awful long time for someone like Sharon Chambers. Awful long tryst for Dr. Kristenson, as she more or less seemed to be swearing to in her papers. He scowled at her signature on the bottom of the page. She was not lying perhaps, but she was certainly not telling the whole truth.

Still, palimony, though it held out the largest award, was a blatantly dubious claim no matter what their relationship had been. He hadn't gone in too far with Sharon Chambers about that. Wouldn't get that complicated he had hoped. In any event, Hathaway seriously doubted that the super-model was interested in the doctor's money although her ulterior motivations didn't concern him as long as they didn't interfere with the settlement, if he could get one, which he was not so sure about today.

He slid the defendant's papers across the table without speaking and his eagles perused its meager contents.

Despite his convictions and his fighting stance, Hathaway had no intention of taking this flimsy issue to trial. He wanted a settlement and he needed to act fast in order to get one because he knew by experience that Keagan intended to bury him alive in paperwork and to make him work like a dog. Willard Hathaway possessed a different kind of ambition than that. He liked the easy money the best. He glared at the photos the plaintiff had sent.

Jane Doe. He believed Sharon Chambers about her, too, and even if the suit against the woman was baseless, he was fairly certain Dr. Kristenson would rather she remain anonymous. It would be devastating to their budding romance if she was joined in the matter. Ms. Deep Pockets. He wondered what her stake in the matter really was. How guarded was she about *her* privacy? Boy-oh-boy, didn't she look familiar? Where the hell had he seen that face before?

"Any luck with Miss Universe here?" he asked, displaying one of the photos.

The table grumbled and sputtered in a succession of no's and excuses.

"Well, she obviously exists," he interrupted, pounding the table with his fist for silence. "Find her or you'll all be flipping burgers by the end of the month."

Not worried about the effects of a public disclosure of her private acts? Wrong!

[&]quot;Robert?"

[&]quot;I know, Helaine. I read the papers."

[&]quot;How did this happen? I can't even work without hearing about it!"

[&]quot;It's public record, Helaine."

[&]quot;But who cares? It can't be important enough to be on the goddamned front pages!"

[&]quot;Above the fold no less. You rank."

[&]quot;Robert, you knew this would happen?"

^{&#}x27;I hoped for the best, Helaine. They go through the records looking for people like you. It was only quiet while they waited for your answer. I think you'll have to get used to it."

[&]quot;And my goddamned picture, too-with Sharon's! Robert, I have to live here. I work here. How am I going to live with this everyday? There are reporters waiting outside my office building right now. I passed

them this morning. They were still there at lunch hour. All day, Robert. And I've got clients coming in who can't concentrate on their own problems. They sit and stare at me. I just went for a walk—wisecracks, comeons, indecent proposals. Reporters! And this—quoting my papers out of context. And this here. I didn't even say that. And Jane Doe this, Jane Doe that and what I'm worth, like I'm on the auction block or something. I can't be worth that anyway and where are they getting this stuff from?"

"Well, you are worth that and now you're public property for a while."

"What does that mean? You can't stop this? There's a camera crew out front. They're trying to shoot tits and ass. My tits and ass for godsakes!"

"No, Helaine, not this I can't. So be very careful now. You know?"

And that was only Monday. Think how she felt by Friday.

"Robert?"

"You're handling yourself beautifully, Helaine. Just as I expected."

She started to cry.

"Helaine, are you at work? Helaine? Speak to me."

"Robert, what is their problem? Why are they harassing me?"

"You're the expert, you need me to tell you? Are you at the office?"

"Yes," she sobbed. "Tell me what's going on here."

"These people have no lives. They're the little gnomes who never got picked for the team, the goofs nobody wanted to go to the prom with, the dorks that didn't lose their virginity until they were thirty years old, if at all. Losers getting their revenge by dragging the 'most popular' and the 'most likely to succeed' through the mud."

"Look at this guy editorializing here," she sniffed. "In today's Herald. Look what he says, that pig! He's a client of mine–I saved his fucking marriage!"

"Cancel your appointments for next week. Do you have sunglasses you can wear right now? I want you to put them on and smile as you leave. We don't want the bad guys thinking they're getting to you."

She was weeping uncontrollably.

"Helaine...put Jenny on. Please, Helaine. Do as I say."

There was a moment of relative silence, then, "Mr. Keagan?"

"Jenny, are there any more appointments this afternoon?"

"None. I've tried to send her home but she says she won't have her schedule disrupted like this."

"Well, it is disrupted, isn't it? Get her a pair of cheap sunglasses and cancel next week's appointments."

He heard her discussing it with Helaine. "Okay, Mr. Keagan. She's agreed to that."

"Tell her to meet me out front in a half an hour with the glasses on and one of her fabulous smiles. I'll make a brief upbeat statement to the press and then I'll drive her home."

And that was just Helaine's reaction. Think how Lydia felt observing the fracas all week from her fifteenth-story perch amongst the storm clouds. Even she had seen the tabloids.

Friday at three. She stood across the street from Helaine's building watching Robert Keagan handle an impromptu press conference with Helaine standing like a stone pillar beside him, her eyes hidden behind dark shades, her smile taut. Lydia knew what was behind the glasses. It did not portend well.

"What do they call you, other than Helaine, other than doctor?" she had asked her in bed the last time they were together.

"I used to be called Lana when my parents were alive. No one's called me that in years."

"Lana," Lydia had whispered back to her as they made love. It suit the blond better than the vulgar title of LOVE DOC splashed across the headlines all this week. She hadn't mentioned that nickname, nor the book she had authored that had started it all.

A sex therapist. Well, that explained the stunning lovemaking. That information had caught Lydia by surprise. How little she knew about the woman she was sleeping with. Her own fault for not asking, for not wanting to know anything that might have dissuaded her. Maybe Del was right. Maybe she was from another planet. Look at this: two larger than life women and she hadn't recognized either one of them. And there were going to be other revelations to come, she feared. But it was too late for factoring in Helaine's negatives now, she reminded herself as she crossed the street and mixed with the excited crowd. She needed her. And she needed her.

"There is no other woman," Robert Keagan declared, emphatically waving away one of the most asked questions. "Ms. Chambers is lying," he elaborated, "to herself at least."

That caused a hum.

"Dr. Kristenson, were you in love with Sharon Chambers or was it just good sex?"

Lydia saw Helaine lift her head to the sky, her lips barely moving as she spoke to Robert. He paused, shook his head and asked for the next question.

Lydia pushed forward and Robert nearly choked mid-sentence when he spotted her. He glanced furtively at Helaine to see if she had seen her yet.

She hadn't. Helaine's gaze was fixed on the building across the street, searching the upper floors. Perhaps it had been a mirage all along, the idea that she could leave Sharon, the idea that she could find love again. "Dr. Kristenson?" she heard someone call above the din. She searched the mob for the owner of the very familiar voice.

"I was wondering how your week went?" Lydia asked.

A smile came across the doctor's lips and her worried face relaxed a bit, then a barrage of bulbs went off igniting the sidewalk. She sheltered her eyes with her hand. *Click, click, click, click, click*, *click*, *clic*

"Very well," she answered wearily. "This was the worse part of it."

"Dr. Kristenson!" a reporter called out. "Dr. Kristenson, any plans to kiss and make up with your supermodel?"

Lydia bowed her head and pushed through the crowd.

"Again I will have to point out," Robert Keagan intercepted, "that that is a question based entirely on presumptions. Next?"

"Uh...Jane? It's Del. I've been trying all week. Call me when you get a-"

"Del, don't hang up!"

"Liddy! SHARON CHAMBERS? The 'Love Doc Triangle'? Holy shit. Talk about solar flares. I'm coming over."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

Willard Hathaway held the phone out from his ear. "I said we don't know yet, Ms. Chambers. "Not yet, that's all. We'll get her. Don't panic."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Willard Hathaway barked across the table. "Do you have any idea how much money we could be making here if you did?"

Nobody dared to even speculate.

"Jones, what about the bar?"

"The waiter insists that he's legally blind, dyslexic and partially deaf in one ear. He has difficulty with faces and names. Doesn't know her. Can't say he's ever seen her before."

"Johnson, what did you fall for?"

"Uh, the cabby says she suffering from perimenopausal lapses in her short-term memory and has no clue where Frank's Place even is."

"It's her goddamned cab in the photo, right? In front of Frank's?"

"Well, she says she probably passed in front of the lens by accident."

"Oh, come off it! With her door open? What kind of nonsense is this?"

Johnson threw his hands up in the air.

"Okay. Anybody else? How about just the guys? I mean, when you're out looking at women, wouldn't you naturally take notice of one who looked like this? Especially in the midtown area with all those dreary broads. Why haven't you seen this one?"

"There are no women who look like *that* in the midtown area," someone boldly volunteered. "That area's all finance. She probably doesn't work there—if she works at all."

"Probably just a coincidence," someone else authoritatively added. "A little too glamorous for finance."

Idiots, Hathaway screamed in his head. "Look, I have it from a reliable source that the woman's been to Frank's more than once. That is in the heart of the financial district. Moreover, Dr. Kristenson's offices are in the heart of the financial district. That is most certainly how and where those two women met! She works in that area, maybe lives nearby. It doesn't matter which. She has a name and an address and we need it!"

Saturday. Jones and Johnson had split up their search of midtown. Pretty quiet on the weekend. Nothing but joggers and a few shoppers, delivery boys, service men. And, of course, the run-of-the-mill street vendors. No neighborhood could survive without them. The two met again in the afternoon, rendezvousing at a hot-dog stand.

"This is bullshit," Jones complained. "I feel like a gopher, not an attorney. "Dog," he said to the vendor. "The works, please."

"Gopher? Yeah, I could gopher her—if I could find her. I wonder how much *that* pays," Johnson said, pointing at a pizza boy passing them by with a twelve cut. He sniffed the air and groaned as he threw himself into the shaded bench on the corner by Frank's Place. "Anything going on in there?" he thought to ask.

"Nah, completely different crowd on the weekend. I'm telling you the woman is a mirage or something. And this is just bullshit."

"If I find her, I'm keeping her," Johnson said dreamily.

Jones shoved the rest of his hot-dog into his mouth and started for the crosswalk. "What? You stupid or something?"

"Stupid? C'mon, get happy, Mr. Jones. At least she's a babe."

"A babe! A mirage, I'm telling you." Jones mumbled to himself as he crossed the street.

"Finders keepers!" Johnson taunted from the bench.

Jones lifted his hand and flipped him the bird.

"Hey, where's the pizza place?" Johnson asked the hot-dog man. "I'd rather have pizza."

"No pizza," he said. "Just hot-dogs."

"Nothing."
"Let me see."

```
"Your pizza's here, Ms. Kristenson."
"I'm sorry, what?"
"Pizza boy. Jane's Pizzeria. Where's that?" he asked him.
"Crosstown," the boy muttered, pulling at his baseball cap. "Specialty."
"Jane's? As in J...A...N...E...apostrophe S...?"
"Jane's. Yep."
"Is he alone?"
"He is. Should I search him?"
"No, no. Send him up. Thanks, George."
Helaine waited for the knock and opened the door.
"Good afternoon, Dr. Kristenson. What are you doing for dinner?"
"Oh, my god, next they're going to say I have a thing for little boys."
"Only if I spend the night. Will the doorman notice, you think?"
Helaine reflected a moment. "I'll explain it somehow. Will you?"
"That is the plan, Helaine. Ooh, nice place."
"Nice ruse, Ms. Beaumont. What are you wearing underneath it?"
```

DO YOU KNOW HER? The Sunday edition. All the Sunday Editions.

Lydia Beaumont had gone for her morning jog. She was halfway to the waterfront when she spied her own smiling face under that bold caption, peering out from behind the news cage at a corner stand. She stopped dead in her tracks and took in her catastrophe.

MEET JANE DOE. Jane Doe with Dr. Kristenson. SECRET LOVE. Oh, no, she almost screamed.

"She's gonna wish she'd never been born," said a woman who was buying a copy. Lydia hid her face from her and glanced up the street and back again. Do you know her? Do you know her? Do you—?

"Gonna memorize it or buy it?" the vendor demanded.

He eyed her suspiciously, she thought. She averted her eyes. "Sorry," she replied, her voice scratchy. "Which one's the best seller?" she asked, making an attempt at humor.

"YOU KNOW HER...that one in front of you."

She bought the paper and tripped home with it, her head held low, her last available disguise.

```
"Oh, no." (Delilah)
"Oh, no." (The Keagans)
"Oh, no!" (Helaine)
"Oh, no." (Marilyn and Edward Beaumont)
"Oh, yes!" (Sharon Chambers)
```

Okay. Now she could feel Sharon Chambers on her back. Now she could feel eyes on her everywhere, even the doorman's. Now the phone rang like emergency sirens going off in her penthouse. Now she was an inmate pacing her cell. Or an escaped convict trying to outrun the hounds of hell.

"It's Robert Keagan...call me back...beep...it's your dear sweet mom...beep...Liddy, it's Del...beep...darling, I need to hear from you...call me...beep...Liddy, if you're there pick up...beep...Lydia Ann Beaumont...I can see you didn't tell me everything...Lydia...it's your mom...call me...beep...Queenie?...beep...Queenie, it's daddy...listen...you need to see Stan...right away...call him, please...beep...Robert again...listen, you need to get a hold of Stanley Kandinsky...right way, Lydia...call me...I'll be here all day...and please stay put...beep...Lydia...darling...tell me that you're all right...beep."

"I'm fine. I don't want you to worry about me."

"Lydia, I am worried. What will you do?"

"I don't know yet. I just got the paper."

"I'm acquainted with someone...someone I've met at the Keagans. I can't think of his name. Let me call Robert and ask."

"An attorney?"

"Yes."

"Robert just left me a message. I know who he is. Don't worry, Helaine. I don't have any enemies and I doubt that anyone's going to—"

"You don't need enemies, Lydia. Just people trying to get their kicks. I ought to know."

Lydia bit at her lip. "What do you want me to do? I mean ultimately. How can I make your life easier, Helaine Kristenson?"

"You already have. It's not my decision. How can I make your life easier?"

"Promise me you won't go back to her."

"It'll never happen. I promise."

"How do you feel about being linked to me like this? Are you comfortable with that?"

"I've wanted to be linked to you since the moment I first saw you But I never planned on it ruining your life. Your privacy...if they get your name? Are you comfortable with that, because they might, you know?"

They might, she knew. "Lana..."

Helaine fell silent.

"I have never met anyone like you, you should know."

"Lydia?"

"I would expect to get the girl in the end. That will make my life easier."

"You'll get the girl, Lydia Beaumont. I guarantee it."

"And keep her-they never show that part. I want to get her and keep her. Do you guarantee that, too?"

```
"Yes."
"For how long, Lana?"
"Darling...for as long as you like."
```

Did he know her? You betcha. He'd know Jane Doe anywhere.

Lydia made an appointment with Stanley Kandinsky. Tuesday, 11AM, Stan Kan.

Monday she went to work in a stripped-down version of herself, no makeup, her hair tied back. Otherwise it was business as normal.

By afternoon, having attracted no more attention than she was used to getting, she let her hair down and went to the window to apply her lipstick, taking note of the activities on the ground, the collection of reporters assembling like insects at a picnic across the street again.

For naught, she laughed to herself. Dr. Kristenson had taken a mini-vacation, using the time to reorganize her life, which, up until this week, had been stored in cardboard boxes and stacked randomly in her living room.

Books. So many books. She was out of her league with this woman. There were hundreds, if not thousands of them. Saturday the two of them had gone through a carton of Shakespeare before surrendering to their chronic distraction, after which Lydia felt obligated to confess that she was simply a barbarian who could read, but didn't. A confession that, to her relief, did not seem to concern Helaine much. "Start here," was all Helaine said about it. "Pick one." Lydia selected *The Merchant of Venice* and Helaine chuckled over it all afternoon.

Confessions. Lydia watched the hornet's nest swarming below her. They could get it out of her. That she was Lydia Beaumont. That she was Dr. Kristenson's lover. That she had learned about Sharon Chambers and had thrown caution to the wind to pursue the blond anyway. That she had indeed stolen something that Ms. Chambers says belonged to her. That she had no intention whatsoever of giving it back, no matter how emotionally distressed the plaintiff claimed to be. That she was terrified. Absolutely terrified.

"Not thinking of jumping are we, Jane Doe?"

Joe. Lydia jumped in her skin remembering too late the unlocked door. "Joe-" They struggled. She lost. He had her pinned face-forward against the window. "Joe...you're hurting me." He was excited-she could feel it where he pressed against her backside.

"Thinking of jumping, Jane?"

She tried to face him. He pushed her hard into the glass of her window. "Christ, Joe!" she blurted, looking down fifteen stories at the busy street. It felt as if she was hanging in mid-air. "Joe..." He was lifting her dress. "NO-"

"Dicking Jane..."

"Joseph!"

He put his hand around her throat and tilted her head back. "Now I'm not done talking yet, your highness. So shut up and listen."

Silence. Vertigo.

"You like?" he whispered.

She flinched, dizzy.

"Tell me, Jane Doe. Want to scream?"

She shook her head no.

He slipped his hand up her blouse. "Lydia..."

"I'll call security," she whispered.

"Bet you half a million you won't."

Half a million. She was quiet again. They were in full view of the buildings across from her. She searched the windows to see if anybody was watching. No one was. "What are you talking about?"

He laughed. "I'm talking about being hunted, my dear Jane."

"J-you're out of your mind."

"Shall I blow the whistle, Ms. Doe, like you did on me? These are as gorgeous as ever, by the way," he said, undoing the catch in the front of her bra.

"I'm not a-it's my job. Take your hands off me!"

"Then I'll just have to do my job then. Turn around," he ordered, "you're going to blow me." He grabbed her by the shoulders.

She swung her arm behind her and missed his head by inches.

"Mistake," he said, holding her once more against the window.

She could see her breath on it. "What are you trying to prove, Joe? You're bigger than me?"

"A half million-think she's worth it, Jane?"

"You're mistak-"

"Bullshit, Lydia."

She scanned the buildings again. She should have locked her door.

He read her mind. "You're slipping, your highness. See? That's what a woman can do to you."

She had no desire to go there with him.

"Jane Doe..."

It seemed unlikely she could shake him from this. "What if I am? What's it to you?"

He brought his face close to hers. "To me? Don't you know?"

She turned her head and lay her cheek against the cool glass. "Blackmail? You need money, Joe?"

He bit at her neck and pushed into her.

"Is that what you're after?" she demanded.

He laughed.

"Joe...?"

"You're never coming back to me are you, Lydia?"

She was afraid to answer that. "Do you need money? I can give you-"

"I need this."

(This?) "Never. No way."

"No? I don't see you in a no position."

"NO."

His hands were at her hips. She felt the pressure suddenly off her body. "I said no," she repeated, bringing her heel down on the tip of his shoe.

He yelled in surprise, releasing her and kneeling to the floor. The next blow was predictable, but he didn't see that one coming, either. After she kicked him he lay beside her desk, holding his groin and cursing as she dialed security and requested assistance.

"Mistake," he warned between gritted teeth, as he was being dragged from her office.

"The conversation's over, buddy," the security guard hissed. "Move it!"

Officially, it was all over for Joseph Rios. Lydia shivered with dread.

"Who?"

"A Joseph Rios. Says he works at Soloman-Schmitt."

"No kidding...and why should that impress me?" Willard Hathaway asked. "I'm satisfied with my current broker."

"Because so does Jane Doe. At least that's what he claims."

Across the street from Dr. Kristenson! "What's he look like, a kook?"

The secretary hesitated, her eyes shining. "No, he's a gorgeous piece of man, sir."

"Okay," he laughed. "Better bring him in then. I got a feeling this is going to be good." He opened the bottom drawer of his desk, hit the record button on his hidden tape. "Oh, and Marie," he added as she was leaving.

She stopped at the door. "Yes?"

"Run a background while I interview him. I want the scoop right away."

"Yes, sir."

He waited with bated breath for her to knock again. "Come," he answered.

"Joseph Rios, Mr. Hathaway." The secretary closed the door behind her.

"Mr. Rios. A pleasure to meet you," Hathaway said, standing and extending his hand across the desk.

Rio Joe limped as he crossed the room. He grasped Hathaway's hand tightly before letting go and placed himself painstakingly into the adjacent chair. "Pleasure's all mine, I can assure you," he said, without smiling.

Hathaway grinned and sat down. "What's the other guy look like?"

Joe grimaced. "This? I injured my foot at the gym. Broke it. Three toes."

"I see. That's too bad." Hathaway did a quiet assessment of the well-dressed young man with the aggressive handshake who didn't smile. Very arrogant. Though right now he wore the attitude of a defeated warrior. Hathaway looked him square in the face, but the fella refused to make eye contact. Okay. There's a story here. "So who's Jane Doe, Mr. Rios?"

A sneer came over Joseph Rios' face. Hathaway felt compelled to add cruel to his list of observations.

"Jane Doe happens to be a Lydia Beaumont, top financial strategist for Soloman-Schmitt."

Willard Hathaway whistled. "Edward Beaumont her father, would you know?"

"The same."

That's why her face had seemed so familiar! Hathaway could barely contain himself. Edward Beaumont had brought him a great deal of bad luck over the years and he'd never won a single case when the Madison-Beaumont firm was involved because of it. He had been thrilled to learn of the man's retirement last year, though he knew he was still out there, mucking about, still making appearances at the club, still chasing skirts. Mr. Teflon. A smile came over Hathaway's face. He wanted to spread this joy. He had an incredible urge to call up Beaumont right now and scream *I gotchal*! Oh, to be a fly on the wall when Edward Beaumont sees his little girl's name in the paper tomorrow.

"It's a wonderful service you've provided if this information checks out."

Rio Joe nodded. "It will. Trust me."

"You involved with her?"

"Not anymore."

"I see. Tell me something. Is she clean otherwise?"

"Spotless."

Hathaway took that information in stride. "You know her home address?"

Rio Joe took out his little black book and read it off.

"What's the address over there at Soloman-Schmitt, her floor?"

He pulled out a card and dropped it on the lawyer's desk. "Fifteenth."

"You got a photo of her? You know, wallet size?"

Rio Joe extracted a small color photo from his billfold and handed it to him.

"Beautiful. Beautiful. That's her. Listen, can I keep this? We'll get it back to you, of course. When we're done with it." He saw the young man suddenly scowl and reach over the desk to reclaim his photograph.

"No," Joe answered, slipping it quickly into his breast pocket.

Initially it didn't occur to Lydia that the noisy reporters waiting outside her office building on Tuesday morning were waiting for her. True to form, she hadn't bothered to look at a newspaper before she came to work. If she had she probably would have thought better of it.

When she heard the shouts, "there she is," she turned, assuming they must have spotted Helaine on the other side of the street. It was then, when she noticed the empty sidewalks across the way, that it dawned on her. The stark possibility. The awful likelihood. But by then it was a useless hunch.

So it happened quickly, Jane Doe's transformation into Lydia Beaumont. She stood swamped in front of her own building, perhaps only twenty feet or so from the revolving doors. Lights glared, people shouted, she was jostled on all sides. It's funny what one thinks in a situation like that. She was surprised by her first thoughts. She hoped her hair looked all right. She hoped she didn't look stupid. She hoped her mom wouldn't see her on TV. There was a kind of resignation going on in her psyche as if all along it had been prepared for this outcome. Questions flew at her like bullets and she heard them whizzing by her head and she calmly wondered if it was possible to just walk away from this, to enter her building. And then she discovered it was impossible to move in any direction with reporters surrounding her in every direction,

yelling her name to get her attention, blinding her with their lights and cameras. She glanced at the sky over their heads and said nothing.

"Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont! How long have you and Dr. Kristenson been lovers?" "Ms. Beaumont, over here please!" (click) "Thank you!" "Ms. Beaumont! How did you and the Love Doc meet?" "Ms. Beaumont!" "Ms. Beaumont! "Ms. Beaumont! Could you make a statement? Anything?"

"Are you Lydia Beaumont?" asked a wide-eyed young man who had thrust himself in front of everyone.

Lydia glanced at him. He didn't look like he belonged there. The crowd swayed into her as reporters jockeyed for a better view and she found herself standing face to face with him, watching transfixed as he fidgeted with the large envelope in his hand.

"Are you Lydia Beaumont?" he repeated.

"Are you a reporter?" she shouted back.

"No ma'am, I'm a process-"

Another volley of questions. Server, she finished in her head. He's a process server, fool.

"Are you Lydia Beau-"

"Yes," she interrupted, "Give it to me."

The reporter closest to them heard her declaration and passed it along the ranks. "It's her," they starting screaming all over again. "Ms. Beaumont!" "Ms. Beaumont! Look over here!"

The server was overwhelmed. The two of them stood bobbing in the center, him with his papers, her with her briefcase. He was, Lydia realized, an obstacle to her immediate egress.

"Give them to me," she said again.

He handed her the papers and gulped a few times, trying to remember what he was supposed to say next.

"I've been served," Lydia acknowledged. She had spied a way out toward the street, if she could just get past him.

"You been served, Lydia Beaumont."

"I've been served," she repeated, trying to push him aside. "Now, please, get out of my way!"

He took a few steps back and let her pass, actually restraining a camera man with one outstretched arm.

She gripped the envelope in one hand and her briefcase in the other and forced her way through the melee, the adrenaline pounding in her ears as she proceeded up the block toward Frank's Place, the reporters and cameras in tow, racing alongside of her, attempting to cut her off.

Her first confrontation with the press, Lydia was thinking as she walked, and at worst she was only a little numb. She needed a cab. She needed to see Stanley. Ultimately she knew she would need to retain a driver, as her father had always nagged her about doing. It was no longer ostentatious and pompous. A car and a driver would be necessary for survival now. And, she realized, even a bodyguard—she hadn't known the press could be so rough. She kept her eye on them and held them at bay, holding up her briefcase whenever they came too close.

A few blocks down, she could see Harry standing near the corner on Frank's patio. He was an especially welcome sight this morning and she nearly cried when he raised his arms and beckoned to her. She quickened her pace to lose the undesirable entourage. That, she knew, would only give her a few seconds. Harry was offering his arm to her and she slid hers through it, allowing him to lead her to a waiting cab.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. Terrified."

"Don't be, dear. Everything will be fine." He closed the car door behind her before she could thank him. "Drive!" he ordered the cabby. The car lurched with a loud squeal and then sped away, leaving the gathering mob with a cocktail of dirt and fumes.

Lydia arrived earlier than expected at the uptown office of Stanley Kandinsky. She added cell phone to her mental list of immediate necessities, though she hated their chirps and intrusions.

"May I use your phone while I wait?" she asked his secretary.

"Certainly. There you go."

Lydia checked the time. Ten o'clock already. She had missed an important meeting this morning. "Good morning, it's Lydia Beaumont. Paula Treadwell, please." She noticed she still held the legal envelope in her hand and threw it in disgust on top of her briefcase. "Paula? Oh, you did? Thank you. I don't know yet, I was hoping this afternoon...it's...you don't have to do that. Fine, but I can't let them disrupt my schedule. Yeah, I agree. At my lawyer's right now. True, but maybe he can calm it down so I can get into the building tomorrow. What? Paula...I...I can't discuss this now. I do. I suspect it was Joseph. Yes. He is? I guess that's as good a motive as any. E-mail it to my home office then. Oh, yes, I will. This afternoon. Because it's a priority. Before the board convenes. You know, I don't have it in front of me—when is that? That soon? Oh, god, what a mess. I'm trying not to. Flowers? Where? Paula, you're kidding. From where? Already? Oh, this is utter nonsense. I will, someday. I better give this line back. This afternoon. Home, I guess, till it dies down. I wish I knew. Thank you, Paula. This afternoon. Don't worry, I will."

She handed the phone back and hovered over her personal effects for another half hour.

"Ms. Beaumont, come in."

"Good morning, Mr. Kandinsky."

He shut the door and they sat. "Call me Stan. How's your dad?"

"Please, Stanley. How is he?"

Stanley laughed without blinking. "Worried. Surprised. And how are you? I heard you made a smashing debut this morning."

"Complicates things, I know. I need to get into my office. Why did they serve me at work?"

"Well, I'm sure they thought it would be more dramatic that way, the press already setting up house there and all. Cameras will be greeting you at your home, too. Count on it. Did you say anything to them?"

"Nothing. Should I have?"

"Nothing is ideal. You're a natural."

She winced. "Good teacher."

"Yes...your father is livid about this. The photo and all. We're going to have to hypnotize everyone with our own spin on it. Hush-a-bye as opposed to hush-it-up."

"Hypnotize?"

"We're going to sue the plaintiff for defamation, Lydia. In excess of what she's claiming. We are actually in a very strong pos—"

"Stanley. Ms. Chambers isn't lying."

His eyes became two dark slits. "That is irrelevant."

Paula Treadwell, age 53, is the senior vice president of Soloman-Schmitt. Lydia Beaumont is her protégé. She has groomed her for an assistantship ever since Beaumont first emerged as a promising young investment broker ten years ago. Paula believes, in fact, that Lydia Beaumont is the ideal candidate to become the first female president in the hundred-year history of this investment firm, although she doesn't expect that to happen in this decade. Still, that is her aspiration for Beaumont, despite her protégé's growing disenchantment with the world of finance and her subsequent announcement nearly two years ago that she plans to retire at forty.

VP Treadwell's concerns regarding the present controversy have nothing to do with Beaumont's exotic pursuits and mishaps, about which she really couldn't care less. Nor is she worried over what such disclosures might do to the company's image, especially considering the bombshell of financial revelations she knows is going to explode any day now at Soloman-Schmitt. All the cover-ups: of inside trading, of accounting irregularities, of mysterious overseas partnerships, of red to black overnight banking conversions that turn staggering corporate debt and expenditures into huge capital gains and profits—these are the reports that Lydia Beaumont has been issuing for quite some time and that Treadwell has been endorsing and directing to the board, with no effect, until this week.

This week, at last, the mighty Soloman-Schmitt had taken heed of these warnings, possibly too late, but it had finally begun to get its house in order, firing some of its most prominent offenders, preparing others for their perp walks, accepting resignations without pay. It would be a shakeup that could go all the way up to the chief financial officer, reach all across the board when it's done. To the uninitiated, to the red-handed, it

might all seem like the product of whistle blowing, but it wasn't. Lydia Beaumont was just doing her job, unlike others around her.

Senior Vice President Paula Treadwell fears that the woman is disgusted enough with her work that she might see the Chambers scandal as a good excuse to exit the troubled firm even sooner than she had planned. That would not be good for Senior Vice President Paula Treadwell. Treadwell is undertaking to manage a major corporate scandal and she is depending on her protégé to help her pull it off. She fully expects Beaumont to march into battle beside her and to return, as they say, with her shield or on it. Treadwell has no intention of proceeding without her, no intention of losing her top executive in a love triangle, not to Sharon Chambers with her spurious allegations, not to the esteemed Dr. Kristenson, the seductive siren responsible in the first place for leading Beaumont to the rocks. A corporate shakedown requires patience and skill, after all. And secrecy.

Paula Treadwell glared down onto the street from her top floor offices. "What's the story with that shit down there? Can I arrest those reporters for trespassing?"

"I don't see why not. They're not on the sidewalk. They're on the grounds."

She put her hand to her mouth thoughtfully and considered her options. "Confiscate their cameras—illegal surveillance. Then have security remove them, John. They come back, arrest every one of them."

"Will do."

"And get general counsel over here, right away. I want these tabloids off our ass with this Jane Doe crap. We've got enough problems brewing. Grab me general counsel before you go."

"Which one?"

"Oh, I don't know. All of them."

"Will do."

"And send a limo for Beaumont tomorrow morning. We're re-situating her on private company property. Bring me that directory, John. She's going to need a suite."

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Yeah, mum's the word on this. I want her comfortable. Stock her up with the works. Champagne, caviar, whatever. Get her women if that's what she prefers! A different one every night if that's what it takes to keep her mind off this bullshit. Send her all blonds. Blond bombs posing as bookworms. I don't care, as long as she stays away from THAT WOMAN over there," she said, pointing angrily at the building across the street. "She's a jinx. I can feel it."

John looked doubtful. "Can we do that?"

"What?"

"Blond bombs that look like bookworms? Where would I find them?"

"Oh, John...be creative."

It wasn't difficult for her to keep her mouth shut these days. Anytime she contemplated speaking, a small sob would well up in it. Even her smile had changed, softened considerably by her sadness, though it would never be quite as sublime as that woman's, the one she presently watched on her TV, whose name she now knew was Lydia Beaumont, who looked pretty tightlipped herself, having failed to utter a single response to the crowd of reporters assailing her. She did seem frightened. Sharon was glad to see her unnerved and hoped it put a serious crimp in her future plans. Lydia Beaumont wide-eyed. She didn't need to hear the woman speak to know what she was thinking.

Silence had its advantages, Sharon was learning. She had dropped out of view for awhile, spending most of the past few weeks performing community service in LA, having successfully copped a lesser plea of "contributing to the delinquency of a minor." Only twelve months—for being quiet. She spent most of her free time in hiding, designing her makeover, declining all interviews, stating "no comment" to pushy reporters.

She was planning to reinvent herself. No more flings, no more flash. She wasn't up to it anyway. The wardrobe was the best place to start, she had decided. That should be muted, toned down. Gray. Warm grays. Charcoal, as opposed to black. In natural fibers, no more synthetics, just the real thing. Classic cuts, even for

the hair. Sensible sweaters accented with a single string of pearls. Not a Doris Day motif, of course, too over the top, but respectable, like cashmere and wool are with a full-length tailored skirt.

She examined the mirror. Or should it be mid-calf? Or just a bit above the knees? But those nice, long legs. It was a shame to hide them. They were her trademark. Could she part with her mini's? She'd have to give it more thought.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know, Helaine. I'll call Stan and see if he's heard from her. I need an update anyway. It's been a week."

She had given them the slip, thus the dailies were forced to speculate and embellish as much as possible in her absence, which they found necessary to do all week.

All week they churned out raw data and vital statistics on Lydia Beaumont and when it seemed there was nothing new to add, they juxtaposed them with Dr. Kristenson's, spicing things up with the mountain of juicy tidbits they had collected over the years on Sharon Chambers.

The contest: Plaintiff Chambers asserts that Lydia Beaumont is the other woman; Defendant Kristenson asserts she is not. Oh, how the public loves a triangle! It's the shortest distance between two points.

"And how is Rapunzel doing in her tower? Comfy?"

"Paula! Good, come in. I'm halfway through these numbers."

"Good, SEC next month. Been wearing my lucky girdle all week. How's every little thing?" she asked, trying to ignore the clumsy attentions of a buxom blond performing a crude impersonation of a maid.

Lydia rolled her eyes and stared at the rug. Rip-away maids, rip-away room service, rip-away masseuses...all blond. Duh! And not one of them could make a decent martini. She choked on the one just delivered and waited for Paula's reaction.

"Ugh! What the hell is this?" Paula exclaimed.

Lydia laughed. Serves you right, she said in her head. "Paula, I need a safe outside line."

"We're working on it. I don't know what's taking so long. Use e-mail for now. Ye-god, don't drink that!"

"I need to talk to...someone. E-mail's not quite adequate, cell phone, ditto."

"Well, if you must talk to someone, talk to her," Paula teased. "And be sure to tell her this isn't drinkable while you're at it."

Lydia smiled patiently. "How's damage control progressing? When can I go outside? I'd like to go running."

"We're contacting all our assets. *The Herald, Weekly Times*, so on. Got the red lines drawn in the sand, got a secure zone around the building. Ta-dah! So it'll probably take another week or so for the dust to settle. In the meantime use that gym thing there. What's wrong with that?"

Or so? Lydia folded her arms. "I need to...I need these bimbos out of here, first of all. I can't concentrate. And it's been a week since I've-talked to my friends. The phone...I need a private outside line."

Those complaints didn't surprise VP Treadwell. "Sorry about the bimbos. We thought you might get lonesome, that's all."

Lydia shook her head. "No, not for-oh, never mind. And the phone?"

"The phone? Beaumont. Do you mind if I speak frankly here?"

"Please. That's what I rely on you for."

"Good. Then it won't surprise you that I'd prefer you stay away from Dr. Kristenson. Soloman-Schmitt needs you more now."

Soloman-Schmitt.

"Aw, sweetie, aren't you gonna drink that?" the maid interrupted.

Lydia squirmed. "I really don't think I can."

"Suit yourself. How 'bout a little wine, honey?"

Paula hid behind her hand.

"Wine's fine. Let's try that," Lydia mumbled. This was divine retribution, she was thinking, for her prank on Helaine at the guest house.

"And you?" the woman asked Paula.

"Oh, yes, and then please go when you're through. We need some privacy."

(Why hadn't I thought to say that?)

"Suit yourself," the woman replied.

They sat in silence as the maid fumbled hopelessly with the bottle.

"Leave it," Paula finally ordered. It was amusing, but only for a little while.

They waited till they heard the door close behind her and Lydia took the wine bottle and uncorked it.

"I really am sorry about that," Paula offered. "I just thought perhaps-"

"I know what you thought. It became painfully obvious."

"Well, what the fuck do I know about it? Shoot me in the head."

"It's just that I can't concentrate," Lydia said. "I don't expect you to understand and I don't want to discuss it, but I do need a private phone. Just to talk."

"Look, I don't want anything to jinx our operation here, Lydia. We've got a lot on our mind."

"You have my word that I will stay put until you tell me the coast is clear. But...I...she will be very anxious about-"

"She should have been very anxious before this, what with that tarantula on the loose!"

Lydia swirled the wine and sighed. Okay. But too late now. "Nevertheless, I'm lonesome and not for Soloman-Schmitt."

"I'm going to lose you, aren't I?"

"You might. But not before we finish."

Paula nodded and sipped her wine. "What about Vice President Beaumont? Doesn't that have a nice ring to it?"

"Can't. Don't want to."

"What do you want to do? Lie in bed all day?"

Lydia took a deep breath. "That, too."

"Well, what else then?"

"I want to sit on some of those boards. As many as possible."

Paula perked up. "Really? I can arrange that."

"We'd be in opposite corners, Vice President Treadwell. Better consider that first."

"Not necessarily. Besides, it's better than the alternative, isn't it? The other way I'll be completely deaf and blind until I find your replacement."

"IF. I've seen what's coming through the ranks, Paula. Good luck."

"Isn't there anyone out there? Another Lydia Beaumont?"

"Some, but you've got to grab them quickly and then watch them like a hawk."

"Crap, Lydia. I know you're busy right now, but get me a shopping list."

"Okay. Get me a private line."

The summer gods were packing it in for now, leaving things in the capable hands of their icy associates. The days shortened and the nights grew long again.

Seven-point-three on the Richter scale and some pretty serious aftershocks. That's what it feels like when an institution like Soloman-Schmitt catches cold and sneezes. It did have the beneficial effect of throwing The Chambers-Kristenson-Beaumont affair into the inside pages for awhile, although the press had a new excuse to assemble in front of Lydia's building, so she still couldn't show up for work there.

As a protective measure, Paula Treadwell had the entire contents of Lydia's office shipped under supervision to her VIP's ivory tower. She delayed as long as possible in furnishing her with a private line until the relentless e-mail requests for the same threatened to distract her from her own business, which these days

consisted of a lot of hand-holding and arm-twisting and endlessly sincere public announcements about the promising health of her company. If she didn't watch out she could find herself president of it one day.

"Okay, Beaumont, you've got your private line."

"Prove it."

"How can I do that?"

"Tell me something you wouldn't want anyone else to hear."

"You know you got to start trusting people again. It's not-"

"Spare me, Paula. Go on."

"I cheated on my husband the other night. With the cable man."

"Oh my gosh...thanks."

"I'm under so much pressure and the guy was so sweet. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Okay, it's all right. Thank you, Paula. Thanks."

"You think I should tell Dickie?"

"Paula...no. I don't think you should share this with Dickie."

"What do you think I should do?"

"I...I think you should reflect on it in silence and hang up so I can use my phone. Are you coming by this week?"

"Yes, but I don't know when yet. You're such a prude, you know. I'm still blown away that you're Jane Doe."

"Uh, me too. A prude? Why?"

"Because other than that thing way back in the Paleolithic era, you know with your Mr. Rios, I didn't know you thought about sex."

"Paula...I need to use the phone."

"Right. I'll see you at the end of the week then."

Paleolithic Joe. Delilah had e-mailed Lydia the latest articles and it didn't look good for him. Arraignment on ten counts of securities fraud, him and his gang of fourteen. That was just the beginning, she knew, the tip of only one iceberg in a great big ocean filled with them.

"You want me to hang that up for you, honey?"

Lydia clutched the phone possessively and shook her head. She had forgotten to mention to Paula that blonds were still littering her landscape. Outside the window, she swore she saw snowflakes fluttering by. She had missed the end of a spectacular Indian summer, a particularly long one this year. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Two thirty."

"Thank you." She waited for the maid to leave the room and dialed Helaine at her office.

"She's with a patient right now. Can I take your name and number?"

"Oh...um...tell her, please, that Jane called." She gave the secretary the number. "It's a private number."

"I understand, Ms. Beaumont. I'll let her know as soon as she's out of session."

Lydia coughed, exposed so easily. "Thank you. You have a nice day." She hung up and dialed Delilah at the bank, bypassing her secretary.

"Globe International, Del Lewiston. How may I help you?"

"Del, it's me."

"Hey! Commandant Treadwell let you off the leash?"

"Nah, but I finally got a private line. How's things over your way?"

"I feel the earth move under my feet—not too bad really. Everybody sugaring me. Haven't got time for any Soloman-Schmitt type mavericks in my house. You hear Arthur-Doolittle's going belly-up? Just a matter of time."

"A long time coming. How's it look at the penthouse? I wanna go home."

"Paula's good, but not that good, I'm afraid. Still some stragglers."

"Christ. I need my life back, Del."

"Whowee though, you sure sound exciting these days. All this time I thought you were just this mild mannered financier. Mmm, mmm, Lydia Beaumont, what they say about you. And I'll bet you haven't got laid in weeks because of it, have you?"

"Sit tight. Things will quiet down soon, now that they've got this stuff to gnaw at. Treadwell taking good care of you?"

```
Lydia listened as she read it off. "That's mine. Call me. I hate e-mail." After that she loitered near the
phone for another half hour before going back to work. Another hour flew by and the maid knocked at the
door of the makeshift office.
   "Telephone. Wouldn't tell me her name, though."
   (Of course not.) "Thanks. This is confidential, please."
   The woman made herself scarce.
   "Good afternoon?"
   "Darling...who's that?"
   "Helaine! Um...the maid. I mean room service. I miss you."
   "Maid? Where are you? I've been sick to death worrying that you flew the coop on me."
   "Soloman-Schmitt's holding me ransom."
   "How much are they asking? I'll pay anything."
   "I need to see you, Lana."
   "I need you. When?"
   "Tonight?"
   "Where are you?"
   Lydia gave her the address.
   "Will they stop me at the desk? What do I say?"
   "Just wear your hair down and duck your head. I don't think anybody will stop you."
   "Okay...? And what else should I wear?"
```

"Yeah. Bar no expense, if you get what I'm driving at. It's embarrassing." "Hah! She's a piece of work that one. Send my regards. This your number I'm seeing here?"

"Ain't I something?"

"Lana...surprise me."

Stanley Kandinsky representing Defendant Beaumont? Oh, shit! He had never prevailed in a single case where that man was involved. The stars were simply aligned against Attorney Willard Hathaway.

Racketeers, reconnoiters, raconteurs. Rrmm. VP Treadwell fumed as she rode up the elevator, exiting five minutes later with her own little storm cloud in tow as she stomped gloomily down the hallway. It was a bad day. She rapped impatiently on Lydia's door with a set of white knuckles and waited a few seconds. No answer. She turned the handle. It was unlocked. She let herself in without announcement.

Once inside, she immediately discovered a trail of women's clothes leading from the couch to the bedroom and the excited cries emanating from that direction told her all she needed to know for the moment. She cursed inaudibly and fell into a chair to await the finale, reminding herself to speak to John again about putting an end to the dumb blond parade at the Beaumont pleasure palace.

She put her face in a newspaper for awhile, squinting in the dim light, kicking at the briefcase with her toe as she read. Nothing but bad news everywhere.

Bullshit, bullshit. And same with this Jane Doe Beaumont. And what a time for all of this. You could stand in the middle of town and feel the goddamned ground shaking. And now Rios and his cabal, making the whole firm look like a bunch of cowboys. Renegades running amok in the temple of Soloman-Schmitt. Ten securities violations. Felonies. Fraud. She had enough ass to kick without assisting a grand jury to kick his. They could indict him on the papers alone. The whole bunch of insiders and their Fortune Five Hundred members only clubs. Served them right! The good old boys stepping over the line, lining their pockets with the investors funds. Shit. She didn't want any on her.

Treadwell paused and listened to the private party going on in the bedroom. She was pretty sure that was Beaumont calling the cows home. Atta girl! Plain old fucking. Why couldn't people be content with that? No, a good roll in the sack's too old fashioned. Fucking till you can't walk, that's old. Till you're in love with the whole world, old. Smiling at it like you just dropped acid or something. No, just not thrilling enough today.

Gotta steal, gotta cheat, gotta lie. Got to fuck people over, because just plain fucking ain't good enough. And look at this asshole Sharon Chambers. What in the hell are you smiling about, you fucking menace? I'll bet you don't even like sex, you big phony. Trying to mess with my top girl. My right-hand woman. My goddamned top executive. Bullshit, bullshit!

She threw her glasses into her purse, rolled the newspaper into a ball and punted it. This was serious. She didn't have all night to sit there. She stood up glanced at her watch and went back to the bedroom, cracking the bedroom door to check on the progress there. A blond on top. Fine, we'll give that one a beeper, Treadwell said to herself, and terminate the rest. Look at all that hair. A regular living doll.

"There...yes...there," she heard Lydia coax between breaths.

Paula couldn't make out the blond's response.

"Yes...yes...yes..." Lydia moaned.

Goodness, Paula muttered, with no fear she would be overheard. She closed the door again. Plays as hard as she works—who the hell would have guessed it? She left the doorway and went back to the chair, waiting with growing irritation for another fifteen minutes before approaching the bedroom one last time.

"Okay honey," she finally said, unceremoniously slapping the blond's behind as she spoke, "you're doing Soloman-Schmitt proud, let me tell you. Now go, wash up and make us some martinis."

"Paula!" Lydia gasped. "Paula," she gulped incredulously.

The blond buried her face in Lydia's neck. Paula heard her whisper, "Are you all right?"

Lydia pulled the sheets over the woman and tried to sit up, but failed. "Paula! What are you doing-?"

"Beaumont! Go on, blondie, she's fine. Something's up, Beaumont. Get dressed." She threw a towel and a bathrobe at them and the ladies climbed out of the bed without another word, the blond heading for the bathroom, concealing herself in the robe, her face hidden by her hair.

Lydia threw the towel to the floor and marched naked into the living room, VP Treadwell in pursuit. "Paula, for Chrissake! You interrupted my—what is it? Why are you here?"

"Wow, look at those abs. You're fit as a fiddle, Beaumont."

Lydia swore under her breath. "You're standing on my clothes, Treadwell. Those are my things you're on. Here...pass me that sweater, please. Thanks. And those, too. No, no, just the pants. Sit, please. Sit. Thank you." She cast a look toward the bedroom and then back to Paula. "Now what's wrong," she muttered as she dressed. "I thought you weren't coming until the end of the week?"

"Yeah, I see you thought that. And I thought you didn't care for bimbos?"

"Paula's, she's not-"

"Yeah, yeah, Yeah, Look at this. A subpoena. Oh, here's Goldilocks now," she said, addressing the woman without looking at her. "Honey, you know how to make a martini?"

"Paula," Lydia started to protest.

"Indeed I do. How would you like them? Dry? Or wet?"

Lydia looked askance and took the papers from Paula.

"Dry, if you can manage it. I got that this afternoon, Beaumont! In front of the grand jury no less. Are we ready for this? A fucking subpoena. CRAP."

"I...I'll make those," Lydia called over her shoulder. "Don't do that. Please."

Paula reached out and fanned the documents with her hand. "You hear that? That's the sound shit makes hitting a fan! This is what it looks like in black and white. You got the numbers yet on those accounts, the one your boyfriend fudged?"

"Okay, Paula. Okay. Please. Sit down. Listen to me. One, you're embarrassing me right now and I'm more than a little overwhelmed by your being here. Two, as you know, he is not my boyfriend. Not anymore."

"Here you go, ladies. Two dry martinis. Will that be all?"

Lydia stared at the rug and threw the papers onto the coffee table.

"Thanks, hon," Paula cooed. "Now, if you don't mind. We really need some privacy here. Ex-boyfriend, I meant, of course. What a rat!"

Lydia was silent.

"I'm going to have a breakdown without you, Beaumont. I've checked out your list. There's no one like you and you know it."

The blond retrieved her clothes from the floor and headed for the bedroom. Lydia followed her movements with her eyes.

"Pay attention, Beaumont."

"Paula. You're in rare form tonight. Don't worry about your testimony. I'm three quarters done with the numbers."

"Perfect martini. She's a keeper. I need your final report."

"Final?" Lydia looked anxiously toward the bedroom. "Oh, right, final. I was thinking of something else."

"What, I wonder?"

"Paula...everything is going to come out fine. You need to go home now and get some rest. I understand where we're at and I won't let you down."

Paula saw the blond emerging once again from the bedroom, this time fully dressed. She kept one eye on her as she spoke to Lydia. "I don't mind prepared statements, but sworn testimony? There ought to be a law against it, the end." There was something unusual about that woman. For one she looked a little too upright to be from any of the agencies the corporation depended on. Two, she looked vaguely familiar, though the light could be playing tricks on old eyes. Treadwell felt for her glasses but they were no longer strung around her neck. "You like that one, Beaumont? Don't answer, I know you do. Hey, leave your card before you go, honey, so we can get in touch with you. You know what I mean. You're the first one she's had any interest in."

"Paula-"

"Oh, good. I can't tell you how relieved I am to hear that, Ms. Treadwell. How's your martini?"

Was that a mocking tone in her voice? "Perfect," Treadwell replied as she peered with an impending sense of doom at the blond approaching her. Doom? What an inexplicable feeling, Paula thought, reaching out to take the card the blond was offering. Completely inexplicable. Where the hell were her glasses?

Lydia took a huge, uncomfortable breath and threw her head back on the sofa. (I am a barbarian, Paula is definitely the head barbarian, Soloman-Schmitt, a tribe of barbarians, high-paid, overpaid corporate barbarians on the loose. Anybody can plainly see that.)

She could see Helaine was pissed. To laugh? To cry? Lydia couldn't decide. Adding to her misery, there was a congestion building in her womb, the product of what Del called "coitus interruptus." That's what she was experiencing big time. That and an anxiety attack about the possibility that Helaine might be leaving, which she couldn't blame her for doing. She avoided eye contact with her, and instead searched the ceiling for an escape hatch.

"Beaumont, I don't have my glasses. What's the card say?"

"Oh, Paula," Lydia replied woefully, her eyes glued to the ceiling, "I'm sure it says something like Dr. Helaine Kristenson, Psychother—"

"OH, SHIT."

```
"Beaumont, you gave me your word!"
```

Lydia reddened.

[&]quot;I promised to stay put. I'm put."

[&]quot;Oh, you stinker, you did, didn't you? Dr. Kristenson, I wasn't aware you made house calls."

[&]quot;I don't."

[&]quot;Then what the hell are you doing here?"

[&]quot;I was trying to spend a quiet evening with my-"

[&]quot;Quiet? You call that racket you were making quiet?"

Helaine smiled. "I was quiet."

[&]quot;Tell me, do you charge extra for this kind of service?"

[&]quot;Paula-" Lydia began.

[&]quot;No, Ms. Treadwell. It's on the house. Anything for Soloman-Schmitt."

[&]quot;Helaine!"

[&]quot;Yeah? Well I'm glad to hear that. Soloman-Schmitt would like you to go now."

Helaine glanced to Lydia. "Are you in further need of my services, Beaumont? Or am I dismissed?"

"Helaine, please-"

"Dr. Kristenson! Don't you read the papers?"

"Sometimes."

"Good, because sometimes you're in them. You and that woman. And now my top girl, here."

"You forgot to mention Soloman-Schmitt. Isn't that my fault, too?"

"Are you leaving yet?"

"She is not leaving, Paula. Please don't go, Helaine."

Helaine sat.

"Beaumont...you're in over your head. The end."

Lydia nodded. "We all are, I think."

"Did you tell her about the cable man? That was just between you and me."

"Paula Treadwell, trust me. Your name wasn't even mentioned."

Paula downed her martini. "I find that difficult to believe."

"You would," Lydia replied.

"Helaine, I don't want to burst your bubble or anything, but I happen to have it from a reliable source that you spent the night at Soloman-Schmitt's happy land of ill repute and other corporate pastimes. Care to share your secret strategy for winning this lawsuit? Because, being just a humble attorney, it isn't at all obvious to me."

"You're following me?"

"It's called following when the bad guys do it. It's called keeping an eye on you when we do it. How's she holding up?"

"I want her out of there. Can you talk to Stan about it?"

"I'm making tea," Kay interrupted. "Any takers?"

"Tea, please. And what can he do, Helaine?"

"She needs to go home, Robert. They're...they're...absolute Huns. Including Paula Treadwell, their so called white knight."

"You met her?"

"I did."

"Did you joust with the woman?"

"You could say that."

"Who won?"

"It's a draw for now. Robert. She's sending Lydia call-girls posing as room service. Dumb blonds!"

"Spare no luxury, huh? She must really be depending on Ms. Beaumont."

Kay joined them at the table. "Corruptio optimi pessima. It's the corporate culture, Helaine. Lydia's used to it by now. I wouldn't worry."

"You call that culture?"

"No, they do," Robert said. "Kay's right, don't worry. Everybody will go home when things are settled. I'm sure Stan doesn't mind that Treadwell's providing his client with a secure location in the meantime. He's counter claiming you know?"

"For what?" Helaine asked.

"Defamation, slander, the like."

"What?" Helaine was shocked. Her eyes glistened. "Lydia's claiming that she's defamed because Sharon says she's my lover?"

"Uh, no, that's a bit literal," Robert answered nervously.

"Really?" she asked. "Is it?"

Robert had been caught off his guard. He looked to Kay for some assistance.

"Kay? Is Robert right? Am I being too literal?"

"Helaine...it's just to shake them off. It's a standard pleading. Have your tea."

"So she's denying-"

"Legally speaking there's nothing else to do right now," Robert said, apologetically. "He has to get his client out. It's just posturing, Helaine."

Helaine grabbed her coat. "Is Lydia aware of this strategy? Because she didn't mention it last night."

Robert searched his repertoire of one-liners and, coming up empty-handed, turned to his wife once more.

Kay shook her head. "I don't know, Helaine. It seems rather unlikely that she wouldn't. Doesn't it, Robert? I mean, you would know better than I."

He sent her a beseeching look but Kay refused to speak. "She must," he finally answered.

Helaine circled the table. "Has defendant Beaumont sent that answer, would you know?"

"It's not due yet."

"Has she sent it?"

"No."

Helaine was leaving. Robert and Kay followed her with grim faces.

"What are you going to do, Helaine? I wouldn't do anything drastic," Robert implored. "Think like a lawyer for a moment and you'll see you're overreacting."

Impossible. She waited for him to open the door.

"Helaine...think it through first."

"You know...this is all starting to take a toll," she replied, speaking in a hushed tone. "The reporters, the lawyers. All of it." She hesitated at the elevator. "I'm very tired," she added, stepping into it.

Robert stopped the doors from closing. "Hathaway wants a meeting. This is a good sign, Helaine." She rolled her eyes. "Please schedule it soon then. I need to get this over with."

"I think she's probably waiting for things to quiet down again. It's been difficult for her to get around lately, the press constantly following and all. Found her new address, too. I'm sure you can empathize, Ms. Beaumont. I'll tell her you called, though. She'll be happy to know that."

"So she's checking her messages?"

"Yes. Of course."

Lydia felt punched. She had not heard from Helaine in a week and her earlier messages to Helaine's home had not been returned. To make matters worse, Sharon Chambers had emerged from hiding, flaunting a glorious makeover and the front pages were once again being devoted to the nation's most famous couple of the moment, complete with rumors of private settlement talks between the two women and rampant speculations that they were attempting a reconciliation. Lydia had pooh-poohed it all as nothing more than profit driven gossip, but the news of Helaine's surreptitious departure was unexpected and alarming.

"Ms. Beaumont? Is that all, or would you care to leave a message?"

"I would care. Yes, please. Tell her that I...uh...I'll call again. Check back, I mean."

"I'll do that, dear. You have a nice day."

"Thank you, Jenny. You, too."

[&]quot;I'm sorry, Ms. Beaumont, she's on vacation."

[&]quot;Vaca-for how long? When did she leave?"

[&]quot;I'm not at liberty to say. I'm sorry. She did leave you a message."

[&]quot;What is it?"

[&]quot;She asked that you send word when you return home again. You can direct that to me, of course. I'm Jenny."

[&]quot;I don't understand. Was this a planned vacation? She didn't mention it the last time we talked."

[&]quot;She was feeling overly stressed. Harassed."

[&]quot;But I was hoping...when will she be back?"

[&]quot;Good job, Beaumont."

[&]quot;It's just a preliminary but it'll get you through the proceedings without any surprises."

[&]quot;Excellent work. So I suppose I know what you've got planned for tonight?"

[&]quot;Ac-tu-al-ly, no plans."

[&]quot;No plans? Why not? All the trouble I went through?"

```
"Paula...probably the scene here. I'm just guessing."
```

"What is this about? That Chambers woman?"

Lydia shrugged.

"Where is the doctor?"

"Vacation."

"Vacation? Bullshit! She's not going to snub our hospitality. Get her on the phone, Beaumont. I want to talk to her."

"I-she's on vacation, Paula. She doesn't return my calls."

"Beaumont, you are a neophyte. She's not on goddamned vacation, I can assure you."

"Then she's somewhere else, like it says in the papers. Forget it."

"Don't you believe it! I know a power play when I see one. Pass me that phone."

"Paula! I forbid you. It will work itself out."

"Hey! Here's the reading materials you requested. Suddenly joining the human race?"

"Del, thanks! Just curious. Shaker of martinis over there."

"Excellent. What are you having?"

"Heroin."

"Hah! Hey, not too shabby in here, Liddy. You rank."

"How's things at my apartment?"

"Crowded again. The girls and I stopped in to clean up a bit. It was like a human car wash just getting in and out of the lobby. Your poor doorman. He's all but swinging a broom at them to clear them out. Just like cockroaches."

"What is this, Del?" Lydia asked, pointing at a front page article featuring a photo of Sharon and Helaine, heads bent together, smiling. "Can I believe in this stuff?"

"I wouldn't."

Lydia sighed and poured herself a martini.

"And look at glamorous Sharon Chambers, new and improved. She looks like she's in mourning, a grieving widow, for chrissakes."

"A grieving executive, more like it. She's dressing like one of us, Liddy. Gosh, I wonder why?"

"And on the cover everywhere, Del. So who cares about corporate scandal, huh?"

"Paula Treadwell's kicking ass, fixing it up, Liddy. No one wants to hear good news. Got any by the way?" "Oh yeah! You?"

"Promotion. Still just a millionaire. Big date tonight. Yum, yum, yum."

"Good for you. Money's brought me nothing but trouble I fear, now with Sharon Chambers after it."

"She's after you, Liddy, doesn't need the money. What's up with your lawyer?"

"We're not seeing eye to eye. He wants to deny everything and counterclaim for slander."

"Wow. That ought to do the job."

"I can't do that."

"Oh geesh, Liddy. Why not? She's not entitled to your dough. Everyone knows that."

"Money, money, money. Money can't buy you love."

"You're scaring the bejeezus out of me, Marilyn Beaumont. Drink."

"I scare myself. Cheers."

"Cheers. Where's Helaine tonight? What's actually going on with your blond these days, besides that she's got no room to breathe anymore?"

"She's on retreat somewhere. It's starting to get to her, I guess."

"Oh...?"

"Del, I can't send an answer like the one my lawyer's cooked up. Helaine won't go for it. It'll be a real, real long vacation if I do."

"I see."

[&]quot;But we've cleaned it up. Didn't you tell her that?"

[&]quot;I didn't get the chance."

"She's on vacation, Ms. Treadwell. Can I take a message?"

"Yes, please do. You got a pen handy?"

"Yes?"

"Good. You tell your Dr. Kristenson that I'm sending an unmarked limo for her at the corner of Ninth and Vine. It'll be there in an hour."

"But-"

"And also inform her that if she fails to show she'll be reading all about her greatest hits in Sunday's papers. She'll get what I'm driving at."

"What is this about?"

"It's about Lydia Beaumont. You remember her fine ass, doctor? The one you put in a sling?"

"Please...call me Kristenson."

"Drive," Paula instructed the chauffeur. "Let me look at you, blondie."

"Ms. Treadwell, I am not one of your girls."

"And Beaumont is not one of yours. Your hair looks a little wild. Can you comb it?"

"She likes it like this. I presume that's where we're going."

"Okay, leave it then. Now let me tell you something before we get there. Soloman-Schmitt has gone to great lengths to accommodate you, Kristenson, your esteemed snootiness. Please be mindful of that."

"And let me tell you something, Vice President Paula Treadwell. Soloman-Schmitt does not impress me. I want her out of there. And we have other matters we need to square away that don't require corporate handlers."

"Look. I don't care if you like me or not. I didn't get where I am trying to be popular. But there's one thing I don't tolerate and that's games, Kristenson. We cleaned up our act for you. I'm sorry if you don't approve of our culture. I don't approve of Sharon Chambers, the end."

Helaine stared out the window without speaking.

"As to when Beaumont can leave, she cannot go back to her penthouse yet with all those reporters there. That is something I can't control. Sorry."

"Oh? Something that escapes your micromanagement, Ms. Treadwell? That must be a painful concession to have to make. Tell me, do you plan on being our chaperone tonight?"

"If necessary. Turn into the garage, driver. You look lovely by the way. Even with the messy hair. Pull up to the elevator, please. Right here's fine."

Helaine produced a compact and examined herself in the mirror. "Thank you," she said tersely, as she left the car.

"Oh, and Kristenson...?"

Helaine turned and raised her evebrow.

"We never had this conversation, right?"

"I thought you were avoiding me?"

"Darling...I am."

"Oh."

"I see Lydia Beaumont's catching up on her reading."

"Yesterday's papers. Why? Avoiding me, I mean."

Helaine skimmed the stack of newspapers and frowned. "This is ruining us. Oh, and look here, *Keeping Mr. Right.* You want me to autograph it for you?"

"I was curious, that's all."

"Curiosity. About what?"

"They mentioned your book. You hadn't. I was just curious."

"You read it?"

```
"Pretty much."
```

"Still curious though?"

Lydia looked away.

"About what, Lydia?"

"It's all curious, Dr. Kristenson. I don't know."

"What can I clarify for you?"

"Putting someone 'on notice.' You gave Sharon Chambers notice before-"

"I did."

"And what about now? Are you 'working it out' with her, Helaine?"

Helaine threw her coat on the arm of the couch and sat down wearily. "It's about settlement, Lydia. The reporters are lying. What else?"

"Settlement? And how's that going?"

Helaine shrugged. "We've offered twenty-five percent net and the deed to my townhouse."

Lydia nodded. It didn't surprise her it would take that much. "And? Will she take it or not?"

"Lydia...she wants more. That's all I'm comfortable saying."

"Wants what? Something more is what? You, right?"

"Drop it, darling. What else can I clear up for you?"

"What else? Okay, are you sleeping with her?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, is it? She's only gorgeous, that's all."

Helaine sighed. "I'm tired of being photographed with her. Rumor has it I have a lover, but I'll believe it when I see it. When are you going home, Lydia?"

"As soon as I can. Del says the reporters are living there. I can't deal with that."

"Oh, but I can?"

"Helaine...you have more experience with this kind of attention. You and Sharon—" she stopped herself. "I'm not a public person. I hate all this."

"I hate all this!" Helaine suddenly said with a sweep of her arm. "I hate you hiding from it while I'm being followed day and night. I hate your Paula Treadwell school of thought. I hate the idea that you're hoping to sneak out under the cover of darkness. I hate the possibility that you might lie. I hate the possibility you want me only for sex. How do you respond to that charge, *Beaumont?* Can you take me to bed without fucking me? You can't!"

"Fuckin-oh, my gosh." Lydia stood up and walked around the chair, standing behind it as she collected her composure. "Helaine? I've fucked you? What on earth is wrong? What have I done?"

It was a poor choice of words. Helaine regretted them. "Not fuck. I didn't mean that." She lay her head back and closed her eyes. "You love me?"

"I do."

"Sav it."

"I love you."

"How?"

"How?"

"Tell me how you love me. I'd like to know."

Lydia stepped around the chair again and sat once more. "I'm not good at that. Words aren't really my specialty." She took in the long legs, the high-heel shoe that dangled on the tip of a pretty foot. "Numbers. I'm good at numbers, not words. I love you."

Helaine sat up. "Numbers? What numbers then? My breasts, my waist, my hips? Those numbers?"

Lydia looked at her own feet. It was not the kind of conversation she excelled at. It was not the kind of evening she had expected. Her mind was racing ahead to scout out the terrain. It was rocky and treacherous and there didn't appear to be a safe shortcut. She kicked her shoes off and slid them back on again. Pulled at her earrings.

"Can you love me without touching me?" Helaine pressed.

"Without touching you?" Lydia repeated, trying to picture it. She saw Helaine shift impatiently. "You know...I don't disagree with your views, Dr. Kristenson. Of course, I'm aware of how things look-how they

might look, especially under the circumstances. I'm always conscious of the possibility that I might be a savage like the rest of them, but I do love—"

"Without sex?"

Lydia clenched her teeth. "Without sex? You want me to go without sex?" Her face felt hot. "Why should I? I've already done that. What's this about, Helaine? Sharon Chambers?"

"Concentrate on the question. Can you take me to bed without sex, Lydia? I want to know the answer to that."

"Oh? Why? Because there's more to love than sex? Are you accusing me of not loving you enough because I nee-"

"Answer me, top girl! Can you sleep with me without it leading to sex?"

(NO.)

They locked eyes.

"Helaine...this is bullshit. Yes, goddammit. Yes, I can. When I'm eighty years old. Okay?"

Helaine smiled and undid the front of her blouse. Lydia fell back into the chair and watched her undress.

"Tell me what I represent to a Lydia Beaumont."

"This is a trick question?"

"I don't think so."

The shoes were on, the shoes were off, the shoes were on again. Lydia's ears were pink from tugging at her earrings. "Civilization. The good things in life."

"Expensive things, you're saying?" Helaine asked, putting her hands into her hair and lifting it off her shoulders. "Those kind of goods?" she said, suggestively.

Tricky questions. "Rare things, Helaine. Expensive perhaps. I wasn't thinking of that."

"What are you thinking, darling?"

Lydia scoffed. "Guilty things. Feel vindicated?"

"I'm not staying tonight," Helaine replied, rising to remove her skirt.

Lydia was silent.

"That is why you sent for me, isn't it? For this?"

"Sent for you? I didn't send for you. I left some messages, that's all."

The skirt was off.

"And Paula?"

It was dawning on Lydia now. "Paula? She made you come over?"

Helaine chuckled. "Oh, I see," she said, reclining. "Skip it then."

"Skip it? All right, Dr. Kristenson. Whatever you say, Dr. Kristenson. Am I disappointing you if I gawk, or should I leave the room with my bad self?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Come and hold me."

"Hold?"

"You said you could. Come here."

Lydia left her shoes at the foot of the chair. "Like this?"

"Mmmm, nice."

"Can I kiss you or is that impolite?"

"Please, kiss me."

"Like that?"

"Mmmm. Very nice."

"And this?"

"Mmmm..."

"Here?"

"Mmmmm."

"More?"

"More."

"Like that?"

"Yes...like that."

"Lana...you're so-"

```
"Surprise, surprise."
"I ana."
"Mmmmmmm..."
"Is this all right?"
"Lydia..."
"Yes?"
"Nice."
"This too?"
"Oh...Lydia..."
"Yes?"
"You are such..."
"Such?"
"Yes...such..."
"Such what?"
"Mmmmm...such a..."
"Such a what?"
"Such...a liar..."
```

"Well, it's no defense. The press will be dumbfounded, your father dismayed."

"My father is not paying you, I am."

"I was simply stating his emotional interest in the case. He'd like to see you out of the limelight, get back to your life again."

"I'm not lying to achieve his happiness or to get out of the papers. There's still no merit to her claim whether we're lovers or not."

Stanley studied his client's face. "When did you become lovers, Lydia?"

She pursed her lips and rested her chin on the back of her hand. "I don't know, Stan."

"Then try it this way. When weren't you lovers?"

"I just can't say. I don't know that, Stan."

He looked through her and then referred to the legal pad again. "Ultimately it's not dispositive. It's just a shame to give her anything. And to give up defamation, Lydia? They would have dropped suit with that reply."

She knew that.

"Okay. I'll have it drafted by the end of the week. That'll give you time to reconsider."

"It doesn't completely deprive me of a defense. Does it?"

"Of course not. Her claim is frivolous. More akin to malicious. We'll be filing a motion to dismiss it at a later date. That'll leave your Dr. Kristenson to fend for herself, though. Is she aware that you're admitting this?"

"She has no idea."

"The only reason I ask is that she was essentially silent on that part of the claim. But then at that time she was the only one who knew who Jane Doe really was."

"Silence isn't lying. Is it?"

He wrinkled up his brow. "It doesn't affect the truth either way."

"I don't understand."

"Infidelity is not germane in a pecuniary claim against a former lover for economic damages, since it is firmly held that a meritorious suit for support arises exclusively from prima facie proofs of prior financial dependency and subsequent abandonment thereof, irrespective of the actual cause of the partners' separation. In short, it will have no bearing on the plaintiff's award, if any, that she has allegedly suffered the humiliation of sexual and/or emotional betrayal, which is, from what I am able to glean, the gravamen of Sharon Chambers' case against Dr. Kristenson. That part, together with her frivolous complaint against you, will undoubtedly be stricken by order of the court directing the plaintiff to amend her pleading and, possibly, requiring her to serve it again, which she very likely will not do. Understand?"

Lydia rose from her chair and packed up her briefcase. "I think so. Thank you for your time today. I'll see you Friday."

"Same time. Same place. You've got a driver now?"

"Courtesy Soloman-Schmitt."

"Got to do what you got to do, right?"

He walked her to the door. "If you change your mind, let us know."

"What's the worse that can happen if I don't? That the press follows me around, my name's in all the papers, I can't go home or to work, I can't be with my lover?"

Flying colors. VP Treadwell had made it through her grand jury testimony without losing a single drop of blood and the preliminary inquiries by the SEC were going smoothly as well. No new revelations to shake the markets. Unfortunately she was required to name her chief investigator, Lydia Beaumont, and to expound somewhat on Lydia's prior relationship with the now banned and indicted former executive, Joseph Rios. When the press learned of that exciting new twist they pounced on Treadwell's protégé again, this time bandying the facts about with salacious front page offerings like HAVE WHISTLE WILL BLOW and the old reliable standby KISS AND TELL that the readership never tires of.

Frankly, the reporters resented Lydia's aversion to public appearances and they were completely dissatisfied with slick Paula Treadwell's cut-and-dried responses, those deliberately bland unquotables she resorted to using when fielding their questions on the matter. "There is no connection whatsoever," was what she frequently said. Also, "It doesn't concern me. I don't know anything about it. It's not relevant, the end."

So they did what they deemed necessary to force the elusive Lydia Beaumont out into the open. There were a lot of resources available to them for this purpose now that she was no longer Jane Doe to them. She had become, instead, a lot of intriguing and diverse things, including, as they finally discovered, the daughter of Edward Beaumont himself, whose own romantic escapades had already been used to entertain the minions. It was worth another mention, they concluded, and his dirty laundry was once again hung outdoors for another airing. In the meantime, they drummed their fingers restlessly on their desktops and cast their bets on defendant Beaumont's official response to Sharon Chambers' allegations, which was due any day now.

[&]quot;Oueenie?"

[&]quot;Daddy, hi."

[&]quot;You know, if you were in Paris right now they'd make a darling of you."

[&]quot;I'm not, I've got a job to do. Are you telling me to leave the country? I feel I just got here."

[&]quot;Oh, you've arrived all right. This is bigger than anything I've gone through."

[&]quot;I'm not comparing notes with you, Daddy. I think I know why you're calling and I just have three words to say about it-attorney client privilege."

[&]quot;Stan and I go way back and we talk on a regular basis. He knows how worried I am about your future. Your kitten's steering you wrong on this, Lydia. She'll leave you hanging, trust me."

[&]quot;Daddy...please."

[&]quot;Does she know how hard you've worked for your money? She's dragging you through the mud and you're wallowing in it."

[&]quot;Thank you, Daddy, I love you, too. Ms. Chambers isn't getting my money."

[&]quot;I'm ordering you to change your pleading. Think of your old man and do it for him, please."

[&]quot;I can't."

[&]quot;Nonsense. There are other beautiful people in the world you can take up with, especially now that you're a celeb. Think of that, Queenie. It's only sex and, despite popular mythology, Dr. Kristenson did not invent it."

[&]quot;I'm not changing my answer, Daddy. I simply can't."

[&]quot;For godsakes, why not?"

[&]quot;Because it's not just sex, I'm also in love with the woman."

[&]quot;And so is Sharon Chambers. What about her?"

```
"Sharon Chambers?"
"Yes, Sharon Chambers!"
"Her I hate."
```

"She what?"

"Admits most of it."

Sharon stared stonily into the mirror. "That they're lovers?"

"Yes."

"Just a moment, please." She pulled up a chair. "What does she actually deny, Mr. Hathaway?"

"Well...she denies sufficient knowledge as to those allegations stating that you and Dr. Kristenson are or were lovers. She denies sufficient knowledge of your quote-unquote alleged mental condition. She denies suf—"

"Fine. I get it."

"Twenty-five percent is not a bad offer, Ms. Chambers. I urge you again to take it."

She had wanted no less than half gross and was shocked to learn that Helaine was a spendthrift, wasting nearly forty percent off the top on her social concerns, on donor contributions to non-governmental organizations with their bleeding heart domestic programs, on cleaning up minefields in Sudan, on supporting democracy in Burma, ending child slavery in the Ivory Coast, housing battered women and homeless vets. Crap! It was endless.

Even Hathaway had been amazed by the disclosures. "We don't want to look bad here," he had cautioned her in private.

She had hoped to choke the doctor financially so she'd have to agree to reconciliation, but Helaine had rejected that alternative flat out.

She was worth a pretty penny before taxes, before her stupid charitable contributions. The counteroffer, the price of freedom—half her gross current worth. She'd get more if she had to go to trial, Sharon warned Helaine. That didn't seem to scare her any.

"I'm considering all my options, Mr. Hathaway. I'll get back to you."

"Them's fighting words, Helaine," Robert announced. "Starting to sound like a catfight." Helaine grinned. "Meow."

The air tingled and zinged with winter closing in fast.

YES MEANS YES blared one steamy headline with a glamour shot of the woman who dared to say it. They had started to doubt it. At last they knew. Yes. Absolutely yes she was. All that was missing was a recent snapshot of the illicit lovers together. The reporters crowded every known address to get one, but Dr. Kristenson's lover was nowhere to be seen.

So then their eyes were on Sharon Chambers again. Pale Sharon Chambers, clad these days in a tasteful floor length mink, under which she was fitted in shades of gray, dressed very much as if in mourning. Sharon Chambers, eyes glowing with rage, under control so far, to her lawyers' relief and amazement. But it couldn't last and everyone knew it. She had gone in over her head. Now she was certain to lose it.

There were lots of opportunities emerging, like long lost ships on the horizon. Talk shows galore, gossip mags, publishers hawking tell-all book deals, tell all quickies with their fill-in-the-blank format. Bread and butter stuff that appealed to Sharon these days when money was tight, when she was finding herself financially strapped, reluctant to settle and having second thoughts as to whether she may have bit off more than she could chew in chasing down that paper tiger, Lydia Beaumont. It could kill two birds with one stone, she surmised. Bring her in some bread and turn the heat up at the same time. Heat. That wasn't a bad strategy. Paper burns.

"Lana?"

```
"Darling...?"
   "Have dinner with me."
    "I'd love to. Where?"
   "I'll send a car for you."
   "No, let's go out."
   Lydia scowled. "C'mon."
    "Come on."
   "Helaine...please."
    "For someone who doesn't like to hide, you do it very well. You can't do it forever, Lydia. I won't let you."
   "Are you alone?"
   "What do the papers say these days? Am I?"
   (Ugh.) "What do I hear? You sound like you're at the ocean."
    "I'm in the tub, darling. Room for one more."
   "Oh, come on, Helaine. I'll send a car for you."
    "Lydia Beaumont...NO." (click)
   "Del, come in!"
   "Here's your rags, Liddy. I feel like a paper-boy these days. Or a censor."
   "Don't censor. Drinks at the bar. Help yourself."
   "Top of the bestseller list again. Your blond."
   "Windfall. Good for her. She'll need it, I think."
   "Still boycotting Soloman-Schmitt?"
   "Objects to their corporate sponsorship, she says."
   "Does VP-CFO Paula Treadwell know that?"
   "It's my dirty little secret. How many reporters at the penthouse?"
   "Scads."
   "That many, huh?"
   "I hate to say that the normalcy you're expecting will return to your life is gone, but..."
   "But the normalcy I'm expecting will return to my life is gone?"
   "AWOL, Liddy. Like your stubborn blond."
   "Helaine?"
   "Lydia Beaumont! How nice of you to call."
   "I miss you."
    "Prove it."
   "Dinner?"
    "Love to. My place or yours?"
   Lydia could hear her own breath on the line.
   "My place or yours, darling?"
   "I'm gathering that you don't consider this suite my place. Right?"
    "That's right. Come here. We'll eat nude."
   "Shit, Helaine. Us and the entire press corps?"
    "You're being despicable."
   "Despicable. You're right. And I'm sick of eating and sleeping alone."
    "I'll bet. Then grow up and get over here."
   "Helaine...this is getting frustrating, if you know what I mean. Do you?"
   "Indeed, I do. Get over here."
   Lydia was silent, taking her time considering it. Her stomach growled. She was thirsty. "I think you're
trying to set up obstacles here."
```

"Then good night, darling. Sleep well." (click)

"She's turned it down, Helaine. Much to the chagrin of her lawyers." She had expected that. "Now what, Robert?"

The moon was a big bright ball in the sky, punctuating the night, promising to illuminate anything you might have done or dreamt of doing under the influence of darkness.

She had read too many papers. She should have stuck to her financials. The newspapers. They shed no more light than a full moon did, and just like it they made as much trouble, casting long dark shadows in the path so that no matter how familiar the landscape was to you, you'd still feel lost, still stumble over something. Moonlight excursions. You might recognize your way, even make it to your destination, but not without some bruises. Lydia Beaumont was the black-and-blue victim of the falsehood of a brilliant moon pretending to illuminate. All those dark shadows. And the miserable papers.

Of this woman Lydia was reading about lately, this Helaine Kristenson that Sharon described in such intimate details, Lydia had known nothing. Of the woman she knew by the same name, Helaine Kristenson, she had known only good things. The stark contrast between the two, between her Helaine and Sharon's Helaine, had shocked Lydia, not to mention the idea that an editor would have considered the model's scathing kiss-and-tell even printable.

"CHUMP" the Herald had shouted yesterday over a somewhat dopey head shot of Lydia Beaumont. Chump, Sharon had asserted in this most recent interview, portraying Helaine's interest in Lydia as nothing more than "hosting amateur night," allegedly one of the blond's favorite recreations.

And so followed an itemized list of bedroom secrets that would have made the Marquis de Sade blush. A bit of bares-all hype for Ms. Chambers' forthcoming book. Little wonder Delilah had refused to bring the tabloids to her this week. Lydia had been forced to call down for them and was thankful, when she got through with the stack, that the deliverer had had the courtesy to simply leave them in a pile outside her door without knocking. After that, Lydia had taken the phone off the hook and left it like that. She stood this evening in the dark of the quiet suite by a picture window.

A chump? The woman she had contemplated in the mirror didn't exactly look like one, but perhaps that wasn't the best way to judge.

Paris. That might not be such a bad idea, after all. Being the darling of fifty million Frenchmen was surely more appealing than being someone's plaything, someone you were in love with. Paris, yes, or she could go through the fan mail piling up back at her office and select a name from the piles of love letters and flowers sent weekly by the not-so-secret admirers that had converted the place overnight into an indoor garden. If it is as Del says, only chemical, then why not start conducting interviews right away? Perhaps in ten years, twenty, even a hundred, she could find a suitable replacement for Helaine Kristenson.

Lydia drifted above herself tonight, past the plate glass window. It seemed to her that she was floating over the rooftops, a ghost wandering over the city in search of something. Cherchez la femme. For the woman she thought she had known, in all the places she had found her, trying to know her again.

She might be dreaming, sleepwalking, because, except for the tightness in her chest, the dry mouth, she could feel absolutely nothing. Looking down from above it all, the city seemed to have gone silent on her. The buildings looked ominous, the traffic moved like a funeral procession, the neon lights blinked on and off as if a battery was dying.

Midtown, Helaine felt it, too. A terrible silence had engulfed the city. She had rung Lydia's suite enough times to know the woman had taken her phone off the hook. That reaction didn't surprise her, although she had been hoping for a miracle to prevent it. A busy signal. She pondered the implications until she was rendered immobilized.

Robert and Kay were gone for the weekend. She felt virtually friendless, naked if she was to go outside and make her way through the reporters. She drank in the quiet, rocked herself gently and, eventually, wept. Sharon had outdone herself. She had gone over the top this time and, by all outward appearances, for mere monetary gain, though Helaine knew better than that. Sharon had expressed what she was after the last time they had met with their lawyers. It was then that Helaine felt she should tell her she was in love with Lydia Beaumont. Mistake.

She was unsure of what her damages would be with Lydia or if she could stop the bloodletting. The only thing for certain was that, with this brutal exposé, Sharon had put the skids on her own love life, too. It would be quite a while before any one else would trust her.

It seemed ridiculous to challenge the story. This little part here is true, but the rest is not? And that sort of happened, but not quite that way? This is a gratuitous embellishment? And what about amateur night? Yah. Should she sue her over it and further the she said/she said contest already consuming her life like a cancer? Would it change anything anyway? It was doubtful at best.

Helaine waited by the phone all weekend but it didn't ring and on Monday dragged herself to work via limo, in dark shades, her hallmark smile completely missing from her face.

She had a few hairy morning sessions with very probing questions from very horny clients which she managed to effectively sidestep with very direct questions of her own. Few people enjoy that. At lunch time she rang the suite again. Busy. Busy. She had Jenny reschedule her afternoon so she could muddle through the paperwork she'd been putting off for weeks. Four o'clock, Robert called with a let's-sue-her-ass strategy. Sorry he wasn't here sooner. No, she said, flatly. He had expected that response, he told her. It didn't surprise either of them that Lydia was suddenly scarce.

```
Tuesday?
   Wednesday?
   "Helaine...?"
   "Lydia!-thank you, Jenny. I've got it."
   "I need to discuss-"
   "Absolutely, I agree. Please. Let's talk."
   "I don't...I need to see you in person."
   "Lydia, anywhere. Tell me where."
   "This crap. I'm just—"
   "Darling, tell me where to meet you. I can be there in a half an hour." She waited an eternity while Lydia
considered in silence. "Are you still there, Lydia?"
   "Your place, Helaine. I'm walking. It'll take about that long."
   "There's a nest of reporters there, you know?" Silence again. "Did you hear-"
   "Fuck them. Fuck them all."
   "Lydia...?"
   "I'll see you in a bit. Alone, I hope."
   "Lydia, of cour-" (click)
```

There were bodyguards available but she didn't have time to wait and it was unlikely that they would want to escort her on a cold and blustery day. Lydia took the elevator to the lobby and informed the doorman that she was leaving the building. He smiled and noted it.

It was quiet on the street as well, the eerie calm of winter in a metropolis, the time of year when cities look abandoned. No reporters waiting for her here. Paula was good. She sucked in the cold and started downtown.

"Ms. Beaumont! Over here! Ms. Beaumont! Hey! Care to comment, Ms. Beaumont? MS. BEAUMONT!"

Plenty of reporters at Helaine's though. Lydia pushed through them with no comment, assisted, once inside, by a crew of security officers. You need a bodyguard, they told her at the elevator. A coupla goons like us, they said cheerfully, bragging they had just helped Dr. Kristenson break in. She smiled humorlessly and stepped into the elevator. A pair of sunglasses, too, they shouted, like the movie stars do. She waved as the doors closed and rode without interruption to the penthouse. Her hands trembled as she knocked on the door.

"Darling," Helaine said in as natural a voice she could muster. There was no return greeting.

She moved aside and Lydia brushed past her without speaking. "Lydia," she began, locking the door and following her into the living room. "I'm—"

"Tell me about it, Dr. Kristenson." Lydia demanded, producing a newspaper from the inside pocket of her coat and throwing it at Helaine's feet. "What is this about?"

"Lvdia-"

"Tell me!"

Helaine bent and picked up the paper. "I know you're upset-"

"Oh? And how can you tell that?" Lydia paced to the window and back again. "Don't just think of something to say, doctor. Tell me the meaning of that trash. I need an explanation."

"You want to know if any of it's true?"

Lydia refused to look at her.

"I can't explain it so I won't even try. It is not an accurate account, I can say that much-"

"What am I, Dr. Kristenson? A chump? Is that accurate?"

"No."

"What is she talking about then?"

"Anything she can think of to put an end to us."

Lydia faced her. "Then you can just go get yourself another one, right? What with how practiced you are at it."

Helaine felt the blood rising to her cheeks. "You can't believe that, Lydia. You must know better."

"How could I? You're the only-I'm only an amateur."

"Lydia...let me hold you."

"No."

Helaine threw the newspaper on the coffee table. "Are we talking yet? I thought you wanted to see me."

"I've been trying to see you for weeks. What's up with that? Found someone else to play with?"

"I wanted you to stop hiding out there. It's not healthy."

"Healthy? Like that shit there in the papers is healthy? Like my having to hear about it, have my friends and family hear about it, that's healthy?"

"I have no control over Sharon."

Lydia cast her a lethal stare. "So I hear."

"Lydia...don't dwell on this. I beg you."

"Helaine. First you turn me down for weeks-"

"I was wrong. Take me to bed. Right now."

Lydia put her hand to her head. "Helaine. I need-"

"I know what you need. You have my permission."

It was Lydia's turn to blush.

"Come to bed with me, Lydia Beaumont. Now."

"NO. I'm too angry. It would not be all right. I want-"

"Ves then"

Lydia dropped her arm. "Yes what?"

"Yes. Some of it's true. We were lovers, Lydia. Sharon and I. That's what's really bothering you. So take me to bed and let me resolve this for us."

Some of it's true. Lydia knew that. The perfumed air of the apartment felt suddenly toxic, the familiar scent smelled exceptionally bitter now. Elegant Helaine Kristenson, roughing it up with Sharon Chambers.

"I can resolve this," Helaine repeated uneasily. "Lydia...please. I can resolve it." She should be able to. She was an expert.

The newspaper caught Lydia's eye. "Oh, I'm sure you can. You're an expert after all." The tone of her voice was ugly. She stopped herself from speaking.

"Oh, no, Lydia. Don't. Don't think like that."

Don't think like that. She shouldn't have said it. Lydia looked away. "Which parts are true then," she asked, "amateur nights?"

"That's just nonsense. She knows I'm in love with you, that's all."

"In love?" Lydia glanced at her. "And how would she know that?"

"I told her. She knew it anyway, long before then."

Love, that's all. Just an extreme sport. At least to Sharon Chambers. Lydia tried to picture the woman's reaction to Helaine's declaration. Must have felt like falling off a cliff.

Helaine took a few steps forward, stopped when she saw Lydia back away. Time was of the essence here. "Let me take your coat."

She had forgotten to take off her coat. It was hot in the apartment. She felt the urge to pace and grasped at the back of the sofa when she passed it. "What makes me an amateur, Dr. Kristenson?" She inched along the length of it until she was finally clear. "That I don't go around fucking everything I can get a hold of, like she does?" She was addressing the woman who had cornered her in the ladies' lounge at Frank's Place, who had grabbed her like a Rio Joe, her first kiss from a woman. How pissed she had been by that. "Would that be more exciting for you, Helaine? Would that improve my ratings any if I just fucked all the time? Fucked you, fucked her? If I fucked around and around?" Fucked. She hated the word. She felt her hands clenching. "Fucked anything I could get my hands on?" She was making her way back again, to where Helaine stood. "I need some feedback here, doctor. Tell me why this trash is in my face all the time."

They were waltzing without knowing it and Lydia found herself beside Helaine, this time in the doorway of the bedroom. Helaine went inside and quietly got undressed. Lydia cleared her throat self-consciously, stopped talking. She felt flushed and overdressed, confused as to how they had made it this far.

Helaine was in only her slip. She sat down on the edge of the bed. "She's simply trying to have an impact on our love life," she offered. "A negative one to be sure—here, sit with me."

Lydia hesitated, buried her hands in her coat pockets. "We have a love life? That's news I haven't read anywhere."

Helaine smiled, laid backwards across the bed. "I love you. You love me. That's quite a love life, Lydia."

That was true. Lydia walked to the bedside. "I can't do this. I'm not mysel-"

"It's all right," Helaine said, pulling her down.

The scent in the air was sweet again, sweet in the blond hair and on the creamy skin. Lydia crushed the soft mouth with her own. Helaine opened her legs. "Helaine..."

"It's all right."

"Sharon Chambers..." She hated that woman. "In this bed?"

"Lvdia-"

"Yes then...and you loved her?"

Oh, no, not that. Helaine wrapped her arms around Lydia's neck. Yes, but she couldn't bring herself to say it, her lover still wearing her overcoat. "Lydia," she whispered instead, "would you rather we lie on the couch?"

She felt Lydia's hand searching her, gasped as Lydia answered no.

"Well? Good morning?"

"Good morning." Lydia answered, playing with the fringe of the covers. "How are you?"

Helaine was laying on her stomach. "Sore," she mumbled into her pillow.

"Oh." (Didn't sound serious.) "Sore mad, or sore sore?"

Helaine chuckled. "Sore sore."

Lydia pulled the covers down. "I'm sorry."

"You lie."

"And other than these complaints?"

Helaine exhaled loudly into the pillow. "Other than those, aroused."

"Okay. I'm interested."

"I thought you might be."

Lydia bent over her back. "You are something, my dear Ms. Kristenson. I'm thinking of having your baby."

Helaine laughed, opened her legs. Lydia slid between them.

"Make love to me, Ms. Beaumont," she said, over her shoulder.

"I thought you were sore?"

"I am...I don't mean there."

"Not here?"

"Yes...not there."

"Where-here?"

"Mmmm."

"I don't-you'll have to show me how."

"Darling...I can't. There's some oils. Pick one."

"Lana...I don't want to pick. Which one?"

"Lavender-this'll ruin you for a garden, you know."

"Too late now."

"You think I've ruined you, Lydia?"

Lydia massaged her without answering.

"Do you?"

"Lana...how could you have?"

Helaine lifted herself and fell back down. "With all this trouble?"

Lydia put her face into the mass of blond hair. "All this trouble," she teased, sliding her arm under her and continuing to stroke her.

Helaine stretched and relaxed into the bed. "Worth it?"

"I think so. As long as I don't end up like the last one."

"Like Sharon?"

"Was that her name?"

"You think *I* did that to her? Ruined her?"

Lydia massaged the inner thighs. "Spoiled her. Not on purpose."

Helaine tensed her legs. "I really don't know what you're saying."

Lydia lay her cheek against hers. "I really don't know what I'm doing."

Helaine's body went limp. "God, you're an awful tease," she whispered. "Am I spoiling you now, you mean?"

"Lana," Lydia whispered, "I'm trying not to let you."

"Darling, I-"

The press upped the ante. They followed the happy couple everywhere they went, to their homes and back, to dinner, even to the opera. Three nonstop weeks is all it took before Sharon blew her lid. Meantime Rio Joe turned stool pigeon on his friends, producing all kinds of interesting evidence and, since it's true that what goes up must come down, the elevator tapes proved interesting, too.

"Where did you get it?" Lydia asked, visibly shaken.

"Team Chambers," Stanley replied. "It's not admissible, of course." He rolled his pen in his hand. "Just thought you should know it's out there."

"It's been altered. Seriously edited."

"Looks it. We're following up your lead, but security at Soloman-Schmitt leaves something to be desired, apparently. They don't have any idea where it might have come from. But they're sending the complete video, if that's any reassurance. Written record, too. Dates. Events."

"Has Helaine seen this yet?"

"Haven't heard a word from them."

"This is going to be endless, isn't it?"

"Well, Lydia. Hathaway wants you to settle. He knows they can't take you to trial as anything but a hostile witness so this is how they're playing the game." He threw the pen on his desk and sat back in his chair, his hands folded behind his head. "It's called upping the stakes. They're betting you won't want to have to explain this stuff."

"That's blackmail."

"It is, sort of. The plaintiff's hopping mad, Lydia."

"And?"

"I wouldn't recommend paying them to keep it secret. She'll make sure Helaine sees it anyway. That's my hunch."

Lydia nodded in agreement. "That's what I was thinking. How much time did they give?"

Stanley laughed. "Forty-eight hours till they send it to the press. After that it's the flying monkeys wicked witch scene. Unless they're just bluffing."

"Get the original, just in case."

He walked her into the waiting room and held the door. "Back to your normal routine I hear. Apartment. Work."

"Trying anyway," she said, putting on her coat. "Needing bodyguards and limos isn't exactly what I'd call normal though. Being followed everywhere, ditto."

"I don't feel very useful these days," he admitted. This is a free-for-all with the media so heavily involved. It was simpler with your fath—"

She put her hand up to silence him. "Stan. Don't worry. It's better having you than dealing with an attorney I don't know."

"Good, then I won't feel badly. Are we going to see you at Keagans' party?"

"Helaine had mentioned it to me. I guess it all depends on my cinematic debut. How's it going to go over, Stan?"

He looked thoughtful for a second and then shook his head. "I can't even guess about such a thing."

She knew the minute she arrived for dinner that Helaine had seen the video. She knew it at the door when Helaine offered her cheek instead of her mouth. She knew it as she watched her struggle with the wine bottle, and when in exasperation she handed it over with a "get that for me, dear" that sounded flat and tense. She could tell by the way Helaine avoided eye contact, by the way the table was set for two on opposite sides, by the way she seemed to be constantly sidestepping her, by the unspoken words that lurked beneath her small talk as she fussed with the pots and pans on the stove, by the way she was pretending she hadn't seen it at all.

Lydia got out of her way and sat in the dining room. She was surprised she could think of nothing to say. She even wondered if she should volunteer to leave, but she was afraid Helaine might agree to that. With dread she glanced toward the bedroom and was taken aback to see that the door, usually open, had been closed tight. She folded her hands in her lap and studied Helaine's back as she worked in the kitchen...

"How is the-you haven't tasted the wine, Lydia. Pour us," Helaine said, trying to sound cheerful. "Please, the food is ready."

Lydia poured the wine and sat up straight as Helaine served the food. She watched the steam rising from their plates, evaporating above them. She shouldn't have come tonight. Helaine should have told her not to.

"Darling...please...eat."

"Helaine-"

"Don't," Helaine interrupted. "Let's just eat. It's fine."

Not hungry now. "But-"

"I'm not mad, Lydia. I just don't discuss these things. I don't discuss them."

Lydia threw the napkin beside her plate with a disgusted sigh. "You got the original tape from my lawyer, yes or no?"

Helaine put her fork down and picked up her wine. For a moment it looked like she intended to throw it. Lydia almost preferred that over her current approach.

"I saw both."

They stared at each other across the table.

"Helaine-"

"I understand. Please eat. Your food's getting cold."

They are in silence without a toast. Afterwards Lydia followed Helaine into the kitchen with her plate and hung sheepishly beside her as she washed the dishes, drying them and putting them away as instructed. When all the proof of their dinner was finally removed, Lydia remained at the sink, waiting with trepidation to be told what to do next. Helaine spoke without looking at her.

"I'm exhausted," she said.

Lydia hung the towel on its hook. "I'll go then."

"I mean from all of this. Not you."

"What do you want me to do, Helaine?"

She contemplated the question and shook her head. "I'm an old lady, Lydia."

"Helaine, no." Lydia made a motion toward her and was met with an uplifted hand.

"Yes, I am. Too old and too sensitive. Will there be a special boxed edition of your love scenes with Joseph Rios? I couldn't bear that."

"Helaine, of course not. That's-"

"I made a lot of mistakes as you know. With Sharon."

"I'm not Sharon."

"Humiliation is humiliation."

Lydia pushed past her hand. "Helaine-"

"DONT."

Lydia stopped within an inch of her. "Why didn't you cancel dinner then?"

"Because I love you."

"Then why can't I at least kiss you?"

"Because I hate you."

"Oh." Lydia retreated.

"Do you still need him, darling? It sure looked it at the end."

"I'm going now."

Helaine watched Lydia from the kitchen as she buttoned up her overcoat. She saw the door opening wide and Lydia passing through it.

"Tell me you love me, Lydia Beaumont."

Lydia turned in the doorway. "Let me show you."

"Show me, how? Sex?"

Lydia stepped inside again and closed the door behind her. "However," she replied, walking slowly toward her. "I'll just hold you if you like. You have my word."

Helaine sighed. "I have your word, do I? Good. Then hold me."

"Hold...right...lying down?"

Helaine unbuttoned Lydia's coat. "Hold is all you said."

Lydia pulled her inside the open flaps. She was so warm now. "Helaine...?"

"Don't you dare. I have your word." Her hands were in her hair. "How was your dinner?"

Lydia attempted to kiss her. Helaine hid her face.

"Delicious," Lydia murmured. "Can we-don't you think we shou-?"

"No," Helaine replied, undoing herself.

"Just sit on the couch then?"

"Just hold me."

Lydia shivered despite the coat. "I am," she said through clenched teeth.

"Am?" Helaine teased. "Am what, darling?"

"Helaine...don't then."

"Can't?"

Lydia tried to laugh; it sounded like swearing. "I need to sit down. You have my-"

"Word, you said that." Helaine leaned backward, her front exposed. "What else do I have?"

"Ummmm."

"What else?"

"Helaine...you are lovely. This is about the video?"

Helaine let her go and walked into the darkened living room.

Lydia stood rumpled at the kitchen counter. "Can I stay? Should I take off my jacket? Yes, please, my love. Let me take your jacket...Helaine?" She found her fully undressed, lying on the couch.

"Should I...what am I doing, Helaine?"

"Holding me."

Lydia examined the ceiling.

"Well?

Lydia kept the coat on and lay down beside her. "You're testing me, right?"

"Do you feel tested?"

"Helaine-"

"Hold, not touch, my love."

Lydia held her. "I love you, Helaine Kristenson."

"No negotiation," Helaine whispered, slipping inside the coat.

Lydia put her face into the blond hair and pulled her closer. Helaine reached between her own legs and began touching herself. Lydia gripped her tightly around the waist and protested. "Enough, Helaine."

"Hold me."

Lydia put her hand on her breast and Helaine removed it. "Why?"

"I don't want to spoil you," Helaine whispered.

Lydia slid her leg between hers. Helaine shuddered. "Okay?" Lydia asked, trying to rise from the couch.

Helaine pulled her down by her lapels. Lydia tried once more to touch her and was once more rebuked. She dropped her body heavily into Helaine's and pushed against her, grasping Helaine's hands and holding them still at her waist.

"Lana...why are you doing this?"

Helaine laughed.

"You're pleased? Can we go to bed now?"

"No. You're going home."

"Dr. Kristenson...this just can't be right."

"Discipline, darling."

Lydia groaned out loud. "Me?"

"You. Yes."

"I am over-sexed, Dr. Kristenson?"

"What are you thinking right now?"

"That's your fault."

"Hah! If you promised not to and I begged you to, which would you do?"

Lydia put her forehead on the armrest. "I'd break my promise."

"Goodnight, dear Lydia."

"Helaine, I'm not going. I did what you asked."

"You're going."

Lydia made herself heavy again. "Because?"

"Because I'm desperately in love with you, Ms. Beaumont. You make everything ache."

"I see. Then I'm definitely not going. I'll sleep in my clothes on the couch."

Helaine gripped her tight between her legs and wrapped her arms around her neck. "You are very engaging, my love. He must miss you."

Helaine masturbated; Lydia held her.

Lydia woke in the morning, alone on the couch, throbbing, and still wearing her overcoat. She got up in a state of agitation and went into the bedroom. The bed had been slept in, but there was no sign of Helaine.

"Looking for me?"

Lydia turned and found her dressed about to leave. "No?"

"Hmmm. Here's your coffee. Light and sweet, just like you."

"Helaine. I thought-"

"I know what you thought. It's all over your face."

"Thanks," Lydia answered sullenly, "for the coffee that is. Where are you going on a Saturday?"

"I have some morning sessions."

Lydia sighed. "That's right. And then what?"

"Then? And then we have to end this somehow," Helaine said, heading for the kitchen. "They'll never give us any peace if we don't."

"Liddy!"

"Del, you're courageous. Come on up."

"Ahh, who cares about reporters. Hey, look at this," she said, holding up a magazine. "You're setting fashion trends now."

"I am? She looks like me?"

"SEXecutive. Clever, huh?"

"Del, she looks like she just got rolled in the sack. And her shirt's open to her bellybutton."

"Seen yourself lately?" Delilah said, pointing at the front of Lydia's blouse.

Her shirt was open. "Oh, shit. No wonder everyone seemed so happy to see me."

"Long night?"

Lydia groaned and unlocked the door to the penthouse. "Yeah, on the couch."

Delilah laughed.

"Why is everything always so funny to you?"

"You're dense, Liddy, and it is funny."

They went inside.

"She thinks I'm undisciplined. Can you believe?"

"Uh-oh. That's about the security tape?"

"I'm not exactly sure. It's very complicated."

"Ooh! She's playing voodoo on you, sweetie, that's all. Pulling your chain."

They threw themselves into the task of coffee and donuts.

LOVERS' SPAT! TROUBLE IN PARADISE!

"Hello, Mr. Keagan."

"Your majesty, what a thrill. Everybody, please. The face that launched a thousand lips is here. Allow me to present Lydia Beaumont."

They clapped. She stood flustered. "Robert, thanks."

"Introduce yourselves if you dare," he instructed his guests.

"Red or white?" Kay asked, double-fisting the wine. "Thank you for coming."

"Red. Thanks for inviting me."

"Here's a glass," Robert said, "Helaine's not here yet. I don't think she's expecting you. Ah, this is Dr. Jon, Lydia. Lydia, Jon."

"How do you do?"

"I've heard a lot about you, Lydia."

"Well, that's a mouthful," Robert said. "And Stan you already know."

"Stan. Nice to see you, I think," she said with a grimace. "Went over like ten lead balloons."

Jon shot them a puzzled glance. "Where's the beer, Kay?"

"In the crisper, Jon."

Stanley screwed up his face. "So I heard."

"It's a buffet," Kay said. "Help yourself, Lydia."

"Kay, can I talk to you for a second?" Lydia asked.

"Of course. Living room, five minutes. Red or white?" she asked a newly arrived couple.

"I must say you look fabulous, Ms. Beaumont. In person, too," Robert said with a wink. "Oops, there's the door. Excuse me."

Kay waved now from the living room and Lydia joined her in there.

"Has she said anything to you?"

"She hasn't, Lydia. She's being aloof. I hate it when she gets that way. You're speaking though?"

Lydia sighed. "Sometimes, by phone. Maybe I shouldn't have come."

"Don't be silly-oh, Anna. Anna meet Lydia Beaumont. Lydia, Anna. Oh, I better get that door."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lydia. You're even more dazzling in person, I'll have you know."

"Thank you," Lydia said, blushing at the sound of the woman's voice, the bedroom eyes.

Anna smiled. "How is Helaine these days? I haven't seen her in ages."

Lydia took a quick breath. "Well, she's...uh...been quite busy with things...you know...her work and other kinds of assorted things...like that."

"Oh, dear. Too busy. That must pose assorted difficulties."

Common knowledge. Lydia shifted her weight from one foot to the other, passed her wineglass from the left hand to the right. "Yes. Difficulties."

"Quiet evenings must be hard to come by in the limelight," Anna said, sympathetically.

The glass moved to the left hand again. "No, it's not very quiet," Lydia acknowledged with a nervous laugh.

Anna was charmed. "And you, Lydia Beaumont?"

"Me?"

"Now that's right. I heard you're in finance. I guess you don't have any secrets left anymore, do you?"

Lydia clutched the wine glass. "No. At least none I'm conscious of," she said, instantly regretting her words.

Anna sipped her wine and raised her brows.

"And you? What do you do, Anna?"

"I'm sorry," Anna said, stepping closer to her, "I didn't catch that."

"I said-I asked what keeps you busy?"

"Oh, I'm not too busy. I'm a fashion consultant." She reached inside her jacket and produced a card. "Not that you need my advice. Your dress does wonderful things for your eyes by the way. My favorite color."

"Robert, get that!" Lydia heard Kay order.

Robert went to the door. "Dr. Kristenson, what good timing you have."

"Why?" she asked him. "What's wrong?"

He grinned and offered her a glass of red wine as he took her aside. "Ms. Beaumont's here," he informed her.

Helaine smiled back. "To see me?"

"You threw her out of bed, Helaine?"

"Robert! She said so?"

"Of course not. Here, I'll take that."

"And how do you know this then?" she inquired, handing him her coat.

"She has that distinct look. You know the one Caesar—the newspapers, Helaine."

"Robert, please. I know what I'm doing. Where is she?"

He folded the coat over his arm. "I'm glad to hear that," he quipped as he headed for the closet, "because she's in the living room...with Anna."

She glanced in that direction. Sure enough. She could see the side of Lydia's face. She was wearing that startled expression Helaine was so fond of. Anna would find it irresistible, too. Helaine began weaving through the guests, toward them.

"Dr. Kristenson, what a pleasure to see you again. Sorry to hear abou-"

"Please, call me Helaine. Excuse me for a moment."

"Helaine, how are you?" asked Jon.

She smiled politely, her eyes on the pair in the living room. "Jon, excuse me, won't you?"

"Isn't everyone acting strange tonight?" Jon asked his beer bottle.

"Jon, you look lost," Kay said. "Have you tried these? They're delicious."

"In case you ever need assistance," Anna was just saying as she dropped her card into Lydia's hip pocket. "Getting dressed that is."

Ooh-Lydia stepped back.

"Anna," Helaine called from the doorway. Not her most cordial voice.

Lydia turned her head, surprised.

"How nice to see you again," Helaine said, laying her cheek against Anna's. "Offering her redress?" she whispered.

Anna laughed. "How are you, Helaine? Lydia and I were just discussing you."

"Of course you were," Helaine replied, turning to Lydia and planting a kiss on her mouth. "I hear you've been looking for me."

At least. The party had hushed considerably. Lydia had little doubt that if she glanced behind her there would be an audience. Still, a kiss on the mouth...she put her arm around Helaine's neck and kissed her back. "Always looking for you," she said, lowering her voice. "I hope you don't mind I'm here."

"It was delightful to meet you, Lydia Beaumont," Anna said, making her exit. "Helaine, you look as radiant as ever, if not more so. Call anytime, Lydia," she said over her shoulder.

Lydia gave Helaine an apologetic smile and mindful of the Keagans' guests, terminated the embrace.

The show was over. The party's volume rose to normal again.

"You will not call her," Helaine said through her teeth.

"Why, Dr. Kristenson, I didn't think you cared," Lydia teased. "For jealousy that is."

"It is something to resist. If one can."

"Can one?"

Helaine took a gulp of wine. "Shopping for a new wardrobe?"

"Shopping for Dr. Right. My couch or yours?"

"Hah! There's a devil in you. Probably got that from Edward, as well."

"Ouch. I'll tell him you said so. He'll be pleased to hear it. What are you doing later?"

"Lydia Beaumont...I'm taking a breather."

Lydia nodded grimly. "You're punishing me for someone else's crimes."

"I am not. I'm simply trying to avoid the same mistakes. You found my friend appealing?"

Lydia sighed. "I'm not attracted to women. Just you."

Helaine laughed. "Flatterer. Your father taught you well."

"When do you plan on sleeping with me again, Helaine? Before or after my gonads fall off?"

"They do not fall off, my dear."

"Atrophy then?"

"Tell me you love me anyway, you gallivant."

"Tell me you want to jump my bones," Lydia said hopefully.

"Do you ladies need a bed?" Robert inquired. "Because I'm sure we can locate one."

"I love you and your bones, darling. You know that."

"But I am betrothed to another," Robert muttered over their heads.

"And?"

"And you already know I want to jump your bones."

"Over them or onto them?" he inserted.

"Well, what do you want me to do, Lana? I'll do it."

"You can't," Helaine answered.

"I'll be back," Robert said, giving up.

"Tell me anyway, Helaine."

"All right then. I want you to make all this disappear. The hiding, the lying, the cameras, the video takes, the prying in our private life. All of it," she said, setting her glass down and folding her arms. "I want it over with."

Lydia gazed into her wineglass. "And I can do this by going away?"

Helaine reached into Lydia's hip pocket and pulled out Anna's card. "If you choose," she said, ripping it to shreds.

Lydia watched the pieces of paper as they fell to the floor like snowflakes. Winter was certainly the right time for going away, taking a breather as Helaine said. But there were so many commitments. There were meetings with Paula, meetings with regulators, meetings with attorneys. And depositions soon, ordered by the plaintiff. Excruciating who, what, where, why and when's. Swear to this, swear to that, nothing but nails in her coffin, putting an end to a fine romance, the best sex she ever had. "I actually have a choice?" she asked.

```
Helaine chuckled. "Lydia...has anyone ever told you you're dense?"
Lydia perked up a bit. "Yes," she admitted. "All the time. How did you know?"
"Oh, I didn't. Just a lucky guess."

"You're out of your mind. For how long, Beaumont?"
"A few months?"
"I'll just say it's a bit premature but not unexpected, the end. They'll be chewing my ass for an explanation though."
"Thank you, Paula."
"For what?"
"Your brevity."

"Liddy, do what you have to. That's my learned opinion."
"Solar flare?"
"Hey, it happens to the best of us."

"Queenie...I...does your mother know about this?"
"Yes."
```

On the day she was to be deposed for pretrial testimony, Lydia Beaumont sat parked in a white stretch limousine, watching the courthouse steps through her tinted windows, observing the reporters who had coagulated there. Upstairs, she knew, the plaintiff and defendant and an array of restless attorneys were waiting in vain for her arrival. In her place she had had the courtesy to send two very large checks. They were in two separate envelopes tucked in the breast pocket of Stanley Kandinsky, who smiled opaquely whenever questioned as to why his client was so late.

Everything was being done by the clock. Lydia timed the transaction with a digital watch propped up against a bottle of cognac on the bar. It was a little too early for a drink, but she was nevertheless tempted, with hands that had turned to ice, a stomach full and queasy with excitement.

The outcome was uncertain. If all went according to plan, a blond would emerge from the courthouse, fight her way through the throngs of reporters, enter the limo and be whisked away to a secure and undisclosed location. If not, Lydia could expect to see hawk-faced Stan returning the check she had made payable to Helaine, together with the letter explaining that she was offering to pay half of her lover's worth to settle with the plaintiff–gross, just as Sharon had been demanding.

"Myself and what is mine, to you and yours is now converted," she had quoted on the bottom line. Whatever Helaine decided, the plaintiff could keep Lydia's half million. She was getting out today. It was over.

Later Willard Hathaway would recall that he nearly wet himself with joy when he received his envelope and that he thought he might have to call an ambulance for Sharon Chambers when Helaine Kristenson asked for and then promptly signed the settlement agreement. In his ecstasy he had accepted Robert Keagan's hastily negotiated ten-year gag, as well. That would be Sharon's albatross, he figured. She was so blown over she agreed to the stipulation without even knowing.

This all necessarily took longer than originally expected and by the time Lydia spied a blond head of hair at the top of the courthouse steps, she had nearly given up hope on the woman. "Help her please," she ordered the driver, when she saw Helaine being mobbed by the press. The driver went to her rescue and in five minutes Helaine was safe inside the limousine, shivering because she had left the building without her jacket. "Plan A," Lydia told him as she wrapped a blanket around her. He left the curb before the reporters understood what had happened.

```
"Darling, come here."
```

Helaine chuckled and pulled her into the blanket with her. "Consider it a perk then. Where are you taking me?"

Lydia placed a pillow behind her head. "To a hotel, naturally."

"Ah, I see-be careful with those buttons, darling. These are the only clothes I have for now."

"For now you won't be needing any-I just want to hold you anyway."

"You're undressing me just to hold me? Where exactly is this hotel?"

Lydia smiled serenely and kissed her. "Five hours away."

"Five-you'll never make it for that long, Ms. Beaumont! I'll see to it."

"You want to bet?"

"Well, I don't know. Do we actually have any money left?"

"Some," Lydia whispered, lifting Helaine's skirt up. "Be good for me, Lana."

Helaine stretched herself out under the blanket and sighed happily. "All right, I'll bet you a new suit of clothes then."

"You're on," Lydia said, undoing her own blouse.

"I'm on," Helaine murmured, tucking the blanket around them.

"How do you like that?" Lydia teased.

"Lydia Beau...oh...you're cheating..."

Paula Treadwell, president and chief financial officer for Soloman-Schmitt, had finally come to that point in the press conference where she usually lost her patience and went home. The press corps could tell that by the way she held her briefcase. It was back to yes and no and I dunno again or I didn't understand the question. This was, they suspected, probably her last official statement to them as she had steered her troubled company out of imminent danger and no longer felt obligated to provide day-to-day assessments to anyone.

"Okay," she said impatiently, "last question and I'm out of here. Go ahead, you. You, I said. Last question."

"Can you give us a statement concerning your former chief financial strategist, Lydia Beaumont?"

"Concerning what about her?" she growled, grabbing her coat and leaving the platform.

"Concerning her whereabouts and, uh, the private settlement with, uh—"

"Once and for all, that matter has nothing to do with Soloman-Schmitt."

The reporters had been foiled by a gag decree and had pestered Treadwell for the details for two weeks straight.

"Well, uh, we thought since there is a link between Beaumont and Soloman-Schmitt that perhaps you could lend us some insight there."

[&]quot;No."

[&]quot;No?"

[&]quot;That's not what I paid for, Ms. Hard-to-get."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book One THE SECRET KEEPING

[&]quot;My insight? Well, it's obvious isn't it? They've eloped."
"That's it?" he persisted. He'd already guessed that much.
"Isn't that enough?" she said in retort.

[&]quot;We were hoping you could elaborate on that."
"Elaborate? Okay. They lived happily ever after, *the end*."

Fortune Is a Woman

PREFACE

I conclude then that fortune varying and men remaining fixed in their ways, they are successful so long as these ways conform to circumstances, but when they are opposed then they are unsuccessful. I certainly think it is better to be impetuous than cautious, for fortune is a woman and it is necessary, if you wish to master her, to take her by force. And it can be seen that she lets herself be overcome by the bold rather than by those who proceed coldly.

Niccolò Machiavelli, <u>The Prince</u>

CHAPTER 1: Fortune Is a Woman

Hump day. And by the time those five o'clock whistles blow, nearly half a billion people will have fantasized about getting lucky with someone else's woman–437,694,138 to be precise.

She was keeping her without meaning to, absorbing her platitudes silently as she studied the patterns in the silverware. Forming on the tip of the tongue were the kind of words Lydia Beaumont hated to use, difficult pronouncements like "no" and "because I don't want to."

"You can do this for me, Beaumont, unpopular as it may be. It's better to be feared than loved anyway."

Through with the dog-eat-dog stuff for the moment, Paula Treadwell was once again resorting to Machiavelli.

"I know, I know," Lydia answered. "But-"

"No buts. Love fades, fear is everlasting. What-losing your drive?"

"No...avoiding being despised or hated. Also important, you may recall."

Paula peered over her reading lenses and snorted with exaggerated disdain for her squeamish associate. Bloody hands were, she knew, just an occupational hazard in business. "If you can actually avoid such things, good luck."

"True. But it's still preferable to be loved."

Preferences, smeferences. Paula glanced meaningfully at her watch. She had grown impatient with this lunch topic and Lydia's reticence. "Personally I take my love ambitions to the bedroom not the boardroom," she quipped, plunging her fork into an already mangled slice of cherry pie.

How to suppress a corporate coup without spilling a single drop of blood on the president and without the press ever hearing about it. Get the senior vice president to do it! The senior vice president nodded grimly and scanned the dining room. Firing people was not exactly her cup of tea.

There was a lot of background noise in the club, not just glasses clinking or forks scraping plates. If she closed her eyes, couldn't she also hear a few sabers rattling, the crunch of daggers digging deep into the bone, the rustle of cloaks? How many conversations like theirs, Lydia wondered, could be heard in here today?

"I know how you feel about it, Beaumont, but it really is a dog-eat-dog world," Paula opined for the fiftieth time today. She was running out of metaphors. And cherries.

"All right. Enough please," Lydia mumbled, feeling queasy. "I'll do it."

"Good, and quickly please. I'm tired of having to look over my shoulder."

Lunch sucked and it was raining again. "Consider it done."

"Done," Paula replied, flipping open her briefcase. "Here's your hit list."

Lydia wiped her hands with her rumpled dinner napkin and examined the names of the conspirators. No surprises, she folded it several times and jammed it in her pocket. There was a brand new copy of *The Prince* in Paula's briefcase, she had noticed, and it dawned on her that it was that time of year again, time for Treadwell's initiation rites. One single copy.

"Who's your prince this year?" she asked, guiding the subject only slightly away from sedition and sabotage.

"One candidate-can you believe? The rest nothing but a bunch of slobs and miscreants. Absolute first-rate prison fodder."

She could believe that. "Who is it, Paula?"

"Unh, unh. Top secret. You know that."

Who gets a copy of Machiavelli's five-hundred-year-old treatise is still top secret. "Fine."

VP Beaumont's edition looked just about five hundred years old. Stashed somewhere in her office, it was dog-eared, highlighted and tattered to shreds by now, a gift from Paula when the two were merely mentor and protégée, given long before anyone ever imagined that Paula Treadwell would one day rule the mighty kingdom of Soloman-Schmitt, the financial giant's first woman president.

"All politics is corporate," Paula had penned on the inside cover. "Read it."

Lydia laughed, remembering. Read it or else. Whoever it was had no idea what they were in for, the true nature of this very mixed blessing. The pop quizzes, the endless grillings, the midnight inquisitions, the ruined cocktail parties, the elevator hell rides, indigestion at the favorite restaurant they thought Paula would never find out about. They had better read it, Lydia knew. She watched the woman reorganizing her paperwork, closing the briefcase and setting it on the table with a loud smack. President Treadwell had a delivery to make, the sound declared. A tradition to uphold. "I'm sorry to have kept you so long, Paula."

"Anything else, ladies?"

"No, we're done here," Lydia informed the waiter. "Put it on the bill, please."

Outside she wrestled hopelessly with her umbrella until at last a gust of wind came to the rescue and blew it open for her. She loomed pensively under it, Paula pacing under the restaurant awning, both waiting for their drivers.

Fear, love, Machiavelli, and a bone-chilling drizzle. Lydia shivered.

"Listen," Paula said, "I know how you feel about this cloak and dagger stuff, believe me."

Lydia doubted that.

"But the bedroom is, after all, the only place where I'd ever consent to being eaten alive."

Their cars arrived, one behind the other. Lydia smiled bleakly and got in hers.

Paula had more to say. Always more to say. She motioned for Lydia to roll down her window. Lydia rolled the window down.

"Speaking of human flesh, how is your blond Venus, Beaumont?"

"Nice segue-midtown please," Lydia told the driver, "Soloman-Schmitt."

"Well?"

Her blond Venus. A much more agreeable subject. Lydia grinned as she rolled the window back up. "Ravenous," she replied, through the crack of it.

"So? How did it go up there?"

VP Beaumont let her briefcase drop to the floor and collapsed in the nearest chair. "Lots of silver platters to fill, I'm afraid."

"Out, out damned spot?"

"You got it," she said, forcing a smile for a clever assistant and coming up with something instead that felt just shy of a grimace. She was a henchman today, battle scarred and weary. She glanced at the time. Three already. "Any calls?"

"No calls. Get happy."

No calls. Lydia reclined in the chair and exhaled deeply. She was exhausted, her feet hurt.

"You look exhausted, Ms. Beaumont."

"Mmmm...that I am," she acknowledged with closing eyes and a wide yawn. "You know," she drawled sleepily, letting her head fall back against the chair, "I think you have something for me." Behind the blanket of her lids she was ready to float away. "You have something for me?" she asked, yawning again, trying to stay focused on the question and listening over the edge of a widening abyss for the answer.

A squawk came from her assistant's chair, no answer.

She could sleep, Lydia realized. Right here if she wanted to. There was just the humming of an office computer and a squeaky chair preventing it, an unanswered...her body jerked and she opened her eyes again. Her assistant had an expression she had never seen her wear before, one of complete stupefaction. "What's wrong?"

"I-what are you asking me, Ms. Beaumont?"

What was she asking? "What did I-?"

"I'm not sure what you meant."

"I'm asking about the memo?" Lydia prodded doubtfully. "I'm thinking the memo?" (Ah, the memo! She's thinking the memo, fool. THE MEMO.)

Venus Angelo was not blond. Even if she bleached her hair she could never be mistaken for a blond. And being blond or not being blond was not exactly what troubled her these days, though it was somewhat relevant to the problem.

The young woman sat lost in her thoughts, thumbing absently through a brand-new edition of *The Prince* and scowling unintentionally at a poster of Marlene Dietrich who gazed lasciviously back at her from behind the bar at Frank's Place.

It was Wednesday. Unlike Friday's happy hour, all was quiet this evening at midtown's favorite corporate hangout, no weekend warriors hanging from the chandeliers. Venus sucked in the calm and listened to Sinatra as she finished her dinner.

She should be home, she was thinking. Home with her husband. Newlyweds, they both ought to be in bed right now, ordering pizza and drinking champagne and thinking up names for their yet unborn children. Nine months married and it was already a fiasco. Doomed, she realized, from the very beginning.

And to think it was not his fault at all. She toyed with her band of gold guiltily and questioned how people could wear one so long. Just the short while she had worn hers had been so indescribably unbearable and it was not simply the plainness of the ring that bothered her, or that it seemed to make her finger swell, but that it was always in the way: when she worked out, when she got dressed, when she braided her hair, when she simply wanted to sit and chill.

Twenty-eight was too young to marry, Venus concluded this Wednesday. Especially to someone she didn't love. She searched the room for the waiter and avoided Marlene Dietrich.

Why couldn't she love Michael?

She was desperate to love Michael. She loved his body, she loved his face, she loved his hands. She could even say that she loved his mind. And didn't it help that her mama liked him, approved of him even if he was just a white boy? What was wrong with her? How could she not love a man that was kind and attentive, not too smart and not too stupid? Why not love a man who was so damn good to her, good in bed?

Venus drowned her sigh in a sip of cognac. It was, she told herself, all her fault. Her fault, because from the beginning it wasn't Michael she wanted to be married to. She signaled the waiter. She shouldn't have said yes to him, should have stood her own ground. Things had been fine when they only lived together. Living together hadn't seemed so daunting to Venus. But now, till death do they part? Damn! And so here she was, with a husband that she didn't want because...she closed her book and slipped it into her coat pocket. "The bill, please."

She should be home with her husband or putting an end to the charade that was hurting them both. She could do this without ever mentioning her boss, without Michael ever really knowing she was in love with her boss, without anyone ever knowing about her boss including her boss. She could say honestly that the marriage proved to be a mistake for *her*, that *she* wasn't ready and had been too stupid to know it at the time. Michael had his own money, their finances were not too mingled as yet, and they had no debt. They could call the whole thing off. Surely, he would go for that solution, considering their present predicament. Surely, the truth was as obvious to him as it was to her. Everything so self-evident, she hoped. *Except* that she was in love with her boss.

VP Beaumont was out of breath and flustered with herself this morning. Up late lovemaking and she was dragging herself all over the court. To make matters worse, her assistant was attempting to show her a bit of mercy. "Hit the goddamned ball, Venus!"

Venus lunged and missed. "Yours again."

"Bullshit. You're letting me win."

Venus killed the ball. "Bullshit," she mimicked. "And why would I do that?"

"Because I'm making a spectacle of myself."

"That simply would not move me, Ms. Beaumont."

"Then hit the goddamned ball!"

Venus served. There followed a series of twangs, a successful volley, and then Lydia ran out of fuel again, defaulted and threw herself in a panting heap against the side wall.

Venus stood over her, barely out of breath. "You all right?"

"Stop feeling sorry for my middle-aged ass."

Venus laughed. "Then get your sorry, middle-aged ass off the floor and play ball with me."

They played terribly for another half-hour and then headed for the sauna to sit and steam over it together, their towels and robes hanging side by side. Venus didn't mention the match, but she could tell by Lydia's expression that she was obsessing on it, pouting over her sluggish performance. It was no big deal, Venus wanted to say, but she sat quietly, too, and pretended with her boss that it was, until, at length, Lydia stood up and sullenly announced that she was leaving.

"I'm going," she said, without making eye contact. "See you at the office."

Venus didn't answer her, just swooned in the heat, too hot and too damp to speak. Shake them nasty thoughts, she scolded herself, as she watched VP Beaumont half limp, half saunter away.

She had something for her boss. Something she couldn't put in a memo. Something huge.

CHAPTER 2: Is a Woman

"Darling, you're limping."

"It's nothing. Made an ass of myself at the club again," Lydia said, rubbing a swollen knee. "Helaine...what are you wearing?"

"It's-" she measured Lydia's reaction to the new gown. "It's for Paula's big shindig. I absolutely forbid you to tear it."

Forbidden. Lydia hobbled to the bar, poured herself a glass of wine. "It's the furthest thing from my mind, Lana. Trust me." The leg really hurt. She leaned on the counter for support.

"Yah. Venus clobber you again?" Helaine asked, unzipping herself.

Lydia groaned an affirmation. "Come here. Let me help."

Helaine went to the bar, knelt on the floor and lifted Lydia's skirt. "Ooh, it's swollen, honey."

"Hah."

"Your knee, of course-you're fresh sometimes. I want you to have it looked at."

"Sometimes?"

"Listen to me. I want you at least to rest it."

"Okay," Lydia said, managing to slide beneath her. "I'm resting it."

Helaine drew the gown up over her head, hurled it toward the couch. "Really, Ms. Beaumont. You need to be a bit more cautious. She's a young woman, more than a decade your junior and—"

"Are you going to do something here, or just talk up Venus all night?"

Helaine leaned into her. "You two will be the death of me yet," she whispered.

"Mmmmmmm."

"For fortune is a woman and therefore, like a woman, she is always a friend to the young, because they are less cautious, fiercer, and master her with greater audacity."

OH, YEAH, Venus wrote in the margin next to that passage. Oh, yeah, in hot pink highlighter pen.

"Let me see it."

"Don't worry about it, Venus. A week, it'll be fine."

"Ms. Beaumont, let's see it. I know about these things. I'm qualified."

Lydia sighed. It hurt to wear heels. Hurt her pride, too. She swiveled in her chair and let her assistant kneel beside her. Let her remove her shoes. Let her lift her skirt. Let her examine the knee. Let her massage—

"It's fine," she blurted, removing Venus' hands and arranging her skirt so that it once again covered her knees. "It's better today."

Venus went back to her desk. "Water," she said, over her shoulder. "Fluid. It'll be all right, though," she added, pecking at her keyboard aimlessly.

Later in the day, as Lydia was heading for home, she hesitated at her assistant's desk and addressed the side of her face. "Stop calling me Ms. Beaumont," she instructed.

Venus ceased typing. "Okay," she said without looking up.

"I mean you've known me for nearly two years. Ms. just seems so...so awkward, I guess." She turned to leave. "I hate it, actually. Call me Lydia," she said, listing in the doorway with the briefcase dangling from her like an anchor. "Or even Beaumont, if you must."

Venus resumed typing. "Okay."

CHAPTER 3: A Woman

There were no queers in the hood. Only he-and-she things. No queers in African America, Venus Angelo had been raised to believe. So she had some issues to straighten out.

By the time Venus had come to work for the financial giant Soloman-Schmitt, she had, like everyone else, already heard of Lydia Beaumont, through the tabloids and television gab shows that had outed the camerashy investment strategist as "Jane Doe" in the highly sensationalized "Love Doc Triangle". The Love Doc, Dr. Helaine Kristenson, was, prior to all this, famous enough for her popular self-help bible, "Keeping Mr. Right," but the palimony suit filed against her by her notorious lover, super-model Sharon Chambers, quadrupled that fame and served as a catalyst to make the name Lydia Beaumont a household word as well. Venus remembered how shocked she had been to learn that Jane Doe worked in the financial industry. There were no queers in finance...well, maybe the whole world is queer then. How do you know?

Low-key, high class, financial strategist Beaumont was not born to be in the limelight, but she wowed the public once she got there, buying off Sharon Chambers for an undisclosed sum. In the millions they said. Wowed Venus Angelo, too, because that's exactly what she would have done if—

Venus had been at the firm for only three years when Lydia Beaumont promoted her to be her assistant. A meteoric rise to be sure and she couldn't turn the offer down, no matter how much her family razzed her about it.

They had never approved of her working for "The Man" anyway, let alone one disguised as a beautiful woman.

Her sister was her worst critic.

"You a ho, Venus."

"Kiss my-"

"Stop it, both of you!"

"C'mon, Mama. She's such a-"

"Out, Jasmine!"

"Yeah," Venus said. "Git."

Jasmine huffed and ran out. Venus heard the door slam and put her head in her hands. Her father, who had been completely silent this afternoon, got up from the table and left the room.

"What do ya'll expect me to do," Venus finally implored, "march on Washington or something? I don't see any of you making sacrifices."

Her mother raised her hand to end the discourse. "How's Michael taking all this?" she asked.

Venus was too perturbed to change her tone. "What do you care, anyway?"

"Well I do care. I care about my baby girl. I was hoping he was right with it, that's all."

"He's fine, Mama. He's not contesting it."

Divorce. What next? "Then you're lucky, Venus. This time, anyway."

"This time? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, baby. Eat your food. Why are you always on edge? If you don't like coming here then you don't have to. She's just a kid, Venus. She's only teasing."

Venus hesitated before responding. "I get you this beautiful place-remember how we used to have to live?-and all I get is hassle when I come home." She pointed toward the living room. "He doesn't even speak to me."

"He never did, Venus, so don't you fret over it. Eat. Everyone knows what you done for us. Eat."

"Maybe the food's not bland enough," Venus heard her father say from the couch. "She likes everything bland now."

"Blond, my ass," Venus muttered in return and with that she got up, kissed her mother goodbye and took a cab downtown to Frank's Place.

Frank's was crowded and rowdy this Friday. Harry, the waiter, sat Venus temporarily at the bar and apologized profusely for inconveniencing her. It was against his policy to seat women alone at the bar, especially pretty women, which Venus was. When her table was finally ready, she found he had left a glass of cognac for her. On the house, he said, in passing. She thanked him and shot it down.

Michael had been such a love about everything; an uncontested divorce. Venus had shared the news with her family only because it was something they had to know. There was no way around it.

So that was that and she would be free again and she didn't have to wear this silly ring anymore. But she didn't exactly relish having to sleep alone either. What could she do about that? she wanted to know this Friday, this minute. The cognac burned. Nothing.

Lydia Beaumont. Lydia. Beaumont.

They had not been to the club together in weeks. In fact, Lydia had taken time off so the knee would heal. She was expected back on Monday. In the interim, Venus had asked her husband for a divorce. It seemed right. She hailed Harry and ordered another cognac, some fries and wings, a mesclun salad.

Beaumont and Kristenson were happily married. What could she do about that? Harry brought the salad. Nothing. She thanked him. Nothing, that's right. And no one knew better than Venus just how happily married they were. It was Venus who delivered Helaine's cryptic love messages to Lydia at the office. Venus who saw the focus go out of Lydia's eyes after she got them. Venus who was forced to observe for the rest of the day the dreamy-eyed VP proceeding then hot and distracted. Another cognac. Another thank-you. Venus had been to their home and to their cocktail parties and to their dinner gatherings and every other kind of event, in every other kind of setting and it was no act, they were happy with each other. Harry brought the wings and fries. She thanked him again. She could see the sparks fly from one to the other, those fireworks. That they were still fresh in love was so painfully clear, their sex life so... well, they never even noticed anyone else. The wings were very hot. Had she said painfully clear or painfully hot? She gulped the cognac down. God, everything tasted like jet fuel tonight. She searched the room for the headwaiter, her mouth on fire.

A good waiter is hard to find. Harry was better than good. He was a mind reader. "Here you go," he said, depositing a glass of water.

That man did everything right. "Thank you."

Mr. Right! What if Mr. Right is somebody's missus? What if she was a pair of well-toned thighs and dreamy blue eyes and a to-die-for sultry mouth? Why didn't the Love Doc write about that? Why didn't she write about *getting* Mr. Right, huh? Maybe getting is much more difficult than keeping.

Getting, keeping, whatever. The immediate problem would be sleeping alone again. And dodging Paula tomorrow night. Where's Michael? Why didn't you bring your husband, Angelo?

She'd have to rehearse some lines for the Treadwell's dinner party, but for right now, oh, man, how the thought of sleeping alone again horrified her. She sized up the situation at the bar and made a quick selection. I sleep alone for fucking no one, she reminded herself, deliberately passing over the guy with the dark hair and blue eyes for the hazel-eyed cutie standing beside him. Why should she sleep alone? For a woman? She winked at him and felt her ring under the table. He smiled confidently, laid a tip on the bar and headed toward her. Ah, that wedding ring. She pulled it off and hid it in her vest pocket. She'd have to put the darn thing on again tomorrow, just for appearance's sake and so Paula wouldn't notice and interrogate her about it. Tonight though, she wasn't into sleeping alone. Not for no one. Not even Mr. Right.

She asked the gentleman to join her for dinner. He did.

"Tell me about Venus."

Lydia gave Helaine a mysterious look. "Tell you what, Lana?"

"What is her story? I find her so impressive."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

"Her story? Her story is that she was a child prodigy. Completed her undergraduate studies by age nineteen, graduate, MBA by twenty-two, Soloman-Schmitt twenty-three, assistant to the vice president twenty-six. Married last year. No children—or no children as yet. Athletic, honest, hardworking, indispensable."

"And beautiful."

"And beautiful, of course. But you don't need that to work for Soloman-Schmitt."

"Hah! But between the two of you it is looking rather like a market trend."

"Now you flatter. You are attracted to my assistant, Dr. Kristenson?"

Helaine paused for a second. "No, my dear. You are."

Lydia coughed and sat up. "I am?"

"Oh, yes. You are."

"Lana, I really don't think so."

"I saw it last night at the dinner party. It happens to people all the time, Lydia Beaumont. Even people like you."

"Helaine! You say this as casually as you might say, 'darling, you have food on your chin.' I am not attracted to Venus Angelo."

"Oh, not true. I would be quite alarmed if you had food on your chin."

"Oh? Good to know. And it would not alarm you if I was attracted to my assistant, which I adamantly deny?"

"It would alarm me if you were in love with your assistant, which you are not."

Lydia put her head on Helaine's bare shoulder and breathed down her neck. "Lana?"

"Yes?"

"I really wanted to rip that dress off you, last night. Did you happen to give any notice to that?"

"Yes, darling. I did see that, too."

"Why don't you be sweet to me then and put it on?"

"Now? Tonight?"

"Now. Tonight."

Helaine threw her head back and laughed. "You have so very little discipline in this department. For such a highly disciplined woman."

"And does that alarm you?

Helaine thought for a moment. "No. I'll be right back."

Chapter 4: Flatterers Must Be Shunned

Paula Treadwell shunned flattery and surrounded herself with wise women and men who did not offend her if they spoke the truth. That is, when she asked them to. By example, Lydia Beaumont, too, chose for her counsel people of wisdom and integrity and gave them full liberty to speak the truth. That is, whenever she asked them to. Helaine Kristenson, on the other hand, with far more porous boundaries than the other two ladies, chose trustworthy friends and associates, but gave them license to speak the truth whenever they damn well pleased, and this, she hoped, would be all the time. Usually it was. Of course, truth is so subjective these days.

"Swell dinner party that was. Put the thank-you note in the mail already. You looked like an exotic dessert," Robert Keagan Esq. said into his coffee.

Kay Keagan smirked. "Or exotic hors d'oeuvres."

Helaine beamed. "It's nice to be edible, but it took me weeks to get into that dress."

"And only a few minutes for Lydia, I bet."

"Well...she is pretty handy."

Lunch at Frank's with her old friends. Helaine had resumed going there again, usually on weekdays, now and then on Saturdays, as she used to before all hell had broken out.

Total hell, but that was years ago. Things had quieted down since then and she was no longer sinking in scandal and front page exposés, courtesy of her ex "pal" Sharon Chambers, who was no longer supermodeling these days, having herself settled down into super-motherhood, a status that seemed, at least for the time being, to be keeping her too busy to make any more trouble for Helaine and Lydia. Of, course, the ten-year gag order Robert Keagan had slipped by Team Chambers did a great deal to contribute to the peace. Helaine was always grateful to him for it and from time to time expressed her gratitude, but he disliked the subject and rarely spoke of their past ordeal. Things had not gone their way and if Lydia hadn't met Sharon's demands, he knew they'd still be fighting the tarantula today, not to mention that Sharon's kiss-and-tell would have long since been published, and who could predict the fallout from that, or what it might have done to Helaine's career, or Lydia's for that matter? Certainly, the ladies would never have been comfortable enough to marry if the melee dragged on still, or carried itself into the next decade.

"Tell me about Venus Angelo," Robert asked.

Helaine glanced at him. "What do you want to know?"

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Everything, I guess. She's quite smitten with your wife, you know. I mean, I'm assuming you know that."

She did. She had noticed that as well, although this observation she had kept secret from Lydia. She was still wondering when it had happened. She had met Venus on a handful of other occasions and had never detected it, so either it had escaped her attention, which she doubted, or it was something Ms. Angelo could no longer conceal. It was made more problematic by the discovery that Lydia was sexually attracted to the girl, albeit only mildly. A recent development as far as the doctor could tell. "She's married," Helaine said. "And so is Lydia."

Kay nudged her husband under the table.

"I'm just curious," he said. "They work closely together?"

Kay sighed impatiently.

Helaine cleared her throat. "She is Lydia's assistant. Quite able, I hear. Loyal and honest. Have you suddenly no faith in Ms. Beaumont, Robert? Or do you know something I don't?"

"I have nothing but faith in Lydia. It is Venus Angelo I doubt, perhaps because I simply don't know her as well as you must."

Helaine chewed her bottom lip. The truth was that she didn't know very much at all about Lydia's assistant except her professional qualifications, that she was married, that she was young and beautiful, that she was more than a little smitten with Lydia.

Helaine Kristenson absolutely abhorred being jealous of anyone. And Dr. Kristenson counseled her patients against it. Jealousy, she often preached, was to be avoided at all costs, lest it play a critical role in the disintegration of one's union. She was not going to flirt with jealousy now. Not ever, if she could help it. She regained her composure, smiled and said, "I am registering your concerns and will keep an eye on the situation. Okay?"

He smiled and finished his mimosa. "Smart girl," was his reply.

Kay's shadow stabbed him to death.

"Oh, come on. 'Men will always be false to you unless they are compelled by necessity to be true.' You know this stuff."

"Paula? You're saying you can't trust Angelo anymore?"

"Open your eyes, Beaumont. Why is she true to you? Because you are the vice president of the Fortune 500 company that employs her? Or is there, perhaps, some other necessity?"

"My eyes are open. I don't see-did I ask for your opinion on this? I don't believe I did."

"Ah-hah! I caught you. The girl is smitten with *you* not her job, and you know it. And if you don't know it, you don't want to know it. Anyone with an eye for such things can see how much she idolizes you. And can you think of anyone else you might know who does have an eye for such things, Beaumont? Hmm? How about a world renowned sex therapist? Know any of those? Yes, well, your blond is no dummy and if she makes a stink over it—which I would do if I were in her place, any woman would, the girl is a knockout in every way—then you won't be able to concentrate on your work and then Soloman-Schmi—"

"Paula! Soloman-Schmitt? This is about Soloman-Schmitt? I will not demote my assistant. That is not in the best interests of Soloman-Schmitt. I will never do it."

Paula stared into her martini. Presently she responded, "You're right," and turned to Delilah Lewiston. "Is she the most obtuse person you have ever met or what?"

Lydia's eyes met Delilah's. "Okay, Del. Say it, please."

Delilah had been silent throughout this exchange. She had missed the Treadwell's dinner party, but Lydia's reaction puzzled her. "Has Helaine said anything about this?"

Lydia balked at the question. She was not going to divulge what Helaine had actually said, but compared to this scene, she seemed the least concerned, the least threatened by the situation. If she was, Lydia doubted she would ever make a stink. It wasn't her style. Besides there was nothing to it, nothing whatsoever to make a stink over. "Del, very little. Not like this nonsense."

"Then it's your call, Paula. I trust Liddy completely."

Lydia smiled triumphantly. Paula pushed the food around her plate and dropped her fork in it for effect.

"I don't want anymore scandal involving the firm and I do want you to pay attention to the situation, for chrissake. How can you be so ignorant? What—someone has to get naked and climb into your lap before you know they've got the hots for you? Grow up, Beaumont, and pay closer attention to the world you live in."

Delilah choked back a laugh. It was true. Lydia Beaumont was the most obtuse person in the world. Scarcely aware most times that it even existed. And yet that world seemed so preoccupied with reminding Dame Beaumont that it was there.

Lydia looked askance. Delilah looked away.

"Why are you always snickering at my predicaments?" Lydia demanded, after lunch was over and Paula had left them on the sidewalk to mull over her indictments. "Why is everything so funny to you?"

"It is funny, Liddy. Let's go get drunk and get our names in the police blotter, make some headlines. That'll show Paula Treadwell."

Lydia laughed at the notion and then fell silent, as if everything Paula had said was finally hitting home. "Geesh, I've already gone through that nightmare. My name in all the papers. I sure wouldn't want to go there again."

"Yeeaah! So pay attention, Liddy. Like the woman says."

"Sales are stable and still pretty high so they're not anxious by any means, but they could be boosted with a revised edition. Some updated entries or the like. That's not an uncommon marketing approach."

Helaine was meeting with her agent this afternoon, her nose still bent about Venus, about Robert's boldness in broaching the subject. Was it that obvious to other people?

"Dr. Kristenson?"

"Look, Sam, parts of the material are already so controversial. How could it ever get old?" This was becoming an annual event. The publisher's request for a revised edition, her reluctance to provide it.

"They're not actually asking for new content here and they're not actually requesting that you really change anything or rack your brains for something new. They'd just like to see a little something different so it wouldn't be exactly fraudulent on their part to claim that this is a new and revised edition. It'll shoot up the charts again for a few weeks, maybe stay up there a few months and boost their sales for the end of the year. You find that too unethical, Dr.? Or are you simply too busy to accommodate the request? If so, they're willing to hire someone to assist you. That is, if you would authorize it."

An assistant. Helaine scoffed inaudibly. If Venus' infatuation was so apparent to Robert and Kay, then who else had noticed it? Sharon's exploits had been humiliating enough, especially since they were so frequently publicized, but Lydia's would be devastating. Lydia was so much the opposite of Sharon. So...so faithful.

"Can I make a suggestion?" Sam asked.

She shook her head. Ultimately she didn't believe it. Lydia was not the adulterous type. Maybe she would be, though, if she was hounded relentlessly about Venus, if Helaine made unreasonable demands and ultimatums as some jealous mates are wont to do. Wouldn't that make Venus seem appealing? A refuge from the terrible nag waiting at home.

Oh, god, a nag. That gave her chills. She knew better than to nag Lydia about rumors and speculation. Lydia was not sleeping with Venus Angelo. She was not in love with Venus Angelo.

"Dr. Kristenson?"

"I'm sorry, Sam. Let me think on this, okay? I'm not making any promises, but maybe it's something I can get to after the tour. For now I'll just think on it. That's my only promise."

Riding the elevator down, Helaine couldn't chase her dark thoughts away. Time was, as always, an issue. She had one more afternoon session, then she could go home. She was thinking of when to discuss the world tour with Lydia and that tonight would just not be the right time.

Time, time, time, the enemy, she acknowledged, critiquing herself as she primped in the ladies' lounge downstairs. She could not, this lady knew, indefinitely compete with girls.

Maybe not, she admitted on the ride back to her office, but Lydia Beaumont was, after all, hers to lose, her Mr. Right to keep. Like it or not, a game was underfoot for her affections so she had to compete. This would be tricky and she'd have to go by the book on this one. Every single letter of it. She wasn't angry with Venus about it and she could never dislike her, but the young woman was not going to get Lydia Beaumont, nor was she going to win her by default. That would have to be over her dead body.

Lydia spent the rest of the day shopping with Delilah and chewing the fat, but her thoughts were predominantly on Venus this afternoon. She was thinking that perhaps she had been aware of the girl's growing attachment and had, indeed, deliberately ignored it. She was thinking also that it was flattering, very flattering at forty-one to be "idolized" as Paula had put it earlier, by such a person as Venus Angelo. She was thinking also of Helaine, who would be hurt by these rumblings and speculations.

"You've got to consider how Helaine would feel, Liddy. You don't want to let this get out of hand so that everybody's gossiping about you, saying that you're having an affair. Whether you are or not."

She would never have an affair because she couldn't really imagine it, having sex with anyone but Helaine Kristenson. Not with anyone, including the lovely and devoted Venus Angelo. Why would she need to? "I would never have an affair, Del. You know that."

That she had been attracted to Venus sometimes was pointless to deny, but there was nothing to confess there. She had never ventured very far with it in her mind. Admittedly, now that she was aware that those feelings might be mutual, it could be awkward to have Venus continue in her duties with her. It would be even worse to think that Paula was watching them suspiciously, having already prejudged the situation. Definitely something had to be done here. It was a very indelicate situation. Very distracting.

Lydia strolled with Delilah, considering aloud the various options and alternatives that Paula Treadwell had put before her at lunch, other than demoting Ms. Angelo, which was patently unethical and unfair. Her number one priority, she emphasized, had nothing to do with Paula or Soloman-Schmitt or her assistant. Her concerns were for Helaine. And, not incidentally, their love life.

"Boy, this is a shame, Liddy. Venus is a great kid. Sharp as a whip."

"I honestly don't know how I can part with her."

Delilah understood the quandary. "But I honestly don't know how you can keep her. Has anything actually happened? Anything that could technically be considered an impropriety?"

What constitutes an impropriety, Lydia wondered. Her hands on my thighs? "Uh...no. Not really," she said bashfully.

Delilah stopped dead in her tracks. "Liddy?"

"C'mon, Del, we shower together at the club. Once she massaged my knee when I hur-"

"Liddy, she has to go then!"

"Right. You're right. I realize that. Now."

They walked quietly after that until they passed the window of "one of those delightful little boutiques" as Helaine discreetly referred to them.

"Ooh!" Lydia exclaimed. "I want that."

"Liddy, what on earth do you do with such a thing?"

Lydia explained it in a whisper. Delilah grinned. Together they looked furtively over their shoulders and stepped quickly inside.

Homeward bound, Delilah offered her commentary. "You two are so sexually obsessed with each other. I don't know when you could even think about having an affair, showers or not."

"Sexually obsessed? You really think so?"

```
"It's Lydia, Dr. Kristenson."
```

"Thanks, Jenny. I'll take it in my office."

Jenny connected them.

[&]quot;Lana."

[&]quot;Darling, I was just thinking of you."

[&]quot;When will you be home?"

[&]quot;Why, you want to meet me for dinner?"

[&]quot;No, I want you home."

[&]quot;Oh, I see. What time?"

[&]quot;Ummmm...now?"

[&]quot;Well, Ms. Beaumont. I don't know if I can slide you in that soon."

[&]quot;I have a surprise...?"

[&]quot;Ah. Well, in that case, I'll meet you in an hour."

Chapter 5: What a Prince Must Do to Save Reputation

She couldn't do it. Even knowing that Paula was waiting for her to, didn't get it accomplished. How could she survive without Venus? Where could she send her anyway? Not up, she was too young for that. Not down, she was too good for that. And why should she hand her over crossways, to a lesser VP? Who could she replace her with once she was gone? How long would it take to train someone even if she could find a replacement, which was unlikely? How would she explain it to Venus? What if they ever had to work together again? Where would—?

"Beaumont! Get up here now."

"I'm coming, Paula."

"I had an interesting chat with your assistant last night. Ran into her at Cicero's, of all places. That seedy jazz club downtown?"

Yes, yes, Cicero's. Lydia had heard of it. Helaine liked to go there sometimes. "Go on."

"Yeah. Well, anyway. Seems she's getting a divorce."

Lydia was surprised by Paula's news. Venus hadn't told her this.

"I smell potential for scandal. Get her out of there, Beaumont."

"There is nothing going on, Paula. I have scrutinized her every move, every nuance, from the moment you first told me your suspicions and I haven't seen anything unusu—"

"I am not going to fire this kid, Beaumont. She's too valuable to me. Put in a request for a transfer or have her do it herself, you coward, but I want it done."

Italian leather couch to her left looked awfully comfortable. VP Beaumont sat down in it, said nothing.

"Vice President of Overseas Operations says you can trade assistants. I didn't explain the necessity." She studied Lydia. "Your hesitation in this matter concerns me, Beaumont. You look bad. Do this by the end of next week," she said. "She'll get more pay, of course. It'll be fine."

Lydia rose looking pale, Paula's henchman again. "Okay, Paula. Anything else?"

"That's all. See you at the board meeting Friday."

(Board meeting?)

"Did you forget?"

She had. "No, no, I remembered. See you Friday."

Shunned. Why, she didn't exactly know. Venus was now working for VP Kendle, a leering blue-hair who talked with a lisp and bathed in cologne. The office reeked of it and she was sure she did, too. Never mind. It's more money and includes travel.

She had forced herself to accept the reality that her crush on VP Beaumont would go nowhere and had allowed herself instead to be swept up with Sebastion Jones, whom she had met at Frank's Place weeks ago. Her divorce was pending, Michael had left the apartment and she was glad not to have to sleep alone all the time.

Actually she enjoyed Sebastion's company. He was smooth and sexy and there was something about the man that inspired images of a pirate for her. He was very much a pirate in bed. A fine specimen.

Mama like him. Jasmine liked him. Even her father seemed pleased with the match.

No word from Lydia, though. That was cold. Venus had run into her only twice since being reassigned and both times the woman had acted shy and aloof. She had considered confronting her about the transfer,

but couldn't think of how to do it and in the end decided against it. Forget confrontations. Forget about it. She had scaled every obstacle life had thrown in her path. This was nothing compared to living in the hood or feeling isolated at the Ivy League. Pale in comparison. Except that she never ached so deeply about those things.

"How's Venus? You haven't mentioned her in awhile."

Lydia tried to dodge the inquiry. "Good," she mumbled into the sheets.

"Good? What on earth does that mean? It's so illiterate sounding."

"I transferred her, Helaine."

"Transferred? What for? Why?"

Lydia rolled over and sat up.

"Lydia Beaumont. You answer me. You wanted to get rid of her?"

"Helaine, we...I transferred her. People get transferred at the firm all the time."

"Well, that's just bullshit, Lydia. What do you think I am? A dumb blond? Why would you transfer your top girl? Look at me. Why?"

They locked eyes. Lydia went for her robe. Helaine went for hers.

"Hiding her somewhere is not a resolution, Lydia. Believe me. I'm the expert here. That will only make it worse."

"What are you talking about? Why do you care?"

"You know what I'm talking about and I care because Venus is a fine young woman and she doesn't deserve this-this-Treadwell treachery."

Lydia flinched. "There were rumors and speculation. I didn't want you to-"

"I already heard them, Lydia! It was not a problem. *This* will make it a problem. You will miss each other. Long for each—"

"Helaine!"

Helaine stood quietly now, grasping her robe.

Lydia spoke calmly. "It's done. It can't be undone. Venus seems fine with it."

Helaine sat on the edge of the bed. "And you? You miss her terribly, don't you?"

Lydia sat beside her. "Helaine, really. I'm fine with it. You're the only one I could ever miss like that and you know it."

"Well, you're a fool, Kristenson. You want those ladies together?"

"Treadwell, I can't abide by this solution. It will have an opposite effect, I can assure you. I've seen it happen before."

"It's done, Kristenson. Beaumont's happy with her new assistant. The end."

"If she's so happy with him, why doesn't she say so?"

"What-she discusses everything with you?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Beaumont, tell your blond bomb how happy you are with your new assistant. That's an order."

Lydia rolled her eyes and laughed. Cocktail party at the Treadwell's. She felt a little tipsy tonight. "Why should I do that? I despise his incompetent, lazy ass."

"You told her that?"

"No. I thought it better to say nothing at all. What's this about anyway?"

"Kindly tell her how happy everybody is with the arrangement and get her off my ass."

"Hah! I'll try that, Paula. I'm sure it'll make a big difference coming from me."

"Good-are you drunk?"

"I am."

"I don't think I've ever seen you drunk, Beaumont. Where is Helaine tonight?"

"She didn't want to come, Paula. She loathes us. Our stunning lack of decency and ethics and loyalty and honesty and integrity and—"

"Ugh. Well, see what you can do. I'd better get you some coffee."

"Kristenson, why is this so important to you?"

"A number of reasons, not the least of which is that I don't want you meddling in my personal affairs or complicating them."

"And I don't want you meddling in the corporation's affairs. So you can see how we are at cross purposes here."

"Treadwell, you say you did this for my benefit, therefore it is my business."

"What is it about me you don't like, Kristenson? I bend over backwards to please you."

"I have a client due in five minutes. That isn't enough time to tell you."

"Oh, come on, Helaine. What do you actually like about me then?"

"Well, that I have time for since the list is so short."

"Yes? Go on?"

"Paula, I like that you're indomitable. Fishing for compliments this afternoon? That must mean you have some guilt over the matter."

"What is done is done and it can't be undone. Good day, Dr. Kristenson. I like that you're indomitable, too. Sometimes." (click)

Chapter 6: Feared, Hated, Despised and Loved

Lydia Beaumont wore a platinum band on her wedding finger. So did Helaine Kristenson. They probably never took them off. Venus had despised her wedding band and was not too eager to wear one again, although Sebastion, who had never been married before, frequently dropped hints that he'd like to try it one day. They had known each other only a few months. It seemed so premature. Besides, she hated the subject.

She should make a decision soon though, she feared. Considering the possibility that she might be pregnant.

Her parents inquired about her plans. Her sister inquired about her plans. Even Paula Treadwell, happy to learn of a Sebastion in Venus' life, inquired about her plans. The ever elusive Lydia Beaumont, however, did not.

Venus concentrated on her new job, which she was beginning to enjoy. If she ever re-married, she decided, she wanted a platinum wedding ring. That might make it more doable.

Happily the pregnancy test came back negative.

Chapter 7: Secretaries, Princes and Fortresses

He was an "Entertainment Consultant." Whatever that was. Venus had investigated his claim, found his company publicly rated and traded and concluded that what she knew about Sebastion Jones, the prince of pirates, was adequate enough to allow him to move in with her in the exclusive high-rise apartment that she had once shared with her husband.

Sebastion was "Assistant to the Chairman." This probably explained his unusual hours.

Venus was "Assistant to the Vice President of Overseas Operations." That definitely explained her long absences.

It was an ideal union. Venus and Sebastion rarely saw each other.

All that combined to also explain why she rarely saw VP Beaumont either, even if their offices were only two floors apart and their homes only three blocks away from each other.

But absence makes the heart grow fonder, they do say. And, in tricky times, it is better to be impetuous than cautious.

"I miss you---V."

Lydia read and then reread the note before folding it several times and putting it in her breast pocket. She missed her former assistant terribly. She was irreplaceable.

"I miss you---V."

Helaine read and reread the note before folding it the way she had found it and putting it back in Lydia's breast pocket. She slipped the coat on a hanger in the closet and said absolutely nothing about it. In the morning she checked the coat pocket again. The note was not there. Nor was it to be found in any of the trash receptacles.

Lydia was turning forty-two this year. Months away, she had already informed Helaine that she wanted a quiet celebration. Just the two of them. Just the two of them and one mid-life crisis. Or at least the early manifestations of one.

The woman was preoccupied nearly all the time now with her alleged signs of aging and, as far as Dr. Kristenson could tell, it was the injured knee, long since healed, that had set things off. After that, there was a host of other minor ailments that had begun to stress Lydia. The strands of gray hair—which Helaine didn't have the heart to say had been there since she had known her. The shortness of breath—after running six miles. Perceived weakness in one or both of her biceps—after weight training. Changes in her complexion...the note troubled Dr. Kristenson.

Helaine was four years older than her mate, but she didn't mind the idea of growing old with Lydia Beaumont. She didn't lose sleep over accumulating grays, or, for that matter, the wrinkles that bunched near her eyes. They were laugh lines, not ones from sorrow or worry. As to aches and pains, these she experienced, too. And recently she had even missed a few periods. These were merely gentle nudges to Helaine, the body keeping her psyche apprised of what time it actually was on the biological clock. Yes, she was aging, but she felt much younger than forty-six and most times she knew she looked younger than forty-six. Unless she thought of Venus.

"Lana?"

"Uh-oh. What time is it?"

```
"One o'clock. I nee-can you get out early?"
```

Helaine laughed low and whispered into the receiver. "Lydia, I have a client."

"Darling, have you forgotten? I'm meeting the Keagans at Cicero's tonight. I won't be home till late."

"Dr. Kristenson...this is a medical emergency."

Helaine paused. "Hold for me, Lydia. Can you hold?"

"Holding."

"Jen? What's the rest of my day look like?"

"Full, unless you get a cancellation. You need a cancellation?"

"I do. I really do." She heard Jenny laugh. "Jen?"

"Okay, I'll reschedule the rest of the day for you. Your one o'clock is waiting, though."

"Thanks, Jen. Ms. Beaumont? Ms. Beaumont, are you there?"

"Well?"

"I've scheduled you for a two o'clock office appointment. Earliest I could fit you in."

"You're an angel, Lana. How much time does that give us?"

"Ah...how much time do you need?"

"Weeeell, I have a lot of problems."

"Oh, I'm sure I can fix them. Of course, you'll have to work with me."

"Mmmmm. I'll see you at two o'clock."

Helaine examined herself in the mirror beside her desk, loosened a button on her blouse and stepped into the adjoining room. "You called, madam?" she asked playfully, before catching the faint scent of a man's cologne. She faltered for a second. Lydia was waiting on the couch, wearing nothing but the ring on her wedding finger. Helaine caught her breath, shut the door and turned the latch. The bolt dropped dead in the lock.

Up in the clouds, in her mighty fortress at Soloman-Schmitt, President Treadwell had her assistant pour her a martini. She was just congratulating herself on how well things were working out for her and commenting on how smoothly it was all going at last when she got the urgent call from her husband.

Prostate cancer.

[&]quot;After that?"

[&]quot;Your two o'clock is here, Dr. Kristenson. Looking somewhat out of breath, I might add."

[&]quot;And lovely?"

[&]quot;As usual. I am going home to watch my soap, if you have no further need of me."

[&]quot;Goodbye, Jen."

Chapter 8: Fortresses

"The best fortress is to be found in the love of the people, for although you may have fortresses they will not save you if you are hated...I would therefore praise the one who erects a fortress and the one who does not."

Lydia and Helaine lived midtown in the penthouse Lydia had owned before she had ever seen the blond sitting alone reading her books in Frank's Place, long before she had pursued her there. Even during the ensuing fracas, when the two found themselves hopelessly entangled in jilted Sharon Chambers' lethal web, it was the only truly peaceful place the two women could escape to, so long as the reporters on the ground digging for dirt weren't aware of their presence up there, which sadly wasn't often enough.

Dirt, like dust, always settles and when it finally did the ladies began yearning for a permanent residence. Flitting about, fleeing reporters was not a real life. Super-model Sharon Chambers might have enjoyed living like that, but Helaine didn't and Lydia wasn't used to it at all.

They searched and searched, but it was hard not to be sentimental about the penthouse and everything else they looked at seemed lackluster in comparison.

High up and away from it all and designed by Lydia to please a goddess, together with the added feature that it was in a very secure building and close to both their jobs, the penthouse was ultimately selected by the newlyweds for their home. Still sparsely furnished at the time that Helaine moved in, she brought with her those accounterments that put the finishing touches on the place and transformed it into what it was today. A castle in the clouds for two.

By contrast, Lydia's best friend, Delilah Lewiston, had a fancy address in the same neighborhood, but the apartment she lived in was quite modest compared to her means. Home was merely a figure of speech for Delilah and she simply had no great attachment to the place and felt no pressing need for domestic fortification. She ate there sometimes. She bathed there sometimes. She slept there sometimes. Sometimes she even had it cleaned.

Her office, on the other hand, was a different matter altogether. Now this definitely could be regarded as a fortress, and truly, if she had to, she could live there, which she did sometimes. Wet bar, Jacuzzi, the works. She was a well-pampered investment banker who spent a lot of time on the job. Globe International, the bank that she worked for, nay ran, spared no expense to keep her comfortable and happy.

Happiness is a good investment. It brings good returns. So Paula Treadwell, too, could boast swank accommodations courtesy of her corporation and its shareholders. Perched on the top two floors of Soloman-Schmitt's world headquarters, she could view very nicely nearly the entire metropolis from her floor to ceiling windows, which was, for a compulsive micromanager who hated to miss a trick, a great delight.

Home for Paula, however, was not a figure of speech and the excesses of her work life seeped into her domestic scene as well. Yet home is much too humble a word to describe the lavish suburban villa she choppered to and from daily. Home for Mrs. and Mr. Treadwell was not just a fortress that protected them from a hostile world. It was practically a nation state.

On to Robert and Kay Keagan. They also lived in Lydia's neighborhood, though perhaps it really should be called the Keagans' neighborhood, since they lived there first. Lived and worked. Twenty years in the same apartment.

Was this a fortress? Well, it could be said that if the world ended tomorrow, Robert Keagan Esquire could still show up for work on time if he wanted to. A spacious apartment with exposed brick, wide plank floors and large sunny windows, the Keagan home felt more like one of those renovated loft spaces one might find farther downtown on the waterfront.

Although large, the actual living area of the Keagan residence amounted to less than one third of the available space. All the rest was devoted to Robert's legal practice. In Fort Keagan there was a computer

room, an expansive file room, a briefing/conference room and two private offices, the larger one–Robert's–containing a good size library. The other office was Kay's, who served as a secretary to her husband and performed for him the kind of mundane and unrewarding duties that help to turn a good man into an awesome breadwinner.

The newest addition to the Keagans' neighborhood was Venus Angelo. Her penthouse was a palace, a refuge from childhood poverty, and in it she finally had all the things she had ever dreamed of having, including a spectacular view.

If you want a better past, you must constantly be working toward a better future—Ms. Angelo's motto. Work she did and by the tender age of twenty-seven she had gotten it all. Luxury and those sorts of things. Just about everything the world had to offer. Just about.

Sebastion was such a dolt at times, him and his entertainment mindset. Always "on" with a face full of pearly whites and all that bottled charm. Venus sucked down another cognac and gazed out her windows at the cityscape shining up at her like a galaxy. She wasn't sure where he had run off to at this hour.

She poured herself another drink and threw it, full, into the fireplace. No home fire burning. Summertime. It was cool inside but Venus was hot under the collar. She and Sebastion had gone to Cicero's tonight and had run into Dr. Kristenson and her friends. She couldn't remember their names just now. She'd met them before, though. She pulled off her shoes and threw those, as well. Sebastion hadn't met any of these people before and to her chagrin had gone into overdrive to woo Dr. Kristenson for an interview, which everyone knew she rarely granted and which, as expected, she succinctly though graciously declined.

It was one in the morning when Venus got home. He made it in by two. So it was two in the morning when Venus' had her first opportunity to tell Sebastion off. Not over the interview exactly, but that he had been so tactlessly persistent about it, even attempting later in the evening to bargain with the doctor for a nude cover on one of his company's skin mags.

A nude cover. What a freakin' disgrace! Dr. Kristenson had blushed and laughed off the idea of it, citing her age. Her friends got up to dance without saying a word to him. After that Sebastion disappeared, a favorite trick of late, and Venus didn't look for him when she left. She was surprised he came home at all. When he did they had harsh words over the incident and he was gone again.

The dolt.

"I should like to have lunch sometime," Dr. Kristenson had said last night, when it was just the two of them left at the table.

That had startled Venus. Have lunch?

"Sebastion is perfectly charming," she reassured, sensing Venus was upset with him. "I didn't mind the attention."

Venus nodded. The woman was...ummmm...wonderful. She hadn't seen her this close up and personal before. They sat without speaking for a while and watched the dancers.

Dr. Kristenson broke the silence. "So. Tell me about Venus Angelo," she coaxed, with a bottled charm of her own.

Venus Angelo squirmed at the sound of that voice. She could tell the doctor anything and she knew it, feeling the urge to do so right then and there. She could tell her everything if she wasn't careful. She held herself back. "I wouldn't know where to start with that, Dr. Kristenson."

"Start with 'a self-made woman,' Venus, and take it from there."

Venus completely understood Lydia's addiction to her. This was not just a woman. She was something more than that. Take it from there. "For sure. Self made, I mean." The doctor's friends were threading their way to the table.

"Lunch then?" Dr. Kristenson pressed. "You can reach me here."

Lunch. "That would be..." Venus took the card she offered and hastily slid it into her purse. "Lovely," she finished.

"Call when you're able," the doctor whispered out of the side of her face. "Well, you two looked quite smart out there, I should say."

Robert and Kay were winded and fell into their chairs, happier it seemed now that Sebastion was gone.

"What a lucky man I am," Venus recalled Robert saying as the evening wore on, "always with such beautiful women."

The Keagans, Venus suddenly remembered, reaching into the fireplace for her shoes. Their names were Robert and Kay. She'd been introduced to them before. Robert and Kay Keagan. She thought they had eyed her suspiciously when they first sat down.

Maybe that was just a guilty mind.

What on earth was she supposed to do at lunch with Dr. Kristenson? Discuss their mates? Venus pulled the doctor's card from her purse, set it on the bar, grabbed a new glass, filled it with ice, set it on the bar. Yeah, she concluded. Talk about their jobs and their mates. Talk about Lydia, talk about Sebastion. Isn't that what women did over lunch? She tapped the card on the countertop. Yeah, they sure did.

Tap, tap, tap, tappety-tap, tap, tap...

Where? Where should she meet Lydia Beaumont's mate for lunch? When? When should she call and arrange to have lunch with Mr. Right's wonderfully fabulous wife? She felt suddenly surrounded by beautiful women, besieged by them. Strangely enough she felt lucky, too. Her stomach jumped. Why on earth would she be having lunch with Dr. Kristenson?

Darling? Lydia heard this in her sleep. Sleeping? She smiled as she dreamt. Are you sleeping? And trembled. Are you? Shook. "Lana..."

"Darling, are you asleep?"

She was awake now. "Lana? What time is it?"

"Hi-wee small hours-I woke you?"

"Wee small...? No, I was waiting."

Helaine had gotten in late, but she needed immediate attention. "I nee-are you too tired?"

Lydia propped herself up on one elbow. Helaine was wet. "Lana...sweet Lana...Del claims we're sexually obsessed with each other," she teased.

Helaine sighed and threw her head back, opened her legs.

"Lana?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you agree?"

"Yes," she said, wrapping her arms around Lydia's neck and pulling her down, "I, uh...yes...yes...I...yes..."

At breakfast Helaine mentioned running into Venus and Sebastion at Cicero's and recounted for Lydia's amusement his social blunder. Lydia laughed but felt sorry for her former assistant and said as much. She had only met the young man a few times but he struck her as the type always on the make, using his job to seem legitimate. He was gorgeous, yes, she agreed, but...and here she stopped herself, wanting to compare him with Sharon Chambers. But no one compared to Sharon Chambers! Instead, she vaguely referenced Joseph Rios with whom she had become so mired down, well before she met Helaine. She hadn't thought of him in years. Rio Joe, her ex, who had ratted her out to Sharon's lawyers, exposed her to the public as Jane Doe and made her life a living hell as a consequence. What was she thinking? No one but Sharon Chambers could compare to Rio Joe! The Feds sat his ass in the pen shortly thereafter and as far as she knew, he was still there today.

Stockbrokers, lawyers, reporters and maybe even entertainment consultants?

Helaine nodded understandingly and changed the subject. "I invited Venus to have lunch with me sometime. Care to join us if she takes me up on it?"

Lydia shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Helaine was pleased with that reaction. "I felt Paula handled the situation badly, you know, and I told her so."

Lydia grinned. Poor Paula. "Yes, I heard."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

After breakfast Lydia went for her morning run, a little later than usual. No maid on the weekend. Helaine tidied up and got dressed, satisfied that there was no intruder, no paramour lurking outside the castle walls, which was a great relief since she had last night instantly recognized the cologne Venus was wearing as being identical to the scent Lydia had carried into her office that one day.

"She reminds me in so many ways of Lydia," Kay said. "I can't say exactly why."

She hadn't noticed the cologne. "That a woman would wear men's cologne?"

Kay looked thoughtful. Venus Angelo could get away with it. "No, not particularly."

[&]quot;Was she wearing men's cologne last night?"

[&]quot;Robert-why?"

[&]quot;I don't know. Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

[&]quot;Yeah...?"

Chapter 9: Acquired Dominions

Paula Treadwell went on with business as usual, but her husband was ill. Very ill. Thoughts of mortality and love and the like permeated her no-nonsense mind these days and she caught herself many times drifting from her work, picturing what it would be like to live alone on the massive Treadwell estate.

Doctors were dominating her life now. Doctors, nurses, hospitals, home health aides, conflicting medical opinions. Decisions, decisions, decisions. It was a chore to be cheerful and it took a concentrated effort to stay focused on the positive.

There were some things to feel positive about. VP Overseas, for instance, was running a tighter ship than ever, performing beyond expectations for the first time in years. That would be due to the Angelo kid.

Paula left her office midday to circulate, still maintaining her regular routine. Venus Angelo was first on her list. A little praise, another raise. She was disgusted to find her Senior VP already there and worried whether this was becoming a habit.

"Beaumont!"

Lydia rose from her seat. Venus saw her cheeks redden and was flattered by what it might mean. *Might*. "Ms. Treadwell! How nice to—"

"In a minute, Angelo-god does this place stink or what?" (Cologne.) "Beaumont, I've been looking all over for you," she invented. "Meet me in my office in an hour."

"Is there anythi-?"

"One hour."

Lydia returned to her own office embarrassed, slunk past her assistant without saying hi, and shuffled the papers on her desk for an hour.

"But you can't be serious."

"It's too much for me right now. I need time to be with Dickie. He's...it's not...it's bad."

Temporarily step down as president. Lydia couldn't believe it. "Paula, you've notified the board?"

"Not yet. I wanted to discuss it with you first."

"With me? Why?"

"Tell me about Venus Angelo, first."

Lydia stiffened. "Tell you what?" she asked defensively. "I miss my brilliant assistant. I stopped in to say hello. I do that now and—"

"Beaumont, let me see your eyes when you talk to me."

Lydia lifted her head.

"Watch yourself, President Beaumont. Everybody else is."

"Who is?"

"The board. It's a gimmee on my word so keep your nose clean."

Lydia went to the bar and picked up a glass and, thinking better of it, put it back on the shelf. "I couldn't do it without my former assistant."

Paula sat at her desk, put her glasses on and studied Lydia through them. Presently she replied. "I doubt the integrity of that claim."

Lydia dropped herself into the chair opposite her. She was tired today. Very tired of Soloman-Schmitt. She had an urge to go home and pull a Rip Van Winkle. "Why would they select me, anyway?" she asked. "Remember Jane Doe? I'm damaged goods."

Paula clenched her jaw. "That's forgotten, Beaumont." (She'd fire Angelo if she absolutely had to.) "Besides, you married the woman. Perfectly respectable conclusion." (But once Beaumont held the reins then

the power was all hers.) "Legal and legitimate anywhere in the civilized world." (Hers to lose. And then what?) "Is this what it looks like, Beaumont?"

"What does it look like for godsakes?"

"I'm not qualified to say. What does it look like to Dr. Kristenson?"

"Paula Treadwell...don't make me say it's none of your business. And don't make me have to hear myself repeating myself. I've told you before that I do not and never will cheat on Helaine." And then she said something she had never uttered before. "The end."

Paula took her glasses off and laid them on the desk. She was trying not to smile at that. "Excellent, Beaumont. Now go home, get laid, be content and leave Ms. Angelo to her own destiny. Yours imminently awaits your attention." She picked up her glasses again and turned her attention to the numbers streaming across her computer screen. "So begin posturing for it right now...and have a nice day."

Venus did not remain flattered by Paula Treadwell's attentions for very long. When Paula returned later that afternoon she brought with her both tricks and treats, and it was, at last then, that Venus recognized her for the witch she was rumored to be. Oh, that she definitely was.

"And I prefer that VP Beaumont never know about this conversation," Paula warned, preparing to leave. "Ideally I'd have your new office situated on the moon, but I fear that wouldn't be enough of an obstacle, considering how frequently she visits there." Paula hesitated at the door. She searched Venus' face. It was blank. "Enjoy your day, Angelo," she cast over her shoulder.

"Thank you again, Ms. Treadwell."

"You're welcome, I'm sure."

(Thank you, thank you, thank you, Ms. Treadwell. May I have another? Kick that is.)

Paula was giving her a private office. More money. More duties, too, since apparently she didn't have enough already to keep her busy. Venus had suspected she was in for it when Paula had begun referring to Lydia as "the Duchess of Valentine," used here as an unnecessarily salacious comparison to the very able, yet most unfortunate Cesare Borgia, the Duke of Valentine. This had made Venus visibly cringe.

"If you love the woman," Paula then stated, "stand down. Don't be the cause of her ruin." She had rightly surmised that there would be no response to that and sought to continue her inquisition. "Now, what happened to ruin our sword yielding Duke then, when his father died?"

Venus shoved her chair back. She was weary of pushy Paula Treadwell and her endless grilling. Grillings at work, in elevators, in restaurants, even at Cicero's. She knew this material from university and was tired of proving and reproving it. She glared at Paula, speechless.

"Tell me, Angelo. What precipitated the fall of-?"

"Men only injure through hate or fear," Venus had sparred.

Paula thrust back. "Yes, Angelo. Men."

Venus coughed. (Touché you fascist, chauvinistic asshole.) "But isn't it better to be loved than to be hated and despised?"

"Hmmph–I know only that it was better to be the Duke of Milan than the Duke of Valentine. Besides, I don't believe you will ever hate or despise our Duchess."

Venus refused to acknowledge the remark.

"Or fear," Paula added. "Now where are we? Oh, yes, Alexander the Sixth. Please tell me so I know, what happened to undo his otherwise fortunate son? Most significantly, what didn't the Duke do that he might have, or in hindsight, that he should have?"

"I do not lov-"

"Don't you even dare, Angelo. You're both too good for that."

Venus folded her hands in front of her. "Okay," she said, her voice constricted.

"You don't, you don't. Then why did you get a divorce?"

Did. Didn't. Might have. What should she say? "He failed to intervene in the appointment of Pope Julius the Second," Venus replied in a monotone.

She sat like that long after Paula had left.

Paula was a shrewd woman. She could both giveth and taketh away whenever she saw fit. That didn't surprise Venus too much. In all, she guessed, a visit like the one she had just received had been inevitable, perhaps long overdue. She wasn't terribly surprised. Just pissed.

The real surprise had arrived well before Paula Treadwell. Venus couldn't believe that Lydia had come for lunch after what had happened this morning at the club.

The two had met for a couple of light sets and a few laps in the pool. The first time in months. Afterwards, VP Beaumont had lost her footing getting dressed at the lockers. Probably the knee acting up. Venus was beside her when she slipped and had swiftly caught her in the crook of one arm, in a catch so precarious that it required her to assist Lydia in standing on her own again. Perhaps that's why Lydia didn't struggle when Venus instead pulled her closer and placed her free hand on the small of her back. Perhaps that's also why Lydia didn't object when the grip tightened around her waist and she found herself locked in Venus Angelo's arms.

The sensation of Lydia suddenly relaxing her body, resting her hands on her shoulders, of her damp skin, of the dark hair hanging in her face and brushing against hers—Venus held her longer, way longer than she should have.

Putting the moves on Lydia Beaumont. Venus had acted both impetuously and cautiously, expecting Lydia to extricate herself, to coldly thank her and resume dressing. Yet the woman only tossed the hair from her eyes and gazed up at her curiously, as if wondering what came next. Venus stood love struck, wondering herself. She spent the next eternity contemplating whether she should kiss her captive, but failed to do it.

If, as they say, success has many fathers, then how can failure be an orphan? Wouldn't it be better said that failure is a bastard? Venus stood quietly gazing into the long, dark tunnel of her gym locker as Lydia hurriedly finished dressing.

Failure is definitely a bitch. She watched Lydia fleeing from her, halting for a split second at the exit as if she might speak, but then abandoning the locker room without even saying goodbye. Venus figured she'd never hear from VP Beaumont again.

She was wrong.

So they lunched together separated by a desk, chatting and laughing as they typically would. They talked shop just as casually as if nothing had ever happened and neither woman brought up the embrace. It was just as if it hadn't happened.

Oh, but it did, it did. Venus placed her hands in her lap. It sure did. She wished she could lie down somewhere soft, somewhere that smelled a trifle more feminine than Kendle's office. Maybe in a hammock near a garden. Maybe on a devilishly hot, hot beach. She surveyed the drab, uninspiring office.

A bed of feathers, some perfumed sheets, satin hands touching her shoulders, a kiss. These were the luxuries Venus allowed herself to dream of now, her hands folded as if in prayer. She wasn't thinking of Soloman-Schmitt, or of the new private office she had been awarded, or of power and wealth, or of Paula Treadwell, or of the Duke of Valentine, or of princes, or of edicts and orders. Fortune had a new meaning for Venus. It had become a woman. One who should have been kissed. One who might have desired to be kissed. Or one who might have let herself be overcome and then kissed. Very likely now it was a lost fortune. She thought this afternoon: What didn't you do, fool, that you might have, or in hindsight, that you should have?

Chapter 10: Fixed in Their Ways

"Queenie?"
"Da–Edward."

```
"Have supper with your daddy?"
   Lydia was trying to break him of this queenie/daddy thing. She was too old for it. But it was an old habit
and so far she hadn't succeeded. "Daddy, what time?"
   "After work. Listen, I've got the deeds to the summer place."
   They were a pair. Him obsessed with dying, converting his assets, giving them away, just in case. Her
obsessed with growing old, hoarding her assets, counting her grays when no one was looking, lamenting her
very skeleton. "Bring them."
   "Bring your better half."
   Almost eighty years old and still flirting with the skirts. "I'll try," she said, "if you promise to behave."
   "Leave her home then. See you at the club, Queenie."
   "Mine or yours?"
   "Mine, of course. I never get used to yours. The lean menu and all."
   "Five o'clock, Edward. I can't get away any sooner."
   "Okay, Queenie. Five it is." (click)
   The summer place, the family's lake house, was boarded up, its gardens overgrown. No one had used the
place in years so it made good sense for her father to want to unload it. Buildings don't hold up well to that
kind of neglect.
   Lydia was planning on renovating it, a future present to Helaine, and she had no real intention of bringing
her to dinner where the sometimes forgetful Edward Beaumont might leak the secret and spoil the surprise.
That left her between a rock and a hard place for the moment.
   "I can't, Lana. I told my father I'd meet him for dinner after work."
   "Lydia? I'll join you then. I'm sure he won't mi-"
   "Helaine-NO."
   There was silence. Had she hung up on her? "Helaine?"
   "But we always dine on Thursdays."
   Thursdays. It was Thursday. "Oh, gosh, I'm-" But she just couldn't risk it. "Lana, I-"
   "Don't you Lana me, Lydia Beaumont. I'm not a fool."
   "Helaine, please. It's my father." She had screwed up again. Something small, but it was the second time
this week. There was static on the other end of the line. "I won't be long. I promise."
   "Oh, fine. Isn't that a lovely consolation? This is not a small thing, I'll have you know. I'm...I don't even know
what...upset."
   Helaine rarely got upset. "I'll see you tonight, Helaine."
   No response.
   "Helaine?"
   "Lydia."
   "I love you."
   "You lo-hang up the phone! You're a cad and I'm...I'm just livid."
   "I know. I'm sor-"
   (CLICK)
```

Venus hung up the phone. Another irritating conversation with her mother. Another you-made-your-bed-now-sleep-in-it bullshit lecture.

She had called to complain that Sebastion was never around. There was nothing particularly unusual about Sebastion not being around, but today Venus had had it with work, with Soloman-Schmitt bullshit, with her new, quiet, desolate, out of sight, out of mind, hermetically sealed office digs on the fifteenth floor, where she was now three whole floors from VP Beaumont and certainly falling, if not in reality then definitely in spirits, and tumbling, tumbling steadily toward the moon if fascist Paula Treadwell could have her way, and probably she was getting her way because the woman who should have been kissed and wasn't, wasn't, WASN'T, was gone again, gone as ordered, no doubt, kissing Paula's ass, doing Paula's bidding like the royal coward she really was, like a, like a rook or a bishop or even a petty pawn on Paula's chessboard, or like a despicable creature, too, a spineless and despicable creature hiding its frightened, despicable, spineless, lily-white ass in a fancy shell somewhere, or like the slick presidential wanna-be she was destined to be, thinking only of her pristine bureaucratic self, her princely future, her corporate reputation, posturing to become king of the shitheap, the most-likely-to that everyone was talking about these days, at the water cooler, at the club, everyone constantly jabbering about Lydia Beaumont, the goody-goody do-good girl, daddy's little girl, daddy-and she probably still calls him daddy-being the first to train her for a brilliant career in ass kissing, and now work life consisted only of work, of tidbits of news, the rampant rumors and speculations that said soon the woman would be kissing the board's ass, too, instead of just Paula's, corporate gossip that could still be heard on the fifteenth desert island floor where she had been marooned for fifty-eight days, count them: fifty-eight MISERABLE days without sustenance, without so much as a fucking phone call, without receiving a single message, without a single message returned, not at the office, not at home, not on her cell, not even an e-mail, and here she was having to leave town again for Overseas Operations, wanting to call the woman, but her highness was just so aloof and above it all, the simplest things so beneath her, didn't even have a cell phone, and soon there would be a plane to board, soon, too soon, flying into the sunset without saying goodbye, yet another month passing like the others before it, and how many more to come after that, who knows, and this time toiling thousands of miles away and not being missed at all, not being kissed, and the whole wide world was beginning to feel like a boundless desert island and she couldn't help but wish she had never, NEVER come to work for Soloman-Schmitt and especially never, never, NEVER for that piece of shit, heartless, high and mighty Lydia Beaumont, and she missed her highness terribly, missed the vanishing on-again, off-again, the ever so handsome and distinguished Valentine Duchess-there she said it, at least in her mind-and once, just once, it would have been so nice to have come home to Sebastion, to find him chilling at home, waiting for her with his smooth smile and his hot hands, to have had dinner all laid out for her instead of the microwave whatever crap she was forced to content herself with in his absence, or it could have been totally rad to have seen some tall summer drinks with paper umbrellas sitting out on the patio, ready to be sipped from colorful crazy straws, old jazz booming from the stereo, silk ropes, toy cuffs, early bed. She could have tolerated anything tonight, put up with anything at all, but the goddamned empty penthouse.

The conversation with her mother had only added to her despair.

```
"Beaumont, why don't you have a cell phone?"
```

[&]quot;I hate them."

[&]quot;Get a beeper then."

[&]quot;Paula, I've got to meet my father. What's wrong now?"

[&]quot;Angelo's leaving for Tokyo in a few days. She'll be gone a month."

Another Treadwell trap? "And...?"

[&]quot;She's in a slump or something. Call her and wish her a nice trip."

Oh, just the usual meddling and manipulation. Paula's trademark. "I thought I was incommunicado?"

[&]quot;This is an exception. Besides, you're in the home stretch now. Cheer her for me. Give her a call. Or better yet, send her an e-mail. No, don't send her an e-mail. Pay her a visit. Say hi, say bye."

Hi, bye. Lydia brushed her hair back nervously. "Okay. I can do that." A few weeks ago she had discreetly popped her head in at VP Kendle's looking for Venus and saw that her things were gone. Her office phone

and e-mail had been changed, too. Searching the corporation's directory was of no use. Her new location either wasn't listed yet or Paula had seen to it that it wouldn't be. Lydia hadn't dared ask around lest word of her quest got back to Paula, or to the board, or to whoever else had a vested interest in such matters. Of course, she could have called Venus on her private cell phone or e-mailed her at home, but... "Where exactly is Venus Angelo these days?" she asked.

"Oh, that's right. I put her on the fifteenth floor. Your old office."

This detail struck Lydia as intrinsically perverse though she didn't comment on it. She wanted to ask if that seemed wise in light of Paula's romantic suspicions and whether or not Venus was aware of the fact, but there wasn't enough time to listen to Paula's hemming and hawing, her predictable and impenetrable techniques for avoidance.

"Hey? You there?" "Then she'll be easy to find. Gotta go, Paula, I'm late already." "You'll see her before she leaves, right?" "When is she leaving?" "Monday, but she'll probably be finishing odds and ends at her office on Friday and Saturday." "You have her working on Saturdays?" "Well...that's her prerogative, Beaumont. I don't interfere." (Yeah, right.)

"Beaumont?"

"Of course, Paula. I'll go see her, I mean."

"Ah, Queenie. This is...?"

"Eeeevlyn," the woman inserted in a husky, aristocratic tone. "Evelyn Wainwright," she said, as if Lydia was supposed to recognize the name.

She didn't.

"Eeeevelyn," Edward Beaumont crooned, winking at his daughter. "This is Lydia, my illustrious daughter."

"Oh, Lydiahhhh, I've heard so much about you."

Ahhhhhhhhhh, the old coot was at it again. Evidently the woman hadn't noticed, or didn't mind his wedding band. "Pleased to meet you, Evelyn," she said. "Edward, is this a bad time for-?"

"No, no, no," he insisted. "I've got a table for the four of us. Where's Helaine?"

"Uh...Helaine couldn't make it, tonight. She sends her love."

"Oh? That's too bad. And here I am on my best behavior." This time the wink was for Evelyn.

The seventy-something-year-old giggle that erupted from her was still as attractive as a girl's, Lydia noted.

"Then we'll just have to carry on without her," Edward said. He held the chair for his date and she sat in it like a throne.

The baroness. That's what Lydia would call this one. She wondered if he had picked her up at the bar. Appetizers. Drinks. Giggles.

His "best behavior" would be the death of him, she kept thinking throughout dinner. She watched charming Edward Beaumont with a mix of pride and shame as he expertly reeled the baroness in. The woman went willingly; she didn't see him the way a daughter might. She was charmed, charmed all evening, laughing until the girlish giggle grew older and older and the lights of the clubhouse finally went dim and there seemed to be only Edward Beaumont left glowing in it, shining like a candle, illuminating the woman's way in the darkness.

Beaumont charm. By the time dessert had arrived, Lydia was feeling notorious, too. She began weighing the greater genetic implications of being the man's daughter and glanced around self-consciously to see if anyone else might be thinking the same.

Probably.

Eight o'clock. The after-dinner drinks and coffee came, followed by the customary argument over which of the Beaumonts would take care of the bill. A foolish ritual; Edward always paid. When Lydia finally left

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

around	nine,	the	paperwor	k for	the	summer	place	well	hidden	in	her	briefcase,	her	thoughts	returned	once
more to) Helai	ne.														

Chapter 11: How Strength Should Be Measured

It was half past nine when Lydia came home from dinner.

"Helaine?" She turned the knob again. The door to the bedroom was indeed locked. Helaine was not answering. Shit, Lydia muttered. She read the note again then flung it and the flannel pajamas it was pinned to across the room. "Helaine, c'mon."

No answer.

Helaine had gone to bed early "to masturbate" so don't even "dream" of disturbing her, the note warned. A hot summer night, the flannel pajamas she had left on the couch was a perfect fuck you.

Lydia rapped on the door. "Helaine? This is a big misunderstanding, I can assure you." She listened for a response but none came. "Lana...please."

Friday morning. Helaine emerged from the bedroom dressed for work and strutted by the couch where Lydia had spent her restless night.

"Good morning, darling," she said in passing. "How was dinner?"

Civility was a good development, Lydia thought. She rolled off the couch and stood naked and bemused in the living room.

Helaine sat at the breakfast table and admired her over the edge of a coffee cup and the paper. "How was dinner, I asked?"

"Dinn-fine." She shook apart the pajamas that had served as a pillow and put them on. "Excellent." They were scratchy and hot. "Thank you." She left them unbuttoned and came to the table. "And how was...uh...well...never mind." She sat down opposite Helaine and grabbed the financial section.

"Excellent," Helaine replied. "Thank you."

Lydia glanced at her. Take away the hostile glint in her eye and she was looking rather demure this morning. Smiling. Lydia gave a hopeful look in return and Helaine rose to leave.

"It was a misunderstanding, Dr. Kristenson. A bizarre and stupid misunderstanding."

Helaine dumped her coffee down the drain, carefully rinsed the cup in the sink and placed it on the rack to dry. "Good," she said, wiping her hands and grabbing her briefcase. "Then it's not likely to ever happen again."

Friday morning. Paula had meetings scheduled till one and Dickie wasn't himself. Vomiting all night. He appeared for breakfast pale and sweating, holding a comb full of his wavy, silver hair. He tried to joke about his condition, but his faded blue eyes were welling with tears. Paula gazed at him, terrified. The chemo. She called the office and canceled everything.

Friday afternoon. Lydia took the elevator down to the fifteenth floor and followed the sound of blaring hip-hop till she found herself in the open doorway of her former office. She had expected to find its occupant too busy for a social call, instead Venus and a few of her associates were conducting what appeared to be an impromptu sendoff. There were tall drinks with paper umbrellas scattered everywhere. Blue, red, green, pink. A few corporate clad youths were dancing, working up a sweat, their coats strewn across the cabinets.

Coats and arms. VP Beaumont smiled, thinking of what Paula's reaction to the scene might have been. She scanned the room for Venus and saw her engaged in a suggestive dance in the corner. She must have

been at the gym this morning, Lydia observed, taking stock of the tight sweats, the sleeveless half top. Very sporty and, save for the heels, not her typical work uniform.

It was pointless to knock. No one could hear above this din. Lydia hovered unnoticed in the doorway and watched Venus dance. The girl didn't seem in a slump, as Paula had claimed. Seemed pretty jubilant, in fact. She saw her arm draped around her partner's shoulder, directing him with her free hand on his hip, a shower of braids cascading onto her muscular shoulders.

She eyed those shoulders, those familiar arms and legs, and took a quick breath. Another time, she said to herself, scrapping the mission.

"Uh-oh!" someone exclaimed as she left. "That was VP Beaumont!"

Venus glanced over. "Where?" she asked, leaving her partner in the corner.

"Just now. Think this'll end up in our personnel folders?"

Venus ran out into the hall.

"Nah, she's cool," someone else said.

"Pump it up, pump it up!" Venus heard from the hallway. The volume rose. She glimpsed Lydia in the elevator, the doors closing.

"Ms. Beaumont!"

Lydia punched the open button and the door gaped wide again.

"Ms.-" Venus was out of breath. "Lydia."

Lydia kept her hand on the button. "I'm-I have to go right now. I'm taking over Paula's appointments today."

Venus held the door. "I'll be here late...or tomorrow morning?"

Saturday morning. Lydia nodded and checked her watch.

Venus let go of the door. "Tomorrow?"

The door began to close. Lydia waved. "I will try," she promised through the slit.

Venus heard, "I will," and a ding.

Saturday morning. Venus was standing at the large window, lost in thought, her back toward Lydia, staring out in the direction of the waterfront, just as Lydia used to do when the office was hers. She seemed unaware that she had her visitor.

Tank top and sweats again. Much quieter this morning, though there were signs of recent revelry. Plastic cups on the floor, an abandoned suit coat. The office was in a state of organized chaos, paperwork stacked in kinetic piles on the floor and desktops, preparations for a long departure. And there was that farewell atmosphere to contend with, an awkward goodbye hanging noxious in the air. She shouldn't have come today. She leaned gently against the door and debated whether to knock and announce herself or just run.

"Good morning, Ms. Beaumont."

"I'm...I came back."

"I'm glad you did." VP Beaumont was anxious, Venus noticed. Flushed and hesitating in the doorway, like she wanted to run.

"I-may I?"

"Yes, yes, come in. Close the door."

Lydia hesitated. She probably shouldn't close the door. "I can't stay," she said, walking in and closing the door behind her. "Long, I mean."

Venus perched on the edge of the cluttered desk. "I'll be gone awhile. You know that?"

"I-yes. Paula told me."

Paula. Venus smiled knowingly and sat down.

"Venus, I wanted to tell you that I-"

"Can't remember my cell phone."

"Your cell phone? Oh, your number. No, I do still have that. I've been, um..."

"Pandering?"

That was a word they both liked. Venus used it accusingly this time.

Lydia blushed and eyed the door.

It was true. She had been pandering. Months of it. And right now, being where she knew she shouldn't be, she was feeling downright cheap. Always on some kind of a mission for Paula Treadwell and she didn't even want to be "king of the shitheap" as she and Venus preferred to call it. She wasn't even supposed to still be in this shitheap. She was supposed to have retired at forty. And what was she doing at Soloman-Schmitt on the weekend anyway, stimulating Venus Angelo's crush? She couldn't defend a single bit of it. She should go.

"You can stay a few minutes?" Venus asked.

"Yes." Lydia said, sitting down. "A few minutes."

"I'm sorry," Venus said.

"About?"

"Pandering."

"Oh." Lydia forced a laugh. "Me, too. You're off to Japan, I hear."

"Japan. And then I suppose the moon."

Lydia smiled at that. Did seem likely.

"Can Lydia find me on the moon?"

"On the moon? Well...on the moon...you know, I'm not sure. I don't know."

"You think she could call me in Japan?"

"I-" Venus was wearing that appealing grin. Her "bad ass" grin. Lydia pictured her dancing with her hand on someone's hip, leading him to anywhere. To the moon. To Japan. "I guess so."

"Which? Find me on the moon? Or call me in Japan?"

She shot Venus a shy look. The knee was acting up today. She put her hand over it protectively. It was hot.

"How is it?" Venus asked.

"Still giving me some trouble."

"Heels, girlfriend."

"Yeah. They don't help."

"Will you call me in Japan?"

There was little chance of that. "I, um, don't-"

"Or do you want me to apologize first? Because I will if you need me to."

"Angelo? Apologize? For what?"

Venus leaned forward. "The locker room?"

"The lock-the-you mean the-?"

Venus nodded and flashed her grin.

It had been too much to hope that Venus would never mention it. "No...of course not."

"I'm sorry."

On the other hand, she didn't want to hear her apologize for it, either. "No, don't-you don't owe me a-" "That I lost my nerve."

"Ah," Lydia murmured. She had indeed lost her nerve. Lydia respected her for saying so. She lifted her hand from her knee to signify she was leaving. "I think I'd better go. Let you get back to your work. You must have an awful lot to do before you leave."

Venus was poised to beat her to the door. "Five more minutes. Just five. It can wait."

Lydia rose from the chair. Five more minutes when she could think of nothing coherent to say was too long. She walked quietly to the door, placed her hand on it and then, feeling Venus behind her, dropped her arms to her sides. "Goodbye, Venus. I wish you a very safe and very prosperous voyage."

"Turn around," Venus whispered. "Please."

Lydia felt her breath warm on the back of her neck. The knee was shot now, her body heavy on it. "No," she said without turning.

"C'mon, Lydia. Hit the ball."

"Angelo, I can't. It's not-"

Venus kissed the nape of her neck. "You can. You know you can. Turn around, Lydia. Kiss me goodbye. One kiss is all I'm—"

One kiss leads to another and another. Anyone would know that much. She took hold of the doorknob. It was cool in her palm. "I—"

"Won't," Venus finished, folding Lydia's arms in front of her and holding her close. "One goodbye then."

"Venus." She threw her head backward. "Venus."

"Lydia."

"Goodbye."

Lydia was tilting. Venus balanced her with her body. "Three goodbyes, then."

"I have to go now. Helaine's-"

"Not yet."

Lydia covered her breasts. "Yes yet."

They rocked together.

"Yes yet?"

"No, no."

"Will you miss me? Say yes, Lydia."

Venus had her by her belt buckle. "Venus...don't."

"Lydia...do. Turn around." The lights were too bright. Venus flicked the switch.

Lydia turned them back on again. "Goodbye, Venus. That's three. Now I have to go."

"Lvdia Beaumont."

Her belt was loose.

"Turn around," Venus pleaded. "Kiss me. Just once."

Saturday and Helaine would be home for lunch. "I just...I can't."

"Can."

The knee felt weaker and weaker.

"At least tell me that you want to."

"I-" the belt came undone.

"Want to."

"I want to go. This minute."

"I don't think so."

Lydia reached for Venus and the belt. She reached for the door.

"Turn around, Lydia."

It was a Saturday. Helaine was home for lunch on Saturdays. She had to go home for lunch. "We can't do this," Lydia said, grabbing the doorknob. "This feels...very wrong."

Venus took her hand. "Lydia, I lo-"

"Don't do that to me. Don't do that." She pushed at the door with both hands.

"Okay," Venus said, stroking her back. "Okay." Those shoulders were hard and tense—"It's okay, Lydia."—her stomach warm through the skirt.

The skirt zipped in the back. Venus undid the button.

"Honey," Lydia whispered. "I really, really have to go."

The ring on Lydia's finger shone brilliant in the fluorescent lights. Venus shielded it with her hand and hit the light switch again. "I can deal with this, Mrs. Kristenson."

Lydia pulled her hand away. "I can't."

"It's not a big-"

"I CAN'T."

She was glued to the door. Venus held her against it. "Okay then. It's okay."

"It's not okay. It's not. I have to go."

"Why isn't it? Tell me."

Lydia grabbed the knob again and jiggled it. "Because I love her." The door cracked open. "I love her," she said, grasping Venus by the hand.

Venus pushed against her and the door shut again. "You love her and there's nothing here for me? What's this?" She brought her hand to her lips. "Tell me, Lydia. What's this?"

What, what. Lydia laid her head against the door. "I don't know. I don't know."

Venus kissed her cheek. It was hot. "Lydia...Lydia Beaumont."

She heard her name and her pulse, the labored hum of the clock stubbornly keeping time on the wall.

"Lydia...?"

"Venus Angelo."

"I'm in love with you. You know that?"

She shouldn't answer her.

"Is that all right?"

"I can't...I can't answer that."

"Can I see you again?"

No. She was hot. She should tell her no. "I'm not sure."

Venus kissed her neck. "When?"

Lydia sighed. Tell her never. "I-I don't know."

"When I return? Can I see you then?"

Venus was holding her up with her hips. "From-from Tokyo?"

"Yes."

"In a month, you mean?"

Venus held her by the waist, caressed her through her blouse. "I'll call you in between."

In between. Oh, god, in between. She couldn't think.

"You'll take my call?"

Helaine would be home for lunch soon.

"Can I give you a ring?"

She was wet-she had to go.

"Can I, Lydia?"

Can Venus Angelo give her a ring? Christ, she already had a ring! She let go of her hand.

"I'll call you, Lydia...in between."

"No, Venus," she choked. "NO, NO, NO."

And with that Venus released her.

VP Beaumont leaned on the wall with one hand and with the other she fastened herself and adjusted her hair. She did not look at Venus while she did this nor when she was done, but waited in silence for her to open the door.

Once in the hallway, she took a very deep breath and made herself walk.

Venus watched her take a few shaky steps and then stop again. Standing still with her back to her, she thought that Lydia seemed very much like the kind of woman who would want to apologize for an incident like this, who might be forming a perfectly respectable apology in her mind.

She couldn't stand the thought of it. "Keep going, Ms. Beaumont," she told her. "Tell Paula I said thanks."

Only two sessions this Saturday morning and Helaine was ready to leave her office by eleven-thirty. She marveled at the briefcase again, smiling in a satisfied way before closing it. No time to walk home. She called a cab.

She had in her haste this morning grabbed Lydia's instead of her own, never having noticed before how similar they were. Inside Lydia's briefcase she had discovered the Abstract of Title for the Beaumont's summer place, the old Queen Anne that she had heard so much about, as well as the new deed conveying it from Edward and Marilyn to their daughter and herself.

That was supposed to be a present, Helaine figured. So it was her duty to preserve Lydia's surprise.

Lydia didn't work Saturdays so it was entirely possible she hadn't discovered the mistake. Sneaking her briefcase in without her knowing shouldn't be that big a problem, Helaine thought, as long as she wasn't acting dopey about it. Of course, there was the chance that Lydia had wanted to put the paperwork in the safe this morning. Then she would have seen right away that there had been a mix-up. She worried on that likelihood before finally dismissing it. Lydia would certainly have called.

Who knows, maybe she won't even be home, considering the ill treatment she had received over the matter. One night on the couch, the next equal to sleeping in the doghouse. Goodness, Helaine thought, urging the cabby to drive faster. She had to make that up to her somehow.

This would put the kibosh on the meaningful discussions she had planned for the weekend. But the truth was that no matter when she broke the news of her upcoming world tour, Lydia would still act blind-sided when departure day arrived. She might as well put it off until her suitcases were in the hall if she wished to avoid that.

She was relieved when she returned to the penthouse to find that Lydia was out. She checked on the last known location of her own briefcase and felt lucky there, too. It was exactly where she had left it. She placed Lydia's by the front door where she remembered picking it up.

She placed her briefcase on the bar and popped it open. There was nothing left for her to do now. Everything was in order. She would be flying all Monday, in Tokyo by Tuesday, lose a day or two in the process. Tickets, cell phone, passport, plastic (never too much plastic), hotel reservations, laptop.

She chose to add to her carry-on weight only two books. The first was her already worn copy of *The Prince*. That was just in case Paula Treadwell could beam herself down. The latter was a fairly recent purchase and it still looked mint. This was Dr. Kristenson's best-selling magnum opus, which although not her usual fare, Venus felt obliged these days to study. She flipped to the inside of the dust jacket, to the black and white photo of Dr. Kristenson. Venus frowned at herself in the mirror over the bar. The doctor was undeniably wonderful. Likable, talented, beautiful, sexy. She closed the book and laid it on top of the other.

The stakes were high and the competition was very, very hot.

Chapter 12: Praise and Blame

Paula had not actually given notice to the board. She had merely given them a heads-up, leaving Lydia in charge of the kingdom for a while. Several of the directors held informal discussions concerning the future governance of Soloman-Schmitt and they were impressed with the senior vice president's record of achievement and her management style which differed so dramatically from CEO Treadwell's sandpaper diplomacy. Not that the board had any genuine grievance with Treadwell. After all, as abrasive as they might find the woman, her techniques had definitely produced positive gains. And they couldn't forget—and she never let them—that she had rescued the corporation from the Securities and Exchange Commission, as well as ultimate bankruptcy. Tally that in with a five-year average annual growth rate of four percent and it was all good. Their only concern was for a smooth transition in the event that Paula stepped down, which seemed more and more likely as the days turned into weeks and Beaumont still stood at the helm.

Some members and prominent shareholders claimed, unofficially, that a smooth transition had already taken place, but the board was taking a wait-and-see approach before stamping their approval. Nothing could become official until Paula Treadwell tendered her resignation. That remained a big IF.

In the meantime Paula acted as a cheerleader on the sidelines and praised her protégé both publicly and privately. It was a great comfort to be able to rely on her for a change. Especially under the present circumstances.

```
"Paula. What can I do for you?"
    "Kristenson, I need to chat."
   "Speak freely."
    "I mean professionally. Death, dying stuff, you know?"
   Very admirable, but it was not the doctor's specialty. "I can recom-"
    "Nonsense. I don't trust anyone else."
   "I see." Dr. Kristenson took the compliment without comment. "You want to come in?" she asked,
leafing through her appointment book. "I should tell you, though, my calendar is full till next month."
    "That's too long. Make time for me now. I'll pay you double."
   "No charge, Paula. I'll check with my secretary for cancellations and get back to you."
    "Don't give her my name, please. And thank you, but I don't need your charity."
   "I'll leave payment to your discretion then. But you can trust my secretary won't reveal your—"
    "I trust no one. I mean as a rule that is."
   "Okay...I'll make the arrangements myself then. How's that?"
    "Dr. Kristenson, I thank you." (click)
   "Yes, Jen?"
   "Lydia. Line one."
   "Thanks, Jen. Well! Good afternoon, Ms. Beaumont."
```

```
"Yes, Jen?"
"Lydia. Line one."
"Thanks, Jen. Well! Good afternoon, Ms. Beaumont.
"Helaine...I'm sorry if...do you have ti—?"
"Two o'clock."
(The line crackled.)
"Lydia?"
"I—you were expecting me?"
"Everyday, darling."
"Everyd—for how long?
Helaine counted in her head. "Nineteen days."
```

"Nineteen days, Lana?"

"Lvdia."

"Nineteen days?"

Helaine fidgeted with her pencil. "Two o'clock then?"

"Lana, I thought-I really don't know what I thought."

"My fault. Can you be here at two?"

"Two o'clock. Definitely. I'll see you at two." (click)

Nineteen days trying somehow to make it up to Lydia. Every subtle overture an act of futility. Nineteen days and nights Helaine had watched in dismay the woman tripping around the house anxious and shy, acting as if she was walking on glass, floundering at night like an amateur, stomping off to work in the morning, her libido in a pretzel.

Talk about sensitive. Dr. Kristenson had forgotten about this part of Lydia's nature.

Two o'clock appointment for hypersensitive Lydia Beaumont. Helaine laughed out loud. Last attempt, my love. After this, I'm sending you for professional help.

That didn't prove to be necessary.

Nineteen days in the doghouse. Every subtle overture an act of futility. Stomping off to work every morning for nineteen days in a row with her libido in a pretzel until she couldn't be subtle anymore.

Two o'clock appointment with Dr. Kristenson. Helaine was herself again. It took Lydia less than nineteen minutes to "pop her thing" as Venus liked to refer to it.

Venus and her bad self and the street slang she had resorted to using to get a laugh or a rise out of her prim and proper ex-boss.

She was in Japan, knocking them dead, and Lydia had received only two short communications from her. Progress reports. They were coolly addressed to "The Interim President" sent via Paula's e-mail. Lydia might not even have had those if she wasn't temporarily set up in Paula's offices.

Interim President Beaumont was up to her elbows in Paula Treadwell's duties. It's only when you fill someone else's shoes that you can appreciate their burden. Lydia also appreciated the pep talks. And, of course, not having to hear about Venus Angelo.

"How we have to live as opposed to how we ought to live, Beaumont. That is the real question."

Right.

"Goodness is not a profession."

But what is it? Lydia was indulging Paula these day.

"Goodness is imaginary. It's a state of mind. And more important than that, a vice when surrounded by those without virtue."

Treadwell and Machiavelli.

"Vice and virtue, Beaumont. That's the perfect martini. I have it for breakfast myself."

Lydia laughed.

"Straight up."

She needed her former assistant but was inexplicably angry at or about her. She couldn't decide which. Maybe both at different intervals. The source of this disturbance, she believed, was their last encounter, but she couldn't deny that she was at the same time extremely put off by the cold and distant shoulder she was getting now. As interim president she might have called the woman herself and given her a piece of her mind over it since she had her cell number and a secure line and the compunction to do it, but she was certain that the instant she heard Venus' voice in her ear again that she would lose her resolve and thereby subject herself to yet more withering remarks such as the last one Venus had issued. In fact, she was still stinging from that crack, in part because what Venus implied felt true.

Or if not exactly true, not exactly false.

The situation that had erupted with Helaine over dinner with Dad had only deepened Lydia's resentment. She couldn't confront this when she was home, but high on her perch at Soloman-Schmitt she thought about these things extensively. Somehow it was all related. Vice and virtue and Venus. Her security and well-being. That of Soloman-Schmitt's.

Helaine Kristenson and Venus Angelo. They had, independent of each other and yet simultaneously, reduced her to nothing for nineteen days. Nothing but a seething woman. A furious woman. A woman scorned. What a release after that to have finally experienced orgasm again.

Lydia sat at the end of the day in Paula Treadwell's corporate compound, safe and secure there, at least for the time being. She was thinking, thinking, thinking. She thought about love. She thought about sex. She thought, with horror, about living without sex for nineteen days and how it had felt like an eternity. She thought it was frightening that Helaine and Venus were both somehow linked to this privation. She had been angry with both of them over it, but now she knew she was, in fact, only mad at Venus. Why that should be the case she couldn't say, but she worried about it nevertheless, what that kind of low-grade, chronic fury might mean, and what it could be doing to her in the long haul.

"Assistant VP Overseas, Ms. Beaumont." This announcement stirred her from her thoughts.

Paula's assistants came with the job and she didn't know them well or trust them. "Put her on line two. And close that door, please," she said, waiting for it to be done before speaking.

"Beaumont here."

"Greetings from Tokyo. Angelo here."

"Yes. How are things in Tokyo?"

"Hopping. I'm supposed to return next week."

"Good, we're expecting you. Is there anything wrong? Why are you calling?" Venus sounded normal. Playful even. Lydia braced herself.

"Well...I was wondering what you would think if I extended my stay?"

"Business or pleasure, Venus?"

"Pleasure. Who's we?"

Pleasure. Lydia suppressed her annoyance. "We what?"

"You said 'we're expecting you.' Do you mean Soloman-Schmitt? Or you?"

Lydia took a deep breath. Should she even ask?

"Ms. Beaumont?"

"Is this a client or...something other? This pleasure thing?"

'No."

No. Just no. So she would have to ask if she wanted more information. Just tell her yes or no and be done with it. "Why have you called me, Venus?"

"Because you're the president. Remember?"

Lydia put her hand through her hair, rested her forehead on the back of it. "Venus...?"

"Lydia."

She needed her here. That need was not a vice. It was for the security and well-being of the state.

"Ms. Beaumont?"

"What is this about, Angelo?"

"I...I shouldn't say."

Rank and vile. Venus Angelo was a scoundrel. "I order you," Lydia said through her teeth. "Tell me."

"Okay. It's...um...about a woman."

She felt that in her chest.

"Be my first time...as you probably know."

(I know only that I am the interim president of a Fortune 500 company. I am the interim president of a Fortune 500 company. This is beneath me. I am not going to react.)

"Tell me you don't want me to do it, Lydia. Tell me to come home."

"I'm...Ms. Angelo, I'm hanging-"

"Tell me not to."

The interim president had a sudden urge to scream. And her womb ached. "Venus," she said, her voice hushed, "I have no right to rule on this."

"I'm giving you the right, Lydia. So hit the ball."

Now she was angry again. At four women. That would include herself and the one in waiting for Venus. "Then stay if you must. I'm going to hang—"

"Is that what you want me to do?"

```
Want. She could feel hands guiding her hips again. "Venus."
```

"Say, honey, I don't want you to."

A belt was too tight and a button undone. "You've never-?"

"Поре."

Lydia switched the receiver to her other ear. This one was red and burning.

"Lydia?"

"I don't...you can't give me the right to...I'm not reacting to this."

"Yes or no?"

Yes or no? Just tell her yes or no. Or better yet hang up the telephone, because it's a checkmate. Venus has cornered the king of the shi—

"Say no, Lydia."

"Venus, goddamnit, don't do this to me. I'm the intimate-I mean interim-goddamned president of this goddamned corporation!"

(Silence.)

"And I'm married and I passionately, passionately love my wife and I can't do this. Do you understand me? I just can't."

(Silence.)

"Angelo? Answer me."

"Yes, Ms. Beaumont. I understand you. I'll need an extra week then."

Lydia cradled the receiver.

"For sheer pleasure."

Sheer pleasure.

"Yes or no?"

Lydia trembled with rage. She was king of this shitheap. Venus was merely a prince, the prince of the darkness that was filling her mind now that her head was completely drained of blood. "No-you sonofabitch," she whispered, before slamming the phone in her ear.

It had been her goal to retire at forty. She had felt secure enough at the time. But now forty had passed and Helaine knew she was at Soloman-Schmitt against her will, that the hefty settlement she had paid to Sharon Chambers had set her back enough to thwart those plans. To complicate matters there had been a change in Paula's fortunes and now because of it and because of her loyalty to Paula, Lydia was destined to become the president of a corporation she had, with some assistance from Helaine, come to absolutely despise. She was, Helaine knew, completely competent to succeed Paula, but she was no longer morally or philosophically qualified.

So the conflict, turmoil and guilt that Paula was confessing to Dr. Kristenson on the couch this Saturday morning, though different than her own, was striking sensitive cords and if Paula wasn't so distrustful the doctor would have insisted that she see someone else, someone with no connection to the corporation. But she was sure that Paula would refuse to go elsewhere and the woman wanted and definitely needed professional counseling. Reluctantly then, Dr. Kristenson added to her long list of exclusive clientele, the esteemed president of Soloman-Schmitt.

Today was her second session.

Paula Treadwell was expressing beliefs that are common to people who are depressed. Prominent amongst these themes was the belief that she was being punished by an unseen force. That there were numerous reasons for it including her various infidelities, her moral turpitude and her blind and sometimes blinding ambition. In addition to those matters it was clear that she was afraid, a sensation that, being somewhat foreign to her, had the effect of making her even more afraid. Dickie was, she was certain, not going to make it and though she described as vaguely as possible the concerns she had about the future without him, they were not vague at all to Dr. Kristenson. The Treadwells had been married for twenty-five years. The woman was afraid to be alone. A very human concern.

So Paula Treadwell was a human being, just as Lydia had always asserted. And she was blaming herself for something that human beings just naturally do. They die. In her case, her husband's prognosis was not a

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

guarantee that he was dying, but he did have only a seventeen percent chance of surviving his cancer, which meant that he was likely to die. As we all are.

If there was a seventeen percent chance that a company's stock would rise fifty dollars a share by the end of next week, Dr. Kristenson had asked, how many shares would you buy today?

Paula smiled as she left. "Thank you, Dr. Kristenson. I'll see you next week."

Chapter 13: Liberality

"When lilacs last in the door yard bloomed," Marilyn Beaumont spouted, "you were but a girl."

"Yah! I was in my early thirties, mom. Hardly a girl."

There were no lilacs on the bush now. Summer had burned them away. Autumn had bruised every leaf.

"Well, a girl to me. Helaine really doesn't know about this?"

"No, still a surprise."

"Oh, look at these," Marilyn said, distracted by a row of crumpled peony bushes, their once full blooms crushed and rotted into the ground, too heavy for the spindly plants to bear. Around them stood the remnants of supports she had erected decades ago. "Your father was right," she said wistfully, "we should have made wire cages for them."

A second compliment for Dad today. Lydia pretended not to notice.

"And you remember the poppies, dear? Do have your workers be careful near those beds. They've got to be over a hundred years old."

Lydia smiled. Yes, she remembered the poppies. She remembered all of it, like it was yesterday. She held her mother's arm as they made their way to the other side of the house.

"Of course, they won't look like much this time of year. I used to let them make heads and then cut them down in July. And see your irises right here? Cut them later. Now," she paused, taking in the browns and yellows of the spent plants, the crowding weeds, "there's a gardener in town I trust very much, because, no offense dear, but you'll need a caretaker. I'm much too old to play in the dirt anymore. My back and all." She put her hand on it, remembering now how it had become so tender. "This man does the Langley place at the bottom of the hill and some of those newer homes on the other side of the lake. Monstrosities really, but their gardens are just lovely. I'll bet he can get these beds in order by spring of next year. Prune those plums and cherries so they'll set fruit again." She squinted out toward the water's edge. "Yes, he can. I'm sure of it."

Marilyn was herself abloom, her daughter realized, happy to be once more in the forgotten gardens of the lake house, happy visualizing the place brought back to life again, with the prospect of Lydia and Helaine living in it, care-taking Eden.

A vision of beauty. But that was a long way off. First, the wraparound porch was rotting into the ground, the roof leaked in three different places, the foundation facing lakeside was unstable at its corner, and the house, which had once itself been as bright and pink as a posy, desperately needed a paint job. Lydia had retained a contractor already and the workers were due next week. Marilyn, knowing this, had rendezvoused with her daughter this weekend in hopes of intervening on behalf of the plant kingdom she loved so much.

"I always apologize to a plant if I harm it," she said. "With humans I just go speechless."

Lydia laughed. So that's where she got it from.

"Better not to mess with people, I learned," Marilyn added. "They're more fragile than roses."

True? Lydia glanced at her. "Mother," she said softly, "I'll take good care of your gardens. They'll be a treasure for Helaine. She loves flowers." She did a three-sixty and took it all in. The whole yard had become a hay field, a lush meadow. "Even the wild ones," she teased.

They strolled around the lake after that, the brisk air cooling them as they walked. Afterwards they are a packed lunch on the decrepit porch and cautiously nipped from a twelve-year-old bottle of white zinfandel Marilyn had found unopened in the pantry.

Twelve years old.

It had been nearly that long since mother and daughter had been to the summer place together and almost never this time of year. To Lydia there seemed a sadness to the occasion. The aging mother, the rundown house, the childless daughter.

Those feelings haunted her throughout the afternoon as the two resumed inspecting the inside of the house and made an inventory of their various other discoveries. Twice she had an inexplicable desire to apologize to her mother. For what, she couldn't exactly say. Maybe for being too faraway and too busy all the time, or for the grandchildren she didn't give her, or for her father's philanderings of which Lydia knew so much more than even her mother did. Maybe it was just watching autumn empty the landscape of all its vitality, replacing it with flashy colors that couldn't and didn't last.

Neglect, she mused, after they had completed their mission for the day and she was following her mother's taillights down the dark country road to the village where they had once all lived together as a family. She and Eddie and Daddy and Mother. Surely that was the reason for her mood she decided: how liberal the seasons had been with the once pretty place, the incredible cruelty of time and neglect, her family's overwhelming neglect. That's what had gotten her so down today.

She retired early that evening so her mother wouldn't feel compelled to stay up late entertaining her. Around midnight, though, she awoke with a terrible longing and used the phone on the night stand to call Helaine. They whispered sweet nothings to each other for over an hour and then finally hung up, both privately satisfied.

Saturday morning, in much better spirits, she returned to the lake house with her mother and, as they had planned, began to tackle the attic situation.

Saturday. Dr. Kristenson had just finished her session with Paula when the phone rang in her waiting room. No Jenny this morning, she answered it herself and was surprised and delighted to hear from Venus Angelo who was back in the states once more, working across the street on a Saturday.

Lunch? Why not? She had wondered if the girl would ever get the courage. Frank's? Well...all right.

"Lovely," the astute maitre de mumbled to Helaine when Venus had exited his restaurant. "Problems at home?"

Helaine chuckled. "None. She's not mine, I can assure you."

"I see...?"

"Might be in love with my wife, I fear."

"Oh?" he said, still unsatisfied. "She has good taste. Fanning the fire?"

"A controlled burn, Harry."

He set her bill on the table and hesitated for a moment. She thought she knew him very well, but she couldn't decipher his expression this time.

"Then I have to believe you know what you're doing," he finally said, "since you are the expert in such matters."

He was not mocking her, she understood. He was deferring. And reserving. "You're being way too modest, monsieur."

The topics were boundless and engaging, but they never once discussed their mates, as Venus would have thought two women having lunch together for the very first time might be inclined to do. Not mentioning them was even weirder to her than babbling endlessly about them.

Good though, because the last thing Venus wanted to talk about was Sebastion. She had seen him only a handful of times since her return from Japan and with his new penchant for pulling all-nighters with god-only-knows who and at god-only-knows where, he had become as elusive these days as the ivory-billed woodpecker. Practically extinct except for a few controversial sightings.

Ditto for Interim President Beaumont who Venus had noticed had somehow developed a pronounced stammer while she had been away. At least whenever she ran into her at work or at the gym or whenever they both attended the same meetings or whenever she had to check in with her by telephone or...Venus now questioned what she had ever seen in her, so convinced was she that the woman was simply an idiot. She would have liked to say to Dr. Kristenson, Do you know what a dork you're married to? Do you have any

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

idea how obtuse and absurd she can be? But instead they talked about world hunger, peace and social justice, AIDS, malaria, Doctors Without Borders, social democracy versus capitalism, in short, the Kristenson Foundation's lofty agenda.

One lunch and Venus Angelo was to become a major contributor to the Kristenson Foundation. Was this to impress a woman who practically fainted whenever they met?

She practiced making martinis this afternoon. Shaken, not stirred. She wasn't sure what she was doing, writing checks to charity, but at least it was for a good cause, and anyway she had found Dr. Kristenson so damned likable, so incredibly charming, it was impossible to refuse her.

So it's a big fat check for the Kristenson Foundation. For hunger, for world peace, for justice and democracy, for medicine. She'd deliver it to the doctor next weekend. They'd be meeting for lunch again then. Same time, same place.

Chapter 14: Villainous

Joseph Rios paced his cell anxiously. It was a habit he was unaware of, something he had become accustomed to doing over the slow passage of time, over the five excruciatingly long years in the federal penitentiary.

It's called doing time. And now, because of good time-good behavior-his sentence had been reduced.

It had been unexpected news. Not that he hadn't tried his best to convince the panel before of his worthiness for parole, but because his fortunes had seemed to him so permanently reversed that he truly believed it too futile to even hope for such a reprieve.

But things can happen whether or not you wish for them, whether or not you believe they will happen. And so this evening Rio Joe paced a little more anxious than usual. He was wired, eager for the outside, though what he would do once he got there he really hadn't a clue. He was banned from the securities industry, banned from banking and investment, banned from anything to do with his former career at Soloman-Schmitt. Christ—he just realized—he wouldn't even be able to vote.

His family had stopped visiting him at the prison years ago. The trip was too much for them, they had said, but he knew better than that. Fuck 'em, he thought to himself, chucking an ancient copy of *Sons and Lovers* to the floor and kicking it across the room. There was no point in notifying them, sharing with those pretentious assholes the first good news he had had in years. They'd only ask him about his plans now that he'd ruined his otherwise glorious future.

What were his plans? Even the parole board had seemed somewhat skeptical about his prospects, stone-faced dickheads that they were.

Well, no plans yet, but big deal, he would be a free man in just six more months. After that, no matter what happened, he would never be caged again. Never, not ever, no way.

But how could he survive legitimately; what actually were his prospects? He had been a millionaire for a day once. He was not a millionaire anymore and he doubted that he could ever be one again, though he still had some hidden resources stashed overseas, some in Switzerland, most in the Cayman Islands. His illegal assets. But, of course, they didn't exactly amount to millions anymore and since he knew he would be watched after his release, making a mad dash for his booty was clearly out of the question.

His booty. He laughed ruefully. Okay, so it wasn't really his money. Who cares anyway? It's all the same thing. Just one big racket.

He paused at the foot of his bed and withdrew from beneath the mattress a folded newspaper article he had pinched months ago from the prison library. It showed a happy Lydia Beaumont, the new "Interim President" of Soloman-Schmitt. He gazed at it poisonously.

She had poisoned him. Ruined his life. Married someone else. A woman. He slumped as he studied her face, the face of the future president, the woman who had helped to send him behind bars, who had lived happily ever thereafter without him. Never inquiring, never writing, never looking back. He wanted her to know that he was getting out soon. He wanted her to look back, to look over her shoulder for him, to worry about her future as he was forced to do about his own, to feel caged like he was. And shunned. And despised. RUINED. He wanted her to grow old and gray overnight just as prison had done to him. He wanted her to go pale and gaunt, even jaundiced. He wanted her to long without hope for an eternity, to yearn for something and for someone she simply couldn't have. He wanted her to know what it was like to go without all of the fine things in life, to lose every single one of them. He wanted her to sink like him, in front of the whole wide world. He wanted her to drown while everyone watched, in unfathomable despair.

He did. He wanted her.

"What is the matter with you tonight?"

Lydia paced the downstairs lobby as they waited for their driver.

"Nothing. Forget about it."

"Darling, stop then. You'll break a heel."

Break a heel! Now that was the ticket. Then they'd be too late for the opera. Maybe have to stay home. Maybe have go to bed early. Lydia shot a sly, almost criminal look at her mate.

"Oh," Helaine said, suddenly wise. She glanced at her watch. Their car had just arrived at the front of the building and the driver stood waiting beside the opened door. Time, time, time. *Madam Butterfly, Madam Butterfly, Madam Butterfly, Wou're* a fiend to make me think of this," she whispered as they both got in.

Lydia hated the opera anyway. "The long way," she informed the chauffeur.

There was no further protest from Helaine. They went the long way.

"Please, Venus, sit down. What's got into you?"

Oh, a number of things, but right now, as was usual whenever she went home, it was Jasmine. Hostile Jasmine with her bad attitude and her bad self and tonight accompanied by her bad homey-from-the-hood boyfriend with his shiny gold tooth and matching chains and the overgrown fingernail on his pinkie for his crack cocaine and his shaved head and untied sneakers, and his stupid backwards baseball cap and those ridiculous baggies, and his relentless hip-hop banter spoken in a pseudo-slick and ever so manly gangster patois—

"Venus, sit!"

Venus sat. "Where's father?" she asked.

"Father is it? Not daddy?"

"I never called him daddy."

"Out with the boys tonight. Finish your supper, honey."

Honey. Venus dropped her fork. She had called her honey she just remembered. How could she dare do that? *Honey, I really have to go,* Lydia had said in the heat of—

"Venus? I asked you something."

"Mama...what?"

"Is everything all right at home? Where you at tonight, girl? The moon?"

The moon? Yes. Yes, dammit all, the moon. She picked her fork up again. "Yes."

Her mother threw up her hands. "Yes, what? Everything's all right or the moon?"

Venus carefully placed her fork to the side of the plate. "Both-Mama why is she with that riffraff? Don't you care?"

"Actually, he's a very sweet boy, Venus. You both seem to prefer sweet boys."

"Yeah, sweet. He's up to no good and you can see that."

"Oh, honey. How do you know? It's just a look."

Honey, honey. We can't. I can't. "She's doing it to spite me. You know it's just spite."

Her mother laughed low. "Perhaps, perhaps. You finished with this?"

The plate looked like an accident. Venus nodded and it was removed. "Why can't she see someone from school?" she asked. She heard her mother suddenly laugh into the sink. "Well, what's funny about that?" Venus pursued. "Why can't she?"

Her mother turned around and wiped her hands on her apron, rested them on her hips. "He is from school, honey. I told you, it's just a look."

Venus looked dumbfounded. Honey. Honey.

"Honey, are you pregnant or something? You seem so...so strange tonight."

She had not observed anything strange about herself. She was always edgy here. "He's from school?" she repeated incredulously.

"Yes, school. Are you?"

"Am I? You mean pregnant? Or strange?"

"Oh, you're acting mighty queer tonight. I swear," Mama muttered, going back to her dishes. "Mighty queer, little girl."

"Perhaps," Venus answered absently. "Perhaps I'm not the one you should be worrying is pregnant."

"I'm not worried you pregnant. I'm worried you never be pregnant. Just leave her alone. Jasmine's as smart as you are." She turned and faced her daughter. "Maybe smarter I'm thinking—why aren't you pregnant, Venus? Why don't I have any grandchildren?"

Bad subject. Venus shrugged. It was not diffidence. She wanted children. She just didn't know when or with whom. "Sebastion's...I don't know, Mama...he's...I don't know."

"Never home?"

She had already complained to her mother about that. Just left out the part that she really didn't give a shit if he was there or not, except when she needed sex. Then she missed him dreadfully. Then, if he was home, she made him know he was missed, made him feel genuinely loved. But Sebastion Jones didn't love her, or if he did, he never let on. Except with that perfect penis. She sighed thinking of it. Sebastion Jones had a penis that should be cast in a mold and mass produced. Maybe that's what he was doing. Distributing himself for mass consumption. "It doesn't matter. I don't love the man anyway."

Her mother sat down. "But you in love, Venus. In love with someone. Someone stole your heart, didn't they?"

Someone had stole it all right. That was the truth. But was steal the appropriate word? Was Lydia Beaumont really a thief like that? Venus felt faint. Was Lydia just a common thief or had she just given her heart to her? Her hand trembled at the possibility of discovery. Who else saw this thing, this love thing? "Mama, I can't do this."

"You'll feel better if you do."

Couldn't she confide her secret to her own mother? Couldn't she confess she had met her soul mate, her Mr. Right? Couldn't she admit this to somebody and take that weight off her over-stressed heart, make herself lighter, if only for an hour or two? Couldn't she tell her mother everything? Would she understand such things? Could she understand this? The ache in her loins and in her chest and in her arms and in her heart?

Her mother's arms were warm and soft, she remembered from childhood. She had had no need of them since childhood, but she didn't, today, feel much older than a child. Her heart was throbbing, her feelings hurt like a child's. She could hear her own pulse, feel her blood. "Mama." Her throat was dry and tight. She listened for any sound that might betray an eavesdropper. No one was home now but her mother. She leaned precariously toward her. Her mother moved closer, her arms opening wide. She collapsed into them.

"Oh, Venus," Mrs. Angelo whispered, holding her daughter's head against her shoulder and cradling her. "Oh, Venus, Venus, it's—" she felt the muscular body quiver. "Baby, it's all right," she whispered, rocking her gently. Venus Angelo was sobbing softly. "It's all right," Mama said. "Gonna be fine, baby girl. Just you wait and see." She rocked her and rocked her and rocked her. "Just takes time. Takes time. We got time, honey. Plenty of time, don't we?"

"Oh, god, Mama...god."

"Don't you worry about that. Everything's gonna be better, baby. Don't you fret."

She proved to be a very good mother, which even she had to marvel at from time to time. She could honestly say that she loved her daughter and that she gave her daughter every reason to love her in return, which the beautiful child gladly did. And, save for the little girl's innate dislike for the industry that had made her mother so rich and so famous—or infamous as the case could be made—they had a perfect mother/daughter relationship.

Sharon Chambers sat on the sidelines watching with dismay as her pretty little girl fussed and became, with every passing moment, more and more impossible at the photo shoot. It was clear she had no desire to follow in her mother's footsteps and although the girl had only begun the misadventure at the tender age of two and was now only the tender age of five, her stint as a child model would, Sharon knew, soon have to come to a screeching halt.

Screeching was probably an appropriate choice of words to describe the present session Helen Chambers had sabotaged with her willfulness and her tears and her other incorrigible characteristics she drew on to end

an activity she had no patience for. She did not like the lights or the strangers poking at her, or being too far from her mother, or not being able to play or read.

"Ms. Chambers...?"

"Yes?" Sharon answered, holding her hand over her eyes to see who was speaking. It was that asshole Coreali.

"She's all yours. I don't think we can use a bit of it."

She saw her daughter slap his hip and run past him.

"Mommy," Helen whispered, climbing into Sharon's lap.

"What, baby?"

The little girl pantomimed a whisper, but blurted loudly, "He's a prick."

Sharon clamped her hand tightly over Helen's mouth and scooped her up for a quick exit.

Nearby, some of the light and sound crew had overheard the child's remark. They laughed in consensus.

"He is a prick," someone agreed.

"Yeah, but she's a brat," someone else countered.

Sharon hustled her daughter out of the room and the two giggled all the way to the elevators.

It would be nice, Sharon sometimes thought, to know who Helen's father actually was because he surely must have been a remarkable man to have such a clever offspring.

Helen Chambers was indeed very clever.

"What now, you brat?" Sharon teased when they reached the lobby.

"Home. I'm going to read to you, Mommy."

"What-again?"

"Don't you like to read?"

No, she didn't. "Why don't you play your violin, instead?"

The child scoffed.

"What's so funny?"

"You, Mommy."

"Really? Why do you think that?"

"Because...it's a cello."

Sharon rolled her eyes. "You must never say 'prick' in public again. Where did you hear that, anyway?"

"It's not funny?"

"No...well, it is...but don't do it again. It makes Mommy look bad."

"Are you bad, Mommy?"

Sharon balked. "We'll discuss that later."

"When?" Helen pressed.

Sharon picked her up and walked to a waiting car. "When you're thirty."

Inside the car she smugly informed her mother, "You said it."

"Said...?"

Helen lowered her voice and managed an authentic whisper. "Prick."

Sharon groaned. "Oh, well. Somehow that just doesn't surprise me." She studied her daughter, her head cocked. She did not deserve this child, she frequently found herself thinking. "Okay, but what did I say about using that word?"

"Not in public," Helen repeated.

Sharon nodded approvingly.

"You said it after you hung up on your lawyer."

Sharon glanced at her daughter. She had argued yesterday afternoon with her attorney. She wanted to break a gag order. For years she had been constantly bugging him to break that gag order, to release the book. It had become an obsession. "Why don't you read to me? I think we've exhausted this topic."

"Exhausted this topic," Helen murmured. "That means shut up?"

Sharon laughed. This was pay-back of some sort. This brilliant little gadfly she had birthed. It giggled back at her.

"You're so pretty, Mommy. Pretty when you laugh."

At that Sharon cleared her throat. She was thirty...something. Nothing to laugh about. "I was," she replied, stroking the child's dark hair.

"Will I be pretty?" Helen asked.

"Yes, Helen Chambers. You already are."

"So then I'll be bad, too?"

Sharon gazed out the window. There were questions like this popping up all the time lately. Bad this, bad that. She didn't want it to become a theme between them and yet she knew it was inevitable, that one day her daughter would learn more than she needed to know about her mother, if not from her then from someone else.

Super-model Sharon Chambers had lived wildly and recklessly and every unglamorous minute of it had been captured on tape or in snapshots. That left nothing that could be denied. And she had lost Helaine Kristenson as a consequence. Lost other things, too, but those losses were nothing compared to losing Helaine. At the end of her career all that she had to show for it was sitting beside her with adoring eyes, in a fancy car, headed for their fancy address. She had never contemplated having a child, let alone one as quick and sharp as this one. She did not know how to deal with the subject of *bad* and how to present her good girl with such a bad legacy, nor was she ready to.

"Helen, please...just read to me."

Helen read to her.

Dr. Kristenson was daydreaming at her desk. The rest of the afternoon belonged to her and she was spending it like this, with her chin resting on her hands and her notes from her earlier sessions scattered around her in disarray.

It's a delicate science, psychoanalysis, and it requires tremendous objectivity. The current problem was hard to be objective about. Lydia was talking in her sleep. No, no, no, the doctor would hear the woman muttering night after night. No...no...no...no...no. Not too terribly incriminating, Dr. Kristenson realized, but shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

From the standpoint of psychology, she understood that Lydia was not so much wrestling with Venus Angelo as with herself, in an effort to suppress her desire for Venus Angelo. Very honorable. From the standpoint of marriage, however, the situation was a total bummer and she had to wonder how it might end, how near to or far from defeat Lydia might be if she was having to fight herself and Venus every night until morning. How far could she be from falling in love at this rate?

That no one could know. Not even Dr. Kristenson.

What the doctor did know was that Venus Angelo was a noble human being and that desiring a noble human being who is also very attractive makes the battle that much harder to win. There was no comfort in this knowledge, no comfort in knowing that whatever progress Venus had made in exciting Lydia's id, she had not accomplished it through villainy. This offered a wife precious little by way of a tactical defense and any offense that Helaine might be contemplating was itself fraught with many perils.

Indeed, it seemed that it was all up to Venus then. It was hers to lose. She would, if she was actively endeavoring to get Lydia, somehow have to fatally blunder, though Helaine rather doubted it would happen that way because, save for falling in love with a married woman who would not reciprocate her affections, noble Venus Angelo had evidently never blundered at anything.

The doctor could say now, because of their luncheons and her skillful probing, that she knew Venus Angelo very well. She knew, for instance, that Venus was deeply in love with Lydia. It was a very big love. She knew, as well, that if ever it came to fruition the two women would be good for each other. The doctor was expert in judging such a matter.

But Helaine was torn by it.

Chapter 15: Exhortation to Liberate

"What in the hell is the matter with you, Liddy? You're acting like a caged animal."

She was turning forty-two. She could start with that crisis and go on endlessly from there. Like what the heck was she supposed to do with herself while Helaine was off on her world tour globetrotting for the Kristenson Foundation for five months? That was, she learned, looming in her not so distant future. Their first significant separation and, she worried, perhaps not their last.

Lydia took in Delilah's expression. Oh, here we go again, she said to herself. She needed a vacation. The apartment in Paris would be nice for a couple days, for a week, for a year. That's what she should do about everything. Swoop up Helaine and get the hell out of here. Enough of this...this...she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

```
"Where's our martinis?" she demanded.
```

Lydia put her drink down. "Let's get out of here. I need to walk."

"Out!"

"Out?"

"Out."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No, Sebastion. I'm not."

"But baby-"

"I am not your baby. Now get out, I said."

"But-"

Venus grabbed him by the tie. "Don't make me say it again, Sebastion Jones. I'm tired of your buts and I want you to go."

"But what about my things?"

"What things? It doesn't even look like you live here. Go!"

Sebastion made for the door and then stopped. He scanned her apartment. It was true. He had no things there. Just Venus. "What's got into you, girl?"

"Fix your tie."

He glanced in the mirror. "Shit! Look at my tie! Look what you did to my tie!" He tried to straighten it, but it was beyond straightening. "What's wrong with you, girl? Here I am trying to abide by your—"

"Nonsense! I don't want to hear it, see? I'll send you another tie. I hate to sleep alone. I'm sleeping alone all the fucking time! Now go!"

He struggled with the tie in the mirror and complained under his breath. "She hates to sleep alone, Sebastion. She hates to be tied down, too. What you think of that, fool? She hates to be alone. She hates to be tied down. She needs her freedom. She hates to be alone." He turned and faced her. "What do you like, Venus? Bet you wouldn't muss Lydia Beaumont's clothes, would ya? Bet you wouldn't toss her out on her ass after you ruined her FIVE-HUNDRED-DOLLAR TIE!"

Lydia Beaumont. Venus glared at him. "Five hundred dollars, Sebastion? You're shitting me, right? Five hundred dollars for a strip of cloth? Here! Here!" She snatched her checkbook and waved it at him. "I'll write you a check for it. How 'bout that? How much you need for that silly-ass rag hanging off your shabby-ass neck? Huh? You want me to make it a six-hundred-dollar tie, Mr. Jones? Okay! Let's do that. Yeah, yeah! I can do that. Hey, everybody! Did you know Sebastion Jones has a six-hundred-dollar tie? Ain't he special?"

"You're nuts."

[&]quot;Well, Liddy, mine's in my hand and yours is in your-?"

"Six hundred dollars? C'mon, that's more than you ever spent on me. Here let's do it. Six...hun...dred...dol...lars...and no fuckin' sense." She was writing a check for six hundred dollars and no cents. She was a little pissed off about his remark. "There." She was flinging the check at him. "Going, going, gone," she taunted, as he bent to the floor and picked it up. "Going, going, gone," she repeated, as he ripped it up.

"Something wrong with you, woman," he said. "Something really, really wrong."

"Nothing wrong with me," she lied. "Now git."

Delilah and Lydia worked their way downtown, stopping every ten blocks or so to order themselves yet another gin martini. Some of these they drank, some they didn't. Consequently, by afternoon they had completely lost track of how many they had actually consumed and, frankly, by then they had ceased to care. Today, Saturday, with the markets closed for the weekend, the temperature so comfortable, the air so cool and refreshing, they felt carefree and liberated. Of course, this was a delusion, a shared delusion. They were only drunk. Executive officers of major corporations are never truly free.

They were headed homeward when the alcohol at last hit them. It struck Lydia the hardest because she had been drinking the most. It was when she began weaving and wobbling that her companion suddenly noticed her condition. At the next corner, when she attempted to reenter a bar the two had left only a few hours earlier, Delilah commandeered her in the opposite direction.

"You've had enough, I'd say." She was thinking now of what Helaine's reaction would be. She checked the time. Four o'clock. Lydia was already two hours late, three sheets to the wind. Maybe they should stop somewhere for coffee. Does coffee really sober you up? Delilah wondered. Maybe we should call Helaine and tell her we're having coffee somewhere.

"I sure have...enough what?"

Delilah covered her eyes. Watching Lydia was making her feel drunker and drunker. She was visualizing a plush sofa and jumping in it. Maybe Helaine wouldn't mind if she took a quick nap when they got there. Oh boy, Helaine. This would not bring her pleasure.

Coffee was a must.

"Enough what, Del? Gin?"

Gin. Delilah groaned in self-disgust. "We're very, very drunk, Liddy. How come we're so drunk?" Ridiculous question. Because they drank too much. She had never seen Lydia so drunk. "Have you ever seen me this drunk before?" she asked of her.

Lydia shook her head. "No, you're pretty wasted, Del. How about me?"

Delilah squinted at her. Lydia was a mess. She wore a stupid smirk. They both laughed. "Oh, brother, Liddy."

"What?"

"Liddy?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think Helaine will notice?"

The answer was so obvious, even to the drunken.

"The question is," Lydia replied, "not whether she'll notice, but whether she'll ever forgive us."

That was unlikely because they were ruining her plans tonight.

"What are we supposed to be doing again?" Delilah asked.

"Opera."

"Oh, geesh, Liddy. Which one?"

Lydia was dizzy. "Umm...Merry Widows...I think." Another opera missed. She wiped the smile off her face, but it was happy there and returned again.

"Oh, I already seen it," Delilah joked. They were conspicuous on the corner and the passersby were cutting them a wide berth. "Do you think coffee will help?"

Lydia steadied herself, one hand on the lamppost. Coffee? She shook her head again and laughed. No nightmares tonight, she thought, her head spinning. She had been having nightmares about Joseph Rios ever since she heard from the grapevine that he was getting out. Every night for nearly a month she had been

running and hiding from him. Oh-the lamppost was moving! The street felt like a raft beneath her. She hadn't been this drunk since...maybe high school. Sinister Rio Joe. She shuddered despite her good mood. What was she afraid of? She couldn't recall right at this moment what she was so afraid of. Hair fell around her face, covering her eyes. She brushed it back with her free hand and grinned foolishly at her friend, amused at the idea of coffee and its alleged healing properties. Helaine had never seen her this intoxicated before and she didn't think it was going to impress her much. Meaning, she'd sleep well tonight, but probably on the couch. "We're screwed, Del. She's going to be furious."

"Ooh." Delilah reflected on this for awhile. It had a somewhat more sobering effect. "How about Irish coffee then?"

Lydia reflected on this for awhile. It had a somewhat more intoxicating effect. "Why not?" she finally said.

"Haven't seen her. But she hates the opera. You know that."

Venus locked her door and swept up the scraps of a six-hundred-dollar check. He should have taken it, she mused. She felt bad about the tie, but was glad he was gone.

The dig about Lydia still smarted. It shot into her brain and ricocheted against her skull bones like a bullet till she had a splitting headache. So she could add Sebastion Jones as yet another person in the universe who knew or suspected she had the hots for the woman. She could pout about this or move on to a new lover. She could hang low for a day or two or just go out tonight and start to live it up again. Forget all about Mr. Jones and Ms. Beaumont and Dr. Kristenson and whoever else might be destined to cross her path and romantically perplex her.

She should get an aspirin. Nah, she should get out of the house. Eat, drink, be merry. That's the cure for this kind of malady. Or was it malaise?

Whatever.

There was nothing in the medicine cabinet for a headache. Venus never got headaches. There were condoms and her birth control pills on the top shelf. She threw them into the waste basket. We're going to take a break from this, she promised the woman in the mirror.

The woman stared back at her without commenting. She looked angry. Very angry.

I should go out, listen to music, some blues, then come home early, go to bed, wake up free and clear and get on with my life. She left the angry woman in the bathroom.

Jazz would be nice. Cicero's had to be avoided, though. At least until Sebastion cooled down. Too bad because she didn't like to go anywhere else. She contemplated the alternatives. They had jazz all over this city. Yeah, but how could she live without Cicero's? She had been going there since college days, Mr. Jones. Way before there had been a Mr. Jones. What could he say to that? She thought about his crumpled tie. Ahh, it's just a tie. Shouldn't take him too long to recover, she assured herself. Let him have Cicero's for now. Lots of girls in Cicero's to keep him occupied. Lots of girls everywhere for that matter. Maybe she should go get one.

She pictured the girl from Tokyo. In her mind the Tokyo girl was still waiting for her, at some hotel bar where they had both agreed to meet. Still waiting, horror of horrors, even though months had passed since Venus had stood her up. What an awful thing to do. Ugh! But it couldn't be helped. Sometimes, just for a sickening thrill, Venus would conjure an image of that girl. Not waiting at the bar, but waiting instead in hell for her. The pretty girl with the porcelain skin and ruby red lips all afire. She deserved that. She had more than stood her up. She had panicked. Got them cold feet after pinning the interim president down.

Sonofabitch!

[&]quot;Still, it's not like her to forget."

[&]quot;What's going on, Helaine? Spat?"

[&]quot;Robert, no. She's out with Del somewhere. They're late."

[&]quot;Flew the coop with Del Lewiston! Doubt it."

[&]quot;That's not what I'm thinking. She's been...troubled. Nightmares and such."

[&]quot;Oh? Let her have some fun then, Dr. Kristenson. Can't be too much fun running Soloman-Schmitt. That'd give me nightmares, too."

Venus stretched out on the floor. *That's the nicest thing you ever said to me, your highness.* That and "honey." Next to the chair, beside her head, was Dr. Kristenson's manifesto. She took it up and opened it to the

bookmark. Chapter fourteen.

She was angry and made a valiant effort to hide it. Lydia was unaware, having debilitated herself on Irish and then Mexican and finally Tahitian "coffees" but Delilah, if she closed one eye and concentrated, could plainly see the sparks of rage flying from Helaine Kristenson. She clumsily helped her drag/carry Lydia to the bedroom and even had enough wherewithal to make the mental note that this left a very comfortable sofa available for her own weary and sodden bones. As soon as they could get Lydia situated, she decided, she was going to claim it. That is, if Helaine didn't object. She cast her a guilty look. "We're sorry," she said.

"Jesus," Helaine answered. "What could you possibly be thinking, if at all?"

"Lana," Lydia cooed, tugging at Helaine's dress, "takethisoff."

Delilah chuckled and then stifled it with her hand.

"Don't," Helaine warned. "What have you done to yourself?"

"Well, I'm...we're...what are we again, Del?"

(Fortune Five Hundred Assholes.) "Drunk, Liddy."

Helaine swore under her breath. "Why?"

"No, no, no. What did you call it before?" Lydia drawled.

Helaine glanced up from the bed. "Water, Del."

Water? Hey, good idea. Delilah went to fetch some.

"Lana, take-"

"Darling, you're positively shit-faced."

"That's it! That's the word. Shit-faced!"

"Don't make a habit of this. Do you understand me?"

"I under...fuck me, Lana. I want to be fu-"

Delilah reappeared with a pitcher of water and a hundred paper cups. "Here's your water, Helaine."

Lydia had Helaine by the dress straps.

"Pour it for me, Del," Helaine said, prying Lydia's fingers loose. "Thanks...here you go, Ms. Beaumont. Drink up." She put a cup to Lydia's lips, but she would have none of it. "Did anybody see you like this?"

The question was a riddle to Lydia. Helaine repeated it for Delilah's sake.

Delilah shrugged and gulped her water. "Probably. We were kind of hard to miss."

"I'll bet you—" Lydia had her arm around her neck and was pulling her down, unzipping her and whispering provocatively in her ear. "I will," Helaine whispered back, "if you drink this."

Lydia took the cup from her and drained it. "Lana," she said, in a drowned voice. The rest she resorted to whispering again.

Helaine's cheeks colored. "The couch, Del–I will–the couch is–I'm–shut that door, Del–I–shut the door!" Delilah staggered from the bedroom.

Chapter 16: Clemency

Her eyes were mere slits that watered when she opened them, something she was only capable of doing for a few seconds at a time, first, just long enough to take in her surroundings, second, to check the time (11AM) and then at last, to determine that she was alone in a turbulent ocean of sheets and pillows. Familiar sheets and pillows. She closed her eyes again, a boat at sea.

The room spun.

For some reason which Lydia couldn't readily recall, she was surprised to find herself in her own bed and she lay in it dazed, pondering the how's and what's of it until, the sleep finally fading, the answers began to come to her, in a rush of nausea and elation.

She threw her legs over the side of the boat and waded to shore.

In the adjoining bathroom she caught sight of herself in the mirror and took a quick breath, pleasantly startled by the reflection. Lipstick doesn't go on your belly! She grinned the grin of a woman still partially inebriated.

Her hair. Oh, her hair! Wetting it and pushing it around produced no satisfactory results. Her head, her head. Aspirin. They must have aspirin. Oh, oh, that hurt! Hey, what happened to Del? What happened to—bathrobe on the door was Helaine's, still damp from the shower she must have taken while Lydia was zonked. The thought of a steaming Helaine made her realize that her groins were sore and that brought on a variety of other sensations, as well. Some good, some not so bad, and there it was again in the mirror, another grin.

Good, good, all good. Helaine had shown her leniency. She splashed her face and slipped into the bathrobe, aroused.

She could smell coffee brewing. Now why should that make her feel apprehensive?

The trip to the kitchen was just that. A trip and a fall and one brutally protracted misstep after another, which necessarily included stumbling into Delilah, out cold on the couch. So that's what happened to Del. She lay snoring, indifferent to an audience or the time or that she was still dressed in yesterday's clothes. Her hair, too, Lydia observed. Ha, ha. Wait till she sees that.

The penthouse was so quiet this morning. Where's the good doctor?

"Darling, I'm in here."

Lydia appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. "Lana."

Helaine looked up from her paper, saw what was on Lydia's mind and dropped it. Today was not going to be an ideal day for discussing the nitty-gritty of the world tour, she could see. Which was probably just as well judging from Lydia's reaction yesterday to the simple mention of it. No point in distressing her further with the specifics. Helaine pushed her chair away from the table and patted her thigh. Maybe she really would put it off until the suitcases were in the hall.

Six months in this halfway house and then he would be free. Piece of cake. He was practically a free man already if one considered that the only people he had to be wary of in here were house personnel, unlike prison with its dangerous cons and its equally hard-ass guards, both hostile and competitive, always pulling off some scheme and turning in a scapegoat if they got caught at it. Here he had it easy for the first time in years. Only had to check in twice a day, wear a hideous bracelet at all times, sleep in the joint every night till dawn.

He was looking for work, he informed staff. That's what he was doing with his days he explained. Seemed perfectly reasonable to them and it matched the treatment plan, the one that had been devised to assist him

in making the difficult transition from a convicted felon to a rehabilitated ex-felon, a new and improved productive citizen of society.

Looking for work all day, quiet and cooperative at night, poring over the want ads alone in his room, not even music playing. Nothing suspicious about that. His record demonstrated a strong work ethic, if no other ethics, and the authorities could in fact confirm that he did go on job interviews even if, as yet, he remained unemployed. Joseph Rios was a model ex-con and they were pleased with him, happy to see him applying himself on the outside.

Industrious Rio Joe was looking for honest work. That proves he was rehabilitated?

He was no changed man, except for looking much older than he might have had he never been incarcerated and for the fact that he would never work in finance again, most likely never wear a three-thousand-dollar suit either, unless he stole it. So there went all those degrees, his Ivy League education. Wasted. It was useless to him now, except for whatever knowledge he had acquired that he could utilize without needing a degree or a license.

He had formulated some ideas, some murky plans that could put his talents to good use—or not so good use—but they had to be put on ice for a while. Five, six months, at the minimum. And, of course, as soon as the coast was clear, he planned on tapping those overseas accounts. Investment capital for a private venture. He sneered wickedly at the thought of it, standing only a few blocks from Lydia's penthouse address. Very private, indeed.

Paula Treadwell was out of prison, too, so to speak. The prison she had constructed for herself out of all that anxiety and fear. Anxiety, fear and that terrible monster, death.

The gods had shown the Treadwells mercy and once again fortune was smiling Paula's way. Dickie was beginning to improve and it seemed he was going to pull through after all. So much for odds and percentages, so much for Saturday sessions with Dr. Kristenson, enjoyable as they had become, and so much for early retirement, though in truth she didn't want her old job anymore and was more likely to discuss power-sharing the presidency with her protégé at this point in her career rather than taking it back full time, this decision arrived at after having had a taste of liberty from corporate life and a break from all the stresses that came with it.

Of course, if she was going to become a part-timer then she should seal a deal as quickly as possible. But there was still plenty of vacation time left to mull it over in and anyhow, she would have to discuss the matter with Beaumont. She needed to convince Beaumont first.

Beaumont. She would be the hardest sell, Paula suspected.

The woman was good at what she did and perfectly competent to do it, but her heart and mind didn't belong to Soloman-Schmitt and Paula, having had some time to think lately, had come to accept that fact, even if it meant having to acknowledge that she had wasted years grooming someone for a job she didn't want. Paula would have liked to ask her where exactly her heart was located these days, but that subject seemed too taxing at the moment.

Maybe Beaumont was different than other people. Maybe the woman had two hearts.

She'd be sure to send Dr. Kristenson some flowers next week and a pretty handwritten thank-you. There were no more sessions scheduled after last Saturday's and there was room to hope that future sessions would no longer be necessary. The crisis, hers and her husband's, seemed to have an end in sight. Some gratitude was definitely overdue.

Paula lounged in a chair by the heated indoor pool, Dickie at her side. He read the paper between naps while she pecked unsuccessfully at the crossword puzzle. This was not a bad way to live, she had to admit. Depending on how it went with Beaumont, she'd approach the board with her proposal ASAP and see if they'd bite. She smiled contentedly at the thought of it, this strategy she had been quietly concocting for weeks. It was a good one. Fail-safe. The worse that could happen is that she would have to share the duties of the presidency for awhile. Beaumont could be pressured to go along with that. Thereafter the renegade would have to either formally commit herself to the position she had risen to or, once and for all, turn it down. If she did step aside...well, loyalties smoyalties, Paula would be free to select a second from among

the other princes in line. A few short months after that maneuver, she'd pull the ripcord on her golden parachute and bail for good.

Unfortunately, her immediate second choice was a bit young for the job just yet and so she was really counting on Lydia Beaumont to step up to the plate. She would have to hold down the fort. At least for the next few years.

Eleven across. Seven letter substitute. Fate? Paula scoffed. Please, that's just too easy.

DESTINY.

Suits were what Sebastion had left behind. Venus stared at a closet full of suits and ties. If these were five-hundred-dollar ties, what on earth were the suits worth? She slammed the door shut. She wanted them out of her apartment, but she didn't have the nerve right now to call him.

Not necessary. Sebastion called and left a message a few hours later. Baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, baby. He needed to come by and get his suits. And ties, if that was all right with Venus.

I'll think about it, Venus said to herself. Right now she was hungry and heading for Frank's for a late lunch, early supper. It was Sunday. No one would be there, which was fine with her since she really preferred to be alone today.

Baby, baby indeed. She could feel herself scowling and did nothing about it.

Frank's 2:30PM. Look what the cat dragged in. Delilah Lewiston.

Delilah had not been able to salvage her hair today and she was looking a little green around the gills, having only risen an hour ago. She spotted Venus in the corner and waved.

"May I?"

"Of course you may. You all right?"

"Hung over. Nothing to it. Martini, Harry, and a menu, please."

"Certainly. Are you all right?" he inquired.

"Yup, hair of the dog, please. And a bowl of coffee."

"Late night?" Venus asked.

Delilah was bleary-eyed. All night she had dreamt of a woman being murdered, all night the poor thing screaming bloody murder, refusing to die, disturbing her sleep. The petite morte she had found in the kitchen this morning explained everything. Lydia Beaumont's multiple resurrections. "Yeah," she laughed. "Wait till you see the other guy."

"Who?"

Menu, martini and coffee. "Thanks, Harry-your interim president, that's who. You'll be real impressed." She took a few swigs of her drink and then chased it with black coffee. "And that's how that's done, in case you ever need to know."

Venus hoped she wouldn't. She also hoped that Lydia wouldn't be joining them. Didn't want to deal with that issue today. Dr. Kristenson apparently would be lunching with them, she realized. There she stood at the entranceway, fresh as a daisy.

Delilah beckoned to her. "Where's Liddy?" she asked.

Helaine smiled patiently. "She'll be here shortly-Venus, how lovely."

"Good afternoon, Dr. Kristenson. How's your little patient?"

"Rare form, I'm afraid to report."

"Hormone levels the same, though," Delilah haplessly offered. "If not worse."

Venus flinched and feigned to be amused. Helaine shot Delilah a reproachful look, but Delilah didn't see it and, because it appeared that she was intent on further qualifying that remark, Helaine felt she had no choice. She kicked her under the table.

Delilah gasped.

"Oh, goodness...I'm so sorry, Del."

I can't do this. Venus glanced anxiously at the door. I just can't.

"Menu, Harry," Helaine said sweetly, taking note of Venus' agitation. "Two, please," she said, lowering her voice. "Ms. Beaumont has promised to join us soon."

"Oh, wonderful." His favorite. "Hair of the dog for her, too, I presume?"

Helaine watched Delilah sip her martini and with a shaky hand pick up the coffee cup. "Uh...no. I don't think that would be wise. Just coffee."

"Coffee it is."

Lydia Beaumont, hormones and hair. Damn, Delilah was a fright! Venus smiled as opaquely as possible and relaxed in her chair. She was curious.

"Well, Venus," Delilah said, dipping her napkin in the finger bowl and swabbing her forehead, "I haven't seen you in eons. How's that Sebastion of yours doing? Gawd, what a handsome man."

Delilah was batting zero. Venus laughed uncomfortably, inadvertently attracting Dr. Kristenson's scrutiny. "I...um...threw him out," she felt compelled to disclose. These were not the kind of matters she and the doctor usually discussed. "Um...yesterday, actually."

"Oh." Delilah put the soggy napkin in her lap. "I'm sorry, kid."

Helaine nodded sympathetically but said nothing.

"There's your polecat now." Delilah said, with a wink. Lydia had materialized at the coat check.

"Oh, good. There she is."

Venus turned to see.

Mmmmm. There she was.

It was not his fault, Venus confessed upon returning from her late lunch. He had, she admitted in the privacy of her penthouse, tried to accommodate her wishes, cater to her contradictory whims. She had been quick to blame, had gone and "harshed his mellow" as he liked to jest, but he was a good man and it wasn't his fault. It was nobody's fault. It was the way things are, or the way they go, or fate, or something in that order. Sebastion Jones had tried to please her. She had made him fail to. But nobody was really to blame for the fiasco. Not herself, because she couldn't help how she felt. Not Sebastion, because he didn't understand how she felt. Not Lydia, though she could think of nothing to add to her defense.

Venus debated returning Sebastion's call but concluded she needed more time to review things. She was still embarrassed about the tie incident. Distracted, too, by lunch with the girls.

She was in love with the wrong woman, she had realized at Frank's, while the four of them ate. If she was as smart as people claimed, she should have fallen in love with a woman like Dr. Kristenson instead. Mature, responsible, together, grounded. Not like Lydia Beaumont who was simply a...a...what were the words she was looking for now?

Oh, what were they? She knew her evening would be shot on a word search.

What she was, Lydia Beaumont.

Venus sat on the floor and did some stretches to relieve the tension that had accumulated in her legs and shoulders.

What was Lydia Beaumont?

Tousled. That was one word for it. Giddy, another. Sex marathons can do that. Venus folded her hands behind her head for sit-ups. The woman had been, all through lunch, sensually delirious. Too full for sit-ups, Venus plopped back on the rug and stared up at the ceiling. Lydia Beaumont had been high on sex. How cute is that? Shit, throw in cute and irresistible. Limpid, soft, supple, bending. Those were good words, too. And her smile. Damn! Her hair. Damn! Venus sighed. Perhaps the "Intimate President" had still been drunk from yesterday's binge because she was also, somehow...what is the word?

The word is flirtatious, though Venus couldn't pinpoint this observation.

Sit-ups. Three. And then she rolled over, leaning dreamily on her elbows with her legs crossing and uncrossing behind her in the air.

Okay, so what she was, Lydia Beaumont. Well, she was probably still intoxicated and she was more than a little addicted to her beautiful wife. But she was, notwithstanding those defects, absolutely flawless and—Venus forgave her everything.

Chapter 17: Conforming to Circumstances

Power share. Lydia eyed Helaine across the room, framed her in her glass. Helaine smiled seductively in return and then averted her gaze, giving her attention once more to whoever that was trying in vain to keep it.

"Beaumont, I'm talking here."

Another cocktail party at the Treadwells. Paula had been skillfully navigating Lydia toward the study where Lydia did not wish to go. Dickie looked good. Still pale and thin. Venus—

"Beaumont!"

"Paula...yes, power sharing. I'm thinking, I'm thinking." She was not.

Helaine was making her way now to the punch bowl. Lydia saw her hook her arm in Venus Angelo's as she passed her. Venus complied self-consciously. She was not a particularly affectionate woman. Not very touchy-feely. Lydia studied the ladies with interest, holding Paula off as long as she could.

"Give me some feedback then, and I can just infer the rest from your grunts."

Feedback. Lydia felt suddenly warm from her chest up. Helaine glanced her way and there it was, a different smile, a variation on a theme. She could not take her eyes from Helaine. That evening dress, the long blond hair. Maybe she was obsessed, like Delilah claimed. She was something in a black dress. Helaine Kristenson was so hot. Even cool, cool Venus seemed to be melting. Paula yacking in her ear. The melting Venus. Question: power sharing. Venus had a nice dress, too. "Mmmm...well...I don't know, Paula." She liked how they looked together, minus Venus' ever growing perplexity.

"You're flushed, Beaumont. Ignore them for the moment."

"Ah, Paula. Did you know it's my birthday in a couple of days?"

(Birthdays. When you're over forty, who the hell cares anymore?) "No, I didn't. Happy birthday, dear."

Lydia shot another look at the ladies at the punchbowl. Paula stepped in front of her and shut the door to the study.

"Did you know it's Lydia's birthday in a couple of days?" Helaine asked, slipping her arm free and ladling punch into empty glasses for a handful of thirsty guests who had collected around the table. "Oh, you're perfectly welcome. I am? Well, I thank you. Whoops—there you go."

"No, I...wasn't aware...no." Venus had seen the study door close from the corner of her eye, had known that the interim president had been watching them before that. She rubbed her bare arms to get rid of the goosebumps. A tête-à-tête with Paula Treadwell. Yuck.

Question: Lydia's birthday. She thought she had had an understanding with the doctor, an unspoken agreement not to discuss Lydia Beaumont. Thought wrong, apparently, because she had already mentioned her twice tonight. "Big plans?" she finally responded.

"Mmmm...big, maybe. But quiet. She wants it quiet." Once again she took Venus by the arm. "Here, let's move away from this table."

"I'll fire her if I have to. Don't doubt me on that."

Lydia exhaled impatiently. "And what would that accomplish, Paula Treadwell?" She was trying desperately not to get angry. "Just what could that possibly accomplish?" She already knew the answer. What had her father said about only asking questions she knew the answer to? She needed to talk to Edward Beaumont. Soon. Or to let him talk so she could listen. "Tell me, Paula. I'd like to know." Tell her why she's excited tonight at the sight of those two women together. Or didn't she know the answer to that, too?

"Ruin her, that's what."

Lydia sat on the corner of the desk and folded her arms. "Not if I'm president, you won't. That's what you want, right? One way or another, I'm president?"

"One way or the other, the end."

"Okay. I'm president. Venus stays. Happy?"

They were equals at last, with nothing to mark the occasion, nothing more to say.

In her mind Lydia was talking with her father. In her mind she was listening very carefully to him, no longer angry, as she had been since she was fourteen. In her mind it dawned on her that she had been angry with Daddy since she was fourteen, a deep-seated anger toward him ever since she had discovered his...his...what? Paula pressed for a date certain. Toward her father. Untoward. His womanizing. Tuesday? Is this womanizing, this sensation she had? Paula always got her way, one way or the other. She was a perfect player. Maybe it was genetics. It was useless to struggle. "Fine, Paula. Fine. I'll announce Tuesday. And thenbecause I know you so well—you'll step down without so much as a heads-up, and I'll be stuck with the whole damn job."

Paula wore an inscrutable smile.

Lydia wanted to leave the little room now. "You know I'm not suited for it." She was suffocating. "I think, in fact, that everyone knows I'm not suited for it."

"You're quite mistaken, Beaumont. You're dead wrong."

She was not up for the pep-talk. She was thirsty. She needed some punch and to find Del. Del, Paula, Helaine, Venus. Why were there so many women in her life? She needed some male companionship. She wanted to talk to her daddy. She wanted to make love to her wife by the punchbowl. With Venus. No, she hadn't thought that. Where was Del, tonight?

"Oh, Paula. You're wrong and you know it."

Paula peered over her glasses and nodded. But it was worth the gamble even if Beaumont could be taken for too timid, for being too nice. She would have to carry her sword at all times to counter those impressions. That would be a burden for her and something she most likely wouldn't want to do. If she didn't, though, then what? Paula stopped nodding.

Then she will have to fake it. They would both have to fake it for her.

"Then you will pretend to possess those qualities that would make you appear suited for it. And there's nothing to doing that, Beaumont. Carry a big stick and shout loudly. Say shit when you have a mouth full of it. You always choose to get pent up, instead. Bad choice, I tell you. Besides, everyone's behind you on this. All but one member of the board."

Vice versus virtue. Power versus glory. Blah, blah, blah. "Which member?"

"Oh, it's that wretched Goodman. Difficult name to live up to."

Goodman. Good to know. "Lovely. And what's the problem there?"

Paula threw up her hands. "You're too flamboyant, he complains. 'Latent flamboyance' I think is how he puts it."

Goodman. Lydia bit her lip pensively. That was not good.

"Beaumont, he's just an old shit. He thinks you're more like a rock star than a corporate officer. Just watch your back, that's all."

Yeah. Okay. Well, she had just given her word, hadn't she? She was job-sharing with Paula Treadwell, if Treadwell could get the board and the shareholders to approve it. She studied Paula's face. She could pass it by them all right. So here we are, Lydia said to herself, already preparing an exit strategy. The two of us president of Soloman-Schmitt, the kings of the shitheap. Truly she was out of her mind to go along with it. "You watch my back," she said, and then she promptly left the room.

"Liddy!"

"Hey, Del."

"Drinkie-pooh?"

"Yes, or ten. Have you seen Helaine?"

"She may have eloped with Venus, I'm sorry to say. That means you and I are finally free to marry. I think I'll wear black. Or should I maybe go with red? Liddy, my love, what would you say to red boots and a black gown?"

"Just the red boots. And a veil. Don't forget the veil." "A black veil?"

There they were over there. Helaine waved. Same smile. Lydia intended to take her home now. "Black. Oh, and be certain the invitations say property of Soloman-Schmitt somewhere."

"Uh-oh." Delilah threw the rest of her martini to the back of her throat. "You Soloman-Schmitt's bitch for life now? President Beaumont?"

"Mmhmm. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. You didn't forget my birthday?"

Delilah looked as if she had swallowed a fork.

"You did. You forgot my birthday, Delilah Lewiston."

"Did not."

"I want a divorce."

"Never."

"Darling?"

"Time to go home."

"Nice chat with Paula?"

Lydia huffed. Venus smiled tautly.

"Home it is. But first, I'd like you to meet the newest and certainly the youngest and most beautiful member of the Board of Directors of the Kristenson Foundation, Venus Angelo. Ms. Angelo, this is my wife."

Venus went along with the formality. "A pleasure to meet you," she said, gripping her empty punch glass with both hands.

Board of Directors. Nice work. She'd be perfect for it. "The pleasure," Lydia replied, "is all mine, I can assure you." Wasn't that something gallant Edward might say? The pleasure is all mine?

Helaine smiled. "Very good then. Shall we go?"

Chapter 18: Arms and Ability

Once and for all, rule number one, public speaking: THE MIKE IS ALWAYS ON.

She despised them and they knew it, a hate-hate relationship that had sprung from the Chambers/Kristenson/Beaumont affair, way back in the early days when they didn't know her name yet, when they simply called her Jane Doe.

Lydia stood on the podium Tuesday morning, the press gathering around like vultures, the corporate logo on an enormous banner behind her snapping in the breeze like a whip. It was supposed to be a joint news conference this morning, but Paula was nothing but a scoundrel and enough time had gone by for Lydia to deduce that she wasn't showing up. Paula Treadwell who was never late for anything was late today, which could only mean that she had never planned on being there at all.

Lydia had held up the crowd waiting for her and they were restless now, chomping at their bits, ready to stampede, whatever it is that a pack of animals do. Lydia gritted her teeth at them in a kind of skeletal grin, the best she could offer under the circumstances. Flashes. Cameras. It was all coming back to her. Why she despised them so much. Why she did not want this job.

"Ms. Beaumont! Hey! Ms. Beaumont!"

There were intermittent hoots and howls and these were becoming more frequent with every passing minute. She would have to deal with the reporters alone. Paula had hung her out there all alone. It was not her specialty being a spokesperson, the front woman. Paula was much better at it.

"Hey, give us a nice big smile, won't you?"

No.

She wiped the phony grin off her face and tapped at the microphone. There was a breathy sound from the speakers at her sides, a *boom boom* and then a piercing squeal. She stepped away from the apparatus while the technician made adjustments for her. By the time he had it fixed the press had settled down a bit.

Joint President Beaumont leaned into the mike and said, "Good morning," as cheerfully as possible. "Good morning," she repeated, finally giving them that nice, big smile.

The crowd swooned. They were going to have fun with Lydia Beaumont again. She had given them quite a chase before and in the ensuing years had been just a tad bit too elusive for their liking. She was in for it now.

She could feel their excitement. She pulled out the prepared statement Paula had crafted yesterday, the one that she had failed to commit to memory, and began in a monotone to read from it.

A collective sigh.

She ignored it and proceeded.

Okay, okay, they grumbled. They already knew this stuff or why else would they be here? What they really wanted was to gawk at and interrogate the new flamboyant joint president of Soloman-Schmitt, not listen to her read.

"Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont!"

A sea of raised arms.

Did it, Ms. Beaumont wondered, actually say anywhere that she had to respond to questions? She searched Paula's notes. Nope, it didn't say anything at all about question and answer time.

"Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont!"

She put her notes away and stared longingly over their heads at the boulevard.

"Over here, Ms. Beaumont! Over here! That's it, that's it! Yes!"

"Ms. Beaumont! How's married life treating you? How's your beautiful wife?"

She nodded with a smile and gave a thumbs-up sign, glancing over her shoulder at her handler. He raised his eyebrow and shook his head. He too had heard Goodman's arguments against her appointment. This scene and the endless potential for it was one of them.

"C'mon. Ms. Beaumont. Give us a break. Make some kind of statement."

She shook her head no.

"Was it worth it?"

She shook her head yes. Two thumbs-up this time. She knew there was something she should be doing to regain control of the situation, but she hadn't a clue what that might be.

"Ms. Beaumont. Ms. Beaumont!"

Cameras. Flashes. Catcalls. This was not cool. She cast a furtive glance to her handler again. He shrugged.

Goodman was right, Lydia thought. The press didn't give a shit that she was the joint president of Soloman-Schmitt and they never would. She brushed her hair from her eyes and felt in her pocket for her sunglasses. She had forgotten the sunglasses. She could hear the banner flapping behind her, the click of cameras, the murmur of the press as they speculated amongst themselves; about her, about Helaine, about everything but the business at hand. Del would probably think this was funny. Perhaps it was. She would, however, have a word or two with Paula about it afterward. This couldn't happen to her again.

"Ms. Beaumont! Cat got your tongue?"

She who hesitates is lost.

"Not still mad at us, are you?"

The traffic on the boulevard ebbed and flowed, ebbed and flowed again, like a pulse.

Uh...no. Not mad. Mad isn't the appropriate word. She tapped the mike again, this time hard enough that the reporters closest to her were forced to cover their ears. Everyone else quieted down. "If you'd like to write your questions on little pieces of paper," she began, "and pass them to the front—"

Jeering was what she would get for goading them.

"Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beau-"

Another whack at the mike. Lydia held up her hand to continue, "and we'll answer as many of them as time will allow."

More jeering.

She was, she saw, only making matters worse. She looked to her assistant beseechingly, ready to walk off.

He was on his cell phone. He gave her another shrug.

"C'mon! How's your love life, Ms. Beaumont?"

A roar of approval.

"Ms. Beaumont!"

All was lost. She turned again to convey this opinion to her useless handler. This time he was motioning with his hands for her to abandon the podium. It seemed like an excellent idea.

"Ms. Beaumont!" a reporter yelled above the crowd, "President Beaumont!"

With that, unfortunately, the reporter had her attention.

"We want to know-how's your sex life?"

She gave the reporter a deadly stare.

He repeated the question.

She glared into his camera.

"Fabulous," he said. "Thank you, love."

"Come on, Ms. Beaumont, come on," Mr. Useless pleaded.

Her sex life. What a stupid bastard. "My sex life," she said, turning toward him and no longer mindful of the mike. "My sex life," she repeated. "What a stupid bast—can you believe this crap?" she asked.

"Ooh, ooh," the man stammered, hurriedly shoving his cell phone into his pants pocket and holding his finger up to his lips.

She paid him no heed. "What a bunch of horny assholes."

"Ooh, ooh," he said again, virtually plucking her from the podium. "Go," he urged, pushing her from behind. "Go!"

She glanced over her shoulder and froze. Absolute mayhem had erupted. An uproar.

"Please, Ms. Beaumont, don't speak," he begged. The press was in hot pursuit. "Just go, go, GO!"

"What the hell was that?" Paula demanded.

"Where the hell were you?"

"Beaumont, that is worse than I could ever have imagined. That is beyond charisma. That is-"

"I'm not trying to be charismatic, Paula. I'm just-"

"Try not to be charismatic! Try not to be. Why are you doing this to me? How could you?"

Lydia fell into the nearby chair. "I...I forgot the mike was on."

"Forgot! The mike is always on. Always, Beaumont. How could you not know that? Even if you don't see a mike, there is a mike, and it is always, always on!"

"Darling, do you want to talk abou-?"

"NO."

Okay. She could understand that. Helaine stroked Lydia's hair. "But thanks for the thumbs-up," she whispered.

"Mmmm...you're welcome."

Lydia wasn't very good company tonight. Sullen and swimming in self-loathing. And if that wasn't bad enough, tomorrow was her birthday.

"Darling, is there anything I can do?"

"I forgot the mike was on."

Helaine smiled. Such a funny gaffe. "Well," she said, with a gentle sigh that she hoped would not betray amusement, "the mike is always on."

"Hey, sport."

"Del, let me just interrupt your mirth long enough to say that I don't want to discuss it."

"Discuss what?"

"Don't make me laugh. Paula is livid."

"And you can see that that's funny, I hope?"

"I forgot the damn mike was still on, believe it or not."

"Well, Liddy, the mike is always on."

"This is not a focus group! It's not a goddamned coffee klatch! And we are not running a beauty pageant here! That woman is nothing but a-a hedonist!"

Lydia Beaumont a hedonist? Sounded rather specious to the board. Stocks were trading high today, so who cares anyway?

"Mr. Goodman-"

"I have the floor and I'm not yielding it!"

The emergency board meeting was called by Mr. Goodman, himself. No emergency was registering, though. Stocks were trading high today thanks to Soloman-Schmitt's newly appointed "corporate heart-throb", as most of the dailies had put it this morning.

Noontime. Stocks high and only half the board showed up. Goodman was furious, indifferent to the two point surge or Joint President Beaumont's soaring approval rating. "She flies in the face of everything Soloman-Schmitt represents. Our tradition, our very ethos has been violated here."

No, Treadwell had been right all along. Beaumont did not fly in the face of corporate tradition; Beaumont was the new face of the corporation. Hedonist or not, she was to be Soloman-Schmitt's makeover, a face *lift*, if you will, to bring the doddering old company into the twenty-first century with a much more youthful glow. No new logo could accomplish that, Paula had successfully argued. No new moniker, no merger or acquisition, just one modern face. That of the alluring and rather enigmatic Lydia Beaumont.

They would let Treadwell know she was a genius. Day one and Beaumont was already working like a charm.

Goodman was sputtering with rage. Members shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. The man was wrong. A dinosaur. A fossil. A relic.

"Silas-"

"I will not yield!"

Damage control. Paula had been tipped off about the emergency meeting and she was glad that Beaumont was out for the day. Having forgotten that it was the woman's birthday, she suspected instead that the joint president was apprised of these developments and was somewhere doing what she did best. Hiding. Or just plain being obtuse.

So Paula had devoted all morning to hand-holding the board, guaranteeing them that which she was no longer certain could be guaranteed. By quarter to twelve it had finally paid off and she announced to her assistant with a somewhat shaky grin that four of the board members had agreed to be no-shows. Her calls to Goodman's home office, however, were not returned, and although shares of Soloman-Schmitt were outperforming in the first part of the day, causing the whole market to rally, she just knew it wouldn't be enough to get him to back down.

The board convened at noon, stocks soaring. Paula had a martini and fingernail lunch complete with stale peanuts and then, with word from an anonymous source that Goodman had failed in his efforts to remove Beaumont, she threw up her arms, and spent the remainder of the day watching the company's shares climb up into the stratosphere, holding her breath, lungs filled with all that dangerously thin air, and waiting, almost faint from the lack of oxygen, until the close of the bell before acknowledging that she could, at last, actually declare victory.

After that, feeling unusually depleted, she went home to her husband, to gloat in private over a triumph that she had, in the eleventh hour, not really expected.

Chapter 19: Fortune

The birthday girl's day was, as she had planned, far less eventful than Silas Goodman's or Paula Treadwell's, though all of their fortunes were plainly crossed and she was working overtime in her mind not to know it. She had started, the night before, doing her hiding act and being hard to get and to those talents she threw in sulking, which she could also excel at and which she did all the way to bed.

Once in bed, however, her other skills went unexploited as Helaine insisted they forego a long night in order to maximize the surprise that lay ahead for the following evening. This did not go over well with Lydia and she slept fitfully, her psyche a victim of the hormonal tyranny she constantly feared would one day come to rule and ruin her. At about three in the morning, having woken from a nightmare (she was being chased by naked reporters), she roused Helaine for the purposes of simply "making out."

This the good doctor finally consented to, extracting first a promise from Lydia that it would not go any farther than that.

"You have my word."

They made out and petted until the sun came up and until their lips were bruised and swollen from kissing.

Early appointments for Dr. Kristenson. She winced at the daylight and reluctantly extricated herself from the love-lock, leaving the bed to the sound of Lydia's bitter protests and emerging from the bedroom exhausted and horny. Dressed, but not at all prepared for her nine o'clock.

Coffee-maker on. She opened the front door looking for the morning paper and found her mate's bewildered face looking up at her, from above the fold. That's right, she muttered to herself, remembering afresh the corporate controversy that was landing Lydia once again on the front pages of the dailies, exactly were she hated to be. Well, it's her birthday for goodness' sake. Helaine stashed it in the coat closet and went back empty handed to the kitchen, giving a start this time to finding Lydia standing there, nude and not nearly as bewildered, holding out two fresh cups of coffee.

"Lana-"

She took one of the cups gingerly. 8:20AM. She was seconds away from calling Jenny. "Drink your coffee, Lydia...please."

"But think of what you're doing to my ego."

Think. Impossible. "It will heal, darling, I assure you."

"But when?"

Helaine grinned and avoided the plaintive eyes. "Tonight, darling."

"Helaine, it's my birthday...right now...this minute."

Quick sip. Quick sip. Quick sip. That birthday suit could ruin everything. All those pretty plans. Helaine shifted her weight from one heel to the other, wanting to fling them both off and lie down.

"La-"

"I have to go. And you have to get ready for your birthday brunch. Remember?"

What a time to think about brunch. Lydia set her coffee cup down at the same moment the phone in the living room began to ring.

"Saved by the bell, Lydia Beaumont. Don't you dare," Helaine warned with a throaty laugh. "I'm out of here." She grabbed her briefcase and hurried from the apartment. "Happy birthday!" she called from the hallway.

"Fine, be that way. Where's the paper then?" Lydia called after her. "The business section?"

"The pa-it didn't come today!"

"Didn't come? How odd-hello?"

"Happy birthday, Liddy! Told you I didn't forget."

What luck, Sebastion Jones remarked to himself, watching as Lydia Beaumont attempted to shield herself from a chorus of happy birthdays. Very good fortune for the assistant of PM Entertainments to run into the flavor-of-the-month like this.

"Happy birthday, dear, Lydia..."

And it's her birthday. What a perfect excuse to approach the woman.

"Happy birthday to you!"

He waited to do so until after the group had finished eating and were enjoying their cocktails.

"Happy birthday, Ms. Beaumont. You remember me? Sebastion? Sebastion Jones? Venus-?"

"Of course I do. Thank you." She squirmed in her seat, eager to be rid of him already.

He showered greetings on the rest of the group. A blinding smile.

Robert and Kay said their hellos like goodbyes.

Delilah ogled. "Won't you join us?" she asked, misreading everyone else's intentions.

He joined them.

"Mr. Jones, I should tell you before you get too far, I don't pose nude," Lydia said.

Sebastion chuckled in such a good-natured manner that she laughed with him.

"We weren't expecting you to," he replied, handing her his card.

She placed it beside her glass. "What then?" Because clearly he was after something.

"Have you heard of 'In Stone Magazine'?" he asked.

(Of course not.) "Does it cover the financial markets?" she teased.

Delilah rolled her eyes.

Sebastion laughed his same laugh. "Well, it does if you'll grant us an interview. You see we-"

"I don't give interviews. Press conferences are bad enough. No interviews, Mr. Jones. I'm sorry."

He nodded. They had expected that. "We pay for our interviews, Ms. Beaumont. We know how busy you-"

"Mr. Jones, I'm sorry to interrupt, but it's my birthday."

Harry came to the table. "Message for you, Lydia." The message was on a silver platter.

She gave the waiter a curious look and took the note suspiciously from him, fearing Paula.

"It was nice to see you again, Sebastion," Robert said, in a leading tone.

"Yes," Kay and Delilah chimed pleasantly.

Sebastion took the hint and rose to leave. "Keep my card, Ms. Beaumont, in case you reconsider. It's a standing offer," he added with his winsome grin. "So you can call me anytime."

She blushed to hear that. She didn't know why. "Thank you, Mr. Jones...I...thank you."

(And the note says: Happy birthday, darling. Meet me at the Lavender Lane Hotel, suite 27, 5:00 sharp. Dinner is at 6:00. Love you—Lana. PS. Don't you dare be late!)

"That's from Helaine," Robert said. "I can tell by your face."

The Lavender Lane Hotel is located downtown on the waterfront where the hedonists like to congregate, say for dinner or drinks, even a romp if they can afford one.

In its earliest conception, the hotel had been a convent, which explains the Gates of Hell motif of the large iron entrance doors. Later, when the place ran out of nuns, it was converted into a boarding school for wayward girls, a far more lucrative venture than Catholicism, as there seemed to be a never-ending supply of young ladies in trouble and well-to-do parents wishing to be done with them.

The school authorities thought the hellish entrance quite apropos to their educational and spiritual mission and they devoted a lot of attention (and girl power) to restoring the ominous doors to their original "beauty" and, once restoration was complete, to keeping them rust-free and shiny.

Child labor, of course, is not only good for a girl's redemption, but it helps to free up financial resources for bigger and better things, which the lavish private lifestyles of the institution's administrators had readily attested to. When "Hell's Gate" (as it came to be called) finally went bankrupt and filed for protection from its creditors, the school was a million dollars in debt, its facilities and residents in appalling neglect, and its

once high profile administrators nowhere to be found. Ultimately the city was forced to seize the property for a decade of unpaid taxes and thereafter it sat boarded up for nearly two decades before anyone else could think of a use for it.

That's when investors and their political pets began eyeing the waterfront district for development, armed with plans for demolishing its historic architecture and promenades and replacing them with high-rise office buildings, tourist attractions and mall-inspired concept museums. That's also when they were met with some powerful resistance, backed up, naturally, by some very deep pockets.

Introducing The Waterfront Preservationists, who could boast a membership that included the likes of Dr. Helaine Kristenson and her "bleeding heart" associates and a handful of civic minded, people-friendly corporations.

When Hell's Gate went on the auction block without the public notice legally required for such sales, the WP mysteriously found out about it anyway and showed up with a few private bidders of their own. Them and a sky's-the-limit acquisition budget. One of those "private bidders" was Anna Grisholm, a personal friend of Helaine Kristenson, a personal friend to many of the waterfront preservationists, and a personal friend to many of the wives of the politicians and their bedfellows attempting to boondoggle the public out of extremely valuable real estate.

Anna won the bid.

That's the method that proved so successful in reclaiming and preserving the waterfront district, the one that eventually defeated the carpetbaggers at their own game and drove them back uptown where they came from.

Today, it is Anna Grisholm and her silent partners who own and manage the historic building which once cloistered nuns and later housed the misfortunate. Except for the fact that the gates of hell are now painted a rebellious pink (lavender in some light), you could say that the Lavender Lane Hotel continues to carry on the tradition of providing for the physical and spiritual needs of its women, though the standard of care has improved dramatically. If you visit, you would see that it still exclusively serves women; in this case women who love women. Or, as Anna frequently jokes in that sexy bedroom voice, "women who love women too much."

"Like you, Lydia Beaumont," she had once teased at a party, when she saw that Helaine had drifted out of earshot. "I watch you," she had added, giving a quick caress to a warm cheek. "I know."

She was pretty with a voice that could take a body half the way there, which she seemed always willing to do. Lydia avoided her whenever possible.

That would be hard to do tonight, she laughed, preparing to dress for dinner. She was bound to run into the woman in the hotel lobby where she was known to keep a watchful eye on her clientele.

Maybe she should go in drag, Lydia thought with amusement, eyeing the possibilities hanging in her closet. Then she could squeeze right by her. She flipped through her wardrobe. Absolutely nothing she owned could ever pass for drag.

But a black pantsuit, a low-cut, tight fitting top and heels wasn't too sloppy. Or what about the blue gown? It was four o'clock already. Butterflies. Better decide soon.

She put Anna out of her mind and committed herself to the pantsuit, tucking a pair of Helaine's lace thongs into the breast pocket of her evening coat and arranging it as a handkerchief, a fetish she sometimes indulged. Lipstick, liner, no rouge—she never needed it—mascara. Ta-dah. This is me, forty-two.

She examined the woman in the mirror. Not too bad she had to admit, as she hooked her sapphire necklace. She gave one last tug of her thigh-highs and slipped on her shoes.

Quarter to five now. She called for her driver.

It was her birthday. She was forty-two. The woman who emerged from the midtown building did not look forty-two to him. She had aged very well.

He stood in the shadows across the street from her address and watched gloomily as she got into her limousine.

He should have married her when he had the chance, when she was in love with him and wanted to get married. If he had, then everything would have turned out differently. She wouldn't have married someone else. She wouldn't have sent him up the river.

He saw the car speed away. She was late for something. A hot time probably. Celebrating forty-two.

He turned up his collar and trudged across town. He always remembered her birthday.

5:05 PM. The birthday girl was on sensory overload. The purple doors, the red carpet, the fleshy faux Fragonards and Watteaus in the plush mirrored lobby at Lavender Lane. Anna.

"Dear Lydia. You have at last decided to call on me."

Side doors, she suddenly remembered Helaine instructing. There were side doors. One of the special features the four star hotel was so famous for, discretion. Too late now. "No, I'm meeting Hel-"

"Suite twenty-seven, dear. You're late," Anna chided, taking her by the arm and escorting her to the elevators.

"I know."

"One of these days," Anna promised, as the doors began to close on Lydia.

Lydia smiled politely.

"Suite four when that day arrives."

The doors closed.

"Or night," Lydia heard through them.

The elevator began ascending.

"Jesus," Lydia muttered. Not to mention the fact that she was late.

A kiss at the door. Then another. "Mmmm, not yet you don't-Anna kept you?"

"Not really." Candlelight, soft music, drawn curtains. Nice. "Lana, let's-"

"Unh, unh," Helaine said, freeing herself. "Champagne first, then-what is that?" (The thongs.) "Darling, those are mine."

Lydia grabbed her hand, smiled rakishly. "To tide me over. I'll trade you."

"Hah. For what?"

"The ones you're wearing."

"Lydia...after dinner."

"Come on, Lana," she urged, coaxing her toward the bedroom, "it's my birthday."

"Lydi-ahhhh-aren't you clever?" she murmured, as the back of her dress came open.

"Lana..."

"Patience, darling. I said not yet."

"No means yes?"

"Lvdia."

"Just five minutes."

Five minutes on a king-size bed did not seem credible to Helaine. She steered them away from it and adjusted her zipper.

Lydia pulled it down again.

"Ms. Beaumont, humor me and have some champagne first...then your dinner."

Didn't seem even remotely reasonable. "We'll just do a dry run?"

"No dry run."

Lydia sat on the bed. "And that would be because?"

"Because I'm not dry. Get up, please."

"Lie down, please."

She shook her head no. "After dinner," Helaine lipped.

"Before dinner," Lydia lipped back.

"We eat first, okay?"

"And then?"

"And then, darling."

This was turning into the longest day of her life. She didn't feel the slightest bit hungry. "This is a game, Dr. Kristenson?"

"Of course it is, Ms. Beaumont. Now follow me."

She found an attendant patiently waiting for them in the shadows, beside her on the service table, a bottle of brut on ice and a vase of long stem roses. She hadn't noticed the girl when she first came in.

"Oh, my g-good evening."

The girl lifted the bottle and began to pry at the cork.

"Helaine, I didn't realize-"

POP!

"I'm sure it's not an issue, Lydia."

The attendant presented them with two flutes of champagne. Lydia took one.

Helaine took the other. "To a nice quiet birthday, darling."

They touched glasses.

"Just the two of us," she continued.

The room was warm. The attendant was removing her jacket.

"You and me." Helaine emphasized.

You and me-yes? Lydia took a sip, one eye on the attendant. Beneath the white coat the girl had been wearing was a dark gown, sleeveless, a string of pearls.

"You...and me...and..."

And?

"Venus."

Bubbles went straight into her nose.

"Happy birthday, Mr. President," Venus said.

Venus?

"Venus," they affirmed in unison.

She felt her glass slip from her hand.

"Yes, could you please send a martini to suite twenty-seven, please? My wife nee-would like a martini."

"Of course Dr. Kristenson. Anything else?"

"Um...forgive me a moment...ves...I'm sorry, can you make that a shaker?"

"A shaker of martinis?"

"Yes."

"Okay. How many glasses?"

"Just one, please."

"One. Certainly. Will that be all, doctor?"

"Will that be all...no...okay...could you send up some cognac too?"

"Some cognac. Of course. A bottle?"

"A bottle, dear? A glass? Just send one glass, please."

"One glass of cognac. One shaker of martinis. We'll send that right up. Is there anything else we can do for you tonight?"

"Yes, please. We have a dinner guest."

"Three dinners, suite twenty-seven? Who else is up there?"

"I don't know. Says here 'and guest,' that's all."

An interesting twist that had escaped Anna's attention. "A guest of Kristenson-Beaumont? Tonight? You there! Hey! Yes, you. Come here. You delivered drinks to suite twenty-seven?"

"I did."

"They have a guest?"

"Apparently."

"You saw her?"

"No, it was dark. Candles."

"But you're sure they have a guest up there?"

"Yes. I heard her."

"Heard-wait! Bring that cart here. I'll deliver those myself. I want to see this mystery woman."

"What if I can't?"

"Darling, if you can't, you can't."

Lydia finished her martini and reached across the table for the shaker.

"But I think you can."

Venus said nothing. It was a million yards to that bed. Only a few feet to the door.

"You can't make love to my wife," Lydia tossed in her direction.

Helaine chuckled.

"Deal," Venus answered from the dark corner where she sat nursing her cognac.

"Deal," Helaine whispered, sitting beside Lydia. "Not too many of those, they'll be serving dinner soon."

What's too many? Two? Three? "Helaine, I've never-"

"Nor I," Venus volunteered. "I've never even-"

"But it's done all the time, ladies. I can assure you."

"But not us, Lana. I'm not-"

"I would rather it be with me than withou-"

"It wouldn't happen, I'm telling you!"

Venus opted to say nothing.

"It won't," Helaine replied, "if we do it my way. It might otherwise. I seek to prevent that, darling. I want it out of your system." There was a knock on the door. She rose to answer it. "And yours, Venus, if that's possible—well, hello, Anna."

"Dr. Kristenson. Working after hours?"

"Anna, I wasn't aware you did room service, too. How lovely."

"Dinner for three," Anna announced jauntily. "My, it's dark in here, Helaine. Do I get to meet your guest or should I just slide her dinner under the bedroom door?"

"Hah...the table, please. Lydia, could you get the lamp?"

Lydia fumbled for a light switch.

Illumination. Venus was on her feet.

"Well, aren't you breathtaking? And this is?"

"Venus," Helaine said, removing the plates from the forgotten dinner cart and arranging them on the table.

"Venus," Anna repeated, holding Venus' hand. "Of course you are."

"Meet Anna, Venus. A very dear friend of mine."

"A pleasure," Venus said, her eyes searching for Lydia's.

This did not escape Anna's notice. She dropped her hand and glanced at Lydia. "Astonishing, Helaine. The two most beautiful women in the world. What are your plans, I wonder?"

"Dinner," was all Helaine would say, giving Anna her cue.

Anna bowed out gracefully and left them with a table set for three.

"Shall we, ladies?"

Chapter 20: Overcome

It takes courage to promise a woman you can please her with just your mouth and your hand. Especially if you're in love with the creature.

Three in the morning. Intrepid Venus gently closed the door behind her and tiptoed barefoot down the hall to the elevator, carrying her shoes as an exhausted athlete might after the big game, one in each hand.

It was not clear by her posture whether she had won or lost. Neither could it be determined by her expression, which seemed to be one of sheer concentration, as if, right now, nothing was more important than leaving the hotel undetected.

She was hoping to avoid the woman named Anna with the intimate eyes and the sensual voice who Venus feared didn't sleep. She was hoping, as well, that she hadn't woken Lydia or Dr. Kristenson.

The hallway was dim, lit at this hour by a row of small, purple, shell-shaped sconces. She counted them as she walked. Seven purple shells to the elevator. When she got downstairs should she use the side door or should she go through the lobby? Should she walk home? Could she get a cab at this hour? Did the hotel perhaps provide car service?

She was dazed. If she could speak, she had no idea what would come out of her mouth. Probably something to the effect that she had never, ever been in love like this, where just lying between someone's legs, in her arms, hearing her orgasm, feeling it, had been enough.

And that was just for starters.

She pushed the button and waited for the elevator. Should she put her shoes on? Would it be cold outside? Did she need a coat? Had she left her coat? The elevator opened silently and she stepped silently inside.

Chapter 21: Fortune in the Affairs of Women

Less than twenty-four little hours later, Ms. Angelo was off to Paris for three weeks and the only thing Joint President Beaumont had to say to her before she left was, "be good." This she did scarcely moving her lips and with an almost imperceptible fluttering of her eyelids that suggested she was doing the very best she could to pretend that nothing whatsoever had happened.

Venus chucked her luggage in the overhead compartment, stretched out first class.

Be good. Now what was that supposed to mean? Thank you for fucking my brains out, have a nice day?

"Ooh, Paula, how thoughtful of you." (Cell phone for her birthday.)

"Don't be smart, Beaumont. It's a discreet little thing just like you."

"Good. So now you can find me anywhere, huh?"

"That's the plan."

"Thank you. It goes perfectly with my shoes."

"What are you in such a good mood about today?" Paula asked. "What did you do last night besides completely forget about your most recent faux pas?" She reached into the waste basket and extracted yesterday's paper from it. "Remember this?"

THUMBS UP!

"I said I was sorry. What do you think I did last night?"

"Hmmm...you know they ought to make an action figure out of you. Keep it up and they will. Make an awful nice little stocking stuffer for your friend there, Mr. Goodman."

"Goodman?"

"He's seething. Weren't your ears ringing?"

"Sticks and stones. Anything worth repeating?"

"How's hedonist suit you?"

Ummm.

"You're very lucky, Beaumont. Charm school's really paying off for you these days."

Lydia folded the newspaper into her briefcase. Another day, another umpteen million dollars. "Paying off for Soloman-Schmitt, too, I'd say."

"Yes," Paula agreed. "Through no fault of your own."

Helaine was home working in her office. Lydia tapped at the door.

"Darling, you're early. I could get used to this."

"Absolutely exhausted. Not you?"

"I'm feeling sleepy now. So did you see Venus?"

"Yes, just before she left for the airport."

"Is she all right?"

"Seemed fine."

"Seemed? Are you sure? Why did she leave us last night?"

"Helaine, please. I didn't ask her that."

"But when did she leave, what time?"

"I don't know. We didn't talk about it."

Helaine turned the computer off and leaned back in her chair. She was glad Lydia wasn't her patient. It would take decades for a breakthrough. "I sometimes have no idea how you ever got enough courage to ask me out, let alone get married."

"It's Thursday-you know I'm shy about those things-are we going to dinner? I'd like to eat out tonight."

"We can, if you like. Did she seem to want to discuss it with you?"

"Helaine...I...don't know."

Helaine shrugged in mocking. "Lydia, sometimes you can be a real jerk."

Lydia took it in stride. "Dinner anyone?"

"Really, darling, it's true. Where shall we eat then?"

"Who's that, Mommy? She's pretty."

Sharon rolled up the newspaper and sent it through the air.

"Mommy?"

"Just a woman, little girl. Some woman."

Helen retrieved the paper from where it fell. "Do you know her?"

Sharon chuckled bitterly at the irony of her daughter's phrasing. DO YOU KNOW HER? Those were the headlines the press used in order to drive Jane Doe out into the open, once upon a time when no one knew who "the other woman" was. No one, that is, but Helaine. Sharon Chambers nodded, silently remembering. She knew Jane Doe Beaumont. She was aging well.

"Mommy!"

"Yes, Helen, I know her."

The child dragged her finger along the type. "Lydia Beeah-Bee-I can't pronounce this. Say this for me."

"Helen." She had no desire to speak the woman's name. "Go play your violin."

"Cello-say it for me, please."

Christ, Christ, Christ. "Beau, as in bow and arrow. Mont as in... in mont...ah, ah sound...Beau...mont, Lydia Beaumont. Now leave it alone, please."

"Beaumont. What kind of name is that, Mommy?"

"Helen!"

The child put on a very moving pout.

"Oh, Helen-French. It's French. Please go play your cello."

"She's French?"

"No, she's not French. It's French. Her name is French."

"French," Helen repeated.

"A French name."

"Like une, deux, trois?"

"Oui. One, two, three."

Helen processed this information before continuing. "Beaumont. What does it mean, mommy? Does it mean something in French?"

Questions. Always so many questions.

Helen smiled sweetly, aware that her mother's patience was wearing thin. "Last question," she promised. "What does it mean?"

Sharon sighed. "Beau...beautiful, Helen. Like you. Mont...umm...oh, Jesus, it would be mount...umm...mountain, I guess. Beautiful mountain. Got it? Are we done here?"

"Beautiful moun...tain." The child seemed content with that. She stood up. "Mommy?"

Another question. "Mmm?"

"Is Lydia Beaumont a bad woman?"

This had reached into the realm of unbearable. "Helen, she's ...no, she's not. She's not a bad woman."

Interrogation over, Helen skipped off to her room. "Beautiful mount," she chanted in flight, "beautiful mount."

"Where are you going?"

"To play my violin!"

Sharon threw the paper again. Beautiful mount! She felt especially unfortunate this afternoon. Fuck you, Dr. Kristenson. Fuck you, Jane Doe.

No stopovers in the seven-hour flight to France. If she was lucky, if the winds were mild tonight, she'd be there in as little as five hours and maybe, since she had lost so much sleep the night before, she wouldn't get jet lag on this trip. Wouldn't that be nice? Take a cab from the airport to the Latin Quarter, freshen up, grab a bite, catch some cabaret later, or just stroll Quai de Montebello and take in the lights of Ile de la Cité, marveling, like anyone would, at Notre Dame, the grand dame of Paris.

Or wouldn't it be fun to skip a stone across the Seine, or drop a coin in it, or just stand on the footbridge above the water counting the lovers below kissing on the banks? Counting the lovers, un, deux, trois, their French kisses ending the day, and she ending hers alone, sitting at an outdoor cafe sipping hot chocolate and "being good"?

How romantic.

The passenger across the aisle was dozing off at his laptop, a slumber brought on by one too many vodka tonics and accompanied by a terrific snoring, a sound which Venus despised. She put the headphones on and fiddled with the stereo until she found some classical music.

No snoring last night. That's not what had kept her up past her bedtime. Thinking of it made her heart jump again, as it had been doing all day.

"Come ladies," Venus could still hear above the violins and snores. Dr. Kristenson's playful dare. "Let's fall in love."

Oh, let's. Venus cranked up the volume. Let's be stupid and fall deeper in love, you mean. She knew now what she should have known then. That a prudent woman would have declined the doctor's invitation. That you can get someone and still not have them.

She was deafening herself with the headphones. She shoved the seat back and closed her eyes tight.

"Are you sleeping?"

She was sleeping. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Your seat belt, please. We're experiencing a little turbulence."

"Okay, thanks." Venus sat up and put the belt on.

"Sleeping is one thing, Venus, but please don't mention love. She'll freak."

Venus wiped the sleep from her eyes. God forbid she should cause any turbulence. She had followed the doctor's orders there. It's not so difficult to avoid mentioning love when you're in bed with someone who won't kiss you or say your first name.

"Are you sleeping?"

Well past midnight and the ladies had fallen asleep. Or so Venus thought. She lay with them, planning to leave.

"Angelo?"

"No," Venus answered into the pillow. "I was listening to you breathe."

There had followed a silence to that. And then, "Can you turn over?"

Venus rolled over. "You want me to hold-"

"No."

"You want to hold m-"

"Sort of."

The scent of perfume and gin and sex hung humid in the air. Venus drew it deep into her lungs. "Can you be a little more specific than that?"

"I want this."

Venus was silent. She had given up all hope of "this."

"Do you mind?"

```
"I didn't think you'd-"
"I know."
"Yes...always ves."
```

Dr. Kristenson slept beside them, curled in a ball like a kitten. Venus could swear she glowed in the dark. She pulled the sheets tight around Lydia's shoulders. "How could I mind?"

"You should probably just say yes or no."

A hand closed over her mouth. Venus kissed it. "You understand?"

"I think so."

There was more to say to this woman who wore a wedding ring to bed, who wouldn't kiss her. Venus caressed her lips thoughtfully and let it pass. In the darkness she made love to the mouth that couldn't speak her name and then sighed pleasantly as it dallied near her breasts.

FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT. Venus felt shaky and adrenaline had begun to build in her arms and legs.

```
She checked the buckle of her belt.
   "Are you going to make it?"
   The plane lurched. She shook.
   What a tease, Venus discovered. "NO."
   "Uh-oh, then."
   "Beau-"
   "Hold on."
   Venus lurched. The plane shook.
   "I can't."
   The airplane was buzzing. Nervous chatter.
   "Can," Lydia assured, bearing down.
   Turbulence. It felt like they had hit a rock. Dozens of them.
   "Pop it, Beau-"
   "Shhhhh."
   "Now."
   "Hah."
   Next to them Helaine turned in her sleep.
   "Beau-"
   "Hold-"
   "Oh, god."
   Another rock.
   "God."
   And another.
   "Damn, Lydia."
   "Hang on."
   "You may remove your belt now."
   "Lvdia?"
```

Lydia blew the hair from her eyes and lay her face against Venus'. "What would you like me to say?"

Venus whispered it in her ear.

Bad-ass street slang. Lydia was reticent to repeat it.

"Say it."

"I-I really don't think I can."

"Try."

She tried it.

[&]quot;Mmm?"

[&]quot;Say something."

"Madam, you can remove your belt now."

Venus removed her seat belt and stood and stretched in the aisle beside the snoring man who had never woken from his sleep. Asleep through everything, just as Dr. Kristenson had done while her wife rocked on.

What a great idea, falling in love. Now what?

From the overhead compartment she withdrew her briefcase and sat down, intent on getting something done in the few hours remaining, or at least on verifying that she had not forgotten anything important.

She had the key to the apartment on Rue St. Severin in her briefcase. It was Helaine's and Lydia's apartment. "A small affair," Helaine had described when offering the place, "but it's the best way to experience the quarter." And here were the names and addresses of "establishments that cater to women." Venus shut the briefcase with a sound loud enough to rouse her travel companion across the way. He coughed himself conscious and glanced at her accusingly.

She put down her case. It was hopeless.

Chapter 22: Necessity

```
"Lana?"
"Two o'clock, darling. Soon enough, or do we have an emergency?"
"Weeell..."
```

He would like to get those suits. He missed having them.

Actually he really, really needed to see Venus, but apparently she did not feel the same sense of urgency about him.

Nevertheless they were his suits and he was entitled to have his suits back and his suits were a legitimate excuse to contact her and he desperately wanted contact with her 'cause it was proving to be a cold, cold world out there, all the women in it made of ice or steel, especially compared to Venus Angelo, and he was sick of all that faux fluff and industry shit, and he was sure if she saw him again, how contrite he was, or certainly how contrite he could be if she would only let him show that to her, and maybe if one more time she saw his big, beautiful and well-meaning grin, all those pearly whites that no one he had ever known or had ever met could resist, then she would return to her senses and get with him again.

That was the plan. A pretty good plan, he thought, except she didn't seem to be falling for it. She didn't return his phone call or his e-mail, she didn't answer his letter, she didn't answer the buzzer at the apartment.

Now what could be with that? Did she need to be so harsh? Did the Sebastion Jones really truly deserve this bullshit?

Nope.

"Okay?"

"Mmmmm, excellent."

"Good, and now that I have you on my couch..."

"I have you! Lift, Lana."

"I–goodness–think you might be right."

"Am. Yes?"

"Oh...yes...yes."

"On your couch, you were saying?"

"My couch?"

"You said, now that I have you on my—"

"No, no, stop then."

"Lana? Stop?"

"Or finish, I mean. Finish first."

If she was an ordinary woman, he would send her flowers. But if he sent her flowers she'd see right through it. Anyway he had never sent her flowers before. He was not a flower type of guy and she was not a flower type of gal. He couldn't even remember seeing a houseplant in her apartment.

She is not ordinary, that's for sure. Ordinary women have needs and, that Sebastion knew of, Venus had none.

Well, that's it then! For the woman who has everything: Sebastion Jones.

"Yes, because it's overdue, darling. I need to know."

"If I'm upset? How could you think that?"

"Because you haven't mentioned that night to me even once."

"But I don't discuss such thin-"

"Lydia Beaumont."

"Right. I'm cool with it. I'm not upset, Dr. Kristenson." She fussed with the buttons of her blouse. "But I couldn't share you, you know?"

"That was quite obvious."

"I mean with anyone, not just Venus."

"Our marriage is not open, Lydia, if that's what worries you."

Some success with those buttons with assistance from Helaine. "Okay, good to know." She hated the topic.

"Come here," Helaine whispered, "I'm going to pull a few more teeth."

"Lana," Lydia said, examining two shoes she held in her hands. "I need to know something else." One shoe was hers, the other Helaine's. They would fit her perfectly, a pair, but they wouldn't match. "Tell me," she said, dropping them both to the floor. "Is it just me, or did you spoil everyone like that?"

The afternoon sun shone brilliantly into Helaine's office and her blond hair was undone and dangling in her face, providing her only cover. She propped her head up on one hand. Stretched out on her own couch, she knew she didn't much resemble a doctor right now and she didn't feel like one either. She could see how naked she was in Lydia's eyes. "Darling, what a funny thing to ask me after all these years." She felt her nipples go hard and crossed her arms behind her head in emphasis. "I think you better get undressed again."

"Dr. Kristenson." The room was sunny and warm and Lydia had all the time in the world today. All the time in the world available at her fingertips and she could spend it on the couch if she so desired; the doctor had no afternoon appointments. She liked how she looked there, sun drenched and sly, her nipples erect. "You're a lovely piece of—answer me first."

"Answer you? What do you want me to say? I never married any of them. That would have been spoiling, don't you agree?"

The couch was a riot of sunshine and blond hair. "Lana, keep your arms like that."

Chapter 23: Coldly

Real women eat quiche in Paris, but they're ten times more likely to be nibbling sweets, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes.

"Pardon. Avez-vous une cigarette, s'il vous plaît?"

Third time today. Venus didn't smoke but some of the prettiest women in Paris did. She made a note to purchase a pack of cigarettes at the next tabac.

"Um, no, I don't. Je m'excuse." She had been unwittingly eyeing this particular brunette and her very, very shapely legs for quite some time now. "Je ne parle pas Français."

"Non? Parlez-vous Anglais?"

"Anglais? English? Oui, je parle Anglais. I speak English."

"Oh-kay," the woman teased. "Américaine, oui? Yes? Êtes-vous Américaine?"

"Yes," Venus answered. "Je suis Américaine."

"Puis-je...may I?" the woman asked, taking the empty chair. "Je m'appelle Claudine. Êtes-vous? Your name is?"

"I'm Venus."

"Bonsoir, Madame. Menu?" (waiter)

"Bonsoir. Je voudrais un verre de vin rouge, s'il vous plaît—ah, un moment. I can purchase you too, Venus?"

Uhh.

"Oui, un carafe de vin rouge," Claudine reordered, taking a cigarette from her purse and lighting it with the nearby candle. "See? I speak some Américain, Venus. You are very beautiful. See?"

Blue eyes. She had blue eyes. "Merci, Claudine. So are you."

"Bon," Claudine replied, blowing smoke through her nostrils like a movie star. "So? Do you like a dance?"

"Do I dance, you mean?"

"Oui-dance! You will dance with me, Venus? Ce soir?"

The waiter came with a carafe of wine and two glasses. Claudine filled them.

"I could dance."

Claudine laughed. "What-we just dance, if you like! If you do like more, we dance and make love. Hmm? Aimez-vous?"

Venus' French was inadequate at best. She took a quick breath and picked up her wine.

"Ah, Venus is timide. How attractive. Santé!" Claudine said, raising her glass.

"Santé," Venus echoed.

"We are oh-kay or I am wrong?"

"It is—you are not wrong. I will go dancing with you, but...how do I say this...I can make you no other promises, okay?"

"Oh-kay," Claudine replied with a raucous laugh. "You Américains. Really, none of you can give a thing. C'est vrai! So why promise?" She sniffed her wine and swirled it in the glass. "Très bien. We try, number one, just to dance. If then we like too much, you take me to bed. From that I promise, if you are any good, I will show you Paris. Oh-kay, Venus?"

If we like too much. Venus was enchanted. "Okay."

[&]quot;Goodman, you are obsessed with this. I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation here."

"I am not obsessed. It is conduct unbecoming for an officer of this corporation, let alone the joint president, Ms. Treadwell, and there is no reasonable explanation for it!"

"It was her birthday. How did you get this information anyway, illegal surveillance?"

"Never mind, I'm presenting it to the board in two weeks and whatever else I-"

"You will do nothing of the sort, Silas! You will cease and desist in this! Do you understand me?"

Silas Goodman sneered contemptuously. "I do not answer to President Treadwell. She answers to me. And to the other board members, as well. Remember them?"

Paula eyed his jugular. "I'm going to say have a nice day, Mr. Goodman," she replied, showing him to the door, "because I've got a corporation to run."

"Run it then, Ms. Treadwell. That is, after all, your only duty. To run it and run it well."

"Look, I think I understand my job description pretty well, as does our Ms. Beaumont. I'm wondering, however, if you're confused about yours."

They stood face to face, neither willing to say uncle.

"I'm doing my job as we speak," he hissed.

"No, on that you are quite mistaken. What you're actually doing is committing a criminal offense. You are violating Ms. Beaumont's privacy and that is definitely not your job."

"Oh? And what will she do about it, Treadwell? Put on a glamorous pout?"

"Mr. Goodman, you are grossly underestimating the woman."

"Am I?"

He was a man who knew his own repugnance and used it to his advantage; Paula backed away from him.

"I said good day, Silas. Thank you so much for stopping in to see me."

"I will take you to task on this," he threatened as he flew out of her office. "All of you."

Lydia had seen him come in and had waited it out in her office next to Paula's, though with the soundproof walls she couldn't catch a word of their conversation. Still, she did not have to be clairvoyant to guess at the subject matter of Goodman's surprise visit. "That was about me?" she asked queasily. He had left in a storm. What else could it be about?

Paula was pacing her office, irritated, one hand on her hip, the other covering her mouth as if to prevent herself from speaking. Goodman was a goddamn-right-wing-fanatic cocksucker.

Lydia stepped inside, shut the door. "Paula?"

Beaumont was a goddamn-left-wing-fanatic-hedonistic asshole. How the hell did that happen? "Beaumont, what in the hell were you doing at Lavender Lane? Have you no goddamn sense?"

"Paula-I-I met Helaine there. For my birthday. I don't have to answer to this."

"No, citizen Beaumont. You don't have to answer to it. But as joint president...now that could be different because then you might even have to answer to: AND WHO THE HELL ELSE DID YOU MEET THERE! And what the hell's going on with that? And don't you dare lie to me, Beaumont! Don't you even dare!"

Shit. She should have used the side door, like Helaine had advised. "What are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do? Excellent question. What am I going to do?" Paula chewed at her nail and frowned. "Well, I can't fire you now, can I?"

"No."

"And I won't let you resign, so forget it."

Forgotten. "And?"

"And I won't force Angelo to resign. She's making us look so-internationally speaking and all-I can't lose her now."

Good.

Paula glared at her ruined nail. It was really Kristenson she wanted to get her hands on. She knew that blond was bad luck from the very beginning and here she was again, leading another of her top girls astray. She choked on the next nail. How unseemly, visualizing strangling her own therapist.

79

[&]quot;John, get the Assistant to Overseas."

[&]quot;Where is she?"

"Overseas! Get her on the phone for me. She's not at her hotel."

'Ms. Treadwell, what hotel? Where?

"Paris, goddamnit! Paris, France!"

"Okay, okay. Did you try e-mailing?"

"Days ago. She hasn't answered. Get her on the phone, John. Now."

"I'll try her cell."

Lydia had tried to reach her, too, but there was no answer at the apartment, just Helaine's voice on the message unit. She had debated leaving a message, but dawdled too long at it. The machine hung up on her both times.

"Beaumont, relax. Be presidential."

The conference call Paula was trying to coordinate was nothing Lydia looked forward to and she wasn't even sure of what Paula hoped to accomplish by it. She wondered if it was typical for Venus to be so hard to find. She had never had to look for her before.

"If you know where this woman is, you owe me to say so."

Lydia hesitated. She knew where Venus was supposed to be. "Is she attending her meetings?"

"Yes, it seems so or I would have heard otherwise. But the hotel-"

"Well then, technically she's where she's supposed to be. Right?"

"Ms. Treadwell?"

"Go ahead, John. You have her?"

"No, I-she doesn't answer. It's not the same time there, you know? Maybe she's-"

"I don't care what time it is! Give me her cell number. I'll call her myself."

He gave her the number.

"See you tomorrow morning, John. Hang up, please."

Lydia felt sorry for John. "Why don't you call him by his last name, Paula?"

Paula pounded out Venus' phone number and it rang in distorted tones over the speaker. "Because I don't remember his last name. Stay focused here."

Five rings. Six rings. Seven rings. Eight-"Allô, already! Qui est là? Who, who?"

A pretty French voice on Venus Angelo's private phone.

Lydia went pale. Paula was too pissed to notice. Someone on the other end had the wherewithal to disconnect.

"Claudine, that was not cool."

"Cool? What is this word?"

Venus clutched her cell phone. That was probably Paula. "Très mal," she muttered, "not cool." Or worse than Paula, it was Lydia.

"Put it down," Claudine demanded. "Or you go. Tu comprends? You go?"

The phone rang again. It couldn't be Lydia. Why would she call?

"Non!" Claudine was completely exasperated by now. It had been tweeting like this for nearly an hour. "You tell them for me you cannot fuck and talk! You tell them this!"

Foock, cannot foock. Rrriinng. Venus suppressed a laugh. Love is supposed to be a rhapsody, not a scherzo. Right? Rrriinng. Was this Paula or was it Lydia? She weighed the questions and the implications while protecting the phone from the wrath of Claudine.

"Fermez la bouche, Claudine...s'il vous plaît...I said please, Claudine...Yes?...Claudine, please...merci...thank you...Yes, Angelo here."

"Treadwell here. I'm going to hazard a guess that that's not your secretary."

Treadwell, thank god. "No, I-"

"Don't bother. Where are you?"

Venus sighed and covered the mouthpiece. "Where am I, Claudine?"

"Where are you? Aiv!" She left the bed in disgust. "Marais."

"Marais, Paula."

"Is that still Paris or should I get a world map?"

"No, it's...it's still Paris. Are you, um, is this priv-"

"NO. And you are an absolute fool, Angelo, if I understand things right. Now get your ass back here."

FOOCK. She put her head in her hand. "When, Paula? Now? I've got fourth-round negotiations tomorrow." She lowered her voice. "Is the joint presi-"

"Finish them up. How many days—say two? Finish them up in two days. We've got a situation here that requires your complete and rapt attention."

What kind of a situation could that be? "Can I talk to her?"

"Does it concern the corporation?"

"It's...well...no."

"Then I don't think so, but I'll check. Ms. Beaumont, do you have anything to say to the Assistant Vice President?"

Venus waited in anguish.

"No, it doesn't appear that Ms. Beaumont has anything whatsoever to contribute to our conversation. We'll be expecting you in two days, then. E-mail your flight schedule so we can have a car waiting for you."

Venus listened to the hum of the dial tone and watched Claudine from the corner of her eye lighting the gas stove, nude in front of her open windows. This was not a bashful woman. She threw on a shirt and joined her in her small kitchen.

"Claudine-"

"Non. You will be saying to me now, oh, Claudine, I must go, my work, I am so very important. And you know what I say? Allez-vous en–go! You don't know how to live, Madame Angelo. Je m'en lave les mains. Au revoir."

Venus laughed despite her predicament. "And you weren't going to say foock me?"

"Oui, I was. I was going to say fuck you, but why should I say it when you know it is the thing already I am thinking? Have some chocolat."

Venus took the cup from her.

"I will find an Américain on vacation," Claudine stated. "Some woman who doesn't love work too much."

"Okay, Claudine. You do that." The creature was selfish and conceited, made for just one thing. She liked her fiery eyes and the insolence of her, her immodesty. She was the exact opposite of Lydia. Except for the hair and her height. That mouth. Those blue eyes and—

"Or how about I find that woman you whisper to? She is also on vacation, your woman?"

"Who?"

"You know, when you fuck me. 'Lydia, Lydia.' Does Lydia vacation, Venus? I go find her then, hmmm?"

"Lyd-what do you mean?"

"Who, who. What, what. Look at you embarrassed. Don't be, Venus. I don't mind. I get what belongs tohah, you look away. You are shy Américaine!"

The chocolate was too sweet, as sweet as wedding cake. Sickly sweet and hot on the back of her throat. She set it on the counter and left the kitchen.

"Venus...?"

"Claudine."

"Oh, Venus...it's nothing," Claudine assured, tugging at Venus' shirtsleeve. "Really, Venus. It's nothing at all."

It's nothing at all to Claudine, Venus could see, but then she would most likely be the exception. Exceptional Claudine. What would Venus have done if Lydia had called her Helaine? That would be no small thing to exceptional Venus Angelo, being called anything but Venus or love or baby or even Angelo. "Okay," she was glad to agree. "It's nothing, Claudine. I understand."

"You, stay?"

Actually Venus was thinking of leaving. Going for a long walk or a fast run.

"You stay."

But she was compelled to stay, too, and she would be leaving soon enough, she reasoned, returning to a city a lot less forgiving than Paris, to a land of women very different from Claudine.

"For a little while."

"Bien...merci."

That cell phone was a nuisance, Venus realized. She turned it off and put it in her briefcase for safekeeping.

"Young Venus...so young." Claudine pulled at her shirt again. "I am sorry about the telephone."

"It's nothing, Claudine. It won't bother us now."

"Tell me of Lydia. I feel her. I see her, too. So many times."

On the other hand, Venus suddenly thought, maybe she should go. There was the apartment on Rue Saint Séverin, a small affair, but that could be a good thing. It wouldn't take too long to pack.

On the chair in the corner of the living room, Claudine's cat had fashioned a bed for itself out of the clothes that Venus had accumulated there in the past two weeks. She had not spent anytime to speak of at Rue Saint Séverin since first meeting Claudine. She had felt more comfortable here for some reason.

"Tell me about this, Venus."

Still maybe it was wise to go there now, to collect herself in peace. The night had become so heavy.

The cat lifted its head and gave her a haughty look, full of feline insight and disdain. Venus never cared for cats and this one was the worse one yet. A spoiled little thing, chubby, arrogant, and petulant. It would, she realized, take hours to get all that hair out of her suits.

"Come," Claudine beckoned, pulling at her sleeve.

The cat began a cough that threatened to produce a hairball, if necessary. She would leave in a little while, she decided, feeling yet another tug on her shirt and seeing the look in Claudine's eyes.

"Come, Venus."

Venus surrendered, captured by a cat, a woman's whispers, her shirttails.

"Beaumont, you're white as a ghost. You want to talk about this?"

It was more than a pinprick. "No thanks, Paula." It was a knife stab. "I'm going home." Of jealousy.

They were on the bed again. Claudine lay across it. "She does things to you that you cannot do to yourself, non?"

Venus winced at the bluntness of it, the crude and awkward English Claudine often used to inevitably express things so well. It was strangely endearing. She wished she had met her first.

"I am wrong about it?"

"No, Claudine."

"Oui," Claudine announced triumphantly. "C'est vrai. I know about such things."

Venus ran her hand along the smooth white thigh. She was contemplating making love to her again. She was thinking also about other things.

"Tell me, Venus. Your Lydia? She is beautiful also?"

"Claudine, she is not my-okay, yes."

"Yes. I knew yes. Here." She removed the shirt Venus still wore. Venus shivered in the chill air.

"Quel âge?"

She gave her a critical look. "Quel âge as-tu?"

"Trente-sept."

"She's forty-two, but she doesn't look it. You don't look thirty-seven."

Claudine wrinkled her nose and laughed. "You Américains. What does thirty-seven look like?"

Venus shrugged. It looks like-

"Lydia...this Lydia. She is not your woman, yes?"

Lydia, Lydia. "Yes, she is not."

"Ah...so beautiful Lydia is married and Venus wants to sleep with her. I think to have her. Oui? This woman with...what...blue eyes...brune hair? This woman with legs like mine? Yes, I know already this, toofeel me here."

She felt her there.

"We feel the same, Venus. Bon chance pour moi, d'accord?"

"Clau-"

"Feel these too. Même chose. Just like mine, I know it."

Venus pinned her to the bed and debated her next move. She should never have said yes to Dr. Kristenson. She should never have made love to her wife. She was a girl competing with a woman. Non? The woman beneath her embraced her again, like she had for weeks.

"Almost the same, aren't we, Venus? I know."

"You are a tart-you know that, too?"

"Mais oui!"

"You've heard that before, I see. At least once."

"Oui, oui, Venus. More than once. And tramp and whore and demimonde. It's good, our difference? The real difference between Lydia and Claudine? Good for you. Good for me."

Her eyes blazed with daring. Venus reached past her for the shirt.

"Non! You make love to her, *maintenant*. You fuck her now, Venus, because she wants you to. Parce qu'elle est dans le besoin...feel her there...*there*, oui."

She pressed Venus' hand to her sex. Venus dropped the shirt.

"She is there, votre dame. You feel her, non? I know you feel it. Nothing is wrong,"

"Claudine-"

"She needs it now...elle est dans le besoin, Venus...maintenant...you see her?...ah, you do...feel her here...ici...ici..."

She could feel her. Perfectly.

"See her here, Venus. Her eyes? Elle est ici...ici...je suis ici..."

She saw her eyes. She could smell her perfume mingling with Claudine's in the bedroom, smell it in her hair. Her hair was hanging in her eyes like it had the night at the hotel on her birthday, after she had finished off two martinis for liquid courage. She brushed it out of her face. She was near her mouth again. No gin on her breath tonight. No wife in the shadows. The same mouth, the same shade of red, the same soft and wet of them, the lips parting the same as they had. Même chose.

"The same, Venus."

The tongue was teasing just the same as she would. Venus bent over her. What do her eyes say tonight? She says yes. Or does she say no, never? No she says maybe, maybe, maybe. Always maybe.

"Elle est dans le besoin."

Her soft, wet mouth. It was too soft, too tender not to touch again.

"Venus."

She had them to herself now. Two teasing lips. Too teasing. Venus parted them with her fingers and moistened them with her tongue. She had been so tender to these lips, lips that couldn't bear to kiss her or speak her name, lips that might never speak to her again. She did not want to return to that, to angry Lydia. She could feel her fuming across the sea, plotting exile. For what reason no one could say. For a wrong that the woman could never legitimately claim.

Venus closed her eyes. She had been so sweet to her, so gentle in her mouth. She lay her cheek against it. It was just as soft as she remembered. She had the desire to crush it now, and an awful sense that she was, for the very first time in her life, floundering in the universe. A hand reached out for hers. She clasped it. There was no ring on it tonight, nothing cold.

"Maintenant, Venus. Now...now."

She put her hand over her mouth and entered her.

"Trouble at work, darling?"

"It's...I can't discuss it, Helaine...rather complex."

"Indeed? Is there anything I can do to make things rather less complex?"

"You're doing it."

"Ah, Venus. Aimer...à demain. It is oh-kay, non?"

(Ah, Venus. To love until tomorrow. It is okay, no?)

Chapter 24: Boldly

You know you've screwed up your romance when all the mystery and uncertainty you've come to depend upon suddenly evaporates from it and you're left instead with a pile of absolutes you never wanted to know about. Like here's the answer to: I wonder when she'll call me again? NEVER. And here's the answer to: I wonder if I should call her? NO.

But look on the upside. You've finally got the answers to life's most frequently asked and certainly most plaguing questions. You and 39,538,316 other human beings on this planet.

It's funny, though. It's not the kind of knowledge people tend to share.

"What's with you? Did something go down in Paris or what?"

"No, Mama. Nothing went down in Paris."

"You still sick about that man?"

"What ma-oh, that one. I don't know. I guess so." Her mother thought it was about a man. Fine. It's about a man then.

"What about Sebastion? Oh, we liked Mr. Jones, Venus. Call him, won't you? No point in making yourself sick over this other guy. Who is he anyway? He can't be all that."

"It's not him so much, right now." She hoped to switch the subject but realized too late that it would just change over to work and this was essentially the same issue.

"Work then, baby?"

"Yes, Mama, work."

Scandal was imminent and extreme measures had had to be taken to preempt Silas Goodman from opening the can of worms that had become Soloman-Schmitt these days. In fact, her career might have been on the line hadn't Paula proved to be so adept at scandal control.

Now losing her job. She wasn't sure how she truly felt about that aspect of the situation. "It's just work, Mama." But she sure didn't want her name dragged through the mud by the tabloids. She could guess how that would feel, how her family would react to it all.

"That why you come back so early?"

Yeah, actually, but she really didn't want to go into it. "We got it all resolved, Mama. It's fixed now."

Paula had hatched a bold counterattack and had just unveiled it in her office yesterday, the first day in the full week that Venus had been back that Lydia could seemingly tolerate being in her presence. The joint president sat in the chair right next to hers, a pillar of salt for the entire hour it took Paula to present the defense strategy. Venus had wanted to interrupt the session, to scream *I'm sorry*, but she was ambivalent about the matter by now and, in truth, not convinced anymore that she had done something she was supposed to feel sorry for.

"Everybody's got secrets," Paula had asserted, dramatically emptying the contents of a big, fat folder onto her desk. "And so does Goodman, that son-of-a-bitch!"

And so he had, much to the relief of the three women in a room, conspiring to pull him off his high horse. Photos, tapes, restaurant tabs, jewelry receipts, income tax evasion. These are the kind of things that indiscreet people with soapboxes and agendas never think about when they're scrutinizing someone else for their indiscretions, when they're just too distracted with very private plans for a very public hanging.

The ladies had Goodman real good, thanks to busy Paula Treadwell. The soon to be ex-member of the board of directors of Soloman-Schmitt would never know what hit him.

Lydia felt bad already. "But what will he do?"

Paula scoffed. "He'll resign 'to spend more time with his family.' Get it?"

Oh, yeah. Now she did.

Six in the morning. There was virtually no one at the club and JP Beaumont was alone in the Olympic size pool, executing her thirteenth lap in the far lane when Venus came in. Absorbed in her favorite exercise, Lydia wasn't aware that someone had intruded on her solitude.

Absorbed in her own concerns, Venus wasn't aware that the swimmer was JP Beaumont. All she observed was that the woman slicing through the water did so with great skill and strength. She took the lane on the opposite side of the pool and picked up her pace.

"Jesus and Mary," Chairman Ackerly said under his breath. "Nice work, Treadwell." He chaired the board but everyone knew the real power behind it ultimately rested with Goodman, a behind-the-scenes kind of man, infamously strident and self-righteous, the type that people were loathe to have to confront, the profoundly difficult type who proved profoundly impossible to overthrow and way too handy at disposing with anyone who dared to try, as Joseph Ackerly had witnessed time and time again. The dossier in front of him was a dream come true and he couldn't help feeling warmly toward the woman who had delivered it to him, even though Paula Treadwell did not generally kindle those kind of emotions in people.

"Not my work, Joe. Compliments have to go to JP Beaumont, I'm afraid. I tried to warn the man."

"Truly amazing," he murmured, practically fondling the contents. "I didn't think Lydia had it in her, to tell you the truth."

"Good. And lucky for our side, neither did Silas."

He flipped through the evidence again. Boy-oh-boy, wouldn't that vicious old fart appreciate this, he said to himself. It was head chopping Goodman style and he knew that it would, without a struggle, render the man instant history. He couldn't wait for the board to convene next week. He intended to bring it to their attention today.

"You thank her for me, Paula. I've been wishing for something like this for years."

Lap nineteen. She was cognizant of someone else in the water. They both reached the same edge at the same time. Dive, tuck, roll, and kick off again. They were synchronized.

Paula got an early start this morning, in her office by six-thirty. No assistants there and no Beaumont either. She liked it that way for the first fifteen minutes, but then it was too much peace and quiet for her to stand and when she discovered that she hadn't a clue where the hot coffee was stashed or how to produce a donut she became restless and found herself roaming the corridors in search of a warm body or a vending machine. By the time she returned with one stale pastry and a tepid glass of water, there was a message already from Chairman Ackerly.

He had promised to give her a blow by blow of the board's reaction yesterday. She would have to content herself till then with this abbreviated version. "Broke out the booze for this one," it said. She was thrilled to hear it. "We faxed him notice of our findings."

Message from Silas, too, though the rat wouldn't leave his name. She recognized his gnarly voice anyway. "I will never resign," he said, completely lacking in humility or the requisite conciliatory tone one ought to have under the present circumstances.

Paula was not faint of heart so she laughed out loud at his challenge. It was, she knew from experience, pure bravado. They always talk like that before they see the proof.

Lap twenty-one for Lydia. The other swimmer was keeping up with her. That was only because she had been at it longer and she was getting tired.

85

Without seeing the case against him, Silas Goodman had no idea how badly he was bleeding. In that state of ignorance, he failed to see the futility of defending his "good name" and it was only minutes after leaving his message with Paula Treadwell that he had the audacity to leave yet another one with the chairman demanding that he be allowed to address the board within the next seventy-two hours, the time, he predicted, that he would need to mount a successful counter-defensive.

Paula had gone to great lengths to leave all the parties concerned with the impression that Goodman's fatal blow had come from JP Beaumont herself, and Silas, having no choice but to believe in it, was reeling from that perception, to the degree that he was no longer himself and that it clouded his judgment. In short, he was not up to the course he had embarked upon and he was not functioning as well as he thought. In this condition he seemed to forget entirely that a corporation does not operate like a democracy with all of its civil protections, a due process clause. He forgot that there are no such things as rights there, only privileges, and that in terms of class, one was either at the top or at the bottom. If one found oneself in the middle somehow and it could not be credited to nepotism or cronyism, then it was only temporary, the time spent there determined simply by how long it would take to rise or to fall. It had also slipped his mind that the only real concern of a corporation and its directors is the "happiness" of its shareholders.

Lap twenty-seven. It seemed the other swimmer might actually overtake her. Lydia sucked in her air deeply before going under this time. She had not expected such a work-out this morning. Tuck and roll–she kicked off farther than before, striving to gain another length over her competitor.

Whether happiness is derived from real profits or from imagined ones is not a relevant distinction in modernized economics. What matters most to a corporation is the shareholders' perception of profitability. After all, markets are driven primarily on two principles: investors are confident therefore they buy; investors are not confident therefore they sell. Anything else is just gambling.

Irrefutably then, bliss is the actual commodity on exchange in the marketplace and the board of directors technically represents the corporation's shareholders in their ambitious pursuit of it, acting utterly infatuated with the corporate officers in happy times and, in unhappy times, protesting too much and wanting the rascals out. It's the same in politics. Consult Treadwell or Machiavelli.

Soloman-Schmitt was in happy times again, after weathering some frightening storms. It had Treadwell to thank for that and the board was necessarily in bed with her, head over heels in love with her protégé, Lydia Beaumont. Goodman's crusade against her, prompted by what, who really knew, had proven to be a liability for him and they were glad to be able to end it all like this. Merely a formality, they granted him his seventy-two hours, at which time they hoped to see him capitulate and resign.

But Silas Goodman did not understand this. He could not see that, like the snake run over in the road and mortally wounded, he was coiling and striking at the air, his fangs broken and drained of their venom, his once elastic spine crushed beyond repair.

It is, they claim, the best form of exercise. Swimming exercises every muscle in the body.

That was probably true, Venus speculated, since every muscle in her body was beginning to ache. If she had known that such a workout awaited her this morning she would have warmed up before getting in the water. She didn't know how many laps the competition was ahead of her, but it did seem that the woman was indefatigable.

"Treadwell here...go ahead, Joe, you're up early...he what...no kidding?...god bless him then...nah, it's only seventy-two hours...well of course...I would...sure, give the file to him right now then...mmhmm...no, he can't...how could he, Joe?...Joe...how can he defeat it?"

86

She had lost like this before, so it was in the act of losing that it finally dawned on Venus that her pool buddy was Lydia Beaumont. Nobody else could swim like that. She halted in the middle of her last stroke, took a few large gasps of air into her lungs and submerged.

"Yeah right, and then he goes home to his wife and family with a bunch of reporters in tow asking him these questions? I don't think so...won't, I tell you... because he's not a stupid man, he's just a chauvinistic man, that's all, and he's made a huge mistake he'll never recover from...I guarantee it, Joe...okay, I'll say he drags it out and does it in front of the board."

Lap thirty-five and Lydia was finally giving in to exhaustion when she suddenly noticed that the other swimmer had dropped from view. She paddled to the ladder and stood on the first rung and inspected the deck. Bone dry. There were no footprints anywhere. Two towels draped over two chairs. Whoever it was hadn't left the pool. She clung to the ladder breathlessly and, out of curiosity, waited in the water for the defeated swimmer to emerge.

"Yes, do it...go on and give it to him and I'll bet you five hundred dollars he tenders his resignation...oh?...okay, I'll make it a thousand dollars...ummmmm, he'll do it by the eleventh hour...the eleventh hour—it's a figure of speech, Joe, you know like blow me?...oh, for Pete's sake, Joe, I've got to give the exact time he surrenders?"

There had just been another swimmer in this pool. They had not left the pool so they had to still be in the pool. Lydia let go of the ladder and sank to the bottom to investigate.

"Joe, forget it, I'm not betting on whether the poor man cries or not...no, I won't do it...hah...because it's grisly and I'm not going to, besides what do you think I am, callous or something?...fine, a separate bet then...ummmmm, five hundred dollars says that he doesn't cry, but his bottom lip trembles."

Hi, Venus waved from her watery empire. There was no response from her astonished mermaid. I'M SORRY, Venus mouthed, seizing the opportunity and watching it expire in an explosion of bubbles. Lydia frowned and climbed back up the ladder.

Chapter 25: Caution

"I'm curious, Angelo, what exactly is your sexuality?"

She wondered why it had taken Paula so long to inquire about it. "I really don't think you can ask me that."

"Let's just pretend I can."

"That's what you came to see me about?"

"Yes."

Venus sighed and set her work aside for the moment. She was extremely wary of Paula. She liked her, she disliked her. She trusted her, she distrusted her. "What do you really want to know?"

"Your sexual preference."

"My sexual preference. Is that all?"

"Yes."

"I prefer it lying down."

Chapter 26: Blame and Praise

He entered the elevator dragging his sword and shield behind him, relieved to find no one else in there. He was going home for a much-needed rest and, in a moment of clarity, had declined to take the incriminating dossier with him, advising the board that he didn't quite need a thorough review of it to see that it was quite thorough.

But hell hath no fury like a man scorned; he made a mental note as he descended never to underestimate a woman again, perfectly aware that his epiphany had hit him too late to be of service in the present war.

He would, he promised himself, perhaps in vain, live to fight another day.

In the meantime, fate, ever twisting as it is perversely wont to do at times, offered him yet one last chance to stand face to face with his victorious opponent, because JP Beaumont had just stepped into the elevator, too preoccupied as usual to immediately notice Silas Goodman slumped there in the corner, his sword hanging ludicrously at his side with its blade broken off at the tip, his once trustworthy shield so heavily tarnished and so cumbersome to him this afternoon that he couldn't bear it anymore.

It was a monstrously golden opportunity for Silas to bury the hatchet and concede defeat in a sportsmanlike manner, but he was, of course, free to use this fleeting moment in any way he saw fit.

The elevator stopped at the next floor and two executives entered.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Beaumont."

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Ms. Beaumont...Mr. Goodman."

"Good af...ternoon. Good afternoon, Mr. Goodman."

"Oh, bravo, Ms. Beaumont. Good afternoon indeed," he snarled. He had always found her aloof demeanor condescending. It was the least of her sins today. "Bravo, Ms. Beaumont. Congratulations are in order for you, aren't they?"

Ding!

Three more executives on the next floor. The two before them repositioned themselves against the wall and stared at their feet as their coworkers boarded.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Beaumont."

"Good afternoon," she answered.

"Good afternoon Ms.-"

"Good afternoon," she interrupted. "And good afternoon," she said, quickly dispensing with the necessity for a greeting from the third.

The three new passengers glanced around the elevator, puzzled by the thick air. "Hey, Smitty, how are you?" one of them asked, trying to lighten things up a bit.

"Good," Smitty muttered self-consciously. He made a series of rapid eye signals toward the corner where Goodman stood glowering and banged on the close button a few times.

"Ah, Mr. Goodman," the hapless speaker continued. "Good afternoon, sir" he offered, smiling ignorantly until one of his comrades jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow.

"Afternoon," Goodman managed.

The elevator descended several more floors in a toxic silence that only Goodman would dare to disturb.

"I guess I underestimated you, Beaumont. Believe you me, it won't happen again."

She was required to respond to that. Everyone in there expected her to. "Mr. Goodman," she began, happy that her voice hadn't failed. "I am truly sorry to hear of your troubles. I wish you nothing but the best. Believe you me."

"Do you? Well isn't that nice to hear? Isn't she nice, your joint president? A real doll."

No one acknowledged his statement.

"You know, I knew your father," he said with distaste.

"Really?" she answered unflinchingly. "Funny that he's never mentioned you."

Someone had the audacity to snicker.

"Knew of him," Goodman hastily qualified. "Of him."

The elevator stopped again, but the would-be passengers, seeing Goodman and the joint president together in such tight quarters and having just heard about their contest, thought better of joining them and decided to wait for the next one instead. No one blamed them for the slight.

"I fail to make the connection. You're blaming my father for your-?"

Another floor and ding! The doors flew open.

"I hope you can explain that to me. It's a rather odd idea."

Two more executives wished to board. They had caught the tail end of JP Beaumont's last sentence and, recognizing that it was none other than Silas Goodman she had cornered, exchanged quizzical looks with each other. "Why not?" one of them finally mumbled, stopping the doors just before they closed again. The others inside made room for them.

"Wally," someone inexpertly whispered, "don't we get out here?"

Wally nudged his colleague to shut up and the doors closed.

Goodman was in no shape for jousting and he could feel that now. His face quivered with agitation, aware that everyone was waiting on his response.

"I'll have you know, young lady-"

"And I'll have you know, Goodman, that I will not tolerate that crap from anyone. I hope I am making myself clear, because I know you've been confused about such things in the past and I regret to inform you that it is that type of confusion that has ultimately cost you so dearly today, though it is plain you to see you are unwilling to accept this reality."

The doors were wide open again but no one had seen that happen.

"Full to capacity!" Wally gleefully announced to three gaping faces in the hallway, three people displaying an inordinate amount of enthusiasm for riding the elevator this afternoon.

"Aw, c'mon!" they clamored.

"Sorry!" Ding! "Full to capacity!"

"Reality!" Goodman was foaming at the mouth. "I'll tell you reality, Ms. Beaumont. The reality is that you and your kind have disturbed the natural order of our world and that it is my duty and the duty of those like me to restore that order again. To those ends I will nev—"

"Mr. Goodman, you do have my sympathy. It must be devastating to wake up and find yourself and your kind so...so obsolete. And I am sorry to hear that you're not comfortable in the world. It is after all the only one we have, imperfect as it may seem. Perhaps now that you've got so much free time on your hands you can explore the possibility that it always was."

A murmur of consent cut off his final retort.

Minutes later, the doors opened to the main lobby and Lydia was greeted by a small crowd that had assembled there, waiting, not for the elevator she realized, but in anticipation. It was blood sport they were eager for and she hated being a part of it. She smiled as benignly as possible as her elevator mates fell all over themselves in an effort to permit her to exit before them. They filed out after her then, conspicuously playing follow-the-leader while Silas Goodman festered, abandoned in his unhappy corner.

Chapter 27: Let Us Now Praise Famous Women

"I believe we are, as a civilized people, ready to embrace the truth, because it is flirting with us and courts our attention. That war, genocide, fascism, sexism, racism, poverty, famine, disease, corruption, ignorance, crime, oppression, torture, rape, slavery, overpopulation, exploitation, environmental degradation and global warming—just to list a few—are not the failings of ordinary women and men," Dr. Kristenson concluded to her standing-room-only audience today. "They are the political and social policies of the patriarchs who have acquired unnatural dominion over them."

"Did she really say this?" Paula asked. "Because you can never trust the papers to get it right."

"They got it right."

"Hmm. Very interesting. Very, very interesting. And would you kindly tell me why Venus Angelo is in this picture with Joan of Arc? That is you there, isn't it?"

Venus examined Exhibit A.

That was her all right. There was Lydia, too. The three of them together again, this time to kick off Dr. Kristenson's goodwill tour at her first brilliant engagement. The doctor was not going to get a standing ovation from Treadwell, Venus could tell. Completely different audience.

"Now Ms. Beaumont...that makes sense to me somehow, but the Assistant Vice President of Overseas Operations for Soloman-Schmitt World Oppression and Unlimited Exploitation Incorporated? I just don't see the connection."

"I'm on the board of directors, Paula."

"Directors of what?"

"Of the Kristenson Foundation."

"The Kris-oh, bullshit, Angelo. To get in their pants, or hers?"

"Hers, I suppose. I have an appointment and I don't want to be late."

"And who's Claudine then, s'il vous plâit?"

"If you please, I'm going to be late."

"Well, don't let me make you late then."

Venus made a quick assessment of Paula's peach and orange dress suit. Nice choice for such a tangy personality. She had no appointment to be late for, which Treadwell would know, so that possibly accounted for the woman's insufferably wry expression and immobility.

"Might as well resign your board duties, governor. I don't think they'll be of any more use to you now."

She was so right about that. Save for an icy cordiality the other evening, Lydia hadn't spoken to Venus or looked her way in months. Her only consolation of late was Dr. Kristenson's unaltered attachment. That and the weekly phone calls from Paris, from savvy Madame Reseigner, Lydia's evil twin, or if not evil then wicked, the wicked double who had done her in and who seemed determined to prove that she was just as gifted with a telephone as she was in bed.

"Your woman knows me then, pretty Venus?"

"Knows of, Claudine. Knows of. She's not my-"

"Oh, c'est bon, très bien. Believe me."

As seductive as it sounded, Venus couldn't resign to such a belief. But then she wasn't prepared to resign to anything just yet.

She enjoyed assisting the foundation and she needed her job at Soloman-Schmitt. As for what to do about Lydia, she was in a wait-and-see mode, poised for that magical moment, the ideal opportunity to explain it all away. This, she assured herself, would happen soon, perhaps once the dust had finally settled on the Goodman resignation, once the weight of that untidy matter was off the joint president's shoulders and out

of people's minds. This strange friction between them she felt she could resolve somehow. She'd work it out in time. She couldn't possibly have screwed up so badly that the woman would never speak to her again. Venus Angelo had never screwed up at anything.

"Resign, Angelo. You screwed up. I don't know how you got as far as you did, but you goofed big time, the end."

"Is that the truth, Paula? You know that for a fact?"

"Truth? You want the truth? The truth is that you have no right to be in love with Ms. Beaumont and she has no right to be hurt by your—your stupid, youthful transgressions. My only concern here is, as always, for the corporation and an executive's photo should never be in the papers except to announce her promotion or her resignation. Never. Do you understand me?"

Stupid, youthful transgressions. Stupid. Youthful. Transgressions. It had a certain ring to it. It had legs. Maybe she should ask Paula to script the apology.

"What's on your mind, Venus? You seem so preoccupied these days."

Lunch. Frank's. Saturday. They had resumed their tradition of not discussing Lydia which was a relief to Venus. She guessed that the doctor must have known it would be.

"It's nothing, Dr. Kristenson. Questions of age, I think. Work, too."

'Dr. Kristenson.' Always so formal. No amount of prodding could get Venus to call her Helaine and Helaine had given up insisting on it. She was Dr. Kristenson to her for eternity. It maintained the distance that Venus must have found so necessary in their relationship.

"Mmmm. Your Ms. Treadwell called to offer me an exquisitely large donation if I give back her Assistant Vice President. Did you know you were that valuable an asset to her?"

"What did you say?"

"I said you were about to be appointed the foundation's acting executive director while I'm on tour and that I couldn't imagine parting with you now for any amount of money. So what do you say to that?"

They had deliberately kept her in the dark about the entire Goodman debacle. Even Paula had managed to keep her mouth shut about it.

But Helaine was not so out of the loop that she couldn't glean from everyone's dour expressions that something had happened at Soloman-Schmitt to trouble them. Even Venus who usually remained neutral regarding corporate crimes and misdemeanors seemed somewhat depressed these days. So, too, the news coverage of late was teeming with innuendo and rumors concerning the internal affairs of the firm and its hierarchy, and although Venus' name was not one of those being bandied about, Lydia's was, as was JP Treadwell's, understandably.

Helaine gathered from all the bald speculation that the reporters knew no more about what was really going on than she or anyone else did, and that, if there was anything to it, the hullabaloo most likely had to do with the surprise resignation of one Silas Goodman from the board of directors, since his name was at the center of every proposed plot and because his resignation was the one detail that would eventually emerge as fact, the only fact, in fact, that Lydia and Venus were both independently willing to confirm was true. Beyond that, the subject was off limits to Helaine and their lips were sealed, and if Helaine hadn't been so consumed with her own work and the daunting task of preparing for an international tour, she might have taken the time to confront the ladies about all the secrecy, since secrets were rarely good things to keep from or between lovers, mates and friends.

Keeping secrets is silly anyway. For famous women.

Helaine was finally getting used to Lydia's new fame and it sometimes appeared that Lydia would, too. She wasn't quite as careless in public as she had been only months earlier, though she still had no respect for reporters and dodged them whenever possible and she still couldn't bear an ounce of bad press, something which everyone involved was aware of.

Helaine routinely pointed out that whenever Lydia came off as relaxed and open with the press corps she received flattering coverage from them.

"So?"

"So maybe we should examine your issue with reporters. Get some closure here."

"They're not reporters, Helaine. At best, they're stenographers."

"I see."

It was a fame that contrasted sharply from Helaine's, having more the elements of pop stardom and the kind of notoriety that rock stars earn as opposed to the status the president of a Fortune 500 company deserved. Perhaps that was Lydia's major objection to it all, that it was attention she had not solicited, for qualities she had never invested much in and which she herself would never have thought to promote over and above her real talents. Maybe she felt diminished by the attention, by the constant buzz about beauty, charisma and charm. Maybe she resented Paula for shoving it to the forefront while at the same time pumping up her pretty princes with her quasi-feminist corporate rhetoric. Maybe at last she saw through shrewd Paula Treadwell and her Machiavellian ways, saw a woman as principled and as onerous as a pimp at times.

"Your suits. And that's it?"

"Venus-"

"What's with the cognac?"

"Baby, please. I told you, I'm missing my fabulous girl."

She bristled at hearing baby again and lord knows she didn't need another bottle of cognac, but fabulous? Now who could turn fabulous down? "Come on in, Mr. Jones."

"Anna, I simply can't do it."

"Would she say yes or no?"

"I don't know."

"This is absurd, Helaine. Give the girl my number and ask her to call me."

"Anna, can't you find a way to accomplish this without me? You're usually so resourceful at such things."

"I certainly can. Give me her phone number."

It was not done and she had no desire to do it. In any event, Anna didn't need to add Venus Angelo to her already burgeoning list of conquests.

"You're being selfish, my friend. Besides, you should be happy to get rid of her, if you catch my drift."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed."

"Okay, my perceptive friend. I'll tell her when next we meet that you praised her highly. She knows where she can find you. Will that be sufficient?"

"And give her my number, too."

"If she asks."

"If she seems even remotely interested. We mustn't make her ask."

"Helsinki, Oslo, Prague, Madrid. Oh, and London. And Paris, Munich. Beijing is still up in the air. Did I say Milan?"

"No, Madrid, I think."

"Right....so...on to Milan and then to Berlin, Delhi, Tokyo...Moscow...Melbourne..." She cast an apprehensive look in Lydia's direction, knowing that she was not too thrilled about the demanding itinerary and being parted from each other for so long. Weeks at a time, Lydia had at last reluctantly complained last night. Helaine had not wanted to dwell on this feature of the tour, but it was very different embarking on an endeavor like this now. So different than the other time, the pre-Lydia period of her life. She was not as famous then and there weren't so many cities scheduled, no beautiful wife to miss. If, like then, it was only

about the book she had penned then she wouldn't dream of doing this, but now it was about the foundation, her life's work. She was a goodwill ambassador on a worthy mission, not just an author promoting sales. "Seoul undecided, too," she continued, a tinge of guilt threatening to spoil her excitement. "But it's shaping up nicely and I've just hired a personal secretary—so yes or no, Venus?"

Paula had ripped Venus another asshole over it. Acting Executive Director of the Kristenson Foundation! She nearly had a seizure when she told her she was considering accepting the position.

"It's only six weeks away," Helaine reminded. "Have you made a decision?"

She had. "I'm scheduled for Saudi Arabia in two weeks, out of the country for three. After that you've got your Acting Executive Director."

Kay was ecstatic. "There's your Executive Director, Helaine!"

"In five weeks," Venus inserted. "Does that help?"

Game theory, Lydia mused, reticent about the entire scheme, notwithstanding the acting directorship falling into Venus Angelo's hands. She saw herself gazing at those hands as they absently toyed with a piece of silverware and, catching herself at it, looked away, past all of the animated faces of her elated breakfast companions, past the present, to focus on a not-so-distant future when she and Helaine would have to globehop to be together, when their marriage would be reduced to a handful of sexual encounters, when they both would have to zip back and forth through the clouds in order to meet their other pressing obligations. It would be months of madness she acknowledged grimly, finding herself once again studying Venus, one more time contemplating her peculiar brand of treachery and wondering what kind of woman this Claudine was and whether smug Venus Angelo had had the balls to bring her to their apartment in the Latin Quarter and do her on their bed.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Helaine said, clasping her hands together. "Thank you, Venus. I'm so grateful, so grateful. Robert, be a doll and ask Harry to break out the champagne for us."

Venus would have to inform JP Treadwell of her new post herself, Lydia quickly resolved. Paula was not going to be a very happy camper when she found out about it and she was certainly not going to be fool enough to be the messenger of such unwelcome tidings. Venus gave her a tentative smile and Lydia smiled back at her obliquely, fingering her wedding band and watching from the corner of one eye as Harry scuttled about the dining room, his polished platters glittering preciously this morning, his shiny spectacles as bright as coins at the bottom of a pool.

Venus was caught up in the moment, shining, too.

Lydia gave her a drop dead glare.

Venus had had it with the drop dead looks. She had had it with chastising herself. She had had it with feeling like an unfaithful lover. Complicating things for her was that the one qualified person she could discuss the situation with was the very last person in the universe she should discuss the situation with, and there was nothing in Dr. Kristenson's book, which she had read in its entirety, that came even close to describing exactly what kind of situation it actually was.

The resulting impasse she was experiencing with Lydia, which she had hoped to cure on her own, was beginning to appear quite permanent, and reality, nay REALITY, was completely wrecking her fantasy life, which heretofore had been rich and rewarding.

So it was, Venus finally understood, just exactly as know-it-all Paula had suggested, totally unrealistic for her to even imagine getting with Ms. Beaumont again, let alone to dream of having her for a thirtieth birthday present, which was pending and had been her life plan ever since she had fallen in love with the—the—she stumbled over the words in her head. She was angry and frustrated today, sick of her domicile, the work environment…herself. The words that came to mind this afternoon were ugly ones. Words like arrogant and bitch.

Oh, man, was she glad to be leaving the country again.

"Hello?"

"Venus?"

"Mama-I'm late, I know."

"Better get here, girl. Jasmine wants to see you. She's sure happy with you these days."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

"The leather coat?"

"God no, that foundation thing you do that was in all the papers. Proud as a peacock and bragging up a storm about you. How long you gonna be, honey?"

Go and figure. "Half an hour-what about the coat?"

"She doesn't care about leather coats. Don't you know that by now?"

Doesn't care about leather coats? Shit no. Venus didn't know that. This one was trimmed with mink. "Mama...you tell her I just made acting executive director of that foundation and I'll be there soon."

Chapter 28: Force

Her lower back hurt when she bent at the waist, the knee had flared up again, more grays in the mirror, crow's feet just like her father's developing around the eyes, reading lenses becoming a vital accessory to her wardrobe, new freckles and other sun damage that she didn't need glasses to see, burst vessels here and there, especially in her tired legs. Lydia and Delilah were shopping for "sensible shoes" that would still look and feel sexy. If there was such a thing.

```
"Loafers?"
   "Please, Del."
   "Clogs?"
   "With a three-piece suit, with my lingerie?"
   "Martini?"
   Lydia scrunched up her face. It didn't seem practical today. "Have you ever been in love, Del?"
   "Uhhhhh...describe the sensation and I'll tell you yes or no."
   "Never mind-are these hideous or what?" She forced her feet into a pair of square-toed flats and yanked
them off in disgust.
   "Yes."
   "Yes hideous?"
   "Yes love, Liddy. Deep sexual love. Hideous is a pretty good description for that, too. I don't think you're
going to find what you're looking for here."
   "Have you ever been deeply sexually in love with two people at the same time?" Lydia ventured.
   "NO."
   "Is it possible, you think?"
   "Liddy, you...you should probably ask your doctor about that."
   "Never mind."
   Martinis at the bistro across from Cicero's.
   "They say you plowed Silas Goodman under. Didn't think you had it in you."
   "I don't. Paula did it."
   "Ooh, better keep that under your hat."
   "I do."
   The waitress delivered two vodka martinis. "You're her," she suddenly blurted.
   "Who?" Lydia asked, hoping to introduce some doubt.
   "That woman, aren't you? Beau-something? I know it's you. You're her."
   "Yes, yes," Lydia said, her finger to her lips.
```

The waitress nodded understandingly. "Can I have your autograph?" she asked in a hushed voice.

Lydia sent Delilah a beleaguered look.

"Here," Delilah said, offering a napkin.

"The napkin's cool," the waitress said.

Lydia signed it and pushed it toward her.

"Thank you."

"Mum's the word, right? Or Ms. Beaumont and I will have to leave."

"Of course."

96

```
Vodka martinis and fried potato peels. Yum. Lydia watched the entrance of Cicero's.
"Problems at home, Liddy?"
"What do you mean?"
"Bedroom-drink that."
Lydia took a swig and gagged. "Definitely not."
"Okay. Affair?"
"Del, never."
"Okay. What then-good grief, why are we talking like this?"
"Like what?"
Delilah gulped down her martini and hailed the waitress over. "Cryptic."
"That's a drink?" the waitress asked.
"Not you-another, please."
"Me cryptic," Lydia volunteered.
"Oh," the waitress replied. "Another for you, too?"
"Please."
Delilah waited for her to leave. "What then, I said."
"If not an affair, you mean?"
"If not an affair."
"Nothing, just curious."
"About who, Liddy?"
"I'm not going to say."
"For Pete's sake. About who?"
"You know who, Del."
Gin martinis were better than vodka martinis. "Venus?"
"Mmhmm."
"That's done with, I thought?"
"It's a little complicated."
"Ho, ho-sounds it, Dame Beaumont!"
"And that's all I'm going to say."
"And that's all you need to say."
```

Lydia scoffed, considered the couch, reconsidered. "Implying what, Dr. Kristenson? That I'm being childish?"

Helaine gave her a bold look, the meaning of which eluded Lydia. "Implying what?" she asked again.

"Implying nothing, my love. Have you eaten anything today?"

"Yeah, I had some olives."

Olives and booze. Helaine was perturbed. She had asked Lydia to take the time off to accompany her on the trip, but she wouldn't do it. Couldn't leave Soloman-Schmitt for that length of time, she said, not for five months. Helaine had put off her preparations for as long as she could but with only two weeks remaining before departure she could delay it no longer. This tour, she realized, was going to be their first significant collision and although Lydia had yet to come right out and shout about it, Helaine could see her resentment bubbling to the surface this afternoon. She watched with folded arms as Lydia inspected the contents of her luggage.

```
"This, Dr. Kristenson?" Lydia held up the objectionable item. "You're bringing toys? What the fuc-"
```

[&]quot;Darling, you're smashed?"

[&]quot;Nah, not really-ah, you're living out of bags already."

[&]quot;Are you going to make it through this or should I hire a sitter?"

[&]quot;Lydia, come on now."

[&]quot;Aw, shit, I'm...swearing."

[&]quot;Because you've been drinking. Are you going to drink for the entire five months?"

"No, Dr. Kristenson, sometimes I'm going to be flying vast distances to meet my wife in strange, faraway places so I can get token quickies from her. I don't know who'll get her the rest of the time. Must need my head examined, right Doc?"

"I hope you don't think this is charming behavior."

"I never hope or think when I drink. It's incompatible, Doc-"

"Stop calling me that, please. Come here. Let me make you something to eat."

"I don't want food. Why are you doing these things-that birthday thing and now this trip? Are you bored, Lana?"

"Oh, Lydia...please don't."

"Are you?"

She couldn't determine whether Lydia was limping or staggering. "Darling, I know what you're feeling. It's a long time to be separated, believe me, I know. But we have a plan and we're going to manage it...isn't this what we agreed on?"

"I changed my mind. I can do that, you know."

"Changed your-but I can't, Lydia. I can't change my mind. You know I can't."

"I know only that I don't want you to go, not for even one day. Jesus, did I slur that?"

Everything had become problematic. The trip. The tripping. "A little."

If she couldn't bear for even one day our bucolic countryside, its cow barns and cattle, its rednecks, what do you think Venus thought of spending weeks in a desert with oil rigs and jeeps and would-be sheiks? Here and there a sorry-assed camel?

"You will wear," her guide demanded. "Face!" he shouted, draping the piece of cloth dramatically around his head and exposing only his eyes. "You," he insisted, handing her the veil.

His English sucked, but Venus understood his pantomime. "Dude," she said, "I don't think so. You there, tell him no way, I don't wear a veil. WON'T."

Her interpreter anxiously translated for her and Venus saw the other man's face grow dark with rage. He stepped menacingly into her personal space and waved the veil at her again, this time spewing what sounded very much like epithets to Venus and kicking up the sand as he circled her.

"Go fuck yourself," she finally said, grabbing from his clenched fist the keys to the dusty old jeep sitting across the road. "Tell him that," she ordered the interpreter over her shoulder. "Tell him this woman says he can go fuck himself. You understand?"

"I-I cannot-you do not drive the jeep, miss. Cannot!"

"Oh, I can drive it all right," she said, climbing over the door and placing herself behind the wheel. "I'm out of here," she said, starting the vehicle and revving the engine. "Right now!"

The translator was beside himself and the guide, inconsolable, ranted off in the distance while onlookers discussed the scene amongst themselves and shook their heads reproachfully.

"Is forbidden, miss...the women...they do not drive. Cannot."

"Really? Is that right?" And they cannot vote either she had learned only yesterday.

He nodded profusely, relieved that she seemed to be able to comprehend this. "Yes, sorry. Do not."

"So what you got here isn't so much a country as a country club, right?"

"Yes, yes," the man answered emphatically, not understanding the distinction and deceived by her smile.

"Just one big happy fraternity," she added.

His eyes narrowed. "Fra-tern-ity?" He wasn't sure of that word. He reached into his robe for a pocket dictionary.

"And it would be a good idea to have you all neutered. Yes, yes?"

"Oh, yes, miss. Yes, yes," he mistakenly agreed. "Fra...tern...ity...f...r...a...?"

She searched the glove compartment for a pencil. "Here," she said, writing "neutered" out for him. "While you're at it."

He didn't know this word either. "Ne-yu-ter-ed?"

"See ya," Venus said, leaving him to ponder her lines in the sand.

98

"Principles? Screw your principles, Angelo! You should have kept your mouth shut and asked to be driven back to the hotel. Now it's a goddamned international incident! And after I just saved your scandalous hide, how could you?"

"Paula, I-"

"And you even put your insults in writing? What's that, huh? Arrogance? I'd say so. You're not a tourist on holiday, Angelo. You're a goddamned ambassador!"

"Paula, she-"

"I'm not through here, Ms. Beaumont. I haven't even begun."

She would have to resign or be fired. It was preferred she resign because it would make Soloman-Schmitt look bad otherwise. Like maybe they were chauvinists or something.

"Damn, girl. Ever heard of In Stone Magazine?"

"Sebastion, not nude I won't."

"Not nude, Venus. We're thinking hot, though. Seven veils."

"You're shitting me?"

"For real, baby. Tasteful yet challenging. Like you."

"Jasmine?...yes, of course it's fine...no, just surprised...no, call anytime...yes, I really mean it, what did you think of the coat?...you did?...to charity...Jasmine, you gave it to...yes, Mama said...oh, that...ummmm, fired essentially...you are?...well, I appreciate it but...hah...yeah, I kicked ass all right, and ruined myself in the process...well you best believe it, it's true...I don't know yet...don't know that either...is Mama, I mean how are they taking it?...yeah?...that's good, right?"

"Paula Treadwell line two, Dr. Kristenson."

"Uh-oh, I'm not up to that, Jenny. Tell her I'm with a client."

"Greetings from the corporate doghouse, Dr. Kristenson."

"So you come to Marais–d'accord?"

It was a puerile notion so characteristic of Claudine. Venus laughed into the receiver.

Yet there was something refreshing in her logic, the idea that they could just climb into bed and pull the sheets over their heads and in a few weeks everything would be fine.

"So simple, isn't it?"

[&]quot;Did you give her my number?"

[&]quot;I haven't had a minute to devote to it. My tour and all."

[&]quot;Helaine! What's the woman's address?"

[&]quot;Venus! I'm so delighted you called. Are you okay?"

Venus. I in so deligned you caned. The you okay.

[&]quot;I guess. I'm fired, you know? Cleaning out my office. Can you use an executive director right now?"

[&]quot;We'd be honored, Ms. Angelo."

[&]quot;We?"

[&]quot;Being everyone. Absolutely everyone."

[&]quot;Certainement!"

It was not so simple; Venus had lost her anonymity and reporters were lurking everywhere. Claudine would not be a secret pastime for very much longer if Venus couldn't shake them off the trail. "Not yet, Claudine. Soon, though."

"Too bad for your demimonde. Poor Claudine, how she aches for a cruel Américain! Tell me of your woman."

Talk about Lydia Beaumont and her unpleasant pleasantries, those clipped good mornings, those brusque hellos, those dispassionate goodbyes? "Tu es ma femme," Venus lied.

"I am? Oh, Venus, je ne suis pas. But you are very sweet to say it. À bientôt."

They sat by the pool without speaking. Dickie never knew what to say when Paula got like this, he was only happy that it didn't occur often.

The hum of the pump and the gurgling water was soothing to him and he thought if he lay his head back and feigned to nap that she might follow his example and give herself a break for a few hours, but even with his eyes closed he could still feel her disquiet, still hear the anxious *scritch, scratch, scritch* of her pencil and eraser, the truncated obscenities she intermittently muttered under her breath as she undertook to do violence against yet another of her ridiculously complicated word puzzles.

"Mr. Ackerly, I am prepared to tender my resignation if the board refuses to intervene on her behalf. I want her exonerated."

"Ly-Ms. Beaumont-you consulted with Paula about this?"

"I did not."

Whenever Joseph Ackerly was overwhelmed the cowlick on the back of his head raised up. He felt for it now and pressed it down. "I-it's an international incident."

"Over a filthy piece of rag. Would you wear it?"

He ducked that one. "But we do a great deal of business with the Saudis. It's...just their custom."

"Coercing women to hide their faces is not, among better people, considered just a custom, Mr. Ackerly, and Soloman-Schmitt will lose in the court of public opinion if it fails to stand behind Ms. Angelo's objection to it."

"But the case for firing her has already been made. It's settled."

"The case is thin-do you want my comb?"

"No, I...thank you, no. Vice President of Overseas Ops has demanded her resignation."

"Vice President of Overseas Ops is caving into pressure. It's nothing he wants to do. He only wears that title, you know."

Chairman Ackerly was having a full blown bad hair day now. He had a vision of every high ranking female executive employed at Soloman-Schmitt handing in her resignation in protest, and then every mid-level employee, every secretary, the ladies in the cafeteria, even the night shift that cleaned the building, all those indignant women, their spouses, their partners, their families, and hundreds and hundreds of angry protesters and ex-shareholders lined up outside his door, the press corps egging them on. He could see Silas Goodman grinning like the devil himself, saying I told you so and winning after all.

"We'll figure out something," he said. "What do you propose?"

"We'll figure out something, but we may have to bail at the last minute, taking into account the growing tensions in that region. It's a historical conflict and I predict it's about to blow."

Too many tensions in the world for scheduling a goodwill tour, Dr. Kristenson could see. No-fly zones over large portions of the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. China and Taiwan at fisticuffs.

Most of the plans had been finalized, flights, hotel accommodations, but there remained those infinite little details, those maddening minutiae that can bog a person down and ruin traveling abroad before ever stepping foot outside the door and she would rather be spending her precious time with her wife who was clearly suffering at this point and needed her attention.

She felt lucky to be able to place responsibility on someone else's shoulders for a change. Carlos Montague, her newly appointed personal secretary, was a competent and knowledgeable man with an impressive resume and a penchant for details. In his late fifties, he might have thought about retiring from private service having been at it for over thirty years, but he loved being involved in people's lives, especially those people who chose to live full lives, and he knew that full lives frequently required a great deal of organization, which was his specialty, his calling.

"That means Beijing is out?" she asked.

"Only if you recognize Taiwan. It's, as always, one or the other, not both. Only things are worse than ever with warships in the East China Sea."

"Warships, Carlos? Does this nonsense ever stop?"

"Hey, look, you dress up a ten-million-man army with nowhere to go, you better think of something for them to do on Friday nights. You got an e-mail today. The Chinese are forcing you to decide."

"What do you recommend?"

"Neutrality is the best policy, Dr. Kristenson. Unfortunately."

"Dr. Kristenson? Lydia returning your call."

"Thanks, Jen. What line?"

"One."

"Excuse me, Carlos-Lydia, I'm almost finished here."

"Can you talk?"

"Home. You got my message?"

"Yes. Emergency I hope?"

"Be careful what you wish for, darling. Can you leave work early?"

"Leaving right now."

It would be a shell game, Venus realized, juggling the numbers around in her head. The penthouse, her parent's home, Jasmine's tuition, the credit cards...and the directorship at the foundation was only a temporary position, not to mention that it paid only a fraction of the salary she was presently earning at Soloman-Schmitt.

Would the corporation offer her a decent severance package if she discreetly resigned? Would she have to dip into her retirement fund? When would she have to cash in her other investments. The T-bills, the stocks, the bonds? How much money did she actually have in the bank and how many months could she live off her savings? What did *In Stone Magazine* pay for an exclusive interview?

"Thirty grand and that's not chump change, Venus."

Not too bad for a one-hour interview and a cover shot. She was not too keen on the veil motif, however.

"We'll get you sketches, some artistic control," Sebastion assured.

"Before I agree."

"Before you agree."

"Who is it, Dickie?"

"Who's calling, please? I see. Just a second, please." He hit the mute button. "A Joseph Ackerly?"

"Give me that. What's up, Joe?"

"Paula, sorry to distur-"

"You're not. Has something happened?"

"Recent developments. Ready?"

"Shoot."

"Vice President Kendle Overseas has submitted his resignation this afternoon. Early retirement, good severance—why not, I guess he thought."

"And?"

"And the board has, five to three, approved appointing Ms. Angelo in his place since she has assumed so many of his duties already and could guarantee the shareholders a smooth transition. Cheer you up any?"

```
"Yes-why'd you do it?"
```

"Got any heroes, Angelo?"

"Heroes-is this Paula?"

"It is. Who are your heroes, I asked."

"I don't have any. And you?"

"Annie Oakley and Mary Tyler Moore."

(Never heard of them.) "What's this about?"

"I'd like to speak to Vice President Angelo, please."

"Vice Presi-of what?"

"Overseas Operations-where are you?"

"Downtown, skating. What are you talking about? I thought I was fired?"

"Now come on. You were never fired."

"What is that sound?"

"Oh, god, my cell phone."

A terrible inconvenience. "Darling, where'd you get that?"

"Paula, for my birthday. Hello?"

"Nice work, Ms. Beaumont."

"Paula, hi. It worked?"

"Like a charm."

"Did she accept the promotion?"

"Yes-what are you doing?"

"None of your business. Gotta go."

[&]quot;Well...it seemed like the right thing to do."

[&]quot;Yeah! But really. I want to know."

Chapter 29: By Force

It's a popular myth these days. That you are in control of your own happiness, master of your own feelings, that no one else can make you unhappy.

"Angelo-get out of my way."

Venus had woken in an extraordinarily good mood this morning. All that had seemed broken in her world had been surreptitiously fixed. "No, I want to talk to you." Emboldened by her good fortune, she had decided to grab the tiger by the tail today, waiting until the afternoon meeting was over and there was just the two of them left together in the conference room. "Can't we talk? I want to talk." She felt behind her and locked the door, too young, if only by a few minutes, to recognize the folly in this strategy.

"Unlock it. I have absolutely nothing to say to you."

"Lvd-"

"Let me out of this room, I said! I don't want to hear it!"

"You don't want to-fine-that I'm sorry?"

"No-I mean yes." She felt her lips quivering. "Yes. I don't care," she said, her eyes flickering with anger. She made a motion for the door and Venus blocked her.

"Lydia." Venus uttered this like she had on the night they slept together, as she had all through that night. She saw Lydia redden at the sound of it, clench her jaw.

"You bastard," Lydia whispered. "How dare you? How fucking dare you?"

"Because I'm...I'm just heartbroken."

"Good. You deserve that."

"I do, Lydia? Then why did you help me?"

"Why? Because that's business—this is—something completely different."

"Not business? Pleasure?"

Lydia was burning. She brought her hand to her face and dropped it in exasperation. "I am your president, Ms. Angelo. Open the door."

"Business and pleasure, Lydia? Why do I deserve to be heartbroken-because you're married?"

If she rushed the door would Venus prevent her from leaving? It was only a few steps. Would she hold there? She did not want to be held by her. Ever again. They locked eyes.

"Lydia, I just want to talk to you. Just talk."

"Talk? Why don't you talk to your...or doesn't she speak English?"

"My what, for godsakes?"

"Your whore, you punk. Now I've said all I'm going to-"

"Yes, she does. She speaks English. Why are you so troubled about Claudine?"

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. "Then go talk to Claudine or go to hell or do both. I don't care anymore."

"Anymore, Mrs. Kristenson?"

"You...leave my wife out of this."

"Gladly."

Lydia refused to grace the remark.

"I said gladly."

"Angelo...I heard you. Is this conversation over yet?"

"No."

"You have more to say?"

"Yes."

```
Lydia sighed. "Say it then and get it over with."
```

"I love you."

The lights buzzed and the clock ticked. Her body ached.

"Madly," Venus added, "but you know that already. Don't you? Why else would you punish me over Clau-"

"I don't know anything. I'm-who is Claudine?"

"Who's Helaine?"

"I love Helaine. You're saying you love Claudine?"

"No, Lydia. I'm saying I love you."

The lights buzzed, the clock ticked, Lydia needed to lie-

"I said I love you, Mrs. Kristenson."

"I heard you," she snapped. "I'm-Claudine knows about this? I mean you're screwing her, am I right? Did you do her on our-"

"Our, Lydia? Our what? What's our?" Venus pursued. "Yes, she knows about you. Why are you so angry about Claudine? I've had other lov—"

"I don't care about the men. They don't-"

"Threaten you?" Venus cut her off with a smirk. "But Claudine does? Why, Lydia?"

Why? Venus was a formidable sentry, waiting for some fabled password. She wasn't going to get it from Lydia. "Venus–I don't–I'm glad you have a woman because I can tell you that you'll never get another piece of this one. Now move."

"Because of Claudine. Do you want to know what she looks like?"

"It's none of my business-beautiful I suppose."

"Very-do you want me to not love you?"

"Do I-I don't know how to answer that. How old is she?"

"Say I don't want you to love me, Venus."

The lights were growing brighter; they were draining her, humming louder and louder in her ears. "How old is she?"

"Or you can say I don't love you, Venus."

"Angelo, don't."

"Don't. Don't what-love you?"

"Corner me like this. My wife is leaving me and I can't-"

"She's not leaving you. It's her work, that's all."

"Work...for five fucking months. Don't corner me, Angelo. I mean it."

"Then hit the ball."

Lydia had worried the button loose on her jacket. It hung by a thread. "How can you do this? She trusts you."

"She does not trust me. She trusts you. Tell me, Lydia. Because I have a right to know."

"Tell you-figure it out for yourself-I have somewhere I have to be."

"I think I know, but you say it."

"Venus, Helaine adores you. How can you justi-?"

"And I adore her. Say you don't love me and I'll let you go."

"I-" she couldn't. "I love Helaine. Now let me go."

"And I don't love you-say it."

"Venus."

"Or say I love you, Ve-"

"Venus!"

"Or all of the above, Lydia."

Lydia glanced down. She held a button in her palm. "I'm-are we done here?"

"Not yet-say it."

"I don't know what to say...leave me alone."

"Well, what the hell do you know, Lydia Beaumont? And when did you know it?"

"Goddamnit! I know only that I don't want you fucking that woman-now open the door!"

Venus placed her hand on the knob. "Why?"

"Why what? Why do I want to leave? Why am I ruining my clothes? Unh-uh, Venus. Open it. This conversation is over."

"Why don't you want me fucking that woman? Tell me first."

"And that'll make a difference? Because it won't, you know? I still passionately love my wife and you're still a punk, the likes of which I've had before."

"Never!" Venus interjected. "That's not true and you know it."

Lydia slid the button into her coat pocket and made to leave. "Yes it is true. It's a punk who picks up strangers, who would take a woman to bed she doesn't lo-"

"Oh, really? And if you don't love me, what does that make you?"

"That's...not the same."

"Oh, another difference? Well, it's my birthday this time and I want you-"

"Call your whore, Angelo. I told you nev-"

"Then I will! I will, Lydia, with pleasure. Sheer fucking pleasure. Especially knowing that you don't want me to and that you hate the idea of it, even though you don't want me or love me. Especially knowing that you know she's beautiful and that she's younger than you—yes she is—and that she has the decency, whore or not, to say my name when I'm fucking her, unlike you, and to kiss me when I'm fucking her, unlike you, and to hit the fucking ball when I'm fucking her, unlike—"

Crraack!

Chapter 30: Taken by Force

Anatomy of a slap, by Venus Angelo, Vice President of Overseas Operations, Soloman-Schmitt, Incorporated. You hear it first. And it sounds like a castanet. Then you feel it. And it stings.

She was a weaker woman than she ought to be, Venus thought, feeling her eyes tearing up, the lump in her throat, the stinging cheek, but she was determined not to cry. She had not been slapped since she was a little girl. Like then, she knew immediately that she had earned it. A bad temper, a string of insults, speaking the truth in the vicious kind of way that nobody really likes. Taunting.

Lydia had never slapped anyone before, though there were numerous situations in which she might have and one very near miss with Rio Joe. It was her preference, rather, to throw things, which she might have done here had she been holding anything in her hand.

Years from now, when Venus Angelo's psychotherapist asks her the question, "How old were you when you lost your innocence?" she will answer, "Three weeks shy of my thirtieth birthday," but she will decline to elaborate beyond that. In the present, however, she has learned something valuable. That honor is not just about being true to oneself. That it often involves being true to another.

So the transition from girlhood to womanhood was, for Venus, a painful impact, marked by the sound of a castanet. It was like a death in a way, an injury and then pictures flashing before her eyes. Not ones of her own life, to be sure, because she wasn't dying even if she wished she was, but scenes from the movies instead, images of distressed damsels and sullied dames, their lovely hands cutting through the air, some bare, some bejeweled, some gloved, all slapping. She saw a multitude of slappers, glorious in their feminine revenge, retrieving their dignity with a flick of the wrist. She saw the slapped with their handsome faces, their disheveled hair, eyes blinking with surprise, some in pain, some with anger. She had always doubted those scenes. Why would a woman slap a man?

Venus pushed her hair back, blinked the tears away. Lydia's expression was a perfect marriage of shock and grief. She stood transfixed in front of her, as beautiful as any of them, holding the offending hand like an emptied revolver.

She would come to her senses soon, Venus knew from the movies, and slip by her, perhaps exiting through an unguarded door. How did the scene play out, she quickly tested herself. A gallery of cads and rogues paraded in her mind, every one of them drawing the same conclusion, the one she would have to draw, too, having nothing else to draw upon.

She seized the woman and kissed her.

And then, since there was no resistance to it, she kissed her again.

Chapter 31: Compelled

A job in sales with no salary, no benefits. Life can be hard with only a twenty percent commission. He would have to hustle, Joseph Rios could see, to get back the things he was accustomed to having.

Selling ad space in skin magazines was nothing to write home about and he wouldn't, of course, but there were some fine-looking women at PM Entertainments. Better prospects than in finance, he told himself, soured on that whole industry.

"Celia," he had crooned to the fifth-floor secretary, minutes before his interview. "Oh, wow. That's my mother's name," he lied. She blushed just like a woman he used to know.

Rio Joe had them all lined up—or he would, once he had shed that pale skin and his two-hundred-dollar suit, that gaunt jailbird aura he still wore six months out of prison. He was going to dye those grays, too. Gray hair on a young man was a romantic liability, he felt. He needed to broaden his possibilities.

Probation over, he was out of the halfway house, living in a humble two room walk-up on the waterfront. That wouldn't be for long he promised the gray man in the mirror, mister lean and mean. It was time for some tanning booths and a workout. And a trip down to the Caymans for a small advance.

"Who's that, Mommy? She's pretty."

The child had a good eye. "Well...I don't know. She is though, isn't she?"

In Stone Magazine featured one stunning Venus Angelo on the cover this week. No veils, fully clad, small blurb on the inside saying only that she worked for Soloman-Schmitt, the new vice president of something or other. Sharon wanted to know more about the young woman.

So did Helen. "You don't know her?" she asked incredulously. Her mother knew everyone, whether or not she cared for them.

"I don't know her, yet, Helen. Not yet."

"Because a martini is not a comfort food."

Delilah disagreed, but she nodded understandingly. She and Helaine were having lunch and the maitre de was trying not to eavesdrop.

"Am I right, Harry?" Helaine inquired with a wink.

"Certainly," he replied. "Doesn't everyone know that oysters are more comforting than olives?"

"Indeed! No oysters either, Del-Harry, I expect you to back me up on that."

"I wasn't aware," Delilah admitted, when Harry had returned to the bar.

"Well, it's not a big problem. It's just a developing problem, maybe. Or only a potential one. She hates her job, I'm sure you know."

"She has. Even before she met you. We'll be good, Helaine. Trust us."

"I do, Del. I do. You know, she thinks...well she...has issues about my leaving."

"She's a child, Helaine. Always will be."

"Mmmm."

"Mr. Jones, a pleasure to be talking to you after so long. Who is Venus Angelo?"

"Ms. Chambers. You working rags again? We can arrange—"

"No, no, I'm looking for Venus Angelo. How can I have her for dinner, please?"

"Ah, Venus Angelo. Very tasty. Better take a number."

```
"Who is she, Sebastion? You know her?"
```

It was coming back to him. Kristenson. Chambers. Beaumont. He had said too much. "No, not married. Just...hot for someone else. I can't help you, Sharon. She wouldn't like me to."

```
"Then where can I find her?"
```

"Can't. She's around, though. You could run into her if you knew where to look."

```
"Sebastion, you owe me."
```

Flowers for Venus Angelo filled the entire elevator. Lydia let the doors close without entering. She knew where they were going. They had been pouring in all week.

Paula had asked JP Beaumont to speak to Venus about the cover photo, to impress upon the woman how unimpressed she was with it and to inform her that a ragazine was not the appropriate place to announce an executive's promotion. Lydia had agreed to do it with no sincere ambition for the project, more with the aim of heading Paula off and giving the vice president some breathing room than anything else. But she had yet to speak to her.

Venus was out of bounds for Lydia. A smoking gun.

"You spoke to her?"

"I...yes. She's sorry. It won't happen again."

"It doesn't have to, does it?"

"Paula, she gave her mea culpa. What more do you want? She can't stop circulation." She felt useless today. "I feel useless today. I'm going home."

"You're depressed. Stay here."

Lydia turned and faced Paula. "How do you know?"

"I can see it. You've worn black for days. When does she leave?"

"Saturday."

"Oh." Paula took her glasses off and threw her head back. "Ms. Beaumont, I must say, you act as if she's leaving you. Is she leaving you?"

"No, I think...not."

"Well, what do you think she's doing?"

"I think she's bored with me. I think she's flying away because she's bored."

"Lydia, that's...that's absurd. Are you having problems at home?"

"Problems? In the bedroom, that means?"

"No, in the kitchen. Yes or no?"

"Paula, of course not."

"Then why would she be bored with you? How could anybody be bored with you, anyway? You're so...so bizarre."

"A stockbroker bizarre?"

"You're hardly just a stockbroker, Ms. Beaumont. To anyone." Paula went to the bar. She was curious what role Venus played in all this confusion. "Get you anything?" she asked, filling two glasses with ice and rattling them to temptation.

"Scotch, no water."

"Scotch it is."

Lydia watched her solemnly. Helaine would taste the liquor, she suddenly worried. Had she really worn black for days?

```
"Scotch on the rocks," Paula said. "Bottoms up."
```

[&]quot;Ummm...sort of."

[&]quot;Oh, you shit. What's she like?"

[&]quot;Baby, she's a natural. Not all mine, though. Little tricky there, sometimes."

[&]quot;She's married, you mean? I don't have a problem with that."

[&]quot;Do I?"

[&]quot;Probably."

[&]quot;Cheers."

"You slept together, the three of you?"

First drink all week. "Paula...that's private." It felt good.

"Jumped out of your birthday cake?"

That reminded her. It was Venus' birthday today. "Quite a surprise."

"I see. And how did you feel about it?"

"What? Now you're my shrink?"

Paula chuckled. "If you want."

"Out of my league, embarrassed, awkward-shall I continue, Dr. Treadwell?"

"You don't have to. I get the picture. Top it off?"

Lydia thought about it. "Just a splash. Helaine won't approve."

"Aw, she won't know. Use some mouthwash before you go." She filled the glass. "So, tell me how that goes. Will she mind if you call on Venus while she's away?"

"I am not going to call on anyone while she's away. This is not a splash, Paula."

"Work with me here-because you don't want to, or because she'll mind?"

Lydia contemplated the cubes of ice slowly disappearing in her glass. "Yes."

PM Entertainments was scrambling. Venus Angelo had crashed their website for three days in a row and Sebastion was thrilled with himself. "Get it back up, get it up!" She had amassed enough e-mail solicitations to keep her in dinners and lunches till her forty-fifth birthday.

There were other offers, too, but Sebastion dismissed those. People are compelled to be so bold online.

"Who?"

"Sharon Chambers...the model?"

"Model what? Yeah, I heard of her."

"She's been very persistent, Venus. She sent you gladiolas, a bracelet. Must have known it was your birthday."

"Bracelet, c'mon-diamond?"

"Diamonds."

"Di-and that doesn't bother you, Mr. Jones?"

(Why should it?) "Why should it, Ms. Angelo?"

(Silence.)

"What should I tell her? She wants your number."

"Tell her I'm very flattered, but I'm seeing some—I'm in love with someone."

"Is that true, Venus?"

"Yeah...it's true."

"Well, I'm honored then."

"It's not you, Sebastion."

"I know."

Chapter 32: Keeping the Faith

Helaine zipped the last bag, tagged it and placed it beside the others in the penthouse parlor. It's times like these a woman has to ask herself does she really know what she's doing or has she gone out of her mind?

She caught a glimpse of herself in the looking glass. "What am I doing?" she wailed to the woman in it. There was no answer. She held herself and counted the suitcases one more time. Lucky seven.

She was aware of Lydia's eleventh-hour intervention in Venus Angelo's firing, that she had saved the girl's career by threatening to resign. Delilah had divulged this information to her over lunch. She hadn't batted an eye when she heard it, but Helaine had been wondering how it happened that she had lost a full-time executive director before she ever got one.

So now she knew and wasn't sure what to make of it.

Seven bags for Saturday. She stared at the tired woman in the mirror, reached behind her head and pulled the hairpin out. A blond wave cascaded to her shoulders. She squinted as she tugged at the strands. There were sparkles of silver highlights in it, of a slightly different texture than the rest. Sort of kinky.

She adored Venus, but she did not trust her with her wife. She trusted her wife, because Lydia Beaumont was guileless.

That was good and that was bad, Helaine acknowledged, lifting the hair from her shoulders and holding it there, sizing up her mirror self this afternoon as she waited for Lydia to return, bracing herself psychologically, in the event that she came in high on martinis again. Good cleavage, she complimented the blond, and the woman smiled coyly in return.

If she was drinking, their encounter this evening would be wild. Helaine bent over and started to remove a stocking, stopped herself and rolled it up again. Let 'em rip, she decided, pinning it with the garter. That's what they're there for.

Oh, I must be out of my mind to do this, she thought, sitting down on suitcase number three and resting her back against the wall. Must be. She missed her wife already and she was not even gone.

The castle was particularly quiet today, the curtains partially drawn in a halfhearted attempt to divert the sun which poured generously this afternoon into the sun-room. She was rarely home in the afternoon except for the weekends and even then she was hardly ever alone, at least not for long. She would be alone for five months now, only a private secretary and some aides to socialize with, sporadic lovemaking whenever Lydia could break away from work. If she would.

Helaine was anxious for guileless Lydia. She had made no bones about not wanting her to go. She had expressed her concerns eloquently. "I love you. I need to have you every night."

She needed her every night, too. Helaine checked her tote for the cell phone Lydia had recently purchased for the trip. She hated these obnoxious things, things that beeped or whistled or played tunes, always beeping or whistling or blaring some ridiculous ditty, in the theaters or the galleries, the restaurants, her lectures. She felt the side pocket. There it was, in the exact same place as the last time she had searched for it. It would be her lifeline now, the only way they could have each other every night.

Munich, Melbourne, Madrid...the time zones were overwhelming and, in truth, Helaine didn't know for certain how they could arrange even this much, simply talking on the telephone. Carlos was good, but how could he manage it for her, make the sun set half a world away at the same hour Lydia's was going down, the hour she would go to bed and need to talk to her?

She massaged her cheeks and forehead and yawned involuntarily. Light had flooded into the living room despite the curtains. Sunbeams and shadows confounded the patterns of the parquet floor and oriental rug, bedazzled the vase of yellow roses on the end table next to the old couch.

That couch and a few sticks of furniture were all that Helaine had found here when she first moved in with Lydia. And that drawing over there on the wall in the adjoining sun-room, the study of Manet's Olympia,

whose features, in a young student's more modern interpretation, had been subtly altered, an alteration influenced by the standards for beauty of that time, circa 1950. Helaine loved that drawing, Manet's nude goddess, who in this rendering bore more of a resemblance to Lydia than to the painting itself, or even, she was willing to bet, to the courtesan who had originally posed for it. She smiled a melancholy smile thinking of the gossip it had generated over the years. It was a resemblance that rarely went unnoticed by their guests, which had made the drawing quite a sensational conversation piece.

A hallway led from the living room to four separate rooms: the dining room with that dreadful wet bar, the spacious master bedroom with private bath, her home office and library and across from it, Lydia's, which was never used for anything now but throwing weights around.

Helaine couldn't imagine the place looking different than this and could never quite visualize it the way Lydia said it had looked before she renovated. What would it be without the beautiful wooden floors and golden oak trim, the wainscoting? How sterile and—dare she say it?—corporate it must have been. How gray.

She had changed it in hopes of "snagging a goddess" she had seen in Frank's Place, Lydia claimed in her inimitable way. Even the queen-sized bed that had welcomed Helaine their first night had "never been used." Helaine believed her, not just because the mattress was brand-new, but because of her candor. The woman simply oozed integrity. She could taste it in her sweat.

Which is why she no longer pressed her about Venus. Because Helaine understood it all now without asking and couldn't bring herself to make Lydia say it. That Mr. Right would have been Venus Angelo if there had never been a Helaine Kristenson. That it would have been Venus because Lydia respected her, trusted her, relied on her, and found her sexually attractive. And because the way Venus loved her was legitimate to Lydia. It was unabashed adoration, the way she liked it to be, the way she already had it, unfortunately for Venus.

Helaine stood up and glanced in the mirror again. There was yet something else that prevented the match, something one can't fake. Venus was a girl to Lydia. Her only flaw, but it was a major one. She could profess and protest love all she liked—and Helaine was positive she did—but Lydia had a woman and it was that woman she loved, wanted, and needed every night.

The place was brimming with proof of her. In the furniture she had brought when she said, "I do," the books that lined the shelves and were stacked in the corners, her paintings and her piano and her perfume, the very scent of the place, the carpets, the flowers, the vases, the stemware, the linens, the hosiery hanging in the shower, the lingerie draped across the chair in the bedroom, the clothes in the closets, the feather pillows and satin sheets, the towels, the plates, the music. She was everywhere. Helaine could see herself everywhere. A fixture in Lydia's life.

"Ooh, mouthwash and...no, let me guess...whiskey. Methinks Scotch perhaps?"

"Lana-god, let me at that hair," Lydia said, running her hands through it and stumbling over luggage in the process. "Oh, look at this. My little travel zealot's all rearing to go. One, two, three...seven. Seven bags and poof, you're gone, just like that?"

"I can't believe how badly you're handling this."

"Yeah, me either-is this for me?" she asked, turning once more to the blond mane. "And this...my consolation prize, Helaine?"

This was not the right time to confront the drinking problem, Dr. Kristenson reminded herself. It was trouble that had been fomenting for years, part of that despicable corporate culture. She had deceived herself about it, overlooked the warning signs. She was counting on Delilah to be more helpful now that she had called her attention to it. The Scotch, and possibly the mouthwash, too, she attributed to Paula. She would have to speak to her before leaving.

That was a Band-Aid, the doctor knew, but it would hold till she got back. "Follow me, my love," she said softly. She was donning the white flag tonight and leaned gently against her wife so she would know it. "Follow me," she whispered, taking Lydia's hand.

"Where?"

"Bed, of course."

Girls, limes, coconuts, palm trees. Rio Joe lay on the beach frying. His mouth tasted to him like a dead animal and he felt sick, a trifle hung-over from the party last night, the first in what seemed a lifetime.

He had only intended to stay in the Cayman Islands a day, to break open his stash and run back with it, but the women were so hot and the sun was so warm, he gave himself the weekend.

Timing was everything, he mused, fishing around for his flip-flops and rolling up his towel. A day or a decade, no matter. He had the goods; he would pick the time. Behind his sunglasses there was a glint in his bloodshot eyes. Revenge, sweet revenge. He could taste that, too. He sneered like his old self again. All the way back to the hotel.

"Well, what can you do? Can you make a cup of coffee?" Venus asked facetiously.

Former VP Kendle's team of slackers was now VP Angelo's burden. She had inherited his five remaining assistants and shouldn't have been shocked to learn that every one of them was a professional putz, the group's gross productivity a big fat zero. Little wonder she was the only one who had been given a private office. Five big fat zeros. "Can any of you make coffee?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"You think so? You think you can manage me a cup? Well now, I guess I've underestimated you. How about you there? Can you make coffee, too? We can open a diner."

They hung their heads, a pack of overfed dogs.

"Out," she ordered, shutting her door after them.

Half an hour later, a knock and a sinking suspicion. "Come...?"

Four cups of coffee for VP Angelo.

Everyone had boarded but Dr. Kristenson. Carlos was on standby. He was standing by the door of the jet with his hands on his hips.

It was time. "Come with me, darling. It'll be fun," she said. But it was too late for that.

"Heads are going to roll here," Venus threatened, "and I-where's the fifth cup, or can't you all count either?"

They consulted each other about the fifth cup of coffee.

"You didn't put enough water in," one complained.

"I didn't? That's your job."

"You're fired," Venus interrupted. "You, too."

Down to three. This would be easy. "Is this yours?" she demanded of another. It was lukewarm and too sweet. Weak.

"I quit," he answered nonchalantly. He couldn't work for a Venus Angelo. "I definitely quit."

And then there were two.

"Are we fired, Ms. Angelo?"

Could she explain five firings? She didn't think so. Not five in one day. "Nah," she said, grudgingly. "Not yet anyway."

They looked disappointed. "What do you want us to do?"

"Your work!"

Paula was closing up shop for the day when she discovered Chairman Ackerly wandering the empty compound with a brown paper bag.

"Hey, Joe. Looking for me or Ms. Beaumont? She left hours ago."

"You," he said with a grin. "Here's the spoils."

She took the bag. "Told you he wouldn't weep."

"So you won fair and square. Took me awhile to collect all the bets. What are you going to do with it-illegal, you know?"

"We'll put it toward the party fund. Got time for a quickie?"

"Eeeeaaah-yes. Drink I presume?"

"Drink, Joe. I've changed my wicked ways."

"Oh? Terribly sorry to hear that."

"Angelo here. How may I help you?"

"Ah, Ms. Angelo. You can have dinner with me for starters. I hear it's your birthday."

"It is...who's this?"

"Tonight? My place?"

"Uh...I'm...I might...identify yourself, please."

"Too many women, too little time? Or just bad at voices?"

Some of both. "I don't think I...do I know you?"

"You might. Did you like the bracelet?"

Venus cleared her throat. "Can you hold for a second? I've got another call."

"I'll hold."

She set the receiver down and left her office. "Who put that call through?" she growled at her two remaining assistants, both busy picking out the crud from a computer keyboard.

"I did."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"What is your name, please?"

"I'm...my name is Billy."

"Billy what?"

"Kendle. Billy Ken-"

"His son?"

"Actually his nephew."

"I see," Venus said, looking quite vexed. "You need this job, Kendle?"

He gave her a sheepish grin, put his hands in his pockets. "Not really," he admitted.

"Good, because-"

"Cool," he said, taking his coat off the rack and picking up his briefcase. "No problem," he muttered as he walked out.

"And you?" Venus quizzed her last assistant. "Do you need this job?"

"I do," the young woman answered in a small voice. "Student loans and...and stuff."

Loans and stuff Venus could understand. "Fine, you're hired. Screen all my calls from here on in. Visitors, etceteras. No one gets past you, understand?"

The girl nodded.

"What is your name?"

"Kate Fitz-Simone."

"Okay, Kate," Venus said, amazed that anyone was left standing today. "You're in charge. Now I've got to get rid of this caller and after that you'll get your instructions."

"Yes, ma'am."

Venus stopped in her tracks. Ma'am is such an ugly word. She was not ready for that title yet. If ever. "Ms. Angelo will do," she corrected.

"Yes, Ms. Angelo."

Chapter 33: Great Enterprises and Proof of Prowess

Either winter had set in before she left and Lydia had failed to notice it or Helaine had taken the fair weather with her, because every day she had been gone was the same, eight days of cold and damp, the gray skies intermittently weeping, the mercury plummeting at midnight promising snow.

It had brought the exterior work on the lake house to a standstill and Marilyn Beaumont was sorry to have to report to her daughter this week that the porch, which had only needed a few more days of favorable temperatures, would probably languish another season before it was complete. The disappointed crew was moving the operation indoors for now, intent on restoring the battered walls and woodwork, the parquet floors Lydia had completely forgotten about.

"But everything's under control, sweetheart. Don't worry about a thing."

Lydia couldn't get out to the lake house as often as she would like. In her stead, her mom was proving to be an adept project manager, visiting the site at least twice a week to supervise.

"Keep up the good work, Mom. See you...whenever, I guess. A few weeks maybe."

Initially the contractors had reservations about Mrs. Beaumont's visits. Lay people can be difficult and pesky, hindering more than helping with their unwanted advice and their quirky attentions, often squandering hours of a laborer's valuable time with nostalgia and drivel. The highly skilled worker is the one who shows up for work with kid gloves and ear plugs, who knows from experience that a cold shoulder can be the most valuable tool in the toolbox for getting the job done.

To the crew's relief, Mrs. Beaumont did not require this approach. She was neither a nostalgic eccentric nor a demanding chatterbox. Nor was she undecided, willy-nilly, crooked, or cheap. Whenever she drew one of them aside to chat, she tipped them for their time, whether the consultation amounted to only a few minutes or lasted beyond an hour. She didn't ask them to cut corners or quibble over receipts, she didn't pull them off one project to begin yet another or send them in five different directions at once only to later bitch at them that nothing but extras was done by the due date. She didn't show up in the middle of the day with cookies and tea, preposterously dressed or scantily clad. And if one of them needed to consult with her at her home, she didn't, as some customers had an annoying penchant for doing, answer her door nude.

The crew liked Marilyn Beaumont and were enthusiastic about working for her because it was clear to them that she had only two main objectives: that the house be fully restored by her daughter-in-law's birthday next year—bar no expense—and that the flower beds not be trampled in the process. In short, she was a model customer and the lake house was coming along beautifully because of it.

Omitting the unfinished wraparound and a paint job, all the exterior work had been completed by the first flurries. The leaky slate roofs looked mint again, their numerous broken or missing shingles replaced with matching slate salvaged from a dilapidated barn the roofing contractor had discovered half a county away; the gutters permanently removed; the damaged soffits and fascia repaired as needed. The collapsed foundation beneath the corner of the building and the rotted posts and beams of the porch were also history. The lake house was once more standing plumb and true. The masons had been required to jack those parts of the building—one inch a week for six weeks—and after that they had installed temporary supports so that the collapsed foundation could be excavated by hand and the fallen fieldstone re-laid. The hand-hewn sills and uprights that had rotted down in some places to the consistency of dust and paste were chopped away in bits and clumps and then hauled off in wheelbarrows to continue their decomposition in Mrs. Beaumont's old compost heap. They were replaced with brand-new hand hewn ones made of locust, a wood known for its resistance to rot and fungus. The various clapboards, trim boards and gingerbread that had deteriorated from lack of paint and overexposure to the elements had originally been milled of red and white cedar, trees which

still grew abundantly on the neighboring landscape. A purist, the master carpenter assigned to this cosmetic work sought to supply the finishing lumber for the project from the same mill he surmised must have furnished the wood over a century ago, an enterprise which still thrived and which was located, as well, halfway across the county. Once the board lengths had been obtained, the carpenter then meticulously carved them at home in his turn-of-the-century wood shop and when the customized pieces were finally installed, they matched the existing ones so perfectly that Marilyn Beaumont was sure when it was all covered with a uniform color no one would ever be able to distinguish the modern master's work from the old. He had wowed her in the same way replicating the new balusters and the curved balustrade of the porch, the replacement columns, the mahogany tongue-and-groove flooring, the ornate wooden screen doors. Upstairs, off the master bedroom, he had stolen her heart away by miraculously restoring her elegant little balcony to its original glory, having at first horrified and alienated her by stripping it of everything but the cantilevered floor joists. It had been decades since she could stand up there, sheltered from the rain and sun, and stare out at the peaceful lake waters. The only things missing from the reclamation were her children playing below on the bank, swimming, boating, or squabbling, as they often did-or grandchildren. In fact, so reviving was it all to Marilyn Beaumont that she didn't seem to care anymore about not having grandchildren or even to realize that her husband, too, was out of the rosy picture.

The master carpenter was a widower who lived a few towns south of Marilyn in a log cabin he had built for himself after his wife died. In his early sixties, he was a quiet man with a soothing voice and penetrating eyes, wild silver hair he attempted to tame in a ponytail. At first Marilyn had been taken aback by him, his craggy good looks and watchful demeanor, his rugged hands and strong silence. She had thought he must be common to act like this, to be so speechless and to send her sideways glances while he toiled. Several times this past summer she had caught him observing her as she walked in her former gardens and spoke with her roses. Immersed in her pinks and mauves and scarlets, she would suddenly look up toward the house and see him standing there, his hands idle, his amber eyes glinting in the sunlight like a cat's, like a cat, following her every movement. There was an aim in them she had not seen in decades, a man concentrating on the flower he was thinking of plucking. She had been flabbergasted by those encounters, feeling her heart racing like a girl's, that healthy fear long forgotten rising inside her, feeling foolish again as, with nervous fingers, she clumsily checked for her wedding ring through her garden gloves and hastily packed up her tools to drive home beside herself.

Each time he had done this to her she would make up her mind to fire him, return resolute to the lake house the following week, look into his eyes, hear his singsong, "Hello, Mrs. Beaumont," find another of his miracles waiting for her inspection, go breathless, and change her mind again.

"Please," she had finally said, giving in to the inevitable, "call me Marilyn. Mrs. Beaumont sounds too...too formal. Actually," she added, meeting his gaze, "I rather hate it."

"Marilyn," he said softly. "There's fish in your lake, Marilyn. See them jumping?"

She peered out beneath her ring hand. The water was bubbling like a glass of champagne.

"Shall I bring two poles tomorrow?" he asked.

She hadn't fished here in a thousand years. Not since her husband-she dropped her hand. "He's not dead, you should know."

He leaned against the pillar and smiled tolerantly. "Three poles then?"

She stifled a laugh at that and searched the water, and then the sky, and then the ground. At length she answered him. "I can't stand to clean the things...the guts and...and all."

"Well, that's all right. Can you cook?" he asked in a bargaining tone.

Oh, god, could Marilyn Beaumont cook. The man was in for a treat. She studied his eyes to see if he already knew that. They looked inside her. "I can cook," she murmured, glancing over her shoulder and fumbling in her pocket for her car keys.

"Tomorrow morning?" he asked.

Tomorrow was a Saturday. Her thoughts had gone to Lydia then. She wished she knew whether she would be coming out for the weekend. She hadn't been able to for so long. It was desirable to know first

before deciding, but she didn't want to make him wait for an answer or put herself in the position where she would have to call him later, because she knew she wouldn't call him later. Shouldn't.

"Say nine o'clock?"

Nine was a respectable hour, she thought. For fishing. If he had said evening, now that would have been different.

"Or would you prefer later in the evening?" he asked. "Say five?"

He abandoned the post and perched on the railing, an aged Adonis, Atlas retired, Odysseus returning to bend the bow and claim his Penelope, he flirting, she unraveling, his teasing eyes saying, "Whatcha knitting, honey?"

"Whichever," she heard herself respond.

He heard the quake in her voice. "Nine'll be perfect, Marilyn. Perfect for fishing."

Nine had been perfect for fishing that morning and by noon she had caught four legal trout and he three. She avoided the sight of their massacre and cleaning, sitting it out on the porch swing he had brought for her in his work van, where she listened and kept vigil for a vehicle on the long winding driveway, worried that Lydia might think to surprise her with an unannounced visit. She was not concerned that her husband might show up; he rarely came to see her anymore.

She wasn't sure what she would do if her daughter came, though. She could say she had been fishing. That was true. That the man in the kitchen was the carpenter. He had been fishing, as well. What a coincidence, Lydia might challenge. Would she say yes, indeed, agree with her it was so, just a weird coincidence? Would she lie to her daughter? Or couldn't she just tell her the truth, how lonely she had been till the restoration, till he came upon the scene, that she hadn't known it? Lydia was devoted to her father but she knew what kind of man he was. She had heard their arguments when she was little, his midnight exits punctuated with the sound of a slamming door. Would she still think it wrong, the strongman in the kitchen making her feel weak again?

Marilyn swung, wondering now what her friends might have to say about it, a he-man in the kitchen wearing her apron and preparing to pan-fry lake trout for her lunch, forcing her to relax while he peeled the potatoes and tossed a salad of greens he had grown in his own garden, coming outside at intervals to keep the swing going and to give her his silly anecdotal accounts of fishing escapades and hunting mishaps, to ask if she was getting hungry yet, if she wanted more wine. It was this day that Marilyn had learned everything she needed to know about Roy Mann, the master carpenter, to determine whether he was worthy of the sparks he had been kindling, this same day that she agreed to meet him again, say for a leisurely walk around the lake, or a movie, or more fishing, now and then perhaps some grocery shopping, or even a candlelight dinner.

Like so many women of her generation, Marilyn Sanders had only ever been with one man–Edward Beaumont–and that was only after they were married. Consequently, what qualities defined a good man and proved his masculinity to her were those epitomized in her husband, notions arrived at through lack of experience and propped up by the hearsay of the times. Edward was an excellent breadwinner so he was "a good man." Edward was a philanderer. This is "what men do." Manhood equaled prowess.

Perversely, a girl in Marilyn's time became a good woman either through chastity or marriage or both. No rites of passage here, a good woman was one physically mature enough for sexual relations, but morally unwilling to have them until her wedding night, and even then only for the purposes of having children. Girls were taught that good men only proposed marriage to good women. So for good girls like Marilyn and her friends, womanhood equaled chastity, which led to marriage, children, fidelity and domestication. Success.

How, in these bizarre equations, good men would ever find the libertine women they needed on the side and were entitled to have, nobody asked, but Marilyn discovered early in her marriage that there were, paradoxically, plenty of them to go around and that, in fact, her husband seemed to desire the company of such women much more than that of a faithful wife, the mother of his two children.

At seventy-one, she had been faithful to Edward Beaumont for nearly five decades. More than half of that time she had lived virtually estranged from him, occupying herself with respectable pursuits appropriate for a married woman while he flagrantly roamed for the better pastures and the greener grasses that beckoned him

beyond his own fence. She was sitting on that fence now, no longer in love with him, being true to him merely by habit and training. She did not know if, so late in life, she could give Roy Mann all that he wanted from her, but she was damn well willing to try. If her husband would give her a divorce.

"I think I may be too old for you," she had suggested to Roy last week, though she didn't confide her age. It was a moonlit night at the lake and her back had been acting up again. He was helping her to stand up and it made her feel ancient to need his assistance. She was in good shape except for that back, trim, and no other health problems to speak of, unlike so many of her ailing friends.

"Your secret's safe with me," he said. He had been wanting an opportunity to kiss her all night. Finally he had one.

The ladies at the bridge club earlier that day had oohed and aahed about how radiant she was looking lately, but though they voiced their suspicions, as ladies of seventy often do, and though they pried relentlessly for something they could sink their teeth into, as ladies of seventy excel at, they got absolutely nothing out of Marilyn Beaumont. She was not ready to confide in them yet. She recommended, as she always did, a daily walk, some soy, some yogurt, regular doses of black cohosh, and green tea sweetened with wild clover honey.

"I spoke to Edward, today," she whispered to Roy.

He could tell by her voice that the news wasn't good.

"Roy?"

"I'm...would you let me speak to him? Maybe man to-"

"No, God, no. What would you say?"

He laughed through his nose. "I'd say, look here ol' timer, I want to make love to your wife, so what's it to you?"

She tried not to encourage him.

"Hmm, Marilyn? What can he say to that?" He massaged the small of her back as he spoke. "Marry Roy," he murmured as he stroked her. He felt her lean into him. "Marry Roy, Marilyn. Mrs. Roy Mann. Marilyn Mann. Mr. and Mrs. Roy Mann. Do you like any of that?"

She liked it all, but she was already married. "Drive me home, Mr. Mann. Before you make it so I can't live without you."

These were just some of the details concerning the progress at the lake house that Mrs. Edward Beaumont omitted from her glowing reports to her daughter.

```
"Oueenie."
   "Hi, Daddy...Daddy?"
    "Listen, are you going to the lake house this weekend?"
   She hadn't planned on it but, "why?"
    "I've...I want you to go out there. See if your mother's all right."
    "Mom? I just talked to her last week. She seemed fine."
    "Nevertheless."
    "What's wrong, Edward? Is there something wrong with Mom?"
    "I don't...no...she's talking funny, Queenie. I want you to go see her."
   "Funny like what? What do you mean? Senile funny, stroke funny?"
    "No, I don't think so. Just funny, Queenie. I can't go into it right now."
   "Do we need a doctor? Do you want me to call a-"
     "No, no, I don't think that'll be necessary. I'm...just go see her and get back to me. Discreet like. Will you do that for
your old dad?"
    "Of course."
    "Thank you. Heard from your kitten lately? I read Europe's treating her well."
   "Every day-flying out to see her next week."
    "Where to?"
    "She'll be in Zurich for four days."
```

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

[&]quot;Pretty city. Give her my kisses for me. You know where to put them?" "Yes, Daddy. I think so. Listen, do you want me to...what should I tell Mom?"

[&]quot;Tell her that...tell her I said never."

[&]quot;Never-she'll know what that means?"

[&]quot;She knows what it means."

[&]quot;But I don't. What's it supposed to mean?"

[&]quot;Queenie...never means never. Without exception."

Chapter 34: True by Necessity

Billy Kendle must have decided he needed his job after all, or else someone put him up to it. The complaint he filed with the grievance committee cited a "hostile work environment" and "sexuall [sic] discrimination." He sent an identical one to the Division of Labor. His next course of action, he threatened, was to hire a lawyer, maybe bring in the ACLU.

"I'm not dealing with this, Angelo. These regs are for women and minorities, not pampered white men. The kid is a dope and I don't want to be the one who has to tell him."

"I'll handle it," Venus promised Paula, but she completely ignored the complaint making it necessary for the committee to get on JP Beaumont's back to investigate.

JP Beaumont recoiled at the idea of investigating Venus for anything "sexuall" so she put it off, too, dragging her feet and yessing everyone until the Division of Labor finally swooped in demanding a summary from her, which, of course, she did not have ready for them on the day they sent their agent to call on her.

"Pleased to meet you, Ms. Menendez," Lydia said, buzzing an assistant. "Bring me Kendle's personnel file, please."

"Vice President Kendle?"

"No, his nephew. Can I offer you tea or coffee, Ms. Menendez?"

"Thank you, no-his nephew, did you say?"

"Yes. A little nepotism goes a long way sometimes," Lydia explained. "Kendle was an unremarkable employee and it's my understanding he didn't want to work for Ms. Angelo once she replaced his uncle."

"Ms. Angelo succeeded his uncle? It doesn't mention that here."

The assistant entered and deposited a skinny file on the desk. Lydia handed it to the agent.

"This is all?" she asked.

"As I said. Unremarkable," Lydia replied, stealing a peek at the time. She and Delilah were planning to leave in two hours for the lake house and she hadn't packed anything yet. She didn't have time this afternoon for Billy Kendle's melodrama. "I can direct you to Ms. Angelo's offices, if you would like," she said. "She's just below us."

"I would prefer that you accompany me there, if you don't mind. Perhaps we can dispose of things quicker that way."

Perhaps she was right. Lydia gave her a patient smile. "Very well," she said, rising. "Let's do it."

There were three new assistants working for VP Angelo, but only one of them had been present the day Billy Kendle was allegedly fired. Lydia dismissed them for an hour and Ms. Menendez interrogated a rather intrepid Kate Fitz-Simone.

"He said he didn't need the job," she asserted.

"So she fired him? You heard her say he was fired?"

Lydia eyed the girl.

"I have no recollection of that," Kate answered.

"You're saying she didn't fire him?" Ms. Menendez pressed.

"I'm saying I can't recall. I remember only that he said he didn't need the job."

Venus had been out of the office when they came in. She returned now looking smart in a pinstripe suit, arms full of files from her old office. She was pleased to find Lydia there until she discovered the purpose of her visit.

"Oh? Well how do you do, Ms. Menendez," she said, setting the files on Kate's desk and shaking her hand.

"Good, Ms. Angelo. Did you fire William Kendle or not? We'd like to know."

Venus shook her head and avoided Kate's eyes. "He was incompetent. He said he didn't want the job."

"Didn't want or didn't need?"

"Excuse me?" Venus asked, detecting a sticking point and running a playback in her mind. Had Kendle said he didn't need the job or that he didn't want it? She couldn't recall.

"Did you fire him?" Ms. Menendez asked, stepping away from the other question.

"I have to say, I really can't recall."

The agent smiled and jotted a note in her pad. Kate looked to Lydia. Lydia studied Venus' reaction. VP Angelo was dignified, suffering fools.

"From your point of view, Ms. Fitz-Simone, what preceded this event, the, uh, sudden disappearance of Mr. Kendle from his position here?"

Kate took a breath and tried to remember. "He put a call through without clearing it first. It was," she hesitated and looked at her boss, "not business related, unauthorized. He knew not to. Ms. Angelo was...she seemed very displeased."

Lydia and Venus exchanged glances.

Ms. Menendez continued to write. "So it had nothing to do with making coffee?"

"Coffee?" Kate flinched a little. So did Venus. "No, ma'am. That was something else."

"So coffee's not related. Do you find this a hostile work environment, Ms. Fitz-Simone-sexually speaking?"

"No ma'am," Kate replied without hesitating. "Not anymore."

"Not anymore? And when did that change for you?"

The girl glanced to her boss and then JP Beaumont. Both officers nodded for her to proceed. "It changed since Ms. Angelo."

"Uh-huh. I want to ask you something, Ms. Fitz-Simone. You don't have to answer it, but were you ever sexually harassed at Soloman-Schmitt, and if so, by whom?"

It was a can of worms.

"Hi, cowboy," Delilah said to the Marlboro Man she had just discovered making dinner for two in his pretty floral apron in the hot, hot kitchen of the lake house. "Sorry I'm late."

"Del," Lydia warned, aghast at their find. "Mom!" she shouted, cautiously trying to get around him. "MOTHER!"

"Ms. Beaumont," he said as she passed by him, "I can explai-"

"And I want you to-MOM!"

Marilyn was turning the corner at the same time her daughter was. She was dressed for dinner, looking nearly twenty years younger than the last time Lydia had seen her.

"Mom?"

"Hello, sweetheart."

"Ooh, Liddy, I want one-please tell me you're a twin."

Roy was taking Delilah in stride. "No," he answered. "I'm not a twin."

"Pooh. And you made this all by your little lonesome? Gawd almighty, Marilyn."

Marilyn chuckled, self-conscious in front of her daughter.

"Del," Lydia said under her breath, digesting more than just the salmon steak and hollandaise sauce. Dinner was fabulous but she wished they hadn't crashed it. "Shut up."

"Darling, how wonderful! You must be so happy for her."

She was torn actually. Her loyalties. Her heart.

"Lydia?"

"She's waiting for a divorce to...you know."

"That's honorable. And?"

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

She couldn't bring herself to say it, what "never" would mean to her mother, how unspeakably selfish and cruel her father was being. "Will you talk to my father? Reason with him?"

"Darling, you can't mean to say...?"

"He's told her never, Helaine. She's going to sue for one if she has to. Can you believe?"

"Oh, god."

"Will you talk to him?"

"I-yes-if he'll call me. Yes, I'll talk to him."

"He won't call you. Can you call him?"

"Lydia, not as Dr. Kristenson I can't."

"You're not Dr. Kristenson to him. You're a...a kitten."

"Ah...poor, poor Edward Beaumont."

Chapter 35: Not Necessarily True

The suit makes the man. The dress makes the woman.

Chapter 36: Principles and Princes

Switzerland is a country of mountains and lakes, nearly three-quarters of it slathered in Alps. There are rivers, of course, like the Linth and the Limmat, and they're beautiful, but they're not good for much but flowing in or out of the mountain lakes, lakes like the Zürichsee where the city of Zürich is situated.

Zürich is not the capital of Switzerland but it is its largest city. James Joyce is buried here, his final resting place but one of the many pit stops Helaine and Carlos made in a day of sightseeing that also included the historic Town Hall, the Reitberg Art Museum, and the Swiss National. There were other points of interest she would have liked to take in, things she had longed to see again, the music conservatory, the Jung Institute out in the burbs, but there just wouldn't be enough time, Carlos advised. Lydia was coming in tonight. So until then, Helaine could view to her heart's content the Grossmünster on the Limmat Quay, where she could see from her hotel window the twin towers of that ancient church rising high into the air, looking like the arms of a giant referee declaring a touchdown.

Touchdown for Lydia would be 8PM. Having never been to Switzerland before, she should go straight to the hotel for dinner and whatnot. "You'll know you're in the right country if you're hearing German, French and Italian," Helaine forewarned. "Oh, and don't worry. They speak some English, too."

In the meantime, so that she wouldn't perish waiting for her wife, thoughtful Carlos ran Helaine a bubble bath, put on her favorite violin concerto and set beside the tub a light snack consisting of cheese and fruit, chocolate and champagne. Inquiring before he left as to whether he should send up a masseuse before dinner, she replied provocatively, "No, but I'm hoping to need one tomorrow."

He gave her his no comment eyes and left her to her bath and goodies.

The bath was heaven after their cold trek today. In fact, she had been nothing but cold from the moment she had embarked on this journey. London had turned out to be one big, gray, chilly mist and Dr. Kristenson's team had spent most of their days there simply hibernating in the hotel, ordering from room service and tolerating watery beer and meat pies rather than venturing outside. All of them had seen London before anyway, so except for her speaking engagements, even the sun, when it did come out, couldn't lure them from their holes.

That was a dreary beginning to a long trip. From there they had flown up to Stockholm. Brrrrr. Helaine sank into the hot water. She had seen icicles on the wings of their twin engine jet, ice everywhere when they landed. Helsinki, too, was a veritable glacier. Thank god, was her response when Carlos informed her that Moscow was "greatly displeased" by her "rhetoric" and had canceled. She was still freezing when they got down to Berlin and heated beer gardens didn't do much to cure that sensation. Ditto for Munich.

Splish. Splash. She sipped her French champagne and nibbled cheese from the platter.

It had been a cold trip marked by very warm receptions and she was dog-tired, fighting the desire to sleep. She counted out the hours on her soapy fingers. Lydia would have to board a plane by eight in the morning to arrive at the appointed hour. Eight in the evening here would be two in the afternoon Lydia time. The dark might throw her. If jet lag didn't get her right away, she might not be hungry for dinner till midnight. She might not want to go to bed till three, maybe four in the morning...

Swiss timepieces are everything they're claimed to be, so the concierge knew there was nothing wrong with his watch when Lydia Beaumont arrived at his desk two hours ahead of schedule.

Dr. Kristenson's private secretary didn't answer his telephone and there was no answer as well in the doctor's room. The doctor may be sleeping the man thought, not having seen her leave, but that was no reason to prevent Madame Beaumont from going upstairs. He gave her a spare key and showed her to the elevator.

"Here, kitty-kitty," Lydia called to the tousled blond fast asleep in the featherbed. She had woken at four this morning and gone straight to the airport, too wired to wait for an eight o'clock flight. "I bear gifts," she whispered. She set a box of duty-free chocolates and a bucket of red roses on the night stand and crawled in under the comforter to count sheep beside her wife.

"Meow," Helaine purred, half awake. "What time...?"

"Bedtime-is this spot taken?"

"Well...normally that's reserved for my wife."

"Lucky woman. What about here?"

"Hmmm. Now that we might be able to negotiate."

Dinner was presented at nine, but it went cold before they got to it.

Steak au poivre and young red potatoes beats the hell out of wieners and sauerkraut any day, even at room temperature, Helaine thought, reclining in front of the fireplace with her dinner, three in the morning.

Her blood had finally thawed and she could feel it flowing once again into her extremities. She was warmed enough to lounge bare-legged in her hotel room. That she did, dressed only in Lydia's overcoat which she draped extravagantly around her shoulders. Lydia's outfit was much more the fashion understatement. She wore a blanket and a peaceful expression.

They talked and ate and played footsie.

"He's slowly coming around to the idea that he can't claim the moral high ground here," Helaine said, in reference to the Daddy Beaumont affair. She had called Edward twice on the topic of divorce, using the word as often as she could think of in her sentences. She hoped the repetition would familiarize him with the concept, but he had a stubborn mindset regarding his unique marriage and she was afraid to convey her hunch to Lydia, that he would never willingly let Marilyn go. "It will take time, I think," she said, summoning an optimistic tone. "He adamantly insists the two of them had a special understanding."

Lydia couldn't bring herself to discuss any of it with him and she had left for Europe without phoning him or returning his calls, something which she felt extremely guilty about. "The press will eat him alive, I hope you mentioned."

"I haven't brought up that possibility yet. Hopefully it will occur to him on his own."

Lydia had not been this angry with her father since she was a girl; her mother had never disappointed her before. She had had a special understanding about their marriage, too, with both her parents, but the emergence of a suitor had thrown her balance off and now she didn't know how to act with either of them anymore. Everything was different. "I can't believe this happened," she said wistfully. "You know?"

The doctor knew everything. She watched Lydia tug at her earlobe, something she did whenever she was perplexed. Tugging at her earlobes, blushing, tripping over her words, she was a wellspring of revelation to Dr. Kristenson, transparent and refreshing, completely natural. She doubted she could ever leave her for five months again. "Should I paint them?" she teased her, aware that Lydia's interest had shifted once more to all things sensual, her attention centered for the moment on Helaine's naked feet.

Lydia flashed an impish grin. The sun would be up soon. She wanted to be in bed when it rose. With her wife.

"Black toenails perhaps?" Helaine joked, wriggling her toes. "To match my chilblains?"

She reached for her with her feet. Lydia grabbed her by the ankles.

"Lana, what are we listening to?"

"Rachmaninoff, Vocalese. You like?"

"Very pretty. These, too."

"There's a concert tomorrow after my speech. Violin and orchestra."

The bottoms of her feet were smooth, the ankles smooth, her calves soft and warm. Lydia cupped them in the palms of her hands. They felt like ripened fruit. "I'm going to that, too?"

"Yes, I'd-darling, what are you doing?"

"Practicing."

"Yow-what?"

"Pizzicato. You like?"

"Ahh...maestro."

Game over. The panty raid on Soloman-Schmitt had been effectively thwarted and the would-be conquerors forced to retreat with their tails between their legs. It was time to declare victory and move on. VP Angelo was given the honors.

She was playing it by ear these days, wearing two hats, being faithful to everyone, stuck for the moment to a crummy podium at the behest of Paula Treadwell. After this press conference she had to scoot over to the Kristenson Foundation to meet with its board of directors for a briefing. From there she was going to meet Anna Grisholm at Cicero's for a very quick highball. The woman had worn her emphatic no's down to stumbling maybes with her flattery and flowers, a sexy voice which she was not hesitant to employ in the service of begging. Sharon Chambers, however, was not so successful. That one Venus wouldn't go near with a ten-foot pole.

"Soloman-Schmitt," Venus went on, "is a staunch proponent of equal rights, applying rigid yet attainable standards in the hiring and promotion of its employees, standards based on merit and excellence alone. It's a tradition, we believe, that has made us the model company for modern times." Who wrote this? she wondered. "A progressive corporation that considers itself a twenty-first century sentinel in the war against inequality." Jasmine would boo if she could hear this jargon. She wiped the sardonic expression off her face and continued. "As a matter of policy, we do not entertain, engage in, nor tolerate discrimination of any form, be it gender-based, race-based, age-based, or otherwise. Let us be unequivocal here. We do not condone sexual harassment, do not conceal it, and do not permit it to go unpunished if we detect it."

Paula could see that the press was just as enamored of Prince Angelo as they were of Prince Beaumont, though she now knew the former well enough to say she was, ideologically speaking, worse than the latter could ever dream of being. And she was so insolent at times, always acting as if she was doing the company a favor. Like today.

Venus found Paula's probing eye and searched the index card for her place again.

"Rumors of rampant sexual harassment of our employees by their coworkers and supervisors and a vast conspiracy to subvert those employees in their efforts to air their grievances are abhorrent to Soloman-Schmitt. These allegations have been thoroughly investigated, internally and through outside agencies, and with the exception of a few isolated incidents in the past, which have all been addressed and redressed, we have found such claims to be, essentially, baseless and without substance. Although, in the course of our inquiries, a few extreme cases were brought to our attention, it is important to understand that Soloman-Schmitt employs tens of thousands of individuals worldwide and that a few isolated incidents, while certainly regrettable to us, do not represent a pattern of abuse by the corporation nor a climate within it rife for discrimination."

No applause.

"We will in the future, as we have in the past, continue to be vigilant with this issue and aggressive in protecting the right of any employee of this corporation to work and achieve in an atmosphere that is both open and diverse *and* friendly and professional, qualities critical for thriving in today's evolving marketplace. Those are the values and principles that this corporation is founded upon and determined to uphold. The values and principles that have made Soloman-Schmitt a trusted leader in the world of business and finance for more than a century. We thank you for your time today. That'll be all."

"And last but not least, Dr. Kristenson is happy to report that there's been a tropical heat wave of sorts since Ms. Beaumont arrived in Europe. I'm glad to say that her recent e-mails have a more ebullient tone than those of the past few weeks."

It was unlikely, Venus knew, that the doctor had intended this information to be shared at a board meeting. The guy was a sap to make such a disclosure and the board members were saps, too, applauding him for it. And Ms. Beaumont was the biggest sap of them all. Venus wanted to call her up and say so. She smiled copecetic, her hands strangling the notepad she held in her lap.

She was already half an hour late by the time she was able to extricate herself from the board meeting. She rushed the cabby to Cicero's, confidant that Anna would still be there.

"Thank you for the flowers," she said, out of breath. She had forgotten how attractive Ms. Grisholm was. "I'm sorry I'm—I was in meetings."

"Thanks for coming. I'd almost given up hope."

"I'm truly sor-just cognac, please." It was loud in here this afternoon. "Just a cognac," Venus repeated for the waiter.

Anna had been waiting for her date for over forty-five minutes and she had endured the din of Cicero's for as long as she could stand. It would be a waste of an important asset if she was forced to shout in order to be heard. "I'm sound sensitive," she whispered into Venus' ear. "Is it possible we could go someplace quieter than this?"

Venus eyed her guardedly. The woman was hot in that fur coat, beneath it only a cashmere sweater, gray and scooped, and beneath the sweater...nothing. She had caught the scent of perfume in that chestnut hair, a wave of it having fallen across her face, on purpose Venus guessed.

Heart-faced with high cheek bones and small, impertinent features, Anna had the look of a precious doll, pug-nosed and pouting, girlish, save for those large and indiscreet brown eyes. Venus knew if she laid the doll down her eyes would, like a doll's, close automatically, though, like a doll, she would not really be sleeping. The warmth of her leg against hers was seeping into her trouser. She shivered involuntarily. It was cold outside, too cold to roller skate or jog anymore. How Venus hated to be cold or inactive. "Where did you have in mind, Anna?"

Anna shrugged appealingly. "I'm flexible."

A snifter of cognac was delivered. Her leg was warm.

Flexibility, the zeitgeist of the day. Or three days to be precise, ending with Sunday when Lydia would have to fly back to reality.

She likes the opera, but *she* likes Sinatra. So she takes her to hear violins and *she* listens to CDs in the hotel room after the concert. She's a morning person, but *she's* not–she's just used to getting up by seven and would really rather stay in bed past nine if she had her druthers. She lets *her* sleep until ten and lies beside her daydreaming. She's wild for finger food and clarified butter and fine red wine, but *she's* in the habit of chasing dry gin with a medium rare T-bone steak. She settles for a dry white wine with escargot in a puff pastry and nibbles *her* fingers as she feeds her the mushrooms off a sirloin steak seared European which, she claims, melts in the mouth like butter. She prefers IT ideally in private, lying down on satin sheets and feather pillows, but *she's* not so picky. Pressed for time and in the interest of compromise, she expands the possibilities to include sitting down and standing up and *she* happily explores all the available options (taxicabs, limousines, elevators, bathrooms, etceteras).

"This is the joint president of a Fortune five hundred company?" Paula asked incredulously. She handed her assistant yesterday's Daily.

"Double-jointed," he said. "The double-jointed president of Soloman-Schmitt Inc."

"You find this entertaining, John?"

"Whatever it takes sometimes. Don't you agree?" Company shares had ejaculated into the stratosphere again. Soloman-Schmitt was well on its way to becoming a constellation. "Give her credit. At least it's her wife."

"Oh god, could you imagine?"

He tried. "I don't think it can get much worse than this," he finally said. "This," he declared, holding up the paper, "is just about as bad as it—oh, Ms. Angelo. I was just leaving. Ahem...VP Angelo's here, Ms. Treadwell."

She saw her. "Come in, come in."

He hid the newspaper under his arm and closed the door behind him.

Venus had already seen it. "You called?"

"I did. Do you have a dictionary, Angelo?"

"I have a dictionary. You wanted to borrow my-"

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

"Is the word 'discreet' in yours? Because I know it's in mine if you need to look it up."

"Oh. I'll have to get back to you on that. This is Silas Goodman again?"

"No, and don't be imperious with me. You want to grow up and become president?"

"No."

"No what-grow up?"

"Paula, you're following me?"

"To where would I have you followed? The Lavender Lane? Why would I do that, Angelo? How could I if you were being discreet?—there's that word again."

Venus was bent out of shape today. Paula was making it worse. "I didn't know discretion was a requirement for the presidency," she stated acerbically. "I'd hate to break with tradi—"

"I'm your role model here and I'm discreet!"

Venus sat down.

Chapter 37: Lions, Foxes, Wolves and Doves

"The Greco-Persian War, The Peloponnesian War, The Punic Wars, The Islamic Invasion, The Norman Conquest, The Crusades, The Hundred Years' War, The War of The Roses, The Thirty Years War, The English Civil War, The Second Great War, The Spanish Succession, The Austrian Succession, The French and Indian War, The Seven Years War, The Revolutionary War, The Napoleonic Wars, The War of 1812, The War for Greek Independence, The Mexican War, The Crimean War, The American Civil War, The Franco-Prussian War, The Spanish-American War, The Boer War, The Russo-Japanese War, The Balkan Wars, World War I, The Spanish Civil War, World War II, The Korean War, The Vietnam War, The American-Persian Oil Wars...these but a few of mankind's bloody land-grabs."

Dr. Kristenson paused for air and resumed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, aren't we sickened yet by all this greed and violence? Aren't we sick and tired of his story?"

Chapter 38: Grandeur, Spirit, Gravity, Fortitude

There are many conspiracies, JP Treadwell emphasized to her very young vice president, but fortunately, because they are executed by weaklings, the majority of them fail. The best method of prevention, she cautioned, was to avoid being hated or despised.

It also never hurts to be inscrutable.

In the current conspiratorial environment that Soloman-Schmitt's women of fortune had found themselves in, that actually was beginning to sound like good advice to Venus.

There were only three people in the world she didn't want to discover her bisexuality, but when those three people were her mom, her dad, and her sister, that meant she couldn't risk *anyone* at all discovering her bisexuality. There were already way too many people in the know, Paula informed her, including Silas Goodman, who clearly didn't enjoy living out his retirement in checkmate and exile.

"Discretion, Angelo. Those are your marching orders, whether it's true or not that you don't want to be president. I do know this much, that consciously or subconsciously, your ultimate goal is to distress Ms. Beaumont with your exploits, but in the end they will not serve you well there, either. Believe me. I know the woman better than you do. In that vein I will add that, as grand as she may be, no woman could ever be worth ruining yourself for. So exercise discretion on all accounts and have a happy holiday. The end."

She did not want to be president. That was true. The rest of what Venus desired was nobody's business. So she did the best she could to comply with Paula's orders.

"He's exactly my size," Venus informed the clothier. "We're twins."

He took in the womanly figure and tried unsuccessfully to imagine it in a brother. He would have to be some dandy, the old guy thought to himself. "He really should come in to be fitted," he said politely. "Inside lengths and all."

"He can't. It's a surprise," Venus said, mustering genuine disappointment. "For Christmas, you know?"

Three wool suits for a "twin brother" for Christmas. Fashionable but not flashy. Brown, gray, and navy blue. Three white silk shirts for which she would need cufflinks, two of them plain, the other ruffled. One fur trimmed, paisley lined, double breasted, black overcoat with alterations. Six assorted hand-painted ties, two satin ascots, and a partridge in a pear tree.

Only her tailor would know.

Her hairdresser would have to be left in the dark.

"Cut it off, Jasmine. I want it short like yours."

"Venus, you plan to go to the office with an afro?"

Mama shook her head and left the bathroom. "She's gonna show up for work looking like a Black Panther. Speak some sense into your daughter, Daddy."

He declined.

"Oh, you're so suave. I'm sure you could convince them of anything."

"Suave is bad now, Marilyn? Since when?"

He was baiting her. She held her tongue.

"Since Buffalo Bill rode into-"

"Edward."

```
"Marilyn."
"You're talking foolish."
"It's foolish? You're my wife. What do you want from me?"
"A divorce."
"A div-he hasn't got a pot to piss in! How will-"
"He can use the ground, money's not the point. Besides, that's not true."
"You're sleeping with him."
She had denied this three times already. "I haven't slept with anyone in twenty years."
"Now come on. That's not fair."
"Oh, well, not counting the handful of times this ne'er-do-well I know skips into town."
"Ne'er-do-well? That's supposed to be me?"
"Edward...give me a divorce. You have no case and you know it and I'm tired of talking to you."
"Tired? I am your husband!"
"Really? When did you figure that out?"
"Come on, Marilyn."
"What?"
"Are you still wearing your wedding band?"
She pried the ring off. "No, Edward," she answered gravely. "I'm not."
```

Fun and games were over and JP Beaumont was back on the job, a continent and an ocean away from her better half. It would be several more grueling weeks before she could be with Helaine again. That would be Madrid.

"Christmas in Madrid, Del. I don't know what I'll do until then. Work, I guess. Paula's taking most of the time off."

"You need a hobby, Liddy. Or a lover."

"Ugh. We can't go there, Del."

Venus had taken a whole month for the holidays, out until the new year. Lydia didn't know if she was still in town or doing Paris. They had run into each other twice since she had been back, just before Venus had left for vacation. Both times VP Angelo had been friendly and courteous to her, which at the moment had been a relief to Lydia. But then, in her absence, those meetings had begun to bother her. She couldn't understand how Venus could manage to do it. To trouble her like this, whether she was cornering her or not.

```
"How's your mom and dad, dare I ask?"
```

"Same. Helaine's on it."

"You talk to Edward yet?"

She was planning to. At least by Christmas.

"Liddy...?"

"I'm going to. He knows I'm disgusted."

"Poor Edward. All these women upset with him."

"It's his own fault," Lydia said defensively. "He wants his cake and-"

"Forget it, Liddy, let's go out."

"I can't. I can't be intoxicated when Helaine calls."

"I know, I know. Geesh, Dame Beaumont. Married or what?"

She was married all right. The cell phone rang. It was her father.

There was no problem buying men's shoes or accessories. Venus selected a pair of wingtips and a pair of tasseled loafers, silk handkerchiefs, a Swiss watch with a narrow gold band, and, for her shirts, a set of cufflinks with sapphires the color of Lydia Beaumont's eyes. She was so captivated by these stones that she had the salesclerk throw in a couple of tie pins and, oddly enough, even ordered a pair of ladies earrings to match.

She had compromised very little with the haircut. It was short and sleek when not relaxed. A bit of a bob when it was. The point was that it looked very gender neutral and she could now fit it all under a hat.

Buying a man's hat to fit a woman's head perfectly and still have it seem masculine? Now that wasn't quite as simple. First of all, men didn't wear hats like they used to. Secondly, boys didn't either. Eventually Venus found what she was looking for in the costume section of a historic downtown department store.

"I don't think I can do this, Queenie."

[&]quot;I know you can, Daddy. I understand your fear, but I know that you can do it."

[&]quot;Your kitten says I should go into counseling. You think your mother would—"

[&]quot;No, it's too late for that."

[&]quot;It's too late. You're right. I know."

[&]quot;It'll work out, you'll see. Not much will change...for you."

[&]quot;Queenie, I'm...first your brother won't speak to me, now I'm...my wife is...am I going to lose you, too?"

[&]quot;Never. You'll always have me. I promise."

[&]quot;I couldn't do it without you. I'd go-"

[&]quot;You don't have to, Edward. I promise."

[&]quot;Queenie...you free for lunch or dinner this week?"

[&]quot;This weekend I am. How about this weekend?"

[&]quot;Saturday then, one o'clock? How's that suit you?"

[&]quot;That's perfect, Daddy. I'll see you Saturday."

[&]quot;You can bring Del along if you like."

[&]quot;Okay. I will."

Chapter 39: Eminence

Lunch at the club was not as festive as the music and decorations might suggest and Lydia was glad to hear that Edward had another appointment afterward, as did Delilah who needed time to prep and primp for tonight's blind date. That would free up Lydia to do some Christmas shopping if she could only get in the mood to do so. If not, she would go home and nap till Helaine called. Sad dad and his questions concerning Roy Mann had drained her, and Delilah's efforts to distract him from the subject had fallen flat.

"How are you living these days?" he had inquired as they were leaving. "You look pale. What are you doing for food?"

"Maid service and microwaves," Lydia replied, as gaily as possible. The separation was taking a toll and she was aware that she had lost some weight. "Don't worry, Daddy. I'm eating."

"And on the weekends?" Delilah asked.

"Weekends I have popcorn and cereal, like the rest of the latchkey kids."

"You're a true survivor, Liddy. I swear it. Come for dinner tomorrow night-gotta go."

The streets, the sidewalks, the cafes and the stores were teeming with panicked buyers this weekend, fully the madding crowd Lydia had expected it to be. She drifted alongside them for more than an hour, hoping by association to be swept up with their jubilance and when that didn't happen she figured she might as well break down and buy something.

Helaine was easy: underwear, underwear and more underwear, an activity which brightened things up enough for Lydia to buy Marilyn a rope of pearls and yet another cardigan. What color had she given her last Christmas? Red. Or was it green? She had an unexpected vision dancing in her head, a real sugarplum. Creamy pearls against dark, smooth skin.

"Wrap them?" the salesgirl was asking. "Do you want them wrapped, Ms. Beaumont?"

Wrap them, Lydia affirmed. Wrap the creamy pearls. What do you buy your lover's mother, that is your mother's lover, for the holidays? Leather something, she mused. Lovers come in belts and coats, in hats and shoes and gloves and—leather she meant, not lovers. *Leather* belts and gloves. Something leathery for Mr. Mann. She didn't think she could go wrong with leather.

"Lydia Beaumont! What a pleasure. Care to join me for some eggnog?"

She'd know that voice anywhere. "Anna, I-Merry Christmas." Her hands were full with bags and packages and she knew she couldn't trust Anna not to take advantage of it.

"Oh, god, those cheeks," Anna said, coming cheek to cheek with Lydia and making a kissing sound near her ear. "I can't believe I do that to you. Let's go celebrate my triumph with an eggnog."

Vanilla. Lydia smelled vanilla in the woman's hair and her stomach growled. "I can't believe it either-I don't think I can."

"Oh, what skullduggery. What if I told you I have something that belongs to you?"

"That belongs to me? What could that be?"

"Eggnog first. We can go right upstairs on the mezzanine."

Lydia hesitated.

"Come, my beauty," Anna said, taking her arm and leading her. "Helaine can't begrudge me an eggnog and a wink."

From the mezzanine Lydia could see down four floors of merchandise and she could look out on the city to the street below, watch the frozen street vendors hawking their wares, listen as she watched, to the sexy hum of Anna Grisholm's fabulous vocal chords.

Sales were brisk, the joint president of Soloman-Schmitt couldn't help but notice. Shoppers everywhere. Anna appeared to be the only person in this corner of the universe with no packages. Perhaps she just prowled the stores, Lydia speculated, looking for women. She did not care for eggnog or rum, spiced or otherwise. She shouldn't dawdle here anymore.

"How are you faring, Ms. Beaumont, without Herself?" Anna asked. "Meaning what are you doing for dinner tonight, gorgeous, and did you know that I'm a pretty good cook?"

"A pretty cook," Lydia said from behind her cup. There went her stomach again.

"That, too, I've heard...thank you for noticing."

Lydia gave her a small you're-welcome smile and deliberately glanced at her watch.

"Sapphires," Anna whispered, leaning forward intimately.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your eyes, my dear."

"My...thank you."

"And your necklace," Anna added, producing the lost item from her purse.

"Ah," Lydia uttered. She had forgotten about the necklace with the sapphire studded pendant. It was nice to see it again.

"I remembered you had it on the night of your birthday. Briefly anyway. You left it behind."

"Yes." She did not want to venture in this direction. "Thank you, Anna. It's very thoughtful of-"

"It's only one night, Lydia. That's all I'm proposing. You must be terribly—"

"Don't, Anna-I'm not-don't tease." She dropped the necklace into one of her bags and slid the cup to the center of the table. Done here, these motions said.

"Mmhmm. And what happens if I do, if I tease you, Mrs. Kristenson?"

Lydia stood up and collected her packages. "Then I'd hate myself," she replied, without looking at her. "And, consequently, I'd hate you, too."

"Well now, we can't have that," Anna said diplomatically. "Too much hate in the world as it is. You have a Merry Christmas, Lydia...and sleep well."

She did not sleep well, dreaming dreams that felt like nightmares, fighting to surface from them and plunging instead to the depths of another. Here is Venus, a kinder, gentler Rio Joe and then she is Rio Joe, a diabolical lover, taunting her, deserting her, a man, a woman, then neither. Effete. There is Helaine, but she is not Helaine either, not herself at all, and Lydia can think of nothing to say to this blond, one who doesn't speak or can't speak, this fuzzy version of Helaine Kristenson. They stand apart like strangers, on opposites sides of the room, both having nothing to say to each other. And from this standoff Venus emerges again, only now Venus is Venus, with a woman Lydia doesn't know, a woman with sapphire pendants for eyes. She looks like her. They look exactly alike. Isn't it herself in the mirror, herself with Venus in a room she has never seen before, herself lounging on a daybed, looking both sanguine and spent, smiling a practiced smile, bold and insincere? It's Lydia. It's Helaine. It's Venus. It's Rio Joe. It's Anna. She sees Anna with Venus. Anna? It's Anna, or a woman she thinks could be Anna, and Venus is speaking truculent things to her, words that Lydia has heard her say before. That is not Anna. It's the other woman, the woman in the mirror, an insulted lover, her blue eyes moist and angry. Venus is not kind to this woman, not kind, not soft, not...slow, the woman is saying, but Venus goes fast and the woman moves violently with her, her voice drowned by the piercing cry of an alarm. Lydia hears it screaming above the woman's calls. Rrrrrrinnng! There is Anna. It's Anna Helaine is calling to. It's Anna and Helaine? Rrrrriinng! Helaine? Rrriiiiiinng! On the daybed.

"Hello...?"

"Darling, I woke you?"

"No. I was waiting up for you." The apartment was in complete darkness and she couldn't determine or remember if she was on the couch or in their bed. "What time is it?"

"Here or there?"

Sunday morning she stumbled around in the weight room for awhile and then ate dinner rolls and pate for breakfast, washing down hard to swallow lumps with bitter black coffee because she had forgotten yesterday to pick up sugar. The dark circles under her eyes she didn't discover until around eleven. She eradicated them with a spoonful of foundation. The grays that stuck out from the top of her head like antennas she snipped away without ceremony. They were coming in fast, she lamented, selecting from the chifforobe a black and blue, wide-striped pantsuit with flared legs, a black mock-turtleneck sweater, black gogo's with two-inch heels for some much-needed elevation. When was the last time, she asked the svelte Ms. Black 'n' Blue, that you actually had intercourse?

Weeks ago, her eminence replied. Do the math.

The Kristenson Crusade, as the press was calling it, was buried deep inside the paper this Sunday, in approximately the same place where it had been every day this week. Today's article cited sellout European engagements coupled with growing security concerns, though the doctor's supporters far outnumbered the protesters at these events. According to current estimates, that ratio was reportedly ten to one in her favor, but crowds are sometimes dangerous beasts to be caught in, especially crowds comprised of dueling factions, and Dr. Kristenson didn't enjoy being mobbed by anyone, fans or foes. That could explain the tighter security, Lydia reasoned. She would ask about it when they talked later, just to be sure.

She was going through her purchases when Mom called. Santa was bringing her a divorce for Christmas, Marilyn announced glibly. Lydia introduced the cardigan conundrum as a diversion.

"Green, I think. Or was that the year before? No, It was red, sweetheart. It was red."

Maybe she should take the sweater back. Get a monogrammed brown V-neck, or a big bawdy argyle. "How about brown then? That goes with everything."

"Well, I won't say it's the thought that counts if you get me anything brown that isn't in suede, sweetie."

Nothing monogrammed, it suddenly occurred to Lydia. "Okay, Mom, besides a divorce, what do you need or want for Christmas?"

"Since you asked, I want one of those things you and Helaine wear. I'm too shy to... I can give you the size."

"Things we wear? Briefcases, Marilyn?"

"Lydia Ann, you know very well what I'm saying."

She understood the gist of it. "A push-me-up?"

"No, for the torso. I can't think of what it's called. Your father would know."

It's called a bustier. Dad must never know. "It's a bustier, Mom."

She could give the red sweater to Paula, Delilah suggested. Paula was saucy enough to wear a red cardigan any time of year. She'd look like a jalapeño pepper in it, but that wasn't straying very far from the usual lemon lime theme she had going.

Good idea! "And the bustier?"

"Liddy, of course you will. You have to if that's what she's expecting. How could you not? I say leather. Go for leather if they have it."

Leather was over the top, Lydia insisted. But brown was still in good taste. Cocoa actually, like skin. This she had gift-wrapped in the store so she could put it out of sight, and so she wouldn't change her mind at the last minute and take it back. She sincerely hoped, she told Delilah, that she was doing the right thing.

Sure she was, and saving money at the same time. Just think of the economy of it all. Now she wouldn't have to buy Roy a thing. Gawd, what a man!

"Money, my friend, is not the obstacle."

They weren't stinking drunk when they wandered into Cicero's. Stinking drunk would have required another martini which they had solemnly promised each other they wouldn't have.

"Cocktail, ladies?"

"Weeeeell, two gin mar-wait a minute-gin or vodka, Liddy?"

"I guess gin."

"Two gin martinis."

Two gin martinis later they had finally and officially obtained stinking drunk status, the kind of drunk Helaine hated. But that was okay, Delilah assured Lydia, because there was vintage jazz tonight at Cicero's and the place was jam-packed, and every single dark corner in the joint was occupied and every hedonist within walking distance busy holding up the bar or clogging things up on the dance floor.

"We'll just watch, clap, and go straight home. S'aright?"

Lydia nodded tipsily. Why not, she asked herself. It was a raunchy atmosphere, but she wasn't exactly eager to return to her quiet penthouse. Not in this state.

"Here I am, ladies," a balding man in his fifties announced in a spray of red wine. "Let's dance," he demanded, tugging at both of their arms, a flap of hair dangling comically to one side of his head, his tie loosened in the shape of a noose.

Delilah was willing to placate him. Lydia had no desire to be tossed around by a jerk. She rose from her chair to escape him.

"You too, gorgeous," he shouted, getting hold of her by the jacket. "Hey, whatsamatta? I'm housebroken."

"Del...?"

"I'll take care of this. Come on, sugar! She can't dance-wooden leg."

"Oh," he mumbled, grabbing onto Delilah as if she were his lifeboat. "Poor kid."

Lydia rolled her eyes and scoured the room for a bouncer. There were dozens of weird scenes like theirs and not a bouncer to be found anywhere. An androgynous youth poised at the end of the bar was the only person assessing her safety. He smiled soberly in her direction, the whites of his placid eyes shining like a beacon. He had, those eyes informed her, been watching her since she arrived. She was suddenly watching herself, too, from his coign of vantage. She gasped, disrobed.

"Don't worry, Liddy. Just relax. I'm going to jig with god's gift here and I'll be right back." Delilah stopped the waitress on the way to the dance floor. "Two more," she told her.

Lydia teetered and fell in her chair.

"Valentino's got you down to your knickers," Delilah said, nudging her silent companion and pointing at the boy at end of the bar. "Go and figure, Liddy. I thought he was queer."

Not too queer, Lydia realized. She met his gaze again and turned away. "Don't point, Del. It's not polite." From the corner of her eye she could see him rise and begin to pick his way through the crowd. "Shit, Del, we have to go." He was heading for their table.

"Nah, sit. A boy that pretty can't do you any harm."

He was awful pretty, like the Saudi royals she was forced at times to rub elbows with, the boys who acted like men even at twelve. She guessed him to be no more than twenty-five.

"Good evening," he said, "I believe this dance is mine."

"Whoa, Liddy. He's old enough to have a belief system."

Lydia cocked her head and closed one eye. It was a tango. She didn't know how to tango. In fact, she didn't dance. "No, honey. It's not."

He placed a glass of sparkling water bedside her. "Tonic then?"

His suit was, however, stunningly gorgeous and she had an urge to stroke it, which she managed to conquer.

"Aw, dance with him, Liddy. I'm telling you the boy's harmless."

He smiled agreeably.

She disagreed. "I can't dance...all left feet."

"I disbelieve it," he replied, clutching her hand and guiding her away from the table.

She glanced apprehensively at Delilah.

"Go for it," she urged. "I'll join you as soon as I can."

"I'm telling you the truth. I can't dan-"

"It's easy. I'll show you."

They were in the middle of the room now.

"Like this," he said. "Your hand goes...here...no, I lead...that one here...there you go."

He led. She followed.

"Good," he whispered, his hand on the small of her back. "Now when I do this...you spin and come back...spin...yes...now come back...come...like that...perfect...perfect."

"I'm very drunk," Lydia said. The suit was impeccably tailored, his shoulders broad. "Very," she repeated. She gripped his hand for balance. It was warm and strong, his palms soft.

"I know. Left now...good...and...that's right."

"And I'm married."

"I know...dip for me...excellent...now go that way...oh, you're beautiful." He held her by the waist now and led her by the hip. "Come here," he whispered in her ear.

She came closer, close enough to see his long lashes. "How do you know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

"That I'm married."

"How do I know that you're...? The ring," he finally answered, tapping her finger.

Right. She felt him press against her and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm leaving now," she told him.

"No you're not."

No she wasn't.

Delilah waved from across the room. Her dancing partner was significantly older than Lydia's. "How old are you?"

"Old enough...spin again...perfect...and you?"

She ignored the question. "What do you do, son, aside from dance?"

"Son-hah. I run guns. You?"

He had a girlish voice and he spoke in a loud whisper.

"I rob the poor and give to the rich," she said, slurring her speech. "And sometimes I think I drink too much."

"Mmmm. So we're kindred spirits then...thieves. What am I thinking of?"

The song was different. He held her the same. She ignored this question, too. "The room, I'll have you know, is spinning."

"Uh-oh. Can I see you home?"

She hooked her finger in his braided leather belt, put her arm around his waist. "I know you, don't I?"

"Maybe," he said, kissing her neck and dancing her into the nearest dark corner. "What am I thinking of?" "I haven't a-how do I know you?"

"Let me count the ways," he teased. "Put your hand here...right...that's...right."

She closed her eyes.

"I'm going to kiss this spot here," he said.

She let him.

"And here."

"Don't-how would I know you?"

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"No," she answered frankly.

"Me either," he said with a laugh. "I'm going to kiss your mouth and I want you to pretend you don't want me to."

"I-I have to go."

"Ah...perfect...just perfect." He kissed her mouth. "I'm taking you home."

"No you're not," she answered. "What is your name?"

"How many times, do you think I've made love to you?"

She clucked her tongue. "Hundreds. Am I right?"

"No...just once."

"Once?" She leaned her head against the wall, confused. "How was I?"

He grasped her firmly by the hips. "Beautiful."

"Oh, I see. And married, as well?"

"Happily."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

"Mmhmm." She caressed his smooth cheek. Smooth as a girl's, her prince so and so. "I am, you knowhappily married?" He knew. "I've just had too mu-" "I know. I can make you happy, too, though." "How," she asked, "can you do that if I'm al-" He pressed against her. She parted her lips. "Like that." "Liddy?" "Del, I'm...uh...he's...what is your name?" "It's Arabic-can I get you ladies a cab?" "Arabic what?" "Do you want-is Valentino coming with us?" Lydia braced herself against his shoulder. "I'm very...not myself. This isn't-" "I know," he said. She was dizzy. Delilah was expecting her answer. "Your name, please?" He whispered his name in her ear. It was Arabic all right. She kissed the slippery slope of his Arabian lips, the tips of his long, exotic fingers. "Now I'm going home."

"Liddy...?"

"Get me home, Del."

"Are you taking junior with you?"

"I–I can't."

Chapter 40: Feminine

It was easy to find a good cup of coffee in Rome, but not necessarily at three in the morning. She had thought to buzz Carlos next door because she knew her resourceful secretary could arrange anything, but it didn't seem fair to wake him so early, just because she hadn't slept and had abandoned all hope of it.

Since waking, she had tried for three hours to reach Lydia and the phone had rung impotently each time. It was six in the morning now, well past their usual hour for a telephone tryst and she was eager to know where her wife was, since she clearly wasn't where she was supposed to be. She left the cell-phone on the bed and paced her rooms, fit to be tied, her imagination fired now by more than female intuition or bad dreams, her hands cold, trembling from a toxic brew of dread and exhaustion and the horrible idea which had, until this moment been so foreign to her, that Lydia Beaumont was perhaps no more trustworthy than the next guy.

The knock on the door at quarter past was a welcome sound because Helaine was starving and in her angst she had failed to notice it.

"Come in," she called in a strangled voice.

The tray of steaming food entered first, a solace to behold for the destitute, which is how Dr. Kristenson appeared to Carlos this morning, wrapped in a flimsy wool blanket, her hair loose and, as yet, uncombed.

"Oh, Carlos. What would I do without you?"

"I really don't know," he said, setting the tray down. "Nightmares again?"

There had been a scuffle Saturday, on the way to the podium. Six clean-cut, button-collared protesters had been physically hauled away by the Italian police. Americans, Dr. Kristenson had learned after her lecture. One of her aides had been struck blocking a projectile that had been intended for her. That got him three stitches under his eye and possibly a permanent scar. She wanted to fly the young man home but he wouldn't hear of it. Now she had a bodyguard posted outside her door, courtesy of her private secretary who had argued unsuccessfully that she ought to hire more.

"Nightmares, Carlos–I can't find my wife. She doesn't answer her cell phone."

He nodded. This was not an unusual problem, Carlos Montague had learned. It sometimes happened to his clients that their lives got so haywire they couldn't find their mates. "Here, eat something," he said. He left the room and returned with her bathrobe and brush. "This I believe you will find more comfortable than the hair shirt you've got there."

She traded the blanket for the robe and plucked out her snarls with the brush. Oatmeal, sliced melon, toast, and thank god, coffee. "I want to go home," she slurped.

"Yes, I'm sure you do. That is why you have hired Uncle Carlos. He doesn't permit his clients to fail in their endeavors and you will be no exception. We'll try her at the penthouse after breakfast. Everything will be fine."

```
"Del? What-where's Lydia?"
```

[&]quot;Helaine...um...just a minute, okay?"

Helaine perched on the edge of the bed. "Has something happened?"

[&]quot;Well, not really...Liddy, come on...it's Helaine...yes, for real."

They were drunk. Helaine put her head in her hand then signaled for Carlos to leave.

[&]quot;Lana?"

[&]quot;Lydia, what has happened?"

[&]quot;Noth-what do you mean?"

[&]quot;I've been trying to get you for hours. Why are you drinking on a Su-"

```
"Because I can't do this. I just can't."
"Can't talk to me on the phone?"
"Hardly."
"Can't have me and not have me, you're saying?"
"Come home, Lana. I need you. I paid good money to ha—"
"What a very intriguing concept, Ms. Beaumont. Put Del on for me."
"You don't want to talk to...what's with that?"
"Darling, please. Just let me speak to Delilah."
"No."
Edgy. Another facet to this difficult persona. "Lydia, are you working tomorrow?"
"Sure am. Everyone's gone but me and the miscreants."
"Then you need to go to bed and I need to talk to Del."
"Dr. Kristenson?"
"IP Beaumont."
"You lied to me."
"I-about what?"
"You said it was going well. I've read otherwise."
"A white lie so you wouldn't worry yourself like this."
"I worry, therefore I am. Talk nice to me."
"I love you-you're flirting with disaster, I'm sure you know."
```

"You're my disaster...you and that...that hair. I order you to come home and make me feel like a woman again."

Helaine had forty-eight plus hours till her next gig, a much-needed mini vacation. Carlos had planned to

Helaine had forty-eight plus hours till her next gig, a much-needed mini vacation. Carlos had planned to entertain her with a speed tour of Rome, starting this morning with the Ruins. She pressed the telephone to her forehead. He had psyched her for this outing, into being nothing but a tourist for the day, blending with the other sightseers at the Pantheon and the Coliseum. It would take two whole days, he had calculated, to do it right, to view as much of the devastation as possible, including the Etruscan's. Oh, but in six or seven hours she could be home again, dumping JP Beaumont's liquor down the drain, throwing open the windows to air out the place, making dinner, hanging Christmas ornaments, sleeping with her wife, obeying orders.

She fell backward onto the unmade bed. "Okay."

Chapter 41: Better To Be Loved

```
"I can't get a hold of her."
   "You tried her cell?"
   "No answer."
   "And she's not at home, you're sure?"
   "No one saw her leave, but she's definitely not there."
   That's not discreet, Paula thought, that's outright deceit. And then it suddenly occurred to her where VP
Angelo could be found. "I think I know where she is, John. Go back to sleep."
   "Leave her be," Dickie grumbled from beneath his pillow. "Come to bed."
   "This'll only take a second...Ms. Grisholm? Good morning. I need to chat with Venus. You can tell her
it's Paula Treadwell."
   "Turn out the light," Dickie whined. "Have mercy."
   "Hush."
   "Paula? What the-"
   "Spare me the shock and awe, Angelo. I'm calling to tell you you're covering for Ms. Beaumont today.
Eight o'clock sharp, please."
   "I'm...someone followed me?"
   "No, so it must have been a truly brilliant disguise. Your biographer, I'm sure, will be delighted."
   "And you...you just deduced that I was-"
   "I deduced it, the end."
   (Pause.) "Tell me what's going on."
   "Dr. Kristenson called me earlier. She's sneaking into town this morning. Beaumont's slowly unraveling,
by the sounds of it."
   "Oh?"
   "I want you to cover for her until Wednesday."
   "Paula, I'll bet you know I have other plans."
   "Break 'em."
```

Her fellow passengers are staring not because they recognize her but because she is striking in that sable and those sunglasses, in the brown silk scarf tied under her chin hiding her hallmark hair. They stare, as well, because her young travel companion with his swollen eye looks as if he's just been rolled and they're wondering ponderously if she did it and why.

Their speculations are all that Dr. Kristenson finds amusing about her present escapade. Behind her wraparound shades, she is trying to catch some winks because she hasn't slept in almost twenty-four hours. She is also processing the stewardess's announcement that connecting flights may be indefinitely delayed due to a winter storm system which is presently creeping up the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. The stale air of the pressurized cabin has given her a real doozie of a headache and she has just concluded that there is nothing in her purse with which to treat it but a sharp number two pencil. She is hungry, but the sight and smell of the meal that has just arrived is making her nauseous.

Carlos had endeavored to dissuade her from going. The weather over the Atlantic was awfully unpredictable this time of year, had been his best argument, but even that hadn't been strong enough to change her mind. Now it seemed likely that she would be caught in a nor'-eastern, perhaps not get to see her wife at all.

"Send a chopper for godsakes, John. Screw the shuttle if it's grounded. Has Angelo gone home?"

Six in the morning. It had begun to snow she noticed as she exited the cab. She showed the doorwoman her ID and a Ben Franklin and rode the elevator straight up to the penthouse, relieved once inside to find it the same as she had left it.

Her answering machine was blinking. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven messages. It was her mother, Paula, Claudine, Paula, Sebastion, Paula, Paula.

Who, what, where, why, and when, she asked herself in the shower. She washed Anna from her hair and skin, toweled off under the heat lamp and then gargled in the sink. The phones in her office must be bugged, Venus realized, biting down hard on her toothbrush. That would be a relatively easy thing for nosy JP Treadwell to accomplish. Shit, she said with a mouth full of paste, everyone's phone was probably bugged.

She threw the toothbrush into the sink basin, spit and rinsed.

Nosy JP Treadwell. How much could she know? Venus worried, going into the kitchen. The clock on the wall said skip the pancakes and eggs, babe, no time, get dressed. The sinking sensation in her gut told her that the woman knew everything, everything that was said or done at Soloman-Schmitt, maybe even before it was said or done. She scrounged a breakfast bar from her gym bag and gnawed on it while she organized the items on her dresser and slapped on some makeup.

Paula was following her princes. She was tapping their lines.

That's something always to keep in mind, Venus told herself, admiring a glittering pair of sapphire earrings before putting them back into their case again.

Come on, she scolded, stepping over last night's clothes on the way to the closet. We got to rescue Lydia Beaumont today. She chose a tight-fitting number in navy with a low back and long sleeves, platform boots. Get a move on, girl, she laughed uneasily, adjusting her bra under the dress and straightening the seams of her stockings. 'Cause the lady's coming undone and she went and called her doctor.

Outside she was struck by the eerie silence, the empty streets. She trudged toward Soloman-Schmitt in unbroken snow and paused before entering the revolving doors. The building across the way from her was almost invisible in the storm. It looked like a big, gray ghost. She trembled in the cold. Is this what they call a blizzard?

The man intercepting them on the snowy tarmac was Paula's personal pilot. All flights have been grounded, he explained to the weary Dr. Kristenson, including her shuttle. He had clearance to chopper her to a landing pad fifteen blocks from her home or to the next airport where her driver sat waiting, probably snowbound. Whichever she preferred.

Fifteen blocks from her home was Soloman-Schmitt, her companion pointed out. If she couldn't get a cab from there he'd be happy to escort her. It was no inconvenience to him because his parents lived in the vicinity of that neighborhood and he was pretty sure they wouldn't be out in weather like this.

"There won't be any cabs," the pilot predicted. A gust of icy wind came to punctuate his remark. "We'd better go."

10:30 AM. She found Lydia and Delilah out cold on opposite ends of the couch, a picked over platter of pretzels and cheese between them, a blank television screen casting a blue light on their upturned faces. She pulled the curtains aside and turned the TV off.

Delilah was the light sleeper. "Hey, nice coat...Helaine?"

[&]quot;Not yet. You found her?"

[&]quot;Yeah."

[&]quot;Where is she?"

[&]quot;Never mind."

"Good morning," Helaine whispered, giving her a peck on the cheek. She knelt beside Lydia and took her hand. "Darling, I'm home," she said, stroking her face until she finally stirred.

"Lana?" Lydia asked insensibly. "Is that you?"

"It is. Here, come with me," she said, helping her to her feet.

"Geesh," Delilah mumbled, glancing out the window. "It's a winter wonderland out there. What time is it?"

Helaine chuckled. "No school today, girls. Can you rustle up some coffee, Del? We'll only be a few minutes."

"A few-what are you going to do?" Lydia inquired groggily.

"Well, since you ask...first I'm going to spank you."

She couldn't resist poking her head in to say hi to Kate. "Ms. Fitz-Simone, holding down the fort all right?"

"Yes, ma'am-oh, I like that, Ms. Angelo."

"The fort?"

"The hair."

"Flatterer. Anybody else coming in?"

"Your new guy for overseas."

"He better be good."

"Ms. Treadwell sent him."

Another of Paula's princes? "Then he must be, huh? I'm still not here, okay?"

"Okay...?"

"Queen for the day, Kate. Someday this'll all make sense to you. As for right now, I'll call if I need anything."

Up in the ivory tower Venus discovered JP Beaumont's lair locked. She wandered the presidents' compound delivering officious sounding hellos to those staff members who had braved the weather to come in this morning and making a mental note of which cubicles she had found empty. She'd be stuck in the role of a greeter today, she realized, if she couldn't gain access to the joint president's office. She raised her brow when red-eyed John strolled in with the winning numbers.

"She doesn't know we have the combination," he said as Lydia's door slid open.

"Gotcha," was her only response.

"You won't say anything?"

"I'm here for appearance's sake only, John."

"Meaning?"

"That I don't give a shit."

He liked Venus Angelo. She was bitching. "That's the ticket," he said wryly. "Fabulous do, by the way."

"Thanks."

"Hit that button there if you need me."

"I will."

She would be perfect behind that desk, he suddenly thought. "How do you like your coffee?" he asked.

"Light and sweet."

He refrained from saying: I heard that about you.

First she spanked her. Twenty minutes later she left her to collect herself and met Delilah in the kitchen for a jolt of caffeine. She was operating on a second wind and she knew it couldn't last. In the meantime, though, she was deliriously happy, searching the pantry for dinner ideas, on the assumption, of course, that Carlos had been able to notify the maid not to bother to come in today.

She should call Carlos. Let him know she arrived saf-

"Whoa," Delilah blurted, as Lydia entered the kitchen wearing nothing but Helaine's fur and one of her grins. "Nice coat."

She hung up her coat on a peg beside the door and looked around. Aside from the view, which today constituted nothing but a whirlwind of snowflakes, there was nothing too exciting about JP Beaumont's office. Bare walls, Venus noted. Not even a photograph of Helaine. Scribbles on scraps of paper were strewn across the desktop. She held them to the light. That perfect penmanship. A prep school script, she guessed, a holdover from those olden days, from a bygone era that Venus had only read about, when Lydia was just a girl, when she was most certainly called *Miss* Beaumont.

There were so many things she would like to ask the woman formerly known as Miss Beaumont. When did you get your period, Lydia? Who gave you your first French kiss? How old were you when you lost your virginity?

"Good morning?"

"Sebastion, it's Venus."

"Venus! Where were you last night?"

"Busy-listen, I think my phones have been tapped. You know anybody who can check them out for me?" "Home or office?"

"Both. Probably more than just the phones, understand?"

"Wow...yeah I know a guy. You home tonight? We'll stop in."

"Come around seven."

"Seven, weather permitting. Who's bugging you, Venus? Any clue?"

(To tell you the truth, everyone is.) "I know who's doing it. That's not important."

"Okay. See you later." (Click)

So take that, Venus said aloud, knowing perfectly well that if her office was bugged, Lydia's would be, too. "Come in?"

"Here you go. Light and sweet. Just how you like it."

"John," she said, mustering a pleasant smile, "you're indispensable."

Noon: she sent a text message to Carlos. Everything's hunky-dory.

Twelve-thirty: she served a makeshift brunch for everyone. Pasta and frozen vegetables.

Two: she bid farewell to Delilah and filled the Jacuzzi.

Three-thirty: she put her wife to bed; called her maid to say hi and gave her a grocery list for tomorrow morning; called the Keagans to say hi and made tentative plans with them for an early dinner at Frank's Place tomorrow night.

Four: she poured scotch and gin down the kitchen sink, locked the liquor cabinet, and undertook to clean the penthouse.

Seven-thirty: she poured herself a glass of merlot and crashed on the couch to Handel's Messiah.

Sebastion and Venus sat cross-legged and silent in her kitchen while Sebastion's man crept around on all fours searching every nook and cranny of the apartment, pulling up the rugs, investigating the outlets and appliances, disassembling the remote controls. He looked absurd with his earphones and goggles, his high-tech devices and laptop. She felt absurd having him there.

"They usually put them way up or way down," he said authoritatively. "People don't typically look up and down a lot when they're at home."

That made some kind of mad sense to Venus. She gave him the go-ahead to dismantle the ceiling fixtures and wall vents, provided he could get them back together again.

He could. This final chore completed he took his earphones and goggles off and addressed her as he packed his bag. "The hallway and elevator are clean, your phones and electronics are clean, the entire interior zone is clean. There's a couple of motion detection sensors out on your patio, infrared, but I can't get to them with all that snow out there. They're probably fine though. The vents, plumbing, lighting, alarm system...no indication at all of any tampering anywhere. There's no bugs in here, ma'am. Never was."

Sebastion slapped him on the back and handed him a wad of cash. "Good job, my man."

The man shoved the bills into his jeans pocket.

"That's great, but what about my office?"

"I can sweep your office for bugs, but I'll tell you it's most likely in the switchboard and I won't mess with that. Felony trespass if they choose to prosecute."

Felony trespass. Crap.

"But the good news is that surveillance is still pretty primitive in corporate America," the man said scornfully. "Since managers and bosses aren't ashamed to let their employees know they're watching them, practically nothing's hidden from view. Look for cameras and listening devices in the halls and elevators, in cafeterias and copy rooms, lobbies and bathrooms, and especially near those popular water fountains," he told her with a laugh. "Any communal space in your building is big brother domain. Eavesdropping on your telephone calls is fair game, too. Like I said, that's done by switchboard, generally, and then computers sift through everyone's faxes and e-mails—a permanent record by the way, e-mails, even if you delete them. Phone taps and e-mail searches on employees are routine. Random in most cases. In some cases not. Your cell phone, I'm sure you're aware, is never secure. Absolutely anyone can overhear those conversations. Anytime, anyplace. Don't use a cell phone for anything but ordering pizza."

She groaned and sat on the bar stool. "I want my office swept for listening devices. What can I do if it's in the switchboard?"

He shrugged. "You're a vice president there?"

"Yeah."

"Change the policy."

He was turning out to be a lot brighter than she had initially credited him to be. She deflected his jab with a self-effacing grin. "Right now, I mean."

"Oh, right now." He opened his bag of tricks again and like a wizard with his potions produced a tentacled box about the size of a cigarette lighter. "I can attach that to your phone cord. There's an LED right here. That'll flash when someone's opened your line. You can't stop him from listening in, but at least this way you'll know he is."

"And he won't know I know?"

"Not unless you start stuttering or he searches your office, which, of course, he doesn't need a warrant to do."

Would Paula go that far? Venus wondered. Search her office? Nah, she wouldn't search her office. She'd have John do it.

"That's the best I can offer," the wizard said.

"It's better than nothing," Sebastion interjected.

"Yeah," Venus had to agree. "I guess I'll have to risk it."

Ten o'clock. Another nightmare for Dr. Kristenson as she slept on the couch. Carlos is calling to her, half his face in darkness. Up, he says. Get up. But she can't get up. He holds his hand out to her, his face disappearing in darkness. Up, Dr. Kristenson. Come to—a ball of fire.

"Helaine?"

Helaine woke disoriented. She squinted at the figure in the light. Was this Munich? Was it Prague?

"Helaine?"

It was Rome? Where's Carlos?

"Wake up."

"Lydia?"

"You're having a nigh-what are you doing out here?"

"Oh, god, Lydia, I'm dreaming. Awful dreams."

"Lana, you're....safe."

"Safe?" It made no sense to her.

"Here," Lydia whispered, "come to bed."

Chapter 42: To Win or To Vanquish

Forty-eight hours disappeared in the blink of an eye and Lydia returned to work on Wednesday satisfied but still wearing the dark circles of Sunday, Cicero's tempting youth still lurking in the recesses of her mind, jumbled there with vague apprehensions about everything, which good judgment and Delilah implored her not to voice.

Robert and Kay were right. Helaine had lost weight, too. Yes, the Keagans insisted, they both had. Lydia thought it best not to trouble them about nightmares.

Her brief discussion with Carlos after Helaine had boarded the airplane this morning had helped to allay the most prominent fear. Carlos had taken it upon himself last week to hire Dr. Kristenson a burly Australian bodyguard and in her absence this week, had retained the services of yet another, an eagle-eyed Italian currently assigned to meet her at the airport today, posing innocuously enough, Carlos hoped, to pass as her new driver. Hereinafter, he assured Lydia, the doctor would go nowhere without these fellows, whether she liked it or not.

Bodyguards she wouldn't like, Lydia already knew.

The joint president didn't recall leaving her office unlocked but who knows, she said to herself, as she stepped inside it. Clever Venus had filled in for her. Maybe she figured out the combination.

"Black with raw sugar-how's Ms. Beaumont?"

"John," she said, startled by his greeting. Her office seemed in order. "Good," she replied, taking the coffee from him and regaining her composure. "Thank you."

"You left it unlocked," he explained, as if reading her mind. "Which turned out to be rather convenient...considering."

"Oh," she said, blowing steam from the rim of her cup. "I swear I don't know where my head's at these days."

"Don't sweat it," he said, over his shoulder. "We got you covered."

Moments later JP Beaumont flew by his desk with her coat flung open, her eyes blazing, her face taut with a controlled rage. "Is everything all right?" he called after her. He saw her lift her fists in the air. "Ms. Beaumont?"

"Take my calls, John. I'll be right back."

She took the stairs down to VP Angelo's.

Kate smiled to see her so soon. "There," she said, indicating the stack of quarters on her desk. "She said to take these coins."

Lydia pocketed the coins. "Are you in charge here?" she muttered angrily.

The rest of the staff hid their heads behind their cubicles and began feverishly banging at their keyboards. "Yes, ma'am."

Lydia lowered her voice. "Don't ever aid and abet her again. Do you understand me? Or you'll be cleaning the bathrooms for the rest of your professional life."

Kate giggled nervously. "Yes, ma'am."

Venus had removed the little beige ball from JP Beaumont's mouse, left her a note stuffed in the mouse's belly. If Lydia was following instructions right she should have placed this call from the pay phone around the corner from Soloman-Schmitt. Or never see her ball again!

[&]quot;Give me my ball back. I don't have time for this sh-for these shenanigans."

[&]quot;Shenanigans-that's archaic for bullshit? How are you, Lydia? You sound livid."

[&]quot;Are you at the pay—"

```
"Venus,
                          dare
                                             How
                                                       dare
                                                                         play
                                                                                   pranks
                                                                                               on-PLEASE
                how
                                   you!
                                                                you
DEPOSIT...THIRTY...FIVE...CENTS...FOR...FIVE...I'm the
                                                                     ...MORE MIN-oint presiden-EASE
DEPOS...amnit!"
   Lydia could still operate her computer, but it would be a pain in the ass. She could call maintenance to fix
it, but she would look ridiculous. Venus smiled at the sound of coins falling in the slot.
   "TWEN-TY...FIVE...FIF-TY...SEVENTY...FIVE CENTS...THANK
HAVE...TWELVE MORE MINUTES...CALL TIME...CREDITED-eal jerk!"
   "Lydia, you're going to waste this call screaming?"
   "Where is the ball?"
   "I have your ball. It's with your present."
   "My...present?"
   "Merry Christmas."
   "Venus, I didn't get you-where-your place?"
   "Would you like that? I have a fire going."
   "I'd-it's cold, Venus. Please. I need to get back to the office."
   "Kate has your present."
   "Kate does? Then why are we doing this?"
   "Because I wanted to talk to you, to hear your-"
   "You could have called me upstairs!"
   "The whole building's bugged, Lydia."
   "What?"
   "Big brother. Or should I say Big Paula?"
   "Come on...you sound like Helaine now. How do you know this?"
   "You doubt it?"
   (Silence.)
   "Anyway, Kate's got some paperwork you need to review. She'll bring it up in a half an hour."
   "She knows, Venus? She understands all this?"
   Kate was a bright girl. Venus wasn't sure what she knew but she trusted her. "She'll understand if you act
goofy about it." She threw another log on the fire and watched the sparks scatter in the air. "So be cool,
Lydia. It's a Christmas present."
   "Venus Angelo."
   "Yes?"
   "You don't have to give me presents. I've got everything I—"
   "Lvdia Beaumont."
   "Yes?"
   "I'm your Xs, you're my Os."
   "What?"
   "Merry Christmas, your highness." (click)
   "Ms. Fitz-Simone to see you."
   "Thanks, John. Send her in, please."
   "Right away. Are you feeling okay? You look feverish."
   "I'm fine. Just send her in."
   "Good morning...again," Kate said, after John had left.
   "Kate. You have my ball?"
   "Yes, ma'am."
   Lydia held out her hand and Kate placed a small gift box in it.
```

"You're told?" Lydia put the box in her lap and signaled the girl to sit.

"It's in there, I'm told."

"Assistant or accomplice?"

Kate sat.

Kate hesitated. "Yes, ma'am," she responded bashfully.

"Yes-that's for life you know?"

Kate nodded. "I gathered."

Lydia studied her face. She was shy but forthright, fidgety with that wedding band, which meant that she would, inevitably, lose it. A small-town girl, Lydia guessed. Probably from the Midwest where she was the class valedictorian. Peaches and cream and cream of the crop, and from there she went on to graduate with honors, again and again. Here she could have gone unnoticed for years, but she had stepped in it with Venus Angelo. She was a polite, small-town girl serving the hip and street-wise vice president, who was, Lydia suspected, only a few years her senior. Good instincts to know to be loyal and honest to Prince Angelo. For a prince Venus had to be to get away with as much as she had.

Her gift weighed heavy in her lap. "How old are you, if I may?"

"I'm twenty-six."

"How long have you worked for Soloman-Schmitt?"

"Um...thirteen months."

"You put in for your raise yet?"

"A raise, Ms. Beaumont?"

"They don't just fall from the sky, Ms. Fitz-Simone. You have to ask for them."

"I've...no."

"The firm owes you. Put in for your raise."

"Okay."

"And every six months thereafter. That's how it works. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She returned the gift with a thanks-for-your-admiration-style apology. It seemed like the appropriate thing to do. She had been so engrossed lately with Soloman-Schmitt and Christmas shopping, Sebastion and Anna–in a few short days flying to Paris to spend the remainder of her holiday with Claudine–that she had practically forgotten about Sharon Chambers.

Sebastion had been forced to bring up the issue of the diamond bracelet because Sharon was pitilessly pursuing him about Venus and he had run out of excuses. She took Sharon's address and sent it back to her special post. The gladiolas had long since expired in Sebastion's office and though she had never seen them, she thanked her for the beautiful flowers, too, and in this tactful way considered the matter closed. There had been no more calls from Sharon at the office since the day she had fired Billy Kendle, or else Kate was astute enough not to bother her with them. Thus she didn't expect to hear from the ex-model again.

But that was so naïve.

"It's a present, Mommy?"

"Helen, please. Just pay attention to what you're doing."

The child was hanging tinsel artlessly on the tree. She tossed the last clump of it on the floor and ran to her mother's side. "Who's it from?" she demanded to know.

"Santa," Sharon replied. She set the parcel aside without revealing its contents to her daughter, too stunned to admit that pretty Venus Angelo had turned her down, sent back the diamond bracelet. "You know, that fat old bearded bastard in the red suit?" Oh, oh, oh, she would get her for this. Oh yes, she would. A day or a decade, no matter. She would get her somehow.

"Mommy," Helen said reproachfully. "There's no such thing as Santa Claus."

Chapter 43: False

Glossary of common terms found in the female lexicon:

- 1. "No." N_{θ} is a difficult word for most of us, so when we say n_{θ} it means NO.
- 2. "Never." If accompanied by any degree of emotion *never* means *not ever again*. If spoken calmly or firmly it is synonymous with *not in a million years* or simply *no*.
- 3. "I can't." Under any given scenario, *I can't* means *I won't*. It's used a lot because it's nicer sounding than *no* or *never* and it's a great hedge in the event we should change our mind.
- 4. "I couldn't possibly." Of all the terms listed here *I couldn't possibly* holds out the greatest promise because it means *I could if you can convince me it's proper*.
- 5. "No, never, I can't, (and) I couldn't possibly," used in any combination means that we are confused and consider it your fault and you should leave quickly if you don't want your feelings hurt or any other sensitive parts.

```
"Venus-"
"Where are you calling from?"
"The pay phone."
"I'm not taking them back, Lydia. Wear them, please."
"I couldn't possibl-"
"Fine, then bring them to me right now."
"Venus, I just can't accept such a lavish-"
"Then bring them to me, I said. That's the only way I'll take them back."
"That isn't fair."
"Come on, Lydia. It's you you don't trust, not me."
"Us, Venus. I don't trust-"
"You don't like the earrings?"
"I love-they're just beaut-I could never possibly wear them."
"Never poss-they go with your eyes! What do you mean you won't wear them?"
```

Venus plopped onto the couch with a loud, unhappy sigh. How would Dr. Kristenson know? she wanted to ask. She could already hear the answer. *I* would know, Venus. I would know. Oh, Christ!

"All right, Lydia, I'll send a messenger to retrieve them. Will you be home tonight?"

"Yes, of course, I'm sorry, Venus, I hope you know that if I wasn't mar—"

"Venus, you're sweet and I thank you but you know I can't."

"Don't do that, Lydia."

"No, let me speak. If I wasn't married...tell me you understand that, because I am married, I'm married, and I feel terrible about all this, so torn all the time, and I can't explain this to anyone, and I miss my wife desperately and it builds up, and you're too young, I mean so young, whatever, and now the earrings. Can you understand?"

"I understand."

Helaine called around eight that evening to say that she had arrived safely and that Carlos had everything under control, hot food and a hot bath, her notes to study while she was bathing so she could be as vivacious as ever for tomorrow's speech. Lydia could hear fatigue laced in the lilt of her voice and it was just as notable as the failure to mention the subject of bodyguards, which she, too, admittedly avoided discussing. They whispered a few sweet nothings back and forth for a couple minutes but Lydia could tell Helaine was near collapse and she let her sign off tonight with one simple I love you.

It was soon thereafter that she discovered the liquor cabinet was locked, the bar having been emptied of both scotch and gin. Could she drink straight Vermouth? she half joked.

It was not the right time to attempt it, she remembered. Someone was supposed to be coming by soon for the earrings, that is unless Venus had only been placating her. She took them out of their case again and held them to her ears, the fifth time tonight.

Sapphires.

Except for the platinum settings, they might have matched her necklace perfectly. The same quality of stone, the same cut. They did match her eyes, she observed with a quick breath. Who else had said something like that? She hooked them and let them dance from her lobes. Oh, it was Anna. I have something that belongs to you, she had bragged. Do you? But I have everything I need, she remembered telling Venus this morning. Oh, she shouldn't have worded it that way. Sometimes she was so awkward and so thoughtless. Was there anybody in the world who could actually make such a claim as that? That they had everything they needed? In theory maybe she could, but still, she wished now she hadn't sounded so callous. She sat on the couch and loosened her blouse, shook her hair out. The sapphires tickled her neck. She smiled capriciously. In a perfect world she would be able to keep them. In a perfect world it would be improper not to. She closed her eyes and the intercom rang.

"There's a messenger for you, Ms. Beaumont. Should I send the young man up?"

"Yes, I've been expecting him."

"All righty—that elevator there, son, straight up to the penthouse—goodnight Ms. Beaumont. I'll see you for the morning shift, then."

"Goodnight."

Lydia opened her door expecting to find a messenger boy and she was not prepared to see instead the debonair young man from Cicero's tipping his hat to her. Her instinct was to slam the door in his pretty face, but he was inside the apartment before she could do that, standing in the parlor as if he had been invited.

"What th-?"

"Lv-"

She went for the intercom and he overtook her.

"Lvdia, calm-"

"No!" she shouted, extricating herself. "Get out! Get out, or I'll call the police!"

"Lydia," he said, standing under the hall light so she could get a better look at him. "Please, Lydia...it's just me."

The brim of his hat cast a shadow across his eyes in the shape of a mask. She took a sideways step and tripped over the divan and in his rush to catch her before she fell, the hat came off.

"Oh, god," she whispered hoarsely, finally recognizing his face. "Oh, god," she said again, grabbing hold of the sleeve of his overcoat. "Oh, thank god."

Chapter 44: Effeminate

Reality, Lydia has just learned, is subject to change without notice. In some cases a quick-change. "Venus?"

Lydia had doe-in-the-headlight eyes. Venus lowered her to the divan and knelt beside her. There was no booze on her breath tonight, so the rumors must be false. "Just Venus," he said. "Deep breaths, Lydia."

Lydia took a couple deep breaths. "What is the meaning of this?" she asked, letting go of his sleeve and resting her hand on his shoulder. "A trick?"

He pushed the hair out of her face. She could, he suspected, part with a kiss. If it was taken quickly enough. "I don't know. I guess so."

"You guess so?" His coat was trimmed with lamb. Lydia ran her hands up and down the lengths of the lapels and unbuttoned it. Inside was a blue suit with pinstripes, similarly tailored to the brown one she had seen the young man wearing in Cicero's. He had a ruffled silk shirt this time. Buttoned high on the neck. No tie. She felt beneath the coat and then sat back satisfied. Venus was indeed the young man from Cicero's.

He gave her a sly grin, the opportunity to kiss her gone for the moment.

"Why are you dressed like this? I demand to know the meaning of this."

"The pursuit of happiness-did you hurt your knee?"

It ached a little. "I don't think so. What do you mean?"

"What do I mean hurt?"

There was a lock of hair out of place. Lydia tucked it behind his ear. "Happiness. What kind of happiness are you in pursuit of looking like this? I don't understand."

He took her hand and tugged at her ring. "It gives me a little bit of privacy."

"Privacy? So you could be here, with me?"

He turned her hand over and kissed the palm. "So I could be anywhere."

"Oh." She felt a pang upon hearing him put it that way, that he had the right to be anywhere. "Exercising your rights," she said, taking her hand away. "That makes sense."

"You understand it?"

She nodded.

"Tell me what you understand about it, Lydia."

"I understand that...I'm not going to say."

"Lydia, I feel certain you're over thinking it."

"Am I? I feel certain you're lying to me."

He stole that kiss from her now. Her eyes closed. He took another before she could stop him. "It's a necessary evil," he said under his breath as she pulled away from him.

She shook her head in dismay. "I wouldn't know. Is it?"

He seemed to be grinning at her expense.

"Then it must be," she said. "And you enjoy being evil? Don't say you don't. I can tell you're enjoying yourself."

"You seem to be enjoying me, too."

"Well...but you didn't wear this for me."

"What do you like best about it, Lydia Beaumont?"

She loved the coat, the shirt, the pants, the boyish haircut.

He stood up and held open the flaps of his overcoat. "Suit perfect fits, my love. What do you like best?" he asked, modeling for her. "Just for future reference."

The suit was tailored to him. She loved him in it.

"Humor me," Venus pursued.

She thought it prudent not to and reddened with the words she wouldn't say.

He cupped her face and kissed it out of her.

"The coat, the suit, the pants, the shoes," she whispered. "The hat, too," she hastily added, handing it to him.

He set it aside and ignored her suggestion. "Everything then? What a lucky man," he crowed, falling at her feet again. "She likes everything about me."

Everything, even if it was a bit masculine. She brushed the coat with the back of her hand, took the handkerchief, folded it and slipped it into his breast pocket again. The coat, the suit, the man. On fashionable Venus Angelo, it all somehow still looked right, the classic styling so perfectly austere that on Venus' flawless frame it still came off as feminine, the mannish cut not quite able to master the beauty of the woman hidden within its seams.

She shut her eyes. Little wonder she was attracted to Cicero's youth. She opened them again and glared at the young man kneeling beside her in her parlor. It was premeditated. He had known before they met she would like everything about him.

He cleared his throat. "Earth to Lydia?"

"Venus, I...I don't want to spar with you."

"Good," he said, batting his long lashes. "What do you want to do?" he asked. "Take this suit to bed?"

She appraised Venus Angelo, tall, dark, and handsome without her makeup. She was a devastatingly good-looking man, or, as Delilah had observed that night, a swaggering, effeminate, and terribly conceited manchild. A Valentino.

"Lydia?"

She dodged his invitation without commenting. This charmer, she reminded herself, had seduced her into the darkest corner of the nightclub, to take advantage of her there. Prince Charming was the same persistent suitor who had been trying to get her to say yes to him for years, relentlessly attempting to confound her, relentlessly trying to ruin her marriage.

"Wanna?" he pressed.

She narrowed her eyes at him, angry at the both of them, that he had set out to deceive her and that she had actually fallen for his deception. She was glad she had found nothing to drink tonight. Had Valentino expected her to be intoxicated?

"Lvdia...?"

"Why did you come to me like this?"

"I'm here for-they look fabulous on you."

The earrings had temporarily slipped her mind. She puzzled over why the hell she was wearing them as he lifted her face up toward the light and gloated.

"Do you like them, Lydia?"

His earrings! She gave him a look of defiance.

He nodded triumphantly and dropped his hand.

She rubbed her knee though it didn't hurt anymore.

"As much as you like the suit?" he asked, examining the knee just in case. "I think it's all right."

She tugged at an earring and sat back. "I like how you look in your suits, Venus. Unfortunately for me, we both know that."

He took her other leg and felt that knee, too. "This one's better than all right," he teased, holding it at the calf and whistling. "A truly magnificent gam, Ms. Beaumont."

She pulled her leg away.

"You're never going to forgive me, are you?"

"I'm nev-" Lydia stopped short. Never was a lie. Surely he knew it. "Maybe one day," she mumbled.

He flashed her a grin as if he understood what she was thinking and she felt the blood rush to her cheeks again.

"You're very-" she gripped him by the hair. "Privacy from whom?"

"Ouch-privacy? Oh, right, privacy. From Paula. Lydia, let-"

She let go of his hair and smoothed it back in place.

"Woman you're...tell me your thoughts on the earrings."

"I'm wearing them, aren't I?"

"You are indeed. Pretend you don't want me to kiss you."

"Venus..." Her lips were dry. She licked them. "What did Paula think she'd catch you at, I'd like to know?"

He had the right to remain silent which seemed like the best response. Paula was after a much bigger fish than Anna Grisholm. For the moment, he had it dangling from a shiny lure.

The averted eyes and evasive smile told Lydia more than she had really wanted to know. So now she saw, without a doubt, that there were more Claudine's on the landscape, probably dozens more looming out there on his horizon. The suit makes the man, her father always claimed. Then if that was true, Venus was playing the role beautifully.

"Well then, you're a very bad boy, Venus Angelo," she said wryly, hoping to sound nonchalant but wanting with all her heart to punish him.

He saw her eyes flickering. "For what, Lydia? For trying to enjoy life without you? For letting you be happily married?"

Yes, for starters. She wrapped her arm around his neck as if to strangle him, right there in the parlor. She could say it was self-defense. He was a prowler. "For worrying Paula so."

"Mmhmm. Then I'm bad. And you're bad, too, I'm always hoping."

"That's what you hope, is it?" Lydia asked, feeling his watchband. "You should watch what you hope for," she said, winding the fob. "Ah, look at these," she murmured, finally noticing the sapphire cufflinks. "Plan on pairing me? Or just adding me to your collection?"

Venus laughed self consciously.

"Or maybe you're just trying to make it worth her while, VP Angelo? Is that it? So Paula's not wasting all those grand suspicions?" She slid forward solicitously.

Venus moved to accommodate her.

"She catch you at anything yet? Don't lie to me, Angelo."

"I'm keeping her occupied," he said, "if that's what you're digging for."

She undid the top button of his shirt collar and he took a deep breath. "Deeper," she mocked. "That's really what I'm digging for."

"Ah...that's what they all say."

"Do they? I'm sure you must know you're a bona fide bastard."

"And you," he replied, grabbing her by the wrists, "are a bona fide boner. As I'm sure you must know."

"You're a f-"

He nipped at her throat. "Flatterer."

Lydia squirmed free. The glint in her eye was as volatile as gasoline. Venus remembered the mean right hook.

"Deep breaths, girlfriend."

Lydia inhaled. "You, too," she said exhaling in his ear.

"I love you," he exhaled back to her.

"Do you?"

"You know I do," he reaffirmed on the intake.

"And you're womanizing because of it...how sad."

The earring tickled Venus' face. "You're keeping them, I presume-my earrings?"

"I might."

"What does it depend on?"

"You, Venus."

"What about me?"

"You followed me to Cicero's? You were trying to trump me somehow?"

"No, Lydia. That was an absolute fluke."

Venus wore a wide black belt tonight. Lydia hooked her finger in it and pulled on it. The buckle popped open. "A fluke and some merriment, som?"

"I...uh...actually, had just stopped in when you and Del showed—"

"On your way to where, Venus, dressed like that, like this? Not to meet me, you weren't."

Lydia was hot to the touch. "No." Hot all over. "Do you want the earrings?"

"Hmmph. What did you tell me? Soo-neev-that's Arabic, right? How do you say seduction in Arabic, please? I'd like to know some Arabic."

Sunev is not Arabic. It's Venus spelled backwards. Venus smiled guiltily and pulled Lydia's blouse from out of her skirt. "Mrs. Kristenson...?"

Mrs. Kristenson was not at home.

He reached into Lydia's blouse. "Consider this your first warning."

Lydia unfastened the catch of Venus' trousers and unzipped them. "Consider this your last-uh-oh, and what's that, young man? More fun and games?"

"Lydia, I have a...a meet...I mean I might have a..."

"Mmmm." Lydia withdrew her hand. "Which is it?"

"C'mon, Lydia."

"Come on what? Which is it, might or have?"

"Keep it there."

"No-do I know this one, Venus? Is she married, too?"

"Is she mar-what's going to happen here, Lydia?"

"Nothing. You're going to answer my questions and I'm going to send you on your way."

"You're leading me on? Why, because you're mad?"

"Why did you come here? You're asking for it."

Venus laughed. "Why did you dance with me?"

"You know why. Were you disappointed, pretty boy, to get me that easy?"

"I didn't get you, did I?"

Horseshoes and hand grenades. And phalluses. She reached over and zipped him up. "Tell me who that's for, Venus. Who's your baby-sitter, tonight?"

"Baby-damnit, Lydia. DAMN."

"You're cursing me? Now that does take balls."

"You're an awful fucking tease."

"Well, but you knew that before you came—I despise you, you should know."

"For the women?"

"For all of it. Every inch."

"This, too?"

Lydia flipped his coat collar up and stroked his forehead. "That, too."

The bra hooked in the front. Venus unhooked it.

Lydia leaned backward.

It was a dare, he thought, shifting his weight to the other knee. He pinned her arms to her sides and sucked her through the blouse.

"Let me-!"

"Oh, that's right," he said, releasing her. "You're being good and I'm being bad."

"No, it's...a lot simpler than that, Angelo. You're going away...I'm going to bed."

"Does it have to necessarily be in that order?"

"Why? You want to put me to bed first?"

"If you like. I'll watch you sleep."

"Yah-if you're lucky."

"Ah, Lydia. Dear Lydia. I can't understand why you're so angry with me," he said, sliding his arm around her waist and reaching into her skirt.

"Don't," she warned.

He didn't. "But I love you, despite your mad self."

"I...do somehow believe that."

"Good. Then be a real sweet tramp and lie down for me."

"I'm-you must be confusing me for the others."

"Now isn't that interesting? They claim I'm confusing them for you."

The slap he was cruising for was near at last. "Lydia," he said, intercepting it.

"Let me go," she answered.

"No."

"Ve-what do you need from me?"

"I need you to lie down."

"Sex?"

"If that's all you want to give me."

In the garish light of her parlor his shadow was covering her like a blanket. She wanted to turn the light out. "I couldn't possibly."

He parted her knees and wriggled between them. "I think you can."

"No," she insisted, smoothing his rumpled collar. "I can't and I mean it."

He scoffed, half his face hidden in darkness. "Then I think you'd better stop teasing. Don't you?"

She leaned forward to see if he was sneering. He was. "Then I think you'd better go."

He pushed her back into the cushions and held her there with one hand. The blouse was moist, her nipples showing through it like medallions. Down her front there was a row of delicate buttons. Mother of pearl. He yanked at them and the blouse came open.

"Venus, it's gone-"

"Too far?"

She heaved upward in an attempt to escape him. "Yes."

"Too late," he said, tonguing her till she was hard, sucking her slowly until she was once again soft in his mouth, a hundred percent more malleable. "I'm going to take you to bed," he whispered, trying to get up. "We're going to bed now."

"Jesus, Venus. We-" she brought her hands down on his shoulders so he couldn't rise. "We can't."

"We can."

"I can't. I just-"

"You just hate me?" he finished. "That's why?"

She turned her head away. "No," she answered, pulling at her skirt and searching in the divan for lost buttons. "Regrettably, no."

He leaned against her and pushed her skirt up.

She dropped the buttons. "Please, Venus, just go. Just tell me that you're going!"

"I'm going," he said, putting his head in her lap.

"Oh...god."

There were fingers through his hair, hands on his shoulders and on the back of his neck. "Lydia," he said softly.

A string of unintelligible protests descended on him.

"Lydia," he called again and she gently bent her legs for him.

"Venus."

She was beneath him. He was maneuvering her and trying in vain to make sense of the things that she said.

She was ordering him to stop as she was reaching for the front of his pants.

"This is wrong," he heard over the roar of blood rushing in his head.

"Lydia, you're so we-"

"Oh, no, no. Don't you talk. Don't-"

"I'll just...and then I'll go."

"You're-we've already-what's the point of-"

"Because I love you, Lydia. I love you."

She was dripping in his jewels. She covered her face with her hands and tensed her legs. "Aren't you making someone wait?" she whispered.

He hung her arms over his shoulders and grasped her by the hips. "Yes."

"Oh, Venus, you-you-then why don't you go to her, goddamnit?"

"I will," he said, thrusting himself between her legs. "Can you feel that?"

She sure could.

Chapter 45: Cruelty and Clemency

You wouldn't notice it unless you were used to kissing her. Indeed, you had to be kissing her or about to kiss her for it to become apparent.

"No kiss hello? Why are you late?"

"Anna, I'm sor-"

"What is that?" Anna interrupted, taking hold of Venus' chin and examining what appeared to be a fat lip. "What happened to you?"

"Believe me, my dear Ms. Grisholm, I have no intention of discussing it. Do you want me here or not? Otherwise I'm going home."

"Do I want you here? Give me your coat."

Venus took her coat off. "Why do you laugh?"

"Well, sport, I want you, but she obviously didn't." She hung up the coat and came back with an ice pack. "Sit there."

Venus put it gingerly to her mouth and sat on Anna's favorite chair. "Ow," she exclaimed, cursing the gods and, coincidentally, Anna, who was in her lap already.

"Ah," Anna said, evaluating the suit and its contents. "You're packing."

Venus flinched at the contact. Anna was so uninhibited and so fast on the draw. She could get floor burns just talking to her.

"Hold me, Venus, or I'll throw you back to your chilly amazon."

"She's not an amazon," Venus muttered. "Chilly, perhaps." She passed the ice to her other hand and embraced her. "You know, it's such a consolation to me, Anna, to see you so overwrought about my welfare."

Anna did an inventory of the inside of the suit coat. "You'll live, I think. A little hubris never killed anyone."

Venus scowled. The ice was only making the lip hurt more. She threw it behind her.

"Now I wonder whose that is," Anna chided, spying a lipstick smear.

"What?" Venus asked in a muffled voice. "Who's what?"

Anna looked at her shrewdly and, minus the specifics, accurately sized up the situation. Women were, after all, her specialty. Once she used to make a pretty good living dressing them, now she had a pretty good time undressing them, an activity which was more than just a hobby for her. She had in her lifetime dressed and undressed so many beautiful women that she was by now considered a connoisseur of the female sex. Romancing women was, she bragged to her friends, her life's calling, her sole passion, and over the decade or more that she had run the Lavender Lane Hotel, she had dedicated herself to hundreds of them, sometimes two or three at a time, a passion that expanded considerably the definition of "hospitality industry."

As a result, she was quite knowledgeable about their private matters, expert at the subtle things they did that individualized them, their fashion tastes, their distinctive colors, their perfumes. If she thought it was Lydia Beaumont-Kristenson's lipstick blend smeared across her truant lover's collar, most likely it was. This was the second time she had seen it there, the first time she would say so.

"That's twice, Venus," she said, dropping the suit coat and vest to the floor and never missing a beat as she undid the buttons of the ruffled silk shirt.

"Twice what? Is there some kind of problem here? Because I really need to get-"

"Laid. I'll bet. You have Ms. Beaumont's lipstick all over your collar, my love. It's bad rock and roll."

Venus glanced at the shirt as it drifted past her. Mmhmm. She was right. "So?"

"She's the one who punched you?"

"Anna, what makes you think it's Lydia's?"

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

"Sweetie, she's too faithful for a woman like you," Anna said, passing on the opportunity to expound upon the benefits of age and experience. She admired naked Venus and her perfect breasts. "You'll never get her," she added, blowing across her nipples.

Venus threw her head back. "You're jealous?"

Anna took her hand and led her to the bedroom. "Don't be ridiculous," she said, with a good-natured laugh. "The only woman I've ever been jealous of is Helaine Kristenson. And that for almost the very same reason you are, Ms. Angelo."

"Almost?"

"Almost-lay down if you need me."

"And what lies in that distinction?" Venus asked, falling into the middle of the bed. "Almost?"

"Obviously the fact that you're in love with Lydia whereas I just want to sleep with her," Anna replied, kissing the bruised mouth tenderly. "Now you tell me, Venus," she said, just before entering her. "How do you think I know this?"

Chapter 46: If You Wish to Master Her

He was going to have to be a great deal more assertive if he ever hoped to make her his wife. At the rate it was going now that wasn't going to happen unless Edward Beaumont keeled over and died, a blessing Roy wouldn't permit himself to wish for because of his fears concerning bad karma.

He stood tonight stoking a roaring fire he had built in the old fireplace at the lake house, sipping hot toddies with Marilyn and her pretty daughter, opening presents with them, waiting for the wild turkey to ding in the oven, faking complacency.

Lydia was finally warming up to him. She's always been aloof with strangers, ever since she was a young girl, Marilyn had tried to reassure him, but once she gets to know you. He wasn't certain if that's what caused it, clearly she still didn't approve of their relationship, but it seemed at last that the ice was beginning to melt. She could at least make eye contact with him when they spoke and once tonight she had even called him by his first name. Of course, he told himself, erring on the side of caution, it could just be the alcohol. He poured her another drink for good measure and went to the kitchen to check on the potatoes.

"Are you sleeping with him?"

"Lydia, you sound just like your father. The answer is no. This is exactly what I wanted," her mother said, switching the subject and fawning over her new lingerie.

Lydia smiled patiently. I don't believe you, Marilyn, she thought, but really, she forced herself to accept in her heart, it's none of my business. The sky wouldn't fall if her mother was leg wrestling with Roy Mann and lying about it. "Enjoy," she said, in her good little soldier voice. "You deserve it, Mom."

"You are such a good little soldier," Marilyn said, "to indulge me so. Thank you sweetheart."

"So...I could actually sleep here tonight if I wanted to?" Lydia asked, following her mother's lead and dropping the topic of illicit sex. It was a muddy subject anyway.

"You could actually move in if you wanted to! If you didn't mind the contractors coming and going."

She would mind contractors coming and going. "What's the status here? I see new plaster and woodwork. They're nearly done inside?"

"Practically. Except for sanding and painting and staining and tiling. That stuff. Which reminds me, we've got to go over those color chips before you leave for Madrid."

Lydia was leaving next week, Christmas Eve in the morning. These last few days before the much-anticipated departure were dragging by in slow motion and the late night phone conversations with her wife were simply not enough to get her through them cheerfully. Moreover she was troubled with herself, too troubled to tell anyone about it. She had behaved badly in the parlor—there were other words she could use to describe her conduct, but badly would suffice—and the episode there with Venus had left her feeling hollow inside. There was a bevy of apologies for it on the tip of her tongue, but she hadn't the courage to deliver any of them. She needed a fix, to be filled with Helaine Kristenson again, and the TV and newspaper features of the Love Doc, a nickname that had always made her cringe, were poor substitutes for the real thing. The same for the sex videos Delilah gave her as a prank for Christmas. Dumb, hokey, and uninspiring, a reaction which Delilah subsequently denounced as "downright un-American".

"You could really use a therapist, Liddy," she joked.

True.

Her Love Doc was homesick and showing the strain of her foreign tour. With every passing week she saw her audiences growing larger, louder and more demanding. This was going beyond anyone's expectations, auditoriums and theaters choked with raucous fans and celebrity hounds, sidewalks, streets and entrances congested with rancorous crowds of supporters and protesters clashing with each other every chance they could get. Helaine was spooked by it all, and security, though Lydia could see that she was hesitant to discuss it, was becoming a number one issue for her and her entourage. Yesterday she had called earlier than usual

sounding dead on her feet and Lydia wondered aloud how she was going to make it through Christmas in that condition. She had even heard herself offering to cancel their rendezvous so she might rest up for the next leg of the journey. Happily she received strenuous objections to that proposal.

"Carlos has the logistics all figured out and he promises to have me completely restored by your arrival. He's my lifesaver."

Carlos this, Carlos that. And now Carlos was her lifesaver. What flavor, she wanted to retort. "Okay."

She was frequently finding herself jealous of the incredible Mr. Montague. Not only because he had the privilege of being with her wife everyday, but because he was so proficient at providing for her needs. "Tell him I'm delighted," she said, biting her lip and flipping him the bird across the Atlantic. "It gives me such a sense of security to have him there."

"Darling? You're jealous of Carlos?"

"No, no. It's good you have him."

"You needn't be, you know?"

"I'm not really. I'm being sincere. I'm truly grateful to him. Really I-"

"Sweetheart?"

"Oh, I...what was the question, Mom?"

"The color chips?"

"Right. I want us to pick out the colors before I leave for Spain. Did I already say that?"

Marilyn shook her head and smiled empathetically. Her daughter always acted dazed when Helaine wasn't with her, lost somewhere in a foggy love spell that no one else could possibly lift. Until recently, she had forgotten what it was like to feel that way, but it was something they both had in common now, leaving the planet at the wave of someone's wand. Or at the mere idea of it.

"Getting there," Roy announced, returning to them with a broad smile on his swarthy face, a kitchen towel tucked into his belt. "They fit perfectly," he said, casting a shy glance Marilyn's way. "Thank you, Lydia."

"Oh, good," she said, gift perfect fits. So now, thanks to Delilah and her keen eye, Mom would be dating a man who wears leather pants. "You're welcome." (Wait till Daddy finds out.)

"Eddie called," Marilyn said hastily, sensing her daughter's ambivalence.

"Oh?" The prodigal son's annual phone call home. "From where this time?" Lydia asked.

"Hong Kong."

Hong Kong. What an excellent place for a man to live whose only interests were women and wampum was what she didn't say. Dinner was wafting into the living room. She lifted her head and sniffed the air hungrily and swallowed bitter words before she could utter them. Eddie was a sacred cow to her mother and there would be no joy in slaughtering him. He could do that for himself.

It was these subtle movements—a raised head, flared nostrils, dilated pupils—followed by a measured restraint, her dignified silence, that finally won Roy Mann over. Before this he had thought Marilyn's daughter arrogant and perhaps even frigid. She was, he could see now, a very dutiful daughter, and very much like her mother, undeniably warm-blooded.

"He's coming home, he says."

"For the holidays?" Lydia asked. Roy was smiling benignly at her. She willed him to put another log on the fire and he got up with a grunt and did it.

"Sometime in the new year," Marilyn said, unconscious of the fact that she was admiring his backside.

The idea of Eddie coming home, stirring things up with the family again when they were already too topsy-turvy, seemed to have a chilling effect on Lydia. She pushed her chair closer to the fireplace. "It will be wonderful to see him again," she lied. "It's been...I don't know how long...too long."

Marilyn gazed at Prometheus playing with his embers and flames. She didn't know how she would explain him to her son. Eddie was tough on women and unsympathetic. In that respect, he was more like his father than he could ever stand to admit. "Yes, it has been, sweetheart. Too long."

It now had a purplish hue to it, which no amount of lipstick could mask from those who knew her well. "Who did that?" her mother demanded.

"Mama, I hit my mouth at the gym. Merry Christmas."

"Gym?" Jasmine asked skeptically.

"Yeah, gym. No presents for you, right?"

"Right," Jasmine replied, smacking her sister's outstretched palm. "You look like hell," she jeered.

"Thanks." Venus said, handing her a check. "That's so the burns can be in furs this winter."

"Venus, who hit you?" her mother asked again. "What piece of sh-"

Venus held up her hand for silence. She did not want to hear Lydia Beaumont vilified, not even anonymously. Besides, she didn't hit her.

Mama dropped the subject and they all took their seats quietly.

She didn't hit her. She elbowed her by accident, but flailing arms and hundreds of elbows was not the impassioned response Venus was shooting for from Lydia and after the ill fated match in the parlor she felt further away than ever from winning her. In all probability it was time to give up the hunt. She licked her wounds constantly as she chowed down dinner with her family and evaded their prying questions. In less than twenty-four hours she would be in Paris. Once there, the plan was to hide under the covers for a couple of weeks until everything healed. Her bruises, her pride.

"It ain't football," her father muttered. "Pass the gravy."

She shot him a curious look and handed him the butter dish.

"Ain't a game at all," he said. "Pass me the gravy, Venus. The gravy."

For sure love is not a game, but it started out that way for Edward Beaumont the third and he played it hard and fast, an approach he had unfortunately learned from his father, deviating only slightly from his miseducation in that he never married and had no intentions to do so. Ever.

He had been happy playing his games in Hong Kong. Hong Kong was like Shanghai had been for him before he found it necessary to flee: one terrific playground. In Hong Kong he hoped to get back in the swing of things again, stop looking over his shoulder all the time, but as with Shanghai, and before that, Bangkok, and before that, London, his hopes were ultimately dashed.

Everywhere he went was the same for Eddie. He continued to do what it was he always did; he continued to get what it was he always had. In short, nothing but trouble, with a capital W.

The woman with child in the present case was, as always, an attractive one, from an attractive and well-connected Chinese family, the sort of family who did not take kindly to being dishonored by anyone, let alone the distinguished looking westerner who had presented himself to them as a good catch for their educated daughter, who had deceived them with his charm and sophistry into believing he was courting her for the purposes of marriage, painting a rosy picture of their daughter's future married to a successful American businessman while he pilfered from them and then squandered away in high-risk investments, funds worth more than her dowry.

They were after their rambling, gambling, middle-aged American playboy on the run, the breathtakingly reckless day trader who had defrauded them of all that they deemed invaluable. They had their goons hot on his trail and that wasn't funny to Edward Beaumont III. They were big goons and there were a lot of them and they had followed him all the way to Hong Kong and they didn't seem to mind a game of hide and seek, nor were they about to give up the chase for him anytime soon.

So he was going home at last, returning to the scene of his earliest romantic crimes. Those girls must all be married, divorced, and remarried by now, he reasoned. The dust finally settled. Whatever it took, he would, he promised himself, tread very lightly once there, so as not to stir it all up again. Yes, he would. A day or a decade, no matter. He was going to tread lightly now, until this storm blew over, until everything settled back down again.

The "your father" clanged like a broken bell. Lydia gazed into the fire and waited for Roy to check on the turkey again before saying another word. When he abruptly left she sent her mother a pained expression but

[&]quot;Daddy knows he's coming?"

[&]quot;Your father doesn't return my calls. I don't know what he knows."

still said nothing. In the embers she could see shadowy figures. They were dancers and fighters. They were frantically fusing together and licking at the walls, only to disintegrate.

"I'm sorry, honey."

Sorry, honey, sorrow, honey, sad, honey. Lydia was sorry, too, ineffably sorry. Sorry rose up scorching and licked at her insides. She was sorry that the lake house had needed a master carpenter, that its former mistress had needed a master carpenter. I have a fire going. She was sorry about Venus. She regretted the elbow and the earrings. She thought of calling to say so. Sorry I nearly put your teeth out in a panic, she wanted to tell her. Forgive me.

"Lydia...?"

"I know, Mom. So am I."

Roy reentered the room cautiously wearing his new pants. "Ready when you are."

"Ready as ever," Marilyn said, glancing to her daughter.

Lydia glanced to both of them. Del was right, she mused. Roy was a man who could get away with wearing leather pants without the risk of looking queer. Delilah was wrong, however, in her romantic hope that Marilyn would ever be done with him.

Standing an arm's length apart from each other, Lydia could practically see the force that was pulling them together. Illuminated in lamplight and winter's fire, they didn't look old so much as weary. Two weary people who had closed a vast distance between them, walking for so long it had forever stooped them, traveling by day till the sun and the wind and the rain had bleached their hair white and permanently stained their skin, traveling by night till the darkness had left them farsighted. Nothing and no one could have prevented this man and this woman from coming together. They were so clearly each other's destination.

"You go on ahead," Lydia told them. "I need to make a quick call."

Chapter 47: Fortitudinous

It helped immensely to find Paris dry and warm, even if the skies were inclement. It didn't hurt either that Claudine was there at the airport when the plane landed. Venus took her hand and allowed herself to be whisked into a waiting taxi.

"Ooh-what happened?"

"I hit it, Claudine."

"She bit it?"

"Hah."

At the apartment in Marais things were exactly the same as when Venus had last seen it, the cat sleeping like an overindulged trollop on the only decent chair Claudine owned, pantyhose and brassieres hanging from the kitchen hooks, half-read books and newspapers covering the floor like a carpet, and emptied boxes of Parisian confections collecting at the foot of the four-post bed. How the woman loved her *chocolat*.

She smiled and marveled anew at Claudine's exclusive address with its exposed plumbing network and turn-of-the-century appliances, the walls thick with paint and paper and so warped it made her feel seasick to stand up for too long or to ponder the pictures that hung on them, whether they were crooked or not. The wide plank floors were wavy, too, worn into an etched path that forked from the small entranceway. One road led to the left through the living room into the kitchen, the other went right for the bedroom, sneaking past the half-drawn makeshift curtains Claudine had tacked across the doorway for privacy. Privacy from whom, Venus could only speculate. Maybe there were some who came uninvited, who were not welcome in her bedroom. To them, perhaps she was just a coquette and not a mistress. If that was the case then she liked the curtains there, Venus decided, stepping over the fork deliberately and halting in the middle of the living room to drop her bag.

"Même chose, non?"

Yes, exactly the same. Venus threw her coat on the back of the tattered couch and the cat sat up and stretched before landing to the floor with a thud and strolling over to it. Ugh, she thought, as it began plucking, drooling, and kneading. Honestly, she'd seen better behaved strays in the projects.

"She likes you," Claudine said, scratching behind its ears and wiping its double chin. "You see?"

"She just has expensive taste, I think."

"You think that's so?" Claudine asked. Venus Angelo was looking all grown up these days. With her new coif, much more French than Américain. "Moi aussi."

"English, Claudine. English, s'il vous plait."

Claudine was flushed, her eyes twinkling like a pair of jewels. She might be too fond of this arrogant Américain with the bruised lip who spoke no French. "Oh-kay, Venus," she said, turning for the kitchen. "Some chocolat for bed?"

The rain in Spain falls mainly in Madrid, or so it seemed. Helaine sat on the window seat staring at the soggy city through rain-spattered panes, waiting for Lydia to call, waiting for Carlos to bring the hot chocolate.

She dreamt of her mother last night. One of those peculiar and elusive dreams that one remembers having but doesn't. God, her parents had been dead so long, she couldn't recall the last time she had dreamt about them. She didn't know if she'd seen her father in this one. She had the feeling he wasn't there, but then she felt sure she had heard him. What had he said to her?

"Come in, Carlos. It's open."

"Here you go. Hot chocolate, toast, melon...and the papers, if you can bear them."

She could not. "I'll pass today. Thank you, though."

The press was sexing up the tour, quoting her out of context in order to create more controversy, controversy being such a good stimulus for sales and all. She didn't know which was worse, the conservative media or the liberal. Both were at each other's throats, bickering about her and berating their opposition. It was a bloody din, morning, noon, and night. A full blown Kristenson slugfest, the stress of which had made her miss her period.

```
"What am I today?"
```

"I didn't read them yet," he fibbed.

"Carlos."

"A Gandhi."

"Yah-and what else?"

"A passive-aggressive-antisocial-radical-female-supremacist. Eat your breakfast, you man-eater."

"Ouch."

"You asked."

"So I did. No more interviews, Carlos. I never cared for interviews. I'm not doing anymore interviews. They can kiss my-"

"No interviews. Gotcha. Now what I've planned for these next two days is a little rest and rehabilitation starting with a massage this morning at eight. Do you want your bath before or after?"

A bath or a massage was the furthest from her mind right now. "Carlos, can you get rid of Chuck and Antonio? I don't want Lydia to know I need bodyguards. Get rid of them for me, would you? As a Christmas present?"

The bodyguards were a bone of contention between them. She claimed to be conscious of their presence awake or sleeping. "Impossible, Dr. Kristenson. You said so yourself, you need them. Besides," he said, noticing her playing with her food, "they don't eat much. Just like you."

Jesus how she needed to menstruate. "Fine," she replied, poking with a piece of toast at the scum floating in her cup and ignoring what seemed to be a condescending smile. "I'll have my bath after the massage."

It would prove one day to be a very good thing for Helaine that Carlos Montague was infatuated with her, but for the moment, as it pertained to armed guards, it was an inconvenience.

"After it is. And there's your phone call, so I'll see you for lunch then."

"Thanks, Carlos...hello...yes...Lydia?"

"Lana. Are you alone?"

She listened for the door. "Alone now, good morning."

"Good evening. We have to stop meeting like this."

"Do you want to stop?"

"Never. I wouldn't know how."

"I could design a twelve-step program for you if you like. I'm qualified."

"I'd relapse after the eleventh."

"Oh, good. I'm not sorry to hear that. How's the weather?"

"Cold. How's Spain?"

"Damp."

"Ah...me, too."

"Darling, did anyone ever tell you you're a terrible tease?"

Brain-teasers and margaritas. Paula was taking it easy by the pool tonight, resting up for the annual Treadwell holiday bash tomorrow evening and keeping one eye on her husband as he swam his laps in a crawl so laboriously slow she didn't know how he managed to stay afloat.

Fifteen down: seven letters. Un-sunken treasure?

She was trying in vain to call Lydia since the woman had failed to RSVP as requested, but all she could get at the Kristenson-Beaumont fortress was a busy signal. It was nothing but an exercise in futility, she suspected, but she sent her another text message on the cell phone anyway.

"Honestly, Mr. Treadwell, a rubber duckie could swim faster than that!"

He didn't appear to hear her.

Seven letters down, with an θ and an m-who the hell could she be talking to for so long? She circled Lydia's name and put a question mark beside it. Over fifty guests tomorrow, most of them shitheads. Ho! ho! Talking to Delilah Lewiston probably. Paula checked her list to make sure she had invited Delilah. Guest number twenty-nine: martinis. Ms. Lewiston had RSVP'd. She wrote herself a reminder to call the maintenance man to clean the pool in the morning in case anybody fell in.

Dickie must have heard her after all.

"Well, what'd you think of that?" he asked, fishing for a compliment and dripping like a wet dog all over her legs.

```
"Mark Spitz on Quaaludes, if you really want to know."
```

"What's wrong?"

"It's Ms. I'm-just-a-visitor-on-this-planet Beaumont."

"Oh, her. She's not coming?"

"I don't know."

"Flotsam," he said, toweling off.

"Flotsam?"

"Fifteen down."

Fifteen down was...flotsam.

Rrriiinnng!

"Hello?"

"Paula, I forgot."

"You're coming?"

"Yes, sorry."

Lydia Beaumont, guest number one: <u>no alcohol</u>. Paula wrote "flotsa" beside her name and penciled in "Lydiaam" on the crossword, in her perturbation never noticing the errors.

He was mistaken if he believed that Stanley Kandinsky Esq. could hush up his divorce if his wife sued him for one, or that he would offer him his shoulder to cry on. His lawyer was too familiar with the facts for any of that nonsense. The best save-face measure he could take, Stanley advised, was to strike first and immediately file for a no-fault. That would leave Edward Beaumont wide open to speculation but spare him the public ridicule, ridicule being something that the notorious womanizer was simply not up to at this juncture, if ever.

He'd have his pride; she'd have half their assets. No contest. And it would only take the amount of time required to fill out a form and write a check to change his life forever. And Marilyn's.

"Who's the guy?" Stanley inquired, when the paperwork was done.

"Some Mountain William."

"And that is...?"

"A fancy term for hillbilly."

"Oh, I see. Where did Marilyn meet her mountain man, if I may ask?"

"My daughter's redoing our summer home. He's the carpenter."

"A carpenter. Hmmm. And how is Lydia these days? I never see her anymore save in the news now and then and of course in the financials. Though that's probably a good thing, huh?"

"Stan," Edward muttered, "we've been your bread and butter here and you know it."

Stanley's eyes were black and unsympathetic. "You'll feel better in the morning," he said, humorlessly. And in a weird way Edward did.

Chapter 48: She

She arrived at the Treadwell's early and instructed her driver to be out front by ten so she could be home early. No slight to Paula, but she needed to touch base with Helaine before the flight tomorrow morning and she didn't want to be too tired or too drunk when she called.

The atmosphere at the mansion was tense in anticipation of the guests who Paula expected would be coming all at once. Lydia stayed out of her way and made small talk with Dickie as Paula took out her frustrations on the help and skittered to and fro, barking her orders at the back of bowed heads and sighing emphatically. Dickie smiled with a mixture of amusement and awe and offered Lydia a drink which she declined.

"She is magnificent," he said, more as a question than a fact.

Lydia acceded that much. Paula was magnificent. And overwhelming.

"No booze in the punch, my dear."

She tried it but it was too sweet without booze. A hunk of a waiter appeared with a tray of hors d'oeuvres—canapés with caviar, celery and carrots, deviled eggs. Dickie relieved him of his burden and the two of them devoured the goodies for supper while Paula glared over her shoulder at them as she all but whipped the sound-man for failing to produce his tunes on time, kicking at his six-foot speaker as one would a dumb animal who refused to get out of the way.

"But, but," Lydia could hear him whining, which she knew from experience would get him nowhere.

"It is wrong to say you only live once," Dickie said, waxing philosophical. "You only die once." He grabbed a bottle of champagne and her hand. "Let's scrounge up some dessert, kiddo."

Lydia followed him into the kitchen and together they absconded with a cheese cake and a basket of fresh strawberries, settling into chaise lounges by the pool to eat as much as they could before Paula discovered the theft and would come looking for them.

"Aren't we lucky, Lydia? All these spoils?"

They were lucky, she said. The cheese cake went splendidly with champagne, he said. She believed him but should abstain from the bubbly, she said. That was too bad, he said, because it was a very good year. It was indeed a good year, she said, but it wasn't over yet.

It didn't take long to ferret out the thieves.

"Your guests are finally arriving," Paula said, giving her husband the hairy eyeball. "Have we anything left to serve them?"

"Yes, Mrs. Treadwell," he said, looping his arm through hers and beckoning Lydia to join them. "We have ice."

"Ice! Don't even dream of leaving now that you're full," Paula warned Lydia.

"Perish the thought," Lydia replied. "What time is it?"

They were greeted in the main hall to strains of Pachebel and the sound-man, who came rushing to Paula's side like a dog to its master begging for a bone. She threw him one.

"Excellent," was the scrap she offered.

Thereafter he was walking on glass, monitoring his bells and whistles with palpable distress and casting furtive glances toward the hostess at the tiniest pop or crackle, wringing his hands, Lydia couldn't help but think, just like a man preparing himself for his execution.

"Good evening, Ms. Beaumont. Pleasure to see you again."

She had relegated herself to warming a chair in a corner of the room which she had hoped wouldn't get much traffic. "Merry Christmas," she said, clearly not remembering this guest's name and hoping he wouldn't bother to refresh her memory.

"Have you met my wife?" he asked.

```
He glanced awkwardly to his wife. "This is my wife," he said feebly.

(No kidding—where the hell is Delilah?) "Pleased to meet you," she replied, in her befuddled style. Paula was coming at them, a freight train on fire. The couple excused themselves to make way for her. "Something I said?"

"Why don't you socialize?" Paula demanded. "What is so fascinating about this corner?"

"It's quiet."

"You know, I often think the only thing interesting about you is your blond."

"Paula, that's not nice. True, but not nice. Is Del here yet?"

"Just walked in the door."

"Excellent. Then I'm socializing."

She did not think listless quite qualified as rested, but it was better than the agitated state she had been in
```

"No."

She did not think listless quite qualified as rested, but it was better than the agitated state she had been in before. She ran her hands through her hair and yawned with the disheveled blond at her vanity. Brushes, combs, powder, lipstick, anti-wrinkle cream. She wasn't pushing fifty anymore, she informed the woman. She was crashing into it.

Once again she had dreamt of her parents. Mother and father this time, but that was the only detail she remembered upon waking, the meaning, if there was any, made vague by her jolt into consciousness and then displaced entirely by the harsh hues of morning, the first sunshine to be had in Madrid for days. It lifted her soul and showed her age, one of life's bitter little tradeoffs. She snatched a hand towel, covered the mirror with it and opened the window blinds on a gold and purple city.

Through the wall she could hear Carlos stirring, his music blaring the morning revelry, a ritual she had grown accustomed to on the long and now supremely arduous tour. In the corridor, guarding her suite, though she hadn't looked out there yet, was Antonio. She was positive it was Antonio this morning. She could sense him through the door.

He had talked her into a game of cards yesterday, and she had welcomed the distraction, playing some version of rummy until the afternoon was gone and Chuck showed up to relieve him.

```
"What did you do before you became a-a-?"
  "Hired gun, Dr. Kristenson?"
  His English was pretty good.
  "Bodyguard, I was going to say."
  "I was what you call in the States a 'cop.' The police. You want to analyze me?"
  "No, just curious."
  "Analyze me. I do not mind it-rummy."
  Rummy. He won again.
  "What do you want me to find, Antonio?"
  "Me!"
  "Mmhmm." One of the two most commonly misplaced items in the universe: myself and my keys.
"Okay. I'll say a word and you say the first thing that comes to mind. Do you understand what I'm asking?"
  "Yes."
   "We start with sun."
   "Moon."
  "Boy?"
  "Son."
   "Son?" Three of diamonds. "Ah, a son. How about a car?"
  "Collision."
   "Earth?"
   "Quake."
  "Wind?"
  "Storm."
```

Face card. Jack of spades. "Man?"

```
"Woman."
"Marriage?"
"Divorce."
"Love?"
He hesitated and laid down a red queen. "Unrequited."
Hearts. She snapped it up. "House?"
"Home."
"Door?"
"Locked."
"Window?"
"Broken."
She froze. Suicide king. "Father?"
"Son."
"Antonio?"
"Yes, Dr. Kristenson?"
"I'm sorry. Do you want to tell me about it?"
"No-rummy."
```

Today Carlos was converting her rooms into a beauty spa so she doubted she would have any time for card games. She had on her roster another massage, a facial, a manicure, and, in advance of the reflexologist's visit, a pedicure. In between these appointments she planned to bring her neglected diary to date, perhaps take a few catnaps, and tomorrow morning, the big day, she would have her hair done, then lounge around, blond, pink and fragile, in something she hoped her wife might find appealing, something designed to be devastatingly diaphanous.

```
"Did I wake you, sleepyhead?"
"No...I was just dreaming about you."
"Oh? What was I wearing?"
"You know something, Lana? You never wear anything in my dreams."
"Well, that just doesn't surprise me, Lydia Beaumont. Not one bit."
```

She was nude, tidying up the apartment and shooing the cat away while Claudine was out running a quick errand for groceries and cigarettes. It should not have surprised her to stumble upon an old newspaper with a photo of Lydia and Helaine on it, but it did.

The trip to Zurich, Venus gleaned from it, hardly hearing the door opening, Claudine returning as quiet as a cat, bearing cigarettes and breakfast.

"Ah-hah, I was going to show you that. It is her, non?"

"How did you know?"

"Solmanshit-you work together!" She set her bag on the table and lit up a cigarette. "It is her. I know this, Venus. I am flattered."

"Bravo, Claudine. And it's Schmitt, Soloman-Schmitt. You've got breakfast for me?"

"Oui, petit déjeuner for my hungering Américaine."

She boarded the plane to Madrid at half past five. Fair weather, clear skies. Oh, man, how she hated to fly, part of the reason that private jets and whirlybirds were not counted among Ms. Beaumont's possessions.

"Liftoffs and landings, Liddy. Those are the only times you have to worry," Delilah said last night. "Statistically speaking."

She had a mind for statistics. She held her breath until the airplane left the runway.

She answered the door for her mother because Sharon was still not dressed when her date arrived. "She's not ready, yet."

"Can I come in anyway?" he asked.

She gave him a once-over and, thoroughly unimpressed, stepped aside. "I guess so."

"I'm Tom," he said, waiting for Helen to offer him a chair. "Tom," he repeated, unnerved by the surly girl wielding a violin bow as if it were a machete.

"I know," she answered. They were all Toms. Or Dicks. Or Harriets. "Another Tom."

He squeezed his lips together to stop an insult. "Run off and tell your mother I'm here, please."

She did not run. "Mommeeeeee!"

He covered his ears and swore.

She made Robert traditional Christmas Eve dinners even if he was a flaming atheist.

"What took you so long? I called for you a half hour ago."

"E-mail from Helaine. I don't know about this tour, Kay."

"What? Please, don't worry me."

Helaine was ready to throw in the towel, she had disclosed in her message.

She had raised five times the expected revenue already, not just in ticket sales but in charitable contributions, so it was fiscally feasible to cancel the rest of her world engagements without a loss and she knew that no one who watched the news regularly would blame her at this point if she did. The crowd scenes were flat out unmanageable, not just for her private security team but often for the municipalities she visited. Some of her scheduled cities had wired ahead with their safety concerns, urging her to concoct entrance and exit strategies for them, others were stretching civil liberties too thin for comfort, with law enforcement approaches that would make even Josef Stalin blink. Not in her name, she told Robert. She didn't want any part of it.

"She hasn't left the hotel in days, she says. Cabin fever's setting in."

"Well...but, Lydia will be there soon. Don't you think that's part of it, Robert? They're so obsessed with each other. I can't believe they've made it this far."

"I don't think it helps, that's for sure."

She was wearing the cocoa-colored bustier beneath her V-neck tennis sweater, preparing lamb chops for dinner when she got Stanley Kandinsky's express package. She would always, always remember this day. It was 3:33 in the afternoon and the bell rang and she hurried to the door thinking the moment must be charmed.

It was.

She would, accompanied by a few siblings, their significant others, and their offspring, have holiday dinner with her mom in the nursing home. It was not where Delilah wanted her to be, but it was where Mom wanted to be. Her husband was dead, most of her friends gone, she liked meeting new people, and this way she couldn't be called on to baby-sit rug-rats anymore. Sure bingo was a bore and she could do without the visiting square dancers and their frightening attire, but otherwise the joint was hopping, she claimed. A laugh a minute.

She had made a wooden sign in crafts class and hung it on her door. *Nuthouse Sweet Nuthouse* it screamed in garish purple and neon orange paint. Delilah made her take it down.

"It'll just alienate the other residents," she explained.

"Put it in your office then," her mom said. She had spent weeks on the project and hated to see her hard work go to waste. "You don't mind alienating people."

"Nah, I do that for a living. Whole nations at a time."

"You'll keep it?"

"Sure. I'll hang it from my desk."

"Good girl. What did you say your name was again?"

"Ma, that's not even remotely funny."

Chapter 49: War and Peace

It would have made a great photo-op for a terrorist wanna-be, but Lydia didn't need the attention, paparazzis snapping her picture as airport security frisked her and rummaged through her baggage for a high-heeled shoe bomb.

Whale bone in her push-me-up, metal clips on her garters. It was hard for Lydia not to smile at the solemn faced guard conducting the inspection. She was ticklish after all.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Beaumont."

"Don't mention it."

Outside on the tarmac she easily picked out the "dark man" Helaine had described to her, the brooding Antonio, who would be riding with her in the chopper to the hotel. Obviously not one for glad-handing, he merely nodded when Lydia waved hello to him. Follow, she heard him say, his tone brusque and covert, his expressionless face half hidden behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses. She saw her twin selves in their ovals, windblown and apprehensive.

"Here," he said, shouldering her bag. She followed him.

Even inside the darkened passenger compartment he didn't remove the shades. He was gazing at her from behind them, Lydia knew, his posture that of a man always mindful of his gun. She turned the side of her face toward him and closed her eyes as the helicopter lifted away from the launch pad and lurched into its clumsy ascent, moving like a gigantic bumblebee overweighted with pollen. Fut, fut, fut the blades sang as they chopped through Madrid's atmosphere. Fut, fut, fut, fut, fut, she hoped it wouldn't take too long to get there. The noise was annoying and the company bad.

"So you're Dr. Kristenson's woman?" Antonio asked, attempting to break the ice with a sledgehammer.

She glanced at him, agog at his directness. "Take off your glasses, please."

He took off his glasses.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said into his knees, wiping the lenses with his handkerchief before secreting the glasses away into his suit and looking up at her again with keen, interrogating eyes. "You are her woman, belladonna?"

"I am her wife. Woman means...well, that means something else...generally."

"Oh, it means something else." He gave her an appraising stare, seeing well beneath her oxford grays. "You are not that something else, too? Generally?"

She pressed her tongue against the inside of her cheek and parsed her words ineffectually in her mind. Fut, fut, fut, fut, fut, fut, buzzed the bumblebee. At length she decided not to answer him.

On the hotel rooftop she watched with irritation as Carlos and Antonio exchanged unspoken challenges with each other, each determined to be the one who would carry her bag for her. She took it away from them and proceeded to the atrium unescorted, the wind whipping against her body so that she couldn't manage the door by herself.

"Belladonna!" Antonio called, outpacing the older Carlos by leaps and bounds.

She paused without turning to answer.

"Let me," he said, reaching around her for the handle. He yanked on it a couple times and it flung wide open, forcing her to step backwards into him.

"There," he whispered into her ear, his hand in her coat pocket.

"What the-?"

"My card," he said. "In case you should ever need my services."

He had his sunglasses on again. Carlos was approaching quickly. She stepped out of the embrace and over the threshold. "Never," she felt it necessary to inform him. "Believe me."

Antonio simply smiled.

"To the left," Carlos said, out of breath. "There's the private elevator."

Outside Helaine's room, the stolid Aussie Lydia had heard about was positioned like the queen's guard. She halted at the door, Carlos and Antonio at her heels.

"It's open," the young man said unblinkingly.

She went in and locked them out.

The hotel room was afire, the evening sun shining through the window slats leaving bright orange bars across the mahogany table in front of her. Christmas dinner had just been served, pheasant under glass and platters of steaming goodies, but all she could detect still were the lingering smells of diesel exhaust and men's cologne, odors incongruous with the picture that greeted her and inappropriate for the occasion. She leaned back against the door and let the feast fill her senses. From the other side came the stern voice of Carlos reaming out Don Juan Antonio. She was sure he was addressing Antonio. Don't let it happen again, she overheard him warn. She moved away from the door so she wouldn't catch the reply.

She was in for a real treat tonight, she could tell, and one of those famous smiles, the first in weeks, began to creep to the corners of her mouth. Forget everything else. Lana was here somewhere and there were two unopened bottles of Spanish wine: a table red for their dinner and a port for dessert. Both, Lydia noted with rising pleasure, were very good years, very good years she remembered very well. She popped a chocolate-dipped strawberry into her mouth. The champagne, naturally, was French. The poem in the champagne glass was that of love stricken Propertius, once more fixating on his Cynthia.

If you are flint, say no; if not, come soon:

Mere words, that count for nothing, are no boon.

One blow falls bitterest on the lover's head—

When she that's hoped for sends excuse instead.

He lies in bed, and sighs, and rolls about;

bids doors be barred, to keep the truant out;

And makes the slave, questioned to death, retell

The doom he dreads to hear, and knows so well.

She felt her, smelled her perfume, heard the rustle of her evening gown before she glimpsed Helaine from the corner of her eye framed in the archway to the bedroom. The light behind her was a larger than life aura, outlining a body as ideal to Lydia as any Greek statue, and burning permanently into her mind an image she would never easily forget, the deliberate beauty of Helaine Kristenson, a woman designed by a goddess herself, Lydia speculated, feeling her mouth water, her senses singe.

"Are you flint, Ms. Beaumont?"

Lydia was suddenly aware of the weight of the bag she toted on her shoulder. "I'm-?"

"Flint?"

The strawberry was a lump in her throat. Weight was slipping from her shoulder. She swallowed. "Nay, I burn."

"Burn-and come soon?"

"Uh...well...every chance I get."

"Hah!" She passed Lydia and stood on the opposite side of the table. "Chance is luck. Do you feel lucky tonight?"

"Verv."

"My lady feels lucky tonight and she burns," Helaine murmured, lighting the candles in the centerpiece. "Then 'confess your weakness; lovers should not lie. It's some relief to say for whom you die.' Whom for, my love?"

"You're to die for, Lana."

"Ah, I am. 'Love never lets his victims fly too free, but checks from time to time their liberty'-how was your flight, gorgeous?"

"Uneventful-come here."

"I tarry awhile, just to tantalize."

"Then you're flint yourself. Or 'your heart beats slow'!"

"Ooh, Lydia! Nay, nay, 'love put off is never put away'...tell me more."

"More, Cynthia?"

"Yes, more. I delight in your ruin and regret that Paula cannot hear of it herself."

"Oh, you are a cruel mistress...'you must be meek and bow as love requires, so may the outcome answer your desires.' Come here, I said. I'm weary."

"I come soon and send no excuse."

"She comes soon. I pleased a girl of taste and bravely bore: her tantrums—praise me thus, I ask no more. Let later lovers read me when they pine, and ease their own distress when they learn mine.' Bar the door, spurned poet, and see how much she likes it."

"You couldn't, Lydia Beaumont."

"No, I don't suppose so. I confess."

"Poor, poor poet. 'Trained as I am your griefs are safe with me, yet I've a greater skill than secrecy'...hmm?"

"I know that, Dr. Kristenson. It's what brings me here."

"You're a cad to say so."

"Can we do this lying down?"

"I'll bet not."

"No, she says." Lydia plucked another strawberry. "So, 'the path to pleasure leads to bankruptcy'!"

"Pleasure is it?"

"LOVE the poet must have meant-open your mouth."

"Yummmm-'for whatsoever love is held to be, its mark is unpredictability'-try this."

"What is it?"

"Truffles, darling, open wide."

"Mmmmmm...I'm too predictable?"

"I never said that."

"Then I'm stumped. What then when brinkmanship fails?"

"Well, as I spontaneously perceive, Ms. Beaumont, you have one of two choices."

"Choices, you say?"

"Choices, darling."

Choices were not bad things. Lydia was into choices. Her bag landed at her feet with a thud. "Nice dress, by the way," she said, making her way slowly down the edge of the table.

"I thought you might like it."

Lydia was about to round the bend. Helaine grabbed the champagne and moved to the other side.

"You'll need this. Don't you think?"

"A glass...yes." The cork shot off and the bottle foamed. "Oops!" Helaine teased, putting her mouth over the tip of it.

"Oh, shit, Lana." Lydia was gaining ground. "What are my choices?"

"Hot or cold," Helaine said, eluding her again.

Lydia held out the glass and Helaine reached over the table to fill it.

"Hot or cold what?" Lydia asked, picking up a napkin and waving it like a white flag.

"Dinner, my love. Shall we have it hot, as it is?" Helaine proposed with a sweep of her bare arm. "Or cold...as it will inevitably become?"

Inevitably become?

The bottle and the goddess were disappearing together, fading into the sunset of the bedroom. Lydia gulped the champagne, threw the glass against the wall and hastened after them. "Cold," she said, in hot pursuit.

"Cold-you're pretty good on your feet, darling."

"And you're pretty good," Lydia replied, overtaking her, "off."

If you are accustomed to hostilities and life in a heavily armed society-as VP Angelo had been since the day she was born-then peace is for you nothing more than a calm before the storm, the deadly quiet that

precedes a bloody drive-by, the smoky seconds before the sirens go off, the sound of the bell when the markets close. Strolling hand in hand with a beautiful girl in the Tuilleries unmolested, or down an ancient cobblestone street the width of two horses and a surrey in search of that perfect crepe and a bottle of sparkling cider or a rare print or a bouquet, is not all that relaxing. When you are waiting for the spray of bullets to hit the wall, when you are poised for the fight or the flight, when you are ready, constantly ready, and always looking over your shoulder lest you be caught by surprise, peace can be a rather nerve-rattling experience.

She had been at home, she thought, in the synthetic Americas of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Bangkok, Bombay-speeding cultures that shared commerce, crime and commercialism could never truly seem that foreign to her, even if she didn't speak the native languages or honor their customs and ways. But here in the heart of Paris, in the sleepy Paris that Claudine introduced to her, that, just like Claudine, didn't wake up until ten or eleven in the morning, here in the playful Paris that wouldn't go to bed until the last musician went home, Venus felt like an absolute refugee, war torn and restless, the bombs of her other existence still echoing in her head, the bullets perpetually ricocheting.

"What is this?" Claudine complained. "You are stiff!"

Steef.

"What, Venus? You are a criminal, so stiff?"

The Paris police traveled in packs. In twos or threes or more, they were everywhere, patrolling the peaceful citizenry, giving what fors to the picketing unionists, demanding papers from unruly guests. Sometimes they were on foot, sometimes on their bicycles. They were puny compared to those in the States, even compared to Venus, but police were police and she had learned to distrust them. It was a natural reflex to recoil. The very sight of them made her tense.

"Tense, is the word, Claudine. Not stiff."

"Tense. What is this tense about? You tell me."

You are not a tourist on holiday, Venus recalled Paula's admonishment. You are a goddamn ambassador. Right.

What did a goddamn ambassador know of racial profiling or bigotry anyway? Of corruption, intimidation, or excessive force? "You're the prettiest woman in Paris, Madame Reseigner. I swear it."

Claudine wrinkled her nose and smiled. It was too hard to turn down the compliment. "Oh, Venus, Venus," she said, stopping to strategically adjust one stocking. "You are a gangstah, non?"

Uh-oh. Perhaps. "Oui, je suis."

Beneath the rock of her heart Venus had something for unpretentious Claudine. It was impossible not to. She wasn't cool like Anna, hot and then cool, and then asleep. Claudine was hot and then warm and she slept like a cat in its owner's lap, purring contentedly there until morning. She wasn't cool and then cold and then frigid the way Lydia chose to be, changeable Lydia who might allow herself to be seduced so long as she never knew about it. Simmering Lydia, popping her lid so she wouldn't boil over.

"Oh-kay?"

Venus shook the adrenaline out of her arms. There should be a warning label for Lydia Beaumont. Somewhere on her body it should say in bold type *caution*, *contents under pressure*.

"What now, Venus?"

There probably is one. One with bar codes and everything. And when you scan it, it reads *invalid access code* or *sorry, try again*.

"Venus!"

"Claudine-I want to buy you something."

"Oh? Chocolat?"

"Chocolate! No, something more lasting."

"What?"

"What would you like?"

"Mmmmm...I think juste chocolat."

Venus bought Claudine chocolate and the oil painting she had been pining for, a still-life she had spied tucked away in a catalogue room in one of the galleries on St.-Germain-des-Prés. Oil paintings, old or new, didn't hold much appeal for Venus, that was no secret, but on the dealer's recommendation and in the

interest of pleasing her companion, she added one small but elaborate etching to the purchase, a nude reclining on a settee with a cat. The portrait resembled Claudine, Venus reasoned, and, unframed, she wouldn't have to bother with shipping it home. It would fit perfectly into her briefcase.

On the way back to Marais they stopped at the pet store for cat treats and while Claudine gossiped and flirted with the ancient proprietor, Venus browsed his aisles. She knew exactly what she was looking for and, alleluia, there it was, stashed atop the animal crates: the pet bed of her dreams. She bought this, too, in hopes of substituting it for her once spotless overcoat.

"Ahh, you spoil my pussycat, now? It's too far, Venus. Henrietta doesn't need it."

"Too much-Hank will love it."

"Hank!"

Venus felt Hank better suited an animal with so many vulgar propensities. It vexed Claudine to hear her cat's name besmirched like this.

"Poor Henrietta," she said. "You carry it, then."

Venus schlepped the day's haul with a smirk, admiring her lover from behind while Claudine leisurely strolled up the block and nibbled at her new box of chocolates and made eyes at the unsuspecting passersby.

Sugar pie, honey bunch, Venus sang in her head, picking up her gait to match the beat and gain some ground. You know that I love you. It would be a process, she already knew, finding that ideal spot for the painting. Can't help myself. And the cat bed. Hmmm. Now that might require fortification. I love you and—she should stop at the market for a bottle of wine and—nobody else. There was plenty of room for it under her arm. She could accommodate a bottle of wine and a brick of cheese. A baguette. A smoked salmon. Mangos. Even a can of sardines for that rotten, furry beast. Sugar pie, honey bunch. She added a bar of white chocolate for good measure. A dozen lacy carnations.

They were red.

"Here, Hank. Where's your mommy?" Venus threw the bed in the corner and stole her coat out from under Henrietta.

"Meowlp!" the cat protested.

"Meow," Venus corrected. The shower water was running and steam was billowing from the bathroom. Venus placed the cat on her new bed and hung her coat on a high hook in the kitchen. It was a small shower stall, but it could tolerate two people. If they were making love.

"Meowlp!" the cat repeated, standing in the center of the bed as if on a rock in the middle of a raging river. "Meowlp! Meowlp!"

"Come on, Henrietta. What's the deal?"

"Ssssst!" she answered, darting under the sofa.

"Oh, for cryin' out loud. Look. See? Sardines. That's English for-for sardines."

"Venus...?"

"Yes, yes. I'm here."

"Meowlp?"

"Nice kitty."

"Ssssst."

"Venus?"

"I'm coming! Here, eat this, Hank. It's fish. Poisson, POISSON."

That cat stuck its head out and sniffed the air.

"Yeowwwl," it said, calling woefully for its mother.

"Venus...où es-tu?"

"Coming, coming."

"Henrietta...où es-tu?"

"Yeeeowwwl."

"Where are you?"

"In here."

A few days of female companionship and marital bliss was all it took to jump-start Helaine's hormones again. Unfortunately, she was experiencing the kind of menstrual cramping she had, heretofore, only heard anecdotal accounts of or read about in her medical journals. Lydia found her at three in the morning as white as a ghost sitting on the toilet, her head on her knees, the long blond hair nearly sweeping the floor.

"Brandy," she moaned. "There's no goddamned aspirin."

Lydia came back with a glass of port and Helaine took one look at the blood red liquid and covered her mouth so she wouldn't vomit.

"Be a good patient, Dr. Kristenson, and take your medicine."

"My medicine." She propped her head up against the wall and drank the port in several large gulps. "God, Lydia. I've got cold sweats and I'm—I'm practically hemorrhaging here."

"Come lie down. You'll feel bet-"

"Lying down is not the answer to everything," Helaine snapped.

"Uh-oh...come, Lana...let's lie down. It's almost morning. We'll send Mr. Montague for some brandy and ibuprofen."

The port was quick acting on an empty stomach. Helaine permitted herself to be led to bed again. "Do you have your period?" she asked, juicily. "Is that why I got—oh, no, I think I need some water."

A glass of water later, she was fast asleep.

Lydia didn't have her period but she got it the next day. A week ahead of cycle.

Chapter 50: Women

New Year's Eve found Venus as resolute as any woman could be, if not more so.

Lips intact at last, she was resolved never to corner the esteemed Mrs. Kristenson again. As a matter of fact, she was determined to simplify her life all across the board this year and so Anna, too, was on her list of don'ts. A woman who could identify another merely by a whiff of perfume or a smudge of lipstick was not a woman to mess with and Venus wondered why it hadn't occurred to her sooner.

The cab ride from the airport was an eye-opener this time. She made the cabby snake through the city so she could get a better look at the place she had been calling "home" for thirty years. For good reason he was nervous about touring the old stomping grounds, but a hundred dollar bill gave him some newfound courage and, as it was burning a hole in his pocket, he made no objection whatsoever to the risky venture of looping in and around the projects for awhile, though Venus did hear him breathe a loud sigh of relief when she finally directed him to take her home.

Home now was an exclusive midtown address and a life of privileges and a world of plenty. She pondered her journey silently in the back seat of his idling cab and he waited patiently and, of course, expectantly as she sat there breathing in the fumes and contemplating her future in the darkness.

Money can't buy you love, her mother was always insisting, and even her kid sister would back that up. But it had bought Lydia Beaumont love, hadn't it?

She pulled another crisp bill from her purse and slipped it through the slot.

"Thank you, ma'am!" the cabby said. "Thank you!"

Money, money, money, money. It can't buy you love.

The doorman rushed outside to greet her. She tipped him for carrying her bags into the elevator.

It can't buy you love.

"Thank you, ma'am!"

Can it?

The elevator seemed especially small tonight. She entered it gravely and began the customary count to the penthouse.

Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen...she could easily have afforded that more expensive penthouse uptown...eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one...indeed, except for the glass elevator, she had liked it better than this one. It was roomier, the patio was larger, and there was underground parking and keyless entries. *Ding.* But Venus couldn't ride in a glass elevator. A glass elevator in a glass chute? Nun-uh! Not after having been raised to stay away from windows.

She unlocked the gate and tossed her keys across the tiled floor. They clattered to a stop against the brick wall.

Was there anything she did that wasn't because of something else? Something or someone else?

She had gone to work for Solmanshit because Lydia Beaumont had asked her to. It had not been the best offer, but she had been captivated by the blue-eyed recruiter. She continued to work there for the very same reason. Only now she was more than captivated by Lydia Beaumont. She was captured by her. And that was not good.

Not good for Venus Angelo. She had been the prisoner of nothing and no one before this. Poverty hadn't kept her. Fear hadn't kept her. Racism, chauvinism, bigotry, prejudice. All had failed to take her prisoner. What was love compared to those things?

Love. What was love? Oh, really. (Only one message blinking on the answering machine.) Love is something to escape from then. (It's probably that witch Paula.) Or something to rise above.

"Venus, it's—I—I wanted to—just to wish you a Merry Christmas and uh—a safe trip. I'm...you don't need to call me back." (Rewind.)

```
"-you don't-"
(Rewind.)
"-nd uh-a safe tri-"
(Rewind.)
"-erry Christmas and uh-a sa-"
(Rewind.)
"-wanted to-just to wish you a Merry Christma-"
(Rewind.)
"-enus, it's-I-I wanted to-just to wish you a Merry Christmas and uh-"
(Rewind.)
"Venus, it's-I-I wanted to-just to wish you a Merry Christmas and uh-a safe trip. I'm...you don't need to call me back."
(Rewind.)
"Venus, it's-"
```

Lydia had a daydreaming glaze on for this afternoon's briefing with Joint President Treadwell. She was still half in Madrid. The other half was off in the future, in Montreal, her next scheduled rendezvous. In between all this time-traveling, she was wondering if there wasn't some other occupation she might find worthwhile pursuing, something she could take genuine pride in and that would make more constructive use of her time. Like dog walker or fruit picker. Circus clown.

There was a spider's web in the corner of Paula's otherwise pristine office. It stretched from the ceiling to the wall. Lydia watched with unearthly interest as the spider wrapped its noisy lunch, presumably a fly. She had heard somewhere that the spider's venom paralyzed its victims, but this fly wasn't paralyzed. Paula droned on and on. The spectacle was both grisly and compelling.

```
"And that would bring you up to date, Ms. Beaumont."
```

The fly was uttering its last gasps. "I might," Lydia replied.

Paula fell silent, too, assessing JP Beaumont's condition, those big dark circles under her eyes, that faraway look she always found so disturbing.

"What, Paula?"

"You look shockingly bad, I must say. Go home and sleep it off."

Jet lag was only one contributing factor. Lydia had barely slept in Madrid, a city she would be able to claim she had visited, but never seen. She was, in her sleepless delirium, thinking to inquire about Venus, whether she was in her office today, but the thought dissipated like clouds at Paula's suggestion. To sleep perchance. Didn't that seem like a good idea?

"Great idea," she said, sounding more lucid than she actually was. How do you become a dog walker? Do you go to school to pick fruit? Now clown schools Lydia had heard about. So how many years does it take to become a clown? Or was it a master clown? She should've stayed home today. Clearly Paula would have understood if she had.

"Zzzzzzzz," she heard as she left her chair. She still heard it riding the elevator down to the lobby. "Home," she told her driver, and they buzzed back to the penthouse where she finally collapsed on the couch.

Morning found Lydia in confrontation with the maid over the subject of food.

"Popcorn and cake," the woman scolded, "are not on the food pyramid."

She was bean counting, Lydia asserted. Bean counting untouched dinners.

"I make a beautiful dinner and it dries out on the plate. What is this? Just add water and you eat? You have to eat, Dr. Kristenson says."

It is difficult when you're used to eating with someone to get inspired to dine alone.

The dinner had not appealed to her, Lydia asserted. You're not the boss of me and popcorn and cake *is* food. Anyway, she didn't look much worse for the wear of it, she argued.

```
"You get much worse looking and-"
```

"Nothing. Bacon and eggs?"

Bacon and eggs. Lydia's stomached gurgled.

Bacon and eggs, toast with marmalade, French fries, grapefruit juice, and lots and lots of coffee. She was late for work but arrived replenished.

```
"VP Angelo is in the building," Paula announced sarcastically.
```

"Two hours on the job and she's beside herself already."

"About?"

"Her new assistant. He says splendid this, splendid that. She finds the expression unbearable."

Unbearable colloquialisms. No grounds for dismissal there. "Splendid, huh?"

"Splendid."

"Oh, that would be unbearable."

"Yeah, but she's not kidding me," Paula said. "Something else is in her craw."

Another unbearable colloquial. Lydia tried to evade the subject with a disinterested nod.

"Something to do with you, I'm sure," Paula said. "I wasn't born yesterday, girls."

"Paula, let's not. Don't I have a mission here today? What am I without a mission? C'mon, let's have at it."

"You're Head Handshaking Honcho today."

"Whose palms need rubbing?"

"Oh, Representative So-and-So and some behind-the-scenes colleagues of his. I forget."

"Republican or Democrat?"

"What's the difference?"

None that she could think of.

"They're just thrilled to be able to meet with you, Ms. Beaumont. Up close and personal like and-don't let me down, please."

She didn't. But schmoozing was hard work. Lydia went home blistered and bleary.

Beef stroganoff, scalloped potatoes and broccoli awaited her on the top shelf in the fridge, all ready for the microwave and labeled with a note that said, "eat me-doctor's orders." She ate the dinner cold and had a bowl of sugary cereal for dessert.

Stomach full and lids heavy, the couch (oh, the couch, the couch) was calling to her once more. She took the cordless phone and a feather pillow with her and popped in an old movie: Van Johnson liberating Paris and, not incidentally, Elizabeth Taylor. Lydia didn't find him particularly attractive and she bet that Liz hadn't either.

```
"Hello?"
```

Dinner party at the Keagan's Friday night. She wrote an illegible note to herself and hung it on the fridge. Back on the couch and in Paris, things weren't going too well between Van and Liz. Lydia yawned a few times, turned up the volume, stretched, and turned it down again.

```
"Hello?"
```

[&]quot;And what?"

[&]quot;And?"

[&]quot;Darling."

[&]quot;Robert-very funny."

[&]quot;Just a reminder about Friday."

[&]quot;Friday? Oh, that's right, Friday. Seven you said?"

[&]quot;Dinner's at seven. You can come earlier, though. Show us your slides of Madrid."

[&]quot;Slides of...you're very sly, Mr. Keagan. I'll see you Friday."

[&]quot;Darling."

[&]quot;Lana."

[&]quot;You catch up on your z's yet?"

```
"Almost-you?"
```

Harry was at Frank's Place early today, helping the cook to get things rolling for a private party at noon. That gave him the opportunity to see Lydia Beaumont jog past the windows and then, moments later, Venus Angelo in her sweatsuit on the opposite side of the street. Both ladies were taking their morning run downtown, running, coincidentally it would seem, in the direction of the waterfront. He poured a cup of coffee and stationed himself at the table in the window seat, the morning's newspaper a foil for his spying.

"Love Doc" this and that again, and one never-ending hubbub. He had read garbage like this before. What a pity, he mused, flipping through the paper for the horoscopes as he kept an eye out for Lydia and Venus. What a terrible pity.

Lydia and Venus. They ran, he knew, but never together. Were they running together this morning? He studied the stars for everyone, including those notably absent.

Down on the empty waterfront, the ladies eventually reached the end of the line before they finally recognized each other. They waved shyly before making their usual circles and loping back uptown again. Neither knew what to say this morning and both were glad to be in motion and preoccupied. It was a somber winter day and the clock was ticking and there was nothing left for them to say, nothing to do about the widening gulf but to go to work. They ran on toward their respective penthouses, barely glancing up from their opposing sidewalks to look across the street and hardly noticing anything else but the women in their peripheries.

Typically it's a twenty-minute jog back for Lydia, Harry calculated. Twenty minutes if there's nothing keeping her.

Hmmm. Today's a ten if you're born in the year of the tiger. Eight for the rabbit. Five for the monkey.

Running's bad for the knees. Bad for the ankles. Good for the heart.

Harry was amazed how many tigers and rabbits he knew. But clever monkeys? He didn't know so many monkeys.

Good for the heart. Running is.

Venus Angelo was probably a rabbit. How old did he read she was? Young. Yeah, probably a rabbit. A lucky rabbit.

Seventeen minutes, ten seconds and Harry caught sight of Venus in the homestretch. There was young, beautiful, lucky Venus. How effortlessly she runs. How that woman glides.

It's nine for the horse and nine for the dragon, six for the ox and boar. Horses and dragons. Oxen and boars.

Hmm.

And the stopwatch says nineteen minutes and thirty-eight seconds.

According to this you don't want to be a snake or a rat today. Only two for a snake and three for a rat.

Twenty minutes.

Now that leaves dog, sheep, and rooster unaccounted for. Let's see. Dog...? Sheep...? Rooster...?

Twenty minutes and thirteen seconds and here's our Lydia, limping slightly and looking extremely frustrated with herself. Competitive, glamorous Lydia Beaumont, demanding so much of herself. Harry shook his head and rattled the paper. *Teh, teh, teh.* How hard she works.

Well now! The dog, sheep, and rooster might as well go for it today. All sevens.

Harry was impressed with Lydia's time this morning, even if she wasn't. He buried his head in the newspaper as she passed by the restaurant.

"You're limping," Paula said. "Now what?"

177

[&]quot;No rest for the weary. We're out of here tomorrow and then it's Lisbon or bust—is someone there?"

[&]quot;Elizabeth Taylor."

[&]quot;Wow. I have to admit that intimidates me. Send her my regards, will you?"

[&]quot;I'm not even going to mention your name."

[&]quot;Oh, Lord! I've created a monster."

"Jogging. I think maybe arthritis."

"Arthritis! Where's VP Angelo? I've been looking for her all day."

"I don't know. I sa-she didn't come in today?"

"Can't find her anywhere. Missed the one o'clock meeting, too."

That was out of character. Where was she?

VP Angelo was home crafting her letter of resignation. No, not one of those corporate mea culpas or a moving-on-to-bigger-and-better-things resignations. No, no. A genuine take-this-job-and-shove-it resignation. Take your hypocrisy, take your bendable ethics, your world domination, your spies, your fucking bottom-line mentalities, your greed-driven philosophies, your hierarchical bullshit, your kings and queens and princes.

And shove it.

Addressed to both joint presidents, the letter formally began, "I regret to advise you of my decision to resign." But she lost momentum after that and the cursor blinked tauntingly beside the "n" while she mulled over telling the women the truth or maybe in the end simply sanitizing it.

Regret wasn't true. She did not regret her decision. Soloman-Schmitt was a snake pit and she wanted out. She deleted "regret."

Wednesday and Thursday...still no Venus and the word on the street from Paula's spies was that the woman had become a shut-in. Incommunicado. It did not bode well that she wouldn't answer her phone calls or e-mails.

"She could be in contract negotiations as we speak," Paula fretted. "Imagine Angelo working for the competition!"

Lydia couldn't but.

Both joint presidents were concerned about her dereliction and both were at a loss as to what to do about it. Technically she could be relieved of her duties if it came to the attention of the board. If she didn't show by Friday there could be ample grounds.

"Go see her," Paula pleaded. "Talk some sense int-"

"You mean persuade her, Paula? Maybe persuasion's the prob-"

"Well then, it went too far! Didn't it? Way too far!"

Lydia shrugged in despair. It was a heartbreaking matter. "This is unproductive," she muttered. "I've got papers to push."

"Push her, Lydia. She's up there alone. Go and tell-"

"How do you know that?"

"That-what?"

"She's alone...how do you know that?"

"I know-I-it's-nevermind how I know. I know, that's all."

"Oh, Christ, Paula Treadwell. Christ!"

They didn't have much to discuss after that.

Friday came and went the same way, shrouded in silence and uncertainty, Treadwell bordering on hysteria, the joint presidents walking on eggshells and glass in their efforts to cover for an AWOL prince who had never missed a day of work in her life.

The matter of the disappearing Venus was becoming noticeable nonetheless. She had missed two more important meetings and the wasps' nest was abuzz over it. VP Angelo was gone, began the water cooler rumors in earnest. And how exciting, without a single word as to why!

Even Kate was confounded. "Honestly, I'd tell you if I knew."

Paula sneered contemptuously. "No you wouldn't, but kudos for a convincing performance, kid. Go back to work."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And Fitz-Simone..."

"Yes, Ms. Treadwell."

"Take over for her. Don't let anything pile up."

"Yes, ma'am. She's covered."

But VP Angelo didn't keep them in suspense for very much longer and by Friday's closing bell, hope, which had already been so fragile, was now completely shattered.

"I resign," her e-mail read. Subject: "Splendor."

Lydia packed up her briefcase and went home to crumble. Circus clown was looking better and better.

She did not trouble Helaine with these recent developments. Their conversation was light and breezy, about love and food and the Keagans' pending dinner party. There was no point in discussing work or Venus or Paula. Helaine had enough on her mind as it was and Lydia didn't think she would find the situation quite as depressing as she did. They hung up quickly and Lydia tried to unwind in the Jacuzzi before going out for the evening.

Every part of her seethed at Paula's role in the tragedy and her mind was swimming with those things one finds oneself wishing had been said at the time. Lost opportunities and insults aside, there would be a day, Lydia swore to herself, when she would let it rip and Paula would get the cheerful earful she deserved. But in the here and the now Venus was gone. How she could continue at Soloman-Schmitt without her, without knowing she was there, not necessarily beside her, but, Jesus, at least in the same building...she would have to keep that disappointment unnamed and secret, bury it somewhere deep inside her where there was no voice to express it, in a place no one else could ever find.

She dressed in black and arrived at the Keagans' late, too late to show off her slides of Madrid, but just in time to be seated with the other guests and to raise a glass in toast.

"To friendship," Kay said.

Friendship was the group response, though the stares Lydia received from Anna Grisholm all evening were anything but friendly. Anything but.

"I've decided it's the yearning look in your eyes that makes you so attractive, Ms. Beaumont," she said, as Lydia was issuing thank-yous and goodnights and preparing to leave. "That and their beautiful color."

Despite the usual come-on there was an air of resignation in Anna's tone. Lydia welcomed the change. "Thank you, Anna. That's very kind of you."

"Like sapphires," Anna said, taking the liberty of walking her to the elevator. "Has anyone ever told you that besides me? That your eyes are like sapphires?"

"I-uh-well-"

"Yes, I bet they have. That reminds me," Anna said, preventing the door from closing. "I have something that belongs to you."

"Me?"

"You," Anna replied, searching around in her pocket. "It would seem, Ms. Beaumont, that I am forever coming upon your valuables."

"My valuables?" Lydia said, holding out her hand. "But-?"

Anna placed the sapphire earrings in Lydia's palm and saw her face go white. "They are yours, aren't they?"

"I-" her hand was trembling. She clutched the earnings in a fist and shoved them into her pocket. "They...they were...they're...goodnight, Ms. Grisholm."

"Goodnight," Anna said, letting the door slide shut. "Mrs. Kristenson."

Chapter 51: Opposed

In the ensuing weeks following Venus Angelo's resignation, working with Paula had become a nightmare and although Venus hadn't enumerated in her e-mail the exact reasons for her departure or, for that matter, her future plans, Lydia knew that Paula blamed her personally for the catastrophe. Her and that den of iniquity, the Kristenson Foundation.

"It's not a done deal," VP Treadwell said this morning, repeating a declaration she had been making ever since Venus first went on the lam. "The board has indicated they're willing to wink and look the other way if she'll reconsider. Besides, an e-mail isn't an official resignation. Is she working for your wife or what? I have a right to know if she is."

The subject of Venus Angelo was by now a tedious one for Lydia. Tedious and painful. It was very likely that Venus would be working for Helaine. She was aware that the two had had many phone conversations concerning it, but that no decision had been reached yet. The young woman was in "psychic turmoil and transition," and "up to her elbows with the process of discarding her excess baggage," Helaine confided last week. "But everything's fine."

Everything's fine except that everything is not fine. "The board should be searching for a new Vice-Op, Paula. Venus has resigned. The end."

"Oh, crap. CRAP. I knew when I picked her she was too young. That was always on my mind, you know. Her youth."

"Age is not the problem here, Paula. I suspect it has more to do with ethics and ethos than age."

"Oh, do you? You mean sexual ethics, Ms. Highfalutin? Forgive me for being ignorant and old fashioned, but what precisely are the sexual ethics governing a ménage a—"

"Have a nice day, Paula. Keep nagging like this and you'll get my resignation, too. Only I'll be certain to put it in writing so there won't be any room for doubt."

That was how she was keeping Paula at bay these days, preventing the gale storm of I-told-you-sos from blowing in with her own threats to quit.

Lydia was as disenchanted with work as ever, more so now that Venus was no longer there, and she couldn't condemn her former assistant from getting out when she did, while she was still young and stress-free and before gin martinis became the main staple of her diet. She was brave to do it. Soloman-Schmitt was a snake pit.

But if the rest of life was to be spent chasing after Helaine on some foreign shore, playing air tag with her and howdy stranger in hotel rooms, what on earth would she do with herself without work? Sit around all day waiting for her phone call?

Lydia had no intention of making good on her threats to retire. At least not anytime soon. But she didn't want Paula to know this.

*Is you is or is you ain't my baby...*Venus was blasting old jazz. Chillin'.

Paula was on her way over. She stopped at the corner stakeout to interrogate the rumpled fellow in the silly trench coat. "Are you my man?" she asked.

"Um...who are you?"

"Who-Treadwell!"

He scratched his head and pointed across the street. "That guy over there, I think."

"Wha-then who are you?"

"Look lady-"

"Don't lady me! I'm no lady. You're tailing Ms. Angelo?"

"Um...yes, ma'am."

"For whom?"

He kicked at an invisible object on the sidewalk and cursed under his breath. "Goodman."

"Goodman? Get out of here or I'll have you arrested."

"But-"

"Scram, I said!"

He scrammed.

Across the street, the man in the alley was not hers either, though the quarry was the same.

"Your guy's in the diner."

"Mine is? What the hell's going on here?" Paula demanded. "Who are you working for?"

"Can't say. You'll find your guy in the diner, though. I saw him there at lunch time and he hasn't come out since."

Paula produced her cell phone. "At the count of three I'm going to dial 911 if I don't get some answers here. One...two..."

"Chambers-I work for Chambers."

"Sharon Chambers?"

He nodded.

She was taken aback by the implications. "Not anymore you don't-capice?"

"Capice."

She found her guy in the diner all right, double fisting coffee and donuts. "I'm Treadwell," she informed him with disgust. "You work for me?"

"Yeah," he said, wiping jelly from the side of his face. "Yeah."

"Good...vou're fired."

He snickered and gulped his coffee. "Okey-doke."

Paula spun on her heel. "Bill me," she called over her shoulder.

He snickered again. "Okey-doke."

Okey-doke, up at Fort Angelo's Venus was running low on supplies and was just thinking of sending out the wagon trains when she got a buzz from the lobby.

"Paula Treadwell, Ms. Angelo. Should I send her up?"

"Oh-you know I-oh god, I-yeah, send her up." A decision she regretted the instant she made it.

"Well, well, well...and how is Venus Angelo? Citizen Angelo?"

"I'm sorry, Paula, but you should have seen it coming."

"Of course, of course...look, I've emptied the vacant lots and darkened alleyways...no one's following you anymore and I can assure—"

"Too little, too late. It's over with, Paula." Paula was wearing chartreuse today...it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that...chartreuse and burgundy...doo wah doo wah...doo wah doo wah...with matching two-tone shoes and snazzy eyeglass frames, a nifty neon carnation. "I've made up my mind," Venus said, feeling her mouth go sour. "It's too late."

Paula took this in stride. "Good," she said, making herself at home in a leather sofa-chair. "And now what does brilliant Venus Angelo plan to do with herself? Chase windmills for a living? Any money in that, Venus? Chasing windmills?"

"Some."

"Some...and that will pay for all this? For those clothes you're wearing? You've got a nice place here, Venus. Chasing Lydia Beaumont didn't hurt you any if you got all this to show for it. Even if—you catch my drift?"

"This isn't about Lydia Beaumont."

"Bullshit."

Venus sat opposite her on the couch, legs crossed, arms folded. Silent.

"Anyway. Ackerly says-"

"I don't care what Ackerly says."

Paula eyed her thoughtfully. "Do I get to know your plans or is this something I have to wait to read about?"

"Full-time directorship of the Kristenson Foundation. Money's not too bad for a charity and the tour's-"

"I don't want to hear about Dr. Kristenson and don't tell me it's not about Dr. Kristenson and don't tell me it's not about Lydia Beaumont. Don't you think, if it's distance you need, that you're not going far enough away? Why don't you go somewhere where she can't find you?"

"Paula-"

"We can send you anywhere you want to go. Hong Kong. Bangkok. Paris."

"Paris? What are you saying?"

"Soloman-Schmitt is prepared to send you anywhere you want to go. That's how important you are to us."

Venus shut her eyes.

"Don't blow it, Angelo. Pick a place. We can send your family with you, too. The whole shebang." Her family in Paris! Venus couldn't even imagine that.

Chapter 52: Fortune in the Affairs of Women and How It May Be Opposed

Five o'clock and THANK-GOD-IT'S-FRIDAY. Zillions of girls and boys and women and men have ceased to be productive. They're chucking their pencils, kicking up their heels and letting their hair down again.

Friday's going to be a very big day for the Beaumonts. And for the Beaumont-Kristenson's. For Team Kristenson. For Venus Angelo. For Paula Treadwell. Delilah Lewiston. And for many other beings just like them, unwittingly sucked into the vortex of fortune and happenstance.

Marilyn Beaumont began what would be a long Friday at the side of the road in a car that just wouldn't go, stranded there while Roy tried to determine what was wrong with it. He didn't have much time for tinkering—Marilyn had a flight to catch because her John Hancock was required on the amicable settlement she had reached with her soon-to-be-former husband and, to those ends, they would be rendezvousing this afternoon at Stanley Kandinsky's office in the city, at which time she would relinquish Edward's ring.

Marilyn, like her daughter, did not care for airplanes, but she had waited an eternity for this day and was eager to get the darn thing over with. Driving there or flying there was only the difference of a few hours, but that had seemed a lifetime to her, so she had, weeks ago, bravely made up her mind to fly into the city and it was now too late in the morning to change those plans.

Missing the plane was completely out of the question. She would not miss that plane. She sat in the passenger seat of her sedan with her hands folded and her face expectant, counting on the man who was jiggling the wires under her hood. She had the right of reliance here. He had already proven he could fix anything.

One...two...three...vrrrrrroooom!

Paula's day began, as usual, well before she arrived to work. Juggling two cells and a land line while devouring a power breakfast, she was in typical form for her Friday, which ran from this point disturbingly smooth into the evening.

Venus was still a loose end that needed tying up and Paula was eager to settle this business. The kid was set to return from her apartment search in Paris sometime today and she had promised to call by week's end with a decision. A very final decision, because if Paula could clinch the deal, she intended to bind Venus up with Soloman-Schmitt in a ten-year contract. Venus Angelo would be her successor since JP Beaumont would retire someday soon, sit out the rest of her days on a yacht somewhere counting clouds and stars and moonbeams with her blond, so why kick that dead horse around anymore? God, what a waste of an MBA! What a rip-off! What a horrible disgrace to the profession!

But anyway, enough of that. "Okey-doke," she heard herself say as she kissed Dickie on the cheek before rushing out to the chopper. "Wish me luck."

"Luck," he said cheerfully. "Luck, luck, luck, luck, luck."

Speaking of luck and Lydia Beaumont, she was just that moment getting lucky again in Honolulu, in one big finale that would wrap up three days and nights of uninterrupted island ecstasy. The couple was, at last, together on native soil, albeit only briefly.

Friday afternoon Lydia would be flying home and Helaine would have to quit sunny Hawaii to hurry on toward Melbourne for a one-week stint in Australia. Carlos was pushing hard for today's departure because he was trying to keep everyone from completely succumbing to the jet lag that had descended on the team back in Montreal. Sun, surf and pineapples was having a therapeutic effect on everyone, he was happy to see, but another day of inactivity and he might end up with nothing but a bunch of lotus-eaters on his hands. Lotus-eaters in grass skirts and leis—ye gods!

He was already dispensing with the last minute flight details by the time Helaine and Lydia rolled out of bed and scantily dressed themselves for breakfast.

Helaine had never been to Australia and she was curious. Curious about kangaroos and koalas and crocodiles, about a continent that produced strong, silent types like Chuck the bodyguard.

Chuck and Antonio and two staffers were flying to Melbourne ahead of everyone, the bodyguards to scope out the terrain and make preparations in advance for managing the crowd scene, the other two to get her situated at the hotel and assist them in designing her transit route from the airport, per request of certain government officials who had the last minute jitters from watching too much television.

She was in good hands, Carlos assured her. She believed that.

Lydia was aware of her parents' plans today. She was relieved, she had told Helaine last night. Relief was, however, just one of the items she had in her mixed bag of emotions regarding the divorce so she seemed preoccupied today, as she was wont to be about such things, and a bit dazed which gave her that aloof air she had become so famous for.

Helaine hand-fed her breakfast with an understanding smile and, to prevent herself from taking Ms. Beaumont's mood too personally, occupied herself instead with admiring the woman's physique, about which she could never find any room for improvement.

It was pointless to even undertake discussing the divorce. The doctor asked her mate instead if she could taste the difference between fresh pineapples and store-bought-yes-if she planned on wearing the linen suit for the flight back-yes-and if she enjoyed herself last night even though they didn't attend the luau with the rest of the team-you betcha.

Monosyllabic conversation aside, Lydia was being a good sport and supportive daughter to her parents and Dr. Kristenson respected her for it. She could not say for certain how she would herself have reacted if her own parents' marriage had dissolved like this one. But then, since they were long dead, it was nothing she had to trouble herself to imagine.

Since they were long dead-she had dreamt of them again, she suddenly recalled.

"What's wrong?" Lydia asked, retrieving a slice of pineapple from her lap and popping it into her mouth. "What are you thinking of?"

"I-it was-I can't remember actually."

Actually she was lying.

"It's the last leg, Lana. We're almost through this now."

"I know," she replied, shaking the image of her father's weathered hand reaching out for hers. "Get up," she had heard him ordering in the dream last night. "Hurry, child," he had urged her.

She rose without a word and placed the breakfast tray in its stand beside the door. "We had better hurry now, darling. Carlos is playing the evil taskmaster today and I hear tell he wants us all up-and-at-'em by ten or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else no Australia."

Or else no Aruba for Delilah Lewiston if she didn't get it together by ten as well, and then that would be a very disappointing start to the first real vacation she had taken in years.

No phobias here, flying was a cinch for Delilah. She boarded planes intoxicated, drank like a fish in the air, and landed walking like a sailor. Martinis straight up. The only safe way to fly.

Everything was in capable hands, she assured herself this morning, donning a tranquil expression and a summery dress, both of which she would be hiding beneath her winter persona. The bank, the apartment, her mother–taken care of. That left nothing else to do but enjoy herself. Enjoy the sun, the sand and the surf for ten days on end. And get laid for nine nights in a row. Ahhhhhhhh.

[&]quot;I now pronounce you man and woman," Stanley said, without a trace of sarcasm.

Marilyn looked as if she might cry as she took off her wedding ring and handed it over to Edward. "Edward, I-"

"Now, now...it's...as you were, Marilyn Sanders. I had a-" his voice cracked, "a lovely time."

That did it. She was weeping, clutching both Edward's and Stanley's handkerchiefs and groping her way toward the door.

Edward remained seated, counting the certificates hanging on the wall as Stanley escorted the former Mrs. Beaumont into the hall. "Have a safe trip," he heard his attorney console her. Competent Stan with all those awards. Earning his keep.

"Oh, Stan...Stan."

"Everything's going to be all right, Marilyn. Everything's fine," he heard Stan say. "It's okay."

Marilyn's ring had worn thin, Edward observed. Thin enough to break with his bare hands it seemed.

"I know," blubbered his ex-wife. "I know."

He put it in his breast pocket where his handkerchief used to be.

"Goodbye, Edward," Marilyn called to him.

He could feel her waiting for his response. He wanted to rush to the door. He sat instead, unable to bring himself to face her. "God speed, Marilyn," he said to the walls.

"Everything's going to be all right, Edward. I'm proud of you."

"I caught you at a bad time, Queenie?"

"I'm at the airport. Got to board soon."

"Don't let me make you miss your plane then. We'll talk later?"

"We'll talk tonight. Everything's going to...is fine. I love you, Daddy."

"Everything turn out all right?"

"Everything's fine, Roy. I...I'm just...it's heartbreaking that's all."

"Marilyn, I wouldn't want you if you enjoyed it."

"I'm...I'll be boarding soon, Mr. Mann. I can see the airplane from here."

"I'll let you go, love. Keep the phone charged. I'll be waiting for you at the airport."

"Where are you now?"

"De Gaulle, boarding my plane. You got other plans, Mr. Jones?"

"Venus, I said I'd pick you up weeks ago. I been waiting forever for you to call."

"Oh, shit, Sebastion. I was busy...I'm sorry."

"Sorry's cool. Straighten up and fly right, girlfriend. When's your plane come in?"

"Aloha, darling."

"Aloha. Where are you right now?"

"The limo. The plane's standing by."

"Oh, wow. We'll be departing around the same time."

"Uh-oh, here's Commandant Carlos. I better hang up. I love you, Lydia Beaumont-Kristenson."

"You called me about rice? Eat the rice, Ma. It's good for you."

"I ordered lobster and they bring me rice. Are you going to call me from Aruba?"

"If I can find a phone."

"Delilah Louise!"

"I'll give you a ring from the hotel. I got to go, Ma, or I'll miss my plane."

185

```
"You made a decision yet?"
    "Paula, I'm boarding here."
   "I'll send a car for you when you arr-"
    "Sebastion's picking me up."
   "Sebastion? You sure know how to live, Angelo. I'll give you that much. You know how to live."
    "Why it's Dame Beaumont...you get a lei, Liddy? I'm boarding."
   "Me too. Just wanted to wish you bon voyage."
    "Bon voyage. See you in ten."
   "Should I even ask what you've got planned for yourself?"
    "Nah, just buy the book!"
   "So where are you as we speak?"
    "On the plane. Send my love to Robert."
   "I will. E-mail us when you get to Melbourne. Where will you be staying?"
    "Oh, it's so secret, Kay. Even I don't know."
   "Sweetheart, have you boarded yet? I'm just about to."
    "Mom-almost-I was hoping you would call."
   "Have you heard from your father?"
    "Yes. How are you doing? Are you okay? I'll be at the lake house this weekend...?"
   "Oh, how thoughtful, Lydia. We'll talk at the lake house this weekend. Have a safe trip, sweetheart."
    "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen-"
   She had fallen into a contemplative mood, mesmerized by the boarding activities of her fellow passengers.
And her deep-seated fear of flying.
    "Welcome to-"
   Behind her sunglasses she watched as they organized their carry-on luggage and experimented with their
seat controls for comfortable positions.
    "-ternational Airlines."
   She tried to guess about each one. Who they were. What they did. Where they were coming from.
    "My name is Steven Edwards and-"
   Their destinations.
   "I am your captain."
   The women and children first.
   "It's going to be a truly beautiful day for flying, folks."
   Then the men.
    "We will be leaving the runway shortly. Our estimated time of departure is approximately three minutes."
   She was intrigued by their demeanors, by everyone's bored, "frequent flyer" expressions, which she
   "We will be flying today under fair skies and-"
   Their equanimity.
    "—a slight south-westerly—"
   Would that she could feel that calm, she thought. That sure about everything.
    "At the front of each section, you'll see your flight attendants, Judy, Martin, Roberta and—"
```

She hated flying and it showed.

"They will be briefing you soon on a few of our safety features and procedures."

It made her feel vulnerable and introspective.

"So please give them your undivided attention during their presentations."

Morbid and superstitious.

"We trust that you will have a pleasant and enjoyable flight with us and we thank you once again for flying—" Fearful.

Landing was a breeze, but a mob scene complicated a quick getaway at the airport. What the congestion was about Lydia really didn't want to know. Happily the family disembarking ahead of her was large enough to disappear in for awhile so she disguised herself as one of their long-lost relatives and escaped with them, head down and incognito, into the terminal, ditching her human shields only when she had finally made it through the maze of security and baggage checkpoints.

The kiosks with their fast-food smells and neon were a terrible temptation for her this evening. She had barely touched the meal she had been served on the plane. Fast-food would be one better than the bowl of dry cereal that awaited her back at the penthouse, she reasoned, but every place she passed was jam-packed with boisterous travelers and there were camera crews at every bend and she didn't dare risk it.

She had booked a connecting flight which would have brought her much nearer to her final destination, but this was done merely as a decoy, to confound the press which often harangued her at airports. Same for forgoing her limousine. Limousines attract too much attention.

She found the last of the bottlenecks near the street exit and hid herself in that too, hiding as well, as she stood in the long line outside on the sidewalk with her coat collar up around her face, waiting for what seemed forever for a yellow taxi.

It wasn't night yet. She was surprised to see some daylight tinting the evening sky. As always happened whenever she flew, she had lost all track of the time. There were stars speckling the black and blue of the sky and she noticed with some alarm that she would need her glasses to actually focus on them. Her glasses unfortunately were in her luggage with everything else. She pulled her suitcase behind her as the line moved. She was dog-tired, too tired to rummage for them now.

The line was moving nicely. She inched up, her eyes on the heavens and her stomach empty, wondering as she counted stars in the sky, if the maid had left her a dinner in the fridge for tonight. Helaine would have taken care of that for her if she had had the time. Today had been a hectic day, though, and probably phoning dinner requests to the maid was the last thing on Helaine's mind.

The roar and whine of airplanes was incessant. She didn't need glasses to watch them circling overhead in their landing and takeoff patterns. They looked like toys this close up, Lydia thought. Or like a flock of birds. Wasn't it amazing that none of them collided?

"Lydia!"

The next cab was hers. She had nearly made it. The cab pulled up to the curb and the driver got out to assist her with her luggage.

"Lydia!"

She recognized that voice, though there was an unusual tone to it now, one she had never heard before. She approached the vehicle slowly and put her hand on the window, afraid to turn and reply.

"Beaumont!"

A reporter was standing near the car. "There she is," he yelled.

"There she is! She's over there! Ms. Beaumont, Ms. Beaumont!"

Ms. Beaumont stared at the ground and cursed. The cabby froze, holding her bags.

"Lydia!"

In hindsight Lydia should have known. It had been a perfect day. Too perfect a day. Even the weather had conspired to lull her into a false sense of security. Her mind raced and whirled with implausible reasons for Paula being at the airport, intercepting her at the airport.

"Lydia, come with... something's...come with me."

Reporters gathered around them, surrounded the car and the bewildered cabby. Paula held out her hand. Behind her Lydia glimpsed Dickie's anxious face. Venus was flying today, Lydia suddenly recalled. Something had happened to—

```
"Lydia, please. Come quickly."
   "Venus...?"
   Paula shook her head.
   "Ms. Beaumont, have you heard the-"
   "Fuck off," Paula said, shoving a camera man backwards into the spectators. "Lydia, there's been an ac-"
   Cameras went off around her like a rocket brigade. Lydia lifted her arm to shield her face. "An...?"
   "An accident."
   "No."
   "Yes, take my-"
   "Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont! Did she call you from the plane? Ms. Beaumont! When was the last time
you heard from her?"
   "Paula?"
   "Ms. Beaumont! Did you know that the plane-"
   "Let me help you. Dickie and I are here to help. We have the chop-fuck off I said!"
   "Hey, you can't hit a repor-"
   "Ms. Beaumont, won't you make a statement?"
   "She hit m-I'm-am I bleeding?"
   "Oh, Paula-"
   "Ms. Beaumont, where were you when-"
   "Oh, god, I am! I'm bleeding!"
   "Dickie and I can take you home."
   "Ms. Beaumont, over here please!"
   "Back off!" Paula shouted.
   "Ms. Beau-"
   "Hurry, Lydia. We've got the chopper waiting."
   "That's assault and-"
   "Back off then!"
   "Ms. Beaumont, when did you last hear from-"
   "You can't hit a reporter! I'm just doing my-"
   "Do it over there, I said! All of you!"
   The reporters stepped back. "Ms. Beaumont, this way please!" they continued to shout. "Over here! Look
this way!"
   Lydia grappled with the meaning of Dickie's expression. He looked like death. "Paula...an...she's...?"
   "Well, they-they-yes."
   "Ms. Beaumont, can you give us a statement tonight? Anything at all?"
```

"Come on," Paula urged. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Ms. Beaumont, did you talk before her plane went-"

"Her plane?"

"Lydia...yes."

She was not going to faint because she was not a fainter. She went numb instead and slumped against the cab. She would not remember how she made it through the sea of flashing cameras and screaming reporters without fainting, or how she made it into the Treadwell's helicopter and up into the air again. She would remember the moment preceding that, of becoming suddenly conscious of her hand still pressed against the window of the cab and that, when she lifted it, the glass was wet. She would remember forever that on this Friday evening her life ended in a plane crash. That it was shattered like glass. Shattered into little bits and pieces—1,127 to be exact.

But who's counting?

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Two FORTUNE IS A WOMAN

The Stolen Kiss

Though I were doomed to wander on beyond the sea, beyond the sun till my last weary sand was run till then—and then—I'd love thee.

Robert Burns

Chapter 1: Venus

"How old were you when you lost your innocence?"

Venus stiffened. All these shrinks were turning out the same. Always asking her the same weird questions, never really helping. Clearly, she was wasting her money on them. Wasting her time searching for a cure.

Or avoiding it.

"What?"

"I asked you, how old you were when you lost your innocence."

"How old was...? You don't mean my virginity, do you?"

"No."

Venus knew exactly what her therapist meant. She crossed her legs, glanced at her watch and brought two fingers to her lips as if to seal them, a nervous set of reactions she only ever noticed when she was onthe-couch.

Only ten minutes left to their session. She certainly wouldn't have time for this now. She took her hand away from her mouth and shifted uncomfortably, feeling quite small in an oversized, squishy sofa-chair. "That's a very interesting question," she replied at last. "I'm not sure how to answer it."

In reality, there were very few questions Venus Angelo did not know how to answer. She knew the answer for this one, too, but, as luck would have it, she had a three o'clock conference with Paula Treadwell to prep for and that was in just an hour. Mustn't make the president of Soloman-Schmitt wait, after all.

"It's the last one," the therapist prodded. "Or do you want to leave it until next week?"

Venus reached around behind her and felt for her briefcase. There it was, still leaning against the chair. God, it was hot in this room, she thought. One cheek was warm, as if a hand was pressed against it and the other one tingled. "Three weeks shy of my thirtieth birthday," she answered, suddenly on her feet, suddenly wearing her overcoat.

The therapist jotted this into her notepad and looked up, surprised to see her client ready to go. "Do you want to qualify that?" she asked, her eyes now wide with interest. "We've got ten more minutes...?"

Venus glanced at the time again. "Nope."

"Next week then," the woman said, with a patient smile.

"Next week," Venus affirmed.

Riding the elevator down, she remembered leaving her gold pen upstairs so obviously she'd have to keep next week's appointment, if only to retrieve it. Honestly, she was thinking of canceling though, of sending her assistant for it instead, of firing this overpaid quack, too. Just as she had the rest of them.

Damn, how could she be so hot when it was so cold? she wondered, strolling the three blocks back to work, hoping to cool down in the brisk autumn air. She stopped in the lobby to check her pulse. It was normal. Everything's normal, per usual, it just doesn't feel that way anymore. Not since—here's the elevator. Up this time.

"Paula's on line three," her assistant whispered, as she passed by her desk.

"Whv?"

Kate shrugged. "Tell her you're not in yet?"

Venus pondered this option.

"Fitz-Simone, did you hang up on me, you fool?"

"Uh, no, Ms. Treadwell. I, um...?"

Venus sighed. "Tell her I'm not in yet."

"And don't bother telling me she's not in yet because I just saw her mug on the camera."

Kate covered the phone with her hand. "I, uh...she just saw you on the—"

"Tell her I just walked in then. I'll call her right back."

Kate nodded. "She just walked in, Ms. Treadwell. She'll call you right—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'll hold."

Her own office was hot, too, Venus noticed. And both her cheeks stung now.

Getting sick, perhaps. She hung her coat in the corner and let her briefcase drop to the floor beside the wastepaper basket.

On her desk, line three glowed up at her, red hot and unrelenting. She gingerly lifted the phone from its cradle, "Angelo, here," she said in one unhappy breath.

"Ah-hah. Contemplating your navel or hers?"

"Neither—what's wrong? I'm not ready yet."

"Meeting's off, Angelo. We've got a problem. Care to know about it?"

(Not really.)

"Angelo?"

"Another problem, Paula? I thought we fixed all our problems yesterday?" Oh, at last a real chair! She collapsed in it, threw her head back and fixed her eyes on a small painting across the room.

Paula droned on, "shocked, I tell you, shocked," by her most recent corporate crisis but, in truth, it sounded like the same-old-same-old to Vice President Angelo. She wanted to respond with as much. "I'm shocked that you're shocked," she felt compelled to say to her, but she let Treadwell bitch on without interrupting.

The naked woman in the painting smiled back at the vice president approvingly. It was, she agreed, with a glint in her eyes, the best technique for dealing with such a difficult opponent.

Venus looked away.

The photograph hanging to the left of this beguiling nude was that of Jasmine, her kid sister, graduating with honors last year, and with a devil-may-care attitude about being so brilliant. Jasmine was a freshman now at some humble university, having turned down business and finance and Ivy League suitors to pursue liberal arts and women's studies instead.

Oh, Jasmine, Jasmine, Venus was busy lamenting these days. Spending your allowance on the homeless and wearing those dumb-ass rags and an afro all the time. No makeup.

How that girl could make her worry. Jasmine was way too idealistic. Way too inno—

"What's the matter with you, Angelo? Why are you so quiet?"

"I'm listening, Paula, continue."

Liberal arts and women's studies! Mom and Dad were grinning proudly just beneath their incorrigible graduate over there. Liberal arts or rocket science, who really cares? they had argued. Two college-educated daughters is the thing that mattered most to them. So just bite your tongue, baby, they told her, and hip, hop, hooray.

Hip, hop, hooray. Hip, hop, hooray.

"I need some input here, Angelo. That's why we pay you so handsomely."

Well, that wasn't exactly true but, "I'm processing, Paula. I'm processing. I'll have to get back to you on this."

"This evening?"

Venus stifled a scornful laugh. She was having dinner with her folks this evening. She had missed dinner with them last week and still felt guilty about it. Guilt was getting the better of her these days, it seemed. So much guilt now to contend with. And, to make matters worse, she was coming down with something. Spiking a temperature. "By Friday," she promised, thinking tomorrow she might just call in sick and spend the whole miserable day in bed. Alone. Again. "Friday...maybe."

"By Friday? By Friday it'll be too late!"

"I sincerely doubt it, Paula. Trust me, we'll get it fixed."

"Then I'm sending John down this minute with the numbers. You crunch them for me ASAP."

"Good enough," Venus muttered, hanging up without goodbye. "Hello again, Kate."

"Yes, Ms. Angelo?"

"Intercept John for me. He's going to drop another load of shit on our doorway."

"Will do."

Venus grabbed her coat, locked the office again and, in order to avoid running into Paula's right-hand-man, left via the emergency exit.

There was a service elevator on this side of the building, she recalled. A service elevator was better than walking down fifteen flights with a stomachache, though any exercise would probably do her some good right now, she bet. She hadn't exercised in weeks and it was starting to show.

She was right: service elevator straight ahead, doors wide open. She quickly stepped inside it and banged on the button for the garage. Maybe, just maybe, Her Holy Omnipotence wouldn't catch the senior vice president leaving the building this way, by means of the underground parking lot.

That Kate was an absolute godsend, Venus was thinking, as she wove her way through rows of BMW's and SUV's and exited out the entrance ramp onto the street. She couldn't ask for a better assistant, that's for sure. Kate was her right-hand-woman. She'd be lost without her.

Oh shit, and Sebastion, too, she remembered. He was expecting her tonight, after dinner.

Up at the corner, she dialed Sebastion on the cell-phone and got his voice-mail instead. "I won't be able to make it tonight," was the message she left and then she stood there for a moment to get her bearings again, buttoning her coat and unbuttoning it. Deciding.

WALK, WALK, the sign across the street was flashing. That wasn't such a bad idea. She stepped into the crosswalk and ran to the other side. Downtown she would go then, right past *rring...rrring...*sang her cell-phone. She stopped in her tracks to answer it. "Hello?"

"Where the hell are you going, Angelo? What are you doing?"

"I don't feel well, Paula. I'm sick today."

"Well, why didn't you just say so? Why make me worry?"

Venus was taken aback by this. "Worry? About me?" she asked, standing on the sidewalk in front of Frank's Place and shivering, waiting for Paula's reply.

Frank's was open, she noted, and looking very warm and very inviting this afternoon. It was three o'clock. Frank's would be quiet and peaceful at three o'clock. Venus hadn't been there in eons.

"Yes, Angelo. Worrying quite a bit lately. Go home then and I'll see you on Friday." (click)

She did not go home. She had a glass of cognac instead. And two great big servings of Boston creme pie.

"On the house," the famous maitre-de informed her.

"Oh, Harry," she said, eyeing his confections. "Where have you been all my life?"

She left Frank's an hour later, happier than she had arrived. Her stomach didn't hurt anymore. No more temperature.

At six o'clock, feeling repaired, she was having supper with Mom and Dad, making small talk and sidestepping the topic of her work life. Of her love life. Of her sister.

Cognac and chocolate, Venus had calculated, were enough to help her get through this grilling tonight, and her parents need never know how tired she was.

That had been the plan anyway.

"Should I call an ambulance?" she could hear her father asking from the other side of the bathroom door. "Does she need an ambulance?"

"No ambulance," Venus whispered to her mother. "No ambulance, Mama," she repeated, splashing her face with cold water and hugging the sink.

"Venus, I think you're—"

"Should I call the hospital?" he demanded. "Let's call the hospital!"

"Honey, no," Mrs. Angelo answered through the cracked door. "Give us a minute," she told him. "I think it's all right."

Venus had lost her supper and lunch, nearly fainted at the table. She sat on the edge of the tub and put her head down, still woozy. "I need a cab," she moaned. "I need to go home, Mama, and sleep it off."

Mama shook her head and chuckled. "You need to see your doctor, baby girl, that's what. You can't sleep this thing off."

"Are you sure?" Mr. Angelo shouted. "Maybe we should just take her over there? Run some tests?"

Venus groaned. "Get rid of him, please. I'm going to throw up again."

"She'll be okay," Mama assured him once more. "She's ain't sick, honey."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

- "I'm not?"
- "No, you're not."
 "She's not sick?"
- "She's not."
- "Then what am I?"
- "Then what is she?"

- "She's pregnant?"
 "She's pregnant?"
 "I'm pregnant?"
 "You're pregnant."

Chapter 2: Widow Beaumont

"Hard to believe the sun's up there with all those clouds, huh?" Delilah asked her somber captain.

Lydia looked skyward but gave no reply.

A storm was brewing and the ladies' boat had drifted into the middle of the lake. The lake house on the faraway shore had become only a doll's house to them now. If it started raining, Delilah doubted they would make it back in time without getting drenched. Or worse.

"It'll muss my hair, Liddy...ruin my makeup."

It wasn't only her hair and her makeup, though. Delilah Lewiston was afraid of water. Afraid of thunder and lightning, too. She had a few other concerns, as well, but these she wasn't expressing. They pertained to her chronically sullen friend.

"Nah, I think it'll pass, Del. Anything left in that shaker?"

A shaker of martinis, some stale crackers and a brick of cheap cheddar had been their only provisions this afternoon. It was time to go home and get warm again.

"Nothing but ice and crumbs and us chickens over here," Delilah fibbed. "Let's go back and watch TV."

"We drank all that already?"

"All gone, Cap'n. Uh-oh, raindrops on the starboard side, sir. Raindrops on the starboard side!"

Lydia smothered a smile with her sleeve. "Del, that's not the starboard side."

"Whatever-let's get out of here."

Lydia maneuvered the boat around and pointed it toward home.

Back at the house, the menu wasn't any better and it begged the question, "When did you last go grocery shopping, Liddy?" The bar was fully stocked, though. No complaints there.

"I hate public places, Del. Grocery stores are so...so gross."

"But grocery stores are where you find groceries, kiddo. Get dressed. We're going out."

Lydia was entertaining the idea of napping the rest of her day away, or sitting in front of the fire and getting plastered. "You go. I don't want to."

Somehow, that reaction didn't come as any surprise. The empty cupboards, the messy house, the dingy sweats that Lydia had answered the door in; Delilah had not been to visit in awhile and there had been no way for her to gauge by their sporadic e-mailing and long-distance telephone conversations just how much things had deteriorated. "Well, what do you want to do then, Liddy?" she said, in exasperation. "Just roll over and die?"

"Oh, come on, Del. I'm not going to die if there's not enough groceries right this minute. I forgot you were coming today, that's all. I'll go shopping tomorrow."

Forgot was not a winsome word. "Well, you could die, Lydia Beaumont, if all you do is drink and mope like you're doing. If you shut yourself in here day and night and drink yourself into a coma. Which would be very easy to do, by the way, with those sleeping pills you're popping all the time."

Forgot was a poor choice, Lydia realized. A dumb excuse. She shouldn't have said that word. And she should have bought the goddamned groceries, too, avoided all this. "Del...you want to go grocery shopping, we'll go grocery shopping. But I don't want to hear this. Especially not from you."

"Especially from me, I think you should hear it. In fact, I think there's no better person to—"

"Besides, they're not sleeping pills, if you must know. They're muscle relaxants. My knee, remember?"

"Oh, all right, Liddy, if they're *only* muscle relaxants then that's a big load off my mind, let me tell you. Get dressed, please. I'm very, very hungry now. And you know what else? I think deep, deep, deep in your soul, you're very hungry, too."

Deep, deep, deep in her soul, Lydia was absolutely famished. She put her drink down and ran her fingers through her hair. The sweats had to go, she was willing to acknowledge. It was okay now and then, this slumming, but it makes it even harder to go in public if you're dressed like a slob day after day. Her hair was out of control, too. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had it cut.

"Jeans, boots, sweater, brush," Delilah coaxed. "That's how it's done, my friend. Whether we actually want to do it or not."

Jeans, boots, sweater, brush. And a little bit of lipstick didn't hurt either.

Delilah drove.

"Tony's Home-Style Italian Restaurant and Takeout Pizzeria any good?" she asked, idling in Tony's parking lot and waiting for Lydia to make a decision.

"Not bad," Lydia replied. The smell of hot food was wafting into the car through the air vents and her stomach was beginning to complain. "Actually, if I remember right, it's pretty good."

Tony's Home-Style Italian Restaurant and Takeout Pizzeria was a mouthful, but the food was, indeed, pretty good. While they ate, Delilah kept one eye on the tattooed Hercules tossing his dough behind the counter and the other one on her best friend, to see that she didn't slip away somewhere into the clouds. "I must admit," she whispered, pointing out the object of her newfound and transient affection. "Country life does seem to have some advantages."

"Del, you're drooling. Wipe your mouth, please."

"Yum, yum. Guess I won't be needing to see the dessert menu tonight. What could be sweeter than that, I want to know?"

Lydia shot him a sideways glance. A topless mermaid was dancing on his bulging bicep. She blushed and looked away.

"Tell me something, Dame Beaumont. When's the last time you got laid?"

"Del...don't call me that name anymore. I'm not...I'm too old for it."

"Ooh, these bread balls are delicious—when, Liddy?"

"It's really none of your business."

"It's not, huh? Since when?"

It had been Delilah's business ever since the two had met in grad school. How could it possibly not be her business anymore? Lydia twirled spaghetti with her fork and spoon, lifted it to her lips and let the wad fall back onto the plate with a *splat*.

So much for clean clothes then.

"Nice job, Liddy. You got the place swooning, I swear."

So it was the question of when she would be dating that was on everybody's mind now. No longer how she was holding up after the—"Sorry," Lydia said, dabbing at a smear of tomato sauce that had landed on her cuff.

Her mother had broached the subject just last week, only she had done so with a great deal more tact than Delilah. But then, her mom was famous for her tact. Famous for her patience and forbearance, too. "When will you be going out again?" she had gently pried. "Wouldn't it be nice, sweetheart, to get out once in awhile?"

"I have no answer for that," she told her. "Don't feel like going out."

"Don't feel like going out yet," her mother corrected. "You will though," she added, optimistically. "You'll know when it's time."

"It's time," Delilah said, blowing her words over a cup of hot cappuccino. "It's been two whole years now. It's been—"

"Twenty-two months and fourteen days, to be precise. It's not been two whole years yet."

"Twenty-two months and fourteen days....and how many hours, Liddy? How many hours has it been, dare I even ask?"

Hours Lydia had stopped counting. She had stopped counting them when the search efforts were suspended. That's when her life became nothing more than a succession of days and months without end. That was many moons ago, she knew. Many moons and blue moons and eclipses and blackouts. "How many hours are in a night?" she asked, not really expecting Delilah to answer. "Those are the only hours that matter anymore. The ones that count the most to me."

"Oh, Liddy. You're very depressed."

"No shit."

Delilah leaned back in her chair and took a good long look at her friend. Even in this dim light, without glasses, she could tell that Lydia's eyes were red, that there were dark circles beneath them. In the months that had passed since she had last seen her, Lydia had lost more weight, too, but it wasn't a very healthy thin. More fragile than svelte, Delilah feared. "She wouldn't want this for you, Liddy. She really wouldn't."

"Wouldn't want what?"

"That you should grieve forever. She wouldn't expect you to just shrivel up and..."

Lydia pushed her plate away and covered her eyes with her hand. "How do you know what she would want? Do you speak to the...how would you know anyway, Del? You've never even been in love, let alone married."

Delilah switched her gaze back to Hercules, mindlessly flipping his pizza pies. Wasn't it better, she wondered, to be mindless sometimes? Mindless was certainly better than thinking too much, torturing yourself to death with awful ideas. Or with too many excellent memories. He smiled at her and she smiled back at him and winked. She was old enough to be that boy's mother, she realized. So what, though? Maybe he could use a little mothering. Some of us can from time to time. "How's Marilyn doing?" she suddenly thought to ask. "Have you been to see her lately?"

"Marilyn's...Mom's doing great. She stops by sometimes. Sometimes I even let her in."

"I'm glad to hear that. And Mr. Wonderful? How's life with that hunkie Roy Mann?"

"They're very happy, Del. In marital bliss."

Delilah nodded to herself. Marilyn Beaumont deserved to be happy after so many decades of emptiness. And so did her daughter. "How about Eddie? Is he still around?"

Lydia balked at this question. Her brother had come home to roost for awhile, through with his years of swashbuckling, he claimed. That was twenty-two months ago, as well, but why bother to count that? He'd taken up residence at the family's house in town. It was his place now that Marilyn no longer lived in it.

Eddie was running from someone, Lydia had been able to glean from his behavior. A woman, was what she suspected. Mom didn't want to hear about it. She was glad her son was back, regardless of what ill wind may have brought him. He was spending his weekends in the city, she had happily reported last week. Taking a stab at life again.

That could only spell trouble, Lydia had prevented herself from saying. "Eddie's still around, Del. For the most part."

"You know that I run into your father at the club from time to time?"

"Yeah. He mentions it."

"Your poor old dad, Liddy. He always acts a little shipwrecked now. That's how it looks to me anyway. Unless I just make him nervous."

Shipwrecked was a good word for it. Edward had definitely shipwrecked himself. All the Beaumonts were shipwrecked, perhaps. Except for Marilyn. Marilyn had finally been rescued. Lydia sighed and tugged on her wedding ring. "Well...he is a bit. But he's managing."

Pulling words out of Lydia's mouth had never been an easy task, but it was proving impossible today. Delilah wanted to hear her actually talk again, to tell one of her silly secrets, or even to cry. The flatness of her voice and her dull expression was frightening. This was not just a simple case of sorrow here or even clinical depression. This was a sophisticated type of suicide. No blood. No corpse. Nothing. "Liddy...?"

"Del...?"

"I came to say that I miss you, you know? I miss you terribly."

"Ah...that's sweet, Del. I miss you, too."

Delilah leaned forward. "Do you know what I mean by that? When I say that I miss you?"

"Do I—of course I do."

"And do you know that I love you, Liddy? That I truly love you?"

"And I love you, too. That goes without saying, Ms. Lewiston. I love you to pieces. You're my best friend."

The two women shared a long glance, one that extended beyond a table in a restaurant and stretched over a vast length of time between them. Miles and miles of it.

Presently Lydia cleared her throat and spoke. "I know a place that's open all night," she suggested with a wry grin, the first smile Delilah had witnessed since arriving this morning.

"A what?"

"Hah—where there's a supermarket, Del."

"A supermarket?"

"Yes, a supermarket. We need to get some groceries, don't you remember?"

"Groc—oh, good grief, a supermarket! Hell yeah, let's get out of here!"

It was four in the morning. How many hours are in a night? Delilah woke with a start. Those are the only hours that matter anymore. How many hours are in a night? How many hours? How many?

A bad dream perhaps or, more likely, since she rarely had bad dreams, a foreign noise in a strange old house. She sat up in bed and listened in the dark for it, that distinct sound of wailing she thought she'd just heard.

Delilah had grown up in a big old house like this one. A house this old creaks and groans, she knew. It must have been the wind, is what she decided, when she didn't hear the sound again. Wind blowing down the chimney or something. Yes, it was probably just the wind.

By dawn, she had given up on going back to sleep and, with a few rays of daylight to bolster her courage, she got dressed and cautiously ventured from the guest-room to do a little investigating.

She found Lydia out cold on the upstairs landing, a broken cocktail glass and an unopened bottle of scotch beside her.

"Jesus Christ, Liddy—Liddy!"

Lydia gasped and opened her eyes. "Oh, fuck," she murmured, trying to lift herself and failing. "My knee...I...must have slipped."

Delilah took her by the arm.

"I'm all right. I'm all right."

"Watch out, you'll cut yourself. There's glass right there. Are you sure?"

Lydia was sure. "Stiff, that's all." And embarrassed. "Go back to sleep," she said, finally standing. "I'm fine."

"I can't go back to sleep, Liddy. It's morning."

Lydia squinted through the window blinds, her blue eyes bloodshot and tearing and the fog in her brain clouding her vision. "It's morning?"

"Yes, it's morning," Delilah replied, taking her by the hand and trying to lead her. "Come with me."

"Where? Where are we going?"

"I want you to get some clothes together."

Lydia pulled her hand away. "I said, where are we going?"

"To the city. You'll stay with me for awhile. We'll see if we can get you into rehab."

"I can't go to the city, Del. My work is here."

Lydia was still the joint president of Soloman-Schmitt, ruling in absentia with her laptop and e-mails.

"You've got matters pending?"

"Yes."

"Then pack your files, too. You can walk to work from my place."

Lydia teetered at the top of the stairs. She was dazed and not capable of thinking so far ahead. "I can't," was all she could muster.

"You can and you're going to," Delilah said sternly. "Right now."

"I...no."

"Liddy, please. We don't have time to waste on this. You're coming with me."

Coming and going. Going and coming. Was it Monday today? Was it Tuesday? "I can't go. Paula's expecting some numbers from me. This afternoon, I think I told her."

"Paula can wait."

She had fudged those numbers last week, goofed again—the second time this had happened—and Paula was furious with her about it. "No, she can't," Lydia cried. "She can't wait. I can't do it, Del. I can't leave. I can't."

Can't, too many can'ts flying in her face. Delilah hated the word. "It'll be easier to deal with this stuff from the city. Why can't you go? Tell me why. There's no reporters anymore. No one will bother you at my place."

Reporters were not the only reason she had sold her penthouse and fled. "Because I can't."

"Because why, Liddy? Why?"

Lydia hesitated. Morning was burning up the last of the night, sneaking around the edges of the curtains. It would be a bright day today, brilliant and vicious. A day for sunglasses, for a conference call at three with angry Paula Treadwell. She gripped the banister to steady herself. "Because her things are here," she said, her voice breaking.

"Her things are—that's the locked room down the hall?"

Lydia nodded. "It's her room."

Delilah shuddered. Helaine's shrine was just down the hall. Under lock and key for the moment, but not always, she bet.

"All her books are in that room, Del. Her dresses. Her shoes. Her jewelry and gowns. Her furniture. All of her things are here with me. All of *our* things. My...everything."

Chapter 3: Paula Treadwell

We don't expect our loved ones to fall out of the sky on us, to disappear without a trace into the ocean. We may fear it. But we don't expect it.

The moment she heard Helaine Kristenson's plane was missing, Paula had sprung into motion, intercepting Lydia at the airport just as she had landed, and whisking her away to the Treadwell's villa in the suburbs, far out of reach of the paparazzi and press that were quickly assembling.

Lydia's reaction to the tragedy was as bad as Paula had anticipated—even worse—and she undertook to keep her as tranquil as possible, with the help of her husband's sleeping pills and painkillers. And scotch and martinis to her heart's content.

Those first few hours were probably the darkest of them all, she thought, with Lydia asking them over and over again to tell her what had happened; Paula and Dickie taking turns, repeating over and over again what little they knew. That the private jet had left the runway on time, around eleven in the morning, and that by three in the afternoon it had suddenly disappeared from radar.

Sedating Lydia had seemed merciful at the time, but it was a course of action which the Treadwells had come to regret.

In that first week, the search effort for Dr. Kristenson and her crew was labeled a rescue mission and the FAA investigators were reporting directly to Paula and Dickie Treadwell with their findings, happy to postpone any face-to-face discussions with the famous doctor's wife until they could, hopefully, find everyone onboard alive and well, a scenario which seemed to the Treadwells, from the outset, rather unlikely.

Dickie was still recovering from prostate cancer then, which put the onus on Paula to spin a bunch of otherwise fuzzy facts and speculation into a credible yarn that Lydia could deal with. It didn't help matters any that the search for Helaine stretched on for weeks, hampered by bad weather and a shoddy investigation, and that the real facts, when they did trickle in, didn't amount to much either.

Week after week after week they had searched for Helaine, and then a whole month had passed and still nothing.

At the same time this was going on, Joint President Treadwell was shuttling herself back and forth to work, holding down the fort at Soloman-Schmitt, dodging callous reporters, and trying not to be distracted by the flowers and candles that had begun piling up at the front of the high-rise across the street from hers. Trying not to look that way at all, at the building that housed Dr. Kristenson's offices.

Dr. Kristenson was a popular figure and much loved by the public. The pile of roses became a mountain before the rescue mission was called off, spilling over to Soloman-Schmitt's door eventually, though Joint President Beaumont, who couldn't return to her post there, never saw them.

Candlelight vigils and flowers twenty-four-seven. This, too, Paula had glossed over in her effort to spare her protégé. She watched the weeks turn into months and never spoke a word of it.

The public, however, became very vocal, once their grief gave way to suspicion. The Love Doc, as they called her, had been an outspoken, high-profile critic of government and social policy. Indeed, denouncing war and the other unsavory things that industrial nations so often engaged in had been the prominent theme of her goodwill tour, the one that ultimately claimed her life. Therefore, they believed she had been assassinated.

Conspiracy theories rule the day, Paula opined, dismissing the possibility of foul play with a scoff, but even she didn't know what to think anymore when the Department of Defense showed up at her door and, shortly thereafter, two plainclothes gentlemen from the CIA, both parties hoping to interview the bereft Lydia Beaumont, as well as to deliver their condolences.

But by then, Lydia was gone from the Treadwell estate, attempting in vain to live in her penthouse once more and fending off nosy reporters. Unsuccessful in those endeavors, she had finally retreated to her mother's home in the country where she could only be reached by cell-phone. That is, if she ever actually turned hers on.

Where she was precisely at the moment was anybody's guess, Paula informed the government agents, but one thing she did know for certain: Lydia Beaumont-Kristenson was of no mind to entertain their hypothesis and of no mind whatsoever to hear about any exploding spy satellites, if that's really what the government thought might have happened over the Pacific.

Yes, she was concerned about her co-president, Paula admitted. Yes, she was protecting her whereabouts. But JP Beaumont was no criminal, she reminded them. She was a widow in mourning. And being widowed was no crime, she emphasized, so leave her alone. The end.

Government officials were not in the business of harassing executives of Fortune 500 companies. They continued their investigation without the cooperation of the Treadwells or the Beaumonts and, ultimately, as with such things, nothing came of their inquest.

Six months after she vanished from the world, Helaine Kristenson was pronounced "missing/presumed dead" and the cause of the "air event" that extinguished her flame was determined to be "unknown."

President Treadwell sat in her office this Friday afternoon, dwelling on these impossible things as she stared out the window and patiently waited for VP Angelo. The building across the way looked the same to her as it ever did, but her view, nevertheless, had been altered. Whereas once she had wished Helaine Kristenson had never been born, now she wished, all the time, that she wasn't dead. For Lydia's sake.

Poor Lydia. "Yes, John?"

"Ms. Angelo's here. Shall I send her in?"

"Send her in, please, and get the joint president."

"She's waiting on line two."

"Come on in, Angelo. Sit down. I see you're looking radiant today, so what's the problem?"

"No problem."

"Speak now or forever hold your—"

"No problem, Paula. I just didn't feel well."

"You checked her numbers for me?"

"Yes. An extra zero where there shouldn't have been. Irksome, but it's all fixed now."

"Okay. Good afternoon, Ms. Beaumont."

"Good afternoon, Paula."

"I've got the senior VP here, once again. See if she can put in her two cents—or her two million, adjusting for inflation and the high cost of living—how are you?"

"Good afternoon, Ms. Angelo, I'm fine. Paula, it was an extra—"

"Zero, I know. We found it."

Venus leaned over and cleared her throat. "Good afternoon, Ms. Beau...Lydia."

There would be no reply to this, she knew from experience. Lydia didn't address her in these conference calls if she could avoid it, not beyond a perfunctory greeting and a cold, flat goodbye. Here a *yes*. There a *no*. She rose and went to the bar for a glass of water, drinking it with her back to Paula, with her hand over her heart.

How her heart hurt sometimes.

Ah, but in her belly there was this baby! She set the glass down and placed her hands on her stomach, listening but not listening, to the hollow speaker on Paula's line. That voice, once so familiar to Venus, always sounded so strange to her now. So empty. She longed to fill it up for Lydia. To take her in her arms and make her speak once more, in real words, in gasps and giggles and sighs. To rock her, if that's what she needed. Just like a baby.

Her baby.

"Yup, baby girl, I'm pretty sure you're pregnant," Mama had insisted, her joy undisguised. Venus had gone to the doctor the very next day.

"You're nearly four months pregnant," the obstetrician confirmed. "How could you not know this?"

Well, she had missed periods before. It wasn't unusual. Stress can do that, her medical books said. Besides, "I did a home pregnancy test and it showed that I wasn't."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

The doctor responded to that with a snort. "Home pregnancy tests! They're not a hundred percent accurate, you know."

"They're not?"

"This one wasn't," he replied, with a laugh.

No, this one wasn't. Thank God.

"It's a girl, by the way," he informed her, as she was preparing to leave.

"A girl?"

"Yup, a girl."

"A girl?" she repeated, the rest of her words trapped in her throat. A girl! She sat back down on the gurney and bawled.

"Uh, just a moment, Lydia. Do you have any plans for participating in this conversation, Angelo, or are you just going to stand there and eavesdrop?"

Venus dropped from the eaves and took her seat again, in the comfy chair beside the joint president. "I'm sorry, Paula," she pleasantly said. "Please forgive me, Lydia."

Chapter 4: Delilah

How Delilah Lewiston happened to secretly retain the services of the notorious firm, Brown River Enterprises, to investigate the disappearance of Helaine Kristenson and to bring her home if possible, whether she was dead or alive, is an interesting story that pivots on a couple of strange coincidences.

Delilah had assembled at the club with a few of her banking associates one afternoon, almost a year after the doctor had gone missing, six months after the "funeral." It was the same club Paula Treadwell frequented, so it wasn't unusual to discover her in there, too, sitting at a corner table with her financial papers and a couple of big dark clouds for companions.

No one with half a brain ever bothered the president of Soloman-Schmitt when she sat alone like this, when her face was frozen in a pensive scowl and she was drinking cup after cup of black coffee. Delilah merely nodded her head in Paula's direction and didn't give the woman a second thought throughout her lunch.

Lunching at the club with the gang was a weekly ritual that usually only lasted an hour—bankers are busy creatures and time is money, money, money to them. On that day, however, everything had gone wrong for Delilah's group, from the moment that the waiter had seated them at their table. The wrong drinks, the wrong menus, the wrong food and, in the end, the wrong bill for their long and protracted misadventure.

Her one-hour lunch had lasted for more than two hours.

Coincidentally, so did Paula's.

Though Delilah had more important things to do with her time that day, she'd lingered behind to square things up with the head waiter. If she hadn't done this she might have missed out on an opportunity to visit with Treadwell, which the woman, seeing that Delilah's colleagues had finally left the restaurant, urgently hailed her to do.

"Well, hi there, Paula. What's up?"

"Sit down, sit down—did you see this article here in today's paper?"

The *Daily Herald* was the local rag, full of vitriol and gossip, typically. "Let me find my glasses," Delilah said, confused as to how it could have anything to do with the world of finance.

"Never mind your glasses, it's about that missing plane again. Now here are two separate people, Ham radio operators, amateurs, of course, located in two different countries, one based in the Philippines, the other in Japan, and each insisting that they intercepted may-day messages from Kristenson's aircraft an hour and a half after it disappeared from radar, and each one reciting those messages almost identically...in different languages! What do you make of that?"

Delilah slipped her glasses on and read the article slowly, looking up with surprise when she had finished. Both radio operators had reported the signal within the first twenty-four hours that the plane had disappeared. Yet this was the first she had heard of it.

"Now why wouldn't the government agents have mentioned this to me?" Paula asked. "And why didn't they put this in their report?"

"Government agents? I'm assuming you mean the CIA?"

"The CIA, Lewiston, and the Department of Defense. On my doorstep. And they never said a word about it to me."

"The government making house calls...Jesus, Paula. What could that have been about?"

"An exploding satellite, they said at the time, but it makes you wonder, doesn't it? I read that article this morning and thought to myself, exploding satellite, my ass."

Delilah was perplexed. "The Philippines and Japan? Do you think it's credible?" she asked. "Well, I guess it seems credible," she answered herself. "The plane had gone off course, perhaps?"

Paula agreed. "And landed in a rat's nest, that's what. Near China maybe."

"China—oh, good God, I hope not."

There was a mess in China, all right. The ladies fell quiet, picturing it.

Around them, the tables were emptying, the lunch crowd loudly heading back to their offices and cubicles and clustering in small boisterous groups just outside the window. They had been a part of that bustle once, Delilah and Lydia. Even Paula. That was years ago, before they had become chief executive officers, before Lydia had ever laid eyes on Helaine Kristenson, the captivating blond she had glimpsed one day in Frank's Place, midtown's favorite corporate watering hole.

Delilah watched the horde absently, her thoughts a million miles away. In China. "Do you think there's a chance she's...?"

Paula shook her head emphatically.

"But why not? It happens sometimes."

"Only in the movies," Paula said. "Not in real life."

"Well...rarely anyway," Delilah conceded.

"Tell me how could she be alive after all this time? Surely, someone would have seen her, if she was. A blond wandering around those parts. And unarmed? I doubt it."

Delilah wasn't convinced. "It's chaos around there, though, and with that kind of chaos it wouldn't be totally impossible. As long as the plane didn't actually crash." She hesitated before adding, "Or get shot down."

Paula considered this for a moment then shook her head no again. "I really don't think so, Del. But she might have survived, had they acted quickly enough. That's what troubles me so. That they didn't."

It was a grim debate following a crummy meal and Delilah didn't feel much like going back to work anymore, although she knew she had to. She was late. "You think Liddy's heard about this?" she asked, tucking the newspaper under her arm.

"Nah, she doesn't read the papers. Don't show it to her, is my best advice. Can't be much help anyway." Pretty good advice.

That evening, Delilah had searched the internet for more information, a dubious source for the truth, she realized, worse than the papers really, but the story of the may-day transmissions had rung true to her somehow, and it provided names and places which could be readily verified.

Sorting through thousands and thousands of pages devoted to Dr. Kristenson was a daunting task, however. Web sites and fan sites and news sites. No wonder Lydia hated the media!

Lydia called late in the night.

"Liddy! Hi. I—I was just thinking of you. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay. What are you up to?"

"Oh...nothing...really."

"I saw an interesting article in the Daily Herald today...did you happen to see it?"

"An article? No. I mean...what about?"

"About the...it's about the plane. About a may-day signal. Are you online right now?"

"Am I online?"

"I want you to read it...tell me what you think. It's in the Daily Herald on page twelve."

"I—Liddy—I thought you didn't read the papers?"

"I don't. I accidentally stumbled on one today. Are you online yet?"

Delilah pretended to go through the motions of getting online and was once again perusing page twelve of the entertainment section, wondering just what about the death of someone's spouse was so terribly entertaining. "I got it," she said, feigning to read the article as if for the very first time.

"Okay...well?"

What could she say about it? Paula's scenario was probably correct, that even if this story was true, and Delilah believed that it was, what difference could it make now, a year later? If Helaine had survived the plane crash, if she was still alive, why wasn't she here with Lydia? Helaine and Lydia had been obsessed with each other. Delilah had never seen anything like it before. What then, but death, could possibly be delaying her?

"Delilah? Are you reading it?"

"Liddy, I've...what do you want me to do here? I would do absolutely anything to rectify this situation for you. Anything you asked me to. All you have to do is name it."

Lydia had gone quiet on her then, contemplating things in more realistic terms, Delilah hoped. "What can I do?" she repeated. "Tell me."

"I don't know, but she's alive, Del. I can feel it."

Delilah sighed away from the phone so Lydia wouldn't have to hear it. She had told her this stuff before—Helaine's alive, she could feel it She had said it so many times with absolutely nothing substantive to go on. By now, Delilah knew that Helaine being alive was nothing but a hunch or a wish.

That is, until the information on page twelve had surfaced.

"Can you tell me with a hundred percent certainty that you know my wife is dead?"

No. No one could. That's the horrible dilemma those left behind like this are faced with. When a loved one simply never comes home again, when there isn't an actual body to place in the ground beneath their headstone, no normal death per se, then how do you accept that someone's really dead? How do you stop waiting for them "just in case" they're not? What if it's all a big mistake?

"I think of her everyday. I dream of her every night," Lydia had once confided. "And I see her everywhere." She hadn't become a widow so much as a woman on the widow's walk, everyday and every night peering from her balcony toward the sea, searching the horizon for a long lost ship and taking comfort in mirages.

The funeral service had offered no solace.

A mock funeral, complete with a grave, a casket, a burial, was all that could have been done for Dr. Kristenson, and Lydia refused to attend it. The closest she got on that rainy morning was to sit in her limo at the top of the hill and observe it from a safe distance.

Delilah had looked up from under her umbrella and shivered at the sight of the vehicle up there. The black limousine resembled a hearse.

There were dozens of other public ceremonies for Dr. Kristenson as well, memorials and dedications Lydia deliberately missed. She couldn't go to any of these either, "because Helaine wasn't dead."

"Can you prove it to me, Del? Maybe that's what I want you to do. Prove it to me. Because I've seen no proof of it yet."

Delilah turned the computer off then and took a deep breath. She should try, she thought. Prove it to her somehow. If she could prove it to her, then Lydia could grieve at last, grieve a healthy kind of grief and, once and for all, get it over with. Start the healing process, as they call it. That's the only way, Delilah reasoned, that Lydia would ever get on with her life again and come out of hiding. If someone proved to her, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that her mate was truly dead. "Let me think about this, okay? I'll have to give it more thought than I can tonight. It's late and I'm tired."

So over the following two weeks Delilah had given the matter more thought, researching it into the wee small hours of the morning. There were a lot of unanswered questions about the doctor's disappearance, she discovered, and lots of people asking them.

She was going to need help, she finally concluded. The best that money could buy.

"Hey, there, Paula."

"Sit down, Lewiston, sit down. Can I get you a drink today?"

She had to return to the office after this so, "Nah. I'll take a rain check."

"Well, what can I do for you then? I can see it's something."

Delilah got straight to the point. "I know you frequently use them—I'm looking to hire a really good private investigator."

Paula sat up, indignant and defensive. "I know nothing about private investigators," she replied, casting a furtive glance around the room and behind her. "And if by 'you' you're implying Soloman-Schmitt, then I can assure you and whoever else you've been talking with, that you're all quite mistaken. The end."

Soloman-Schmitt Incorporated, with Paula Treadwell at its helm, had the worst reputation in the industry for corporate espionage and dirty tricks. No one in finance was safe from their prying and spying, especially not their own executives. Delilah leaned over the table and whispered, "Yeah. But really, Paula. I need a private investigator."

Paula folded her hands in front of her. "What exactly is this about, Del?"

"It's...it's confidential."

"Is it the Kristenson matter?—because we looked into it and found nothing. Nothing that led us anywhere, that is."

"We? You looked into the may-day transmissions already?"

"No...I've told you what I thought of those and I don't want to repeat myself. So I'm right. It's related to the Kristenson matter."

Delilah denied that it was related to the Kristenson matter.

"Trouble at the bank?" Paula next inquired, her eyes narrowing.

Yes, a very good guess. There was trouble at the bank. Globe International had an internal problem developing and Delilah wasn't sure yet who was involved in it. She needed a private eye.

"You need a private eye..." Delilah Lewiston was famous for running a pretty tight ship at the bank so what sort of problem could she possibly be having? Paula eyed her skeptically before answering, "Call John and ask him what you should do. I've told you already, I personally don't know anything whatsoever about private investigators."

"John? John your assistant?

"Correct."

Delilah smiled gratefully. "And John will know where I can find a reliable one then?"

Paula lifted her arms in protest. "I don't know what John knows!" she snapped. "How could I know what John knows? You'll just have to ask him yourself!"

"Okay, okay. Thank you, Paula. Thank you. You're an absolute pet," Delilah said, rising up to leave. "I'll owe you one."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Keep my name out of it, is all I ask. Oh, and, Lewiston...?"

"Yes?"

"Tell John you're calling about the Goodman case. Be sure to mention Silas Goodman to him."

Poor old Silas Goodman, living in exile for the rest of his days, trapped in a forced retirement. So that's what happened to him! "The Goodman case—gotcha. You have a great day, Paula."

Delilah phoned John from work that afternoon and, come to think of it, with hardly any prodding, he did know something about private investigators. Someone fairly reliable. Someone who went by the name of Armando. No other name. Just Armando.

"Tell him Johnny Five gave you his number."

Johnny Five? Okay. This ought to at least be interesting, she thought to herself, dialing the telephone number Johnny Five had given her. "Hello...I'm looking for a Mr. Armando?"

"No Mr. Armando here, sorry. You must have dialed the wrong num—"

"Armando, I mean then, just Armando. Johnny Five gave me this number. Is this Armando I'm speaking with?"

"Johnny Five...let me check...five...yes...okay, go ahead. You've got the right number."

"I need a private investigator."

"Obviously. Go ahead I told you."

"I'm looking for somebody."

"You husband, your lover or other?"

"Other. My friend."

"How long has your friend been missing?"

"A year."

"A year! Man or woman?"

"Woman," Delilah said. She didn't like Armando, his gruff voice and demeanor.

"That's a long time, lady. The trail's very cold. Name, please."

"Delilah Lewiston."

She could hear him tapping at a keyboard.

"And when exactly did you last see and speak to Delilah Lewiston?"

"No, no, I'm Delilah! I'm looking for a Helaine Kristenson."

Silence greeted this declaration. His keyboard was quiet, too.

"Hello? Armando?"

"Yes, yes, I heard you. You're looking for Dr. Kristenson. You called last week?"

Last week? "No...?"

His keyboard had come back to life again, but she could only hear his breathing. "Armando?"

"One second."

"Is someone else looking for Helaine?"

Armando didn't answer.

"Armando...are you still there?"

"Uh...no...I can't help you with this. You need to call the number I'm going to give you. Call it from a land-line—preferably your residence—on Saturday at...noon, ring it at noon and then hang up. They will call you right back. Tell them that Armando Twelve sent you. Do you understand? Armando Twelve. I'm sorry, but I myself...I can't help you."

"The number you're about to—I can find help there?"

"This is possible, ma'am. Call them at noon...and don't ever call here again." He gave her the number, country code Argentina and hung up in her ear.

After that, she just sat at her desk, the phone in her hand blaring a dial tone, her pulse pounding wildly in her head, her body trembling. She hadn't felt so excited in decades.

Maybe never!

Thursday was a long way off from Saturday at noon, Delilah had discovered, and, having come thus far, she was anxious to get things moving. So much time had already been wasted.

She dialed Argentina with bated breath, let it ring six times and then disconnected. A half hour later her telephone rang. She jumped at the sound of it, picking up the receiver before it could ring twice. "Hello?"

"Argentina calling. You will need to furnish the name of your contact."

"Contac—Armando Twelve," Delilah had blurted, surprised to hear a woman's voice and a British accent.

"This call is being monitored. Please confirm that you are Delilah Lewiston and the following personal facts."

"This is—I'm Delilah Lewiston," she confirmed. She listened then with horror as her vital statistics were rattled off. Her name, birthday, social security number, occupation, salary, marital status, address...

"Now, if you can verify that our information is completely accurate, we will proceed then to the next step."

The information was completely accurate, Delilah said.

"An e-mail has just been sent to you containing a web address and password. Use your first name, in lower case, to log in and review the details of the proposed contract. If you have any questions concerning the contents of this document, use the e-mail address on the bottom of the last page to express them. You will receive a reply within forty-eight hours. If, however, you have no further questions, then simply click the button that says 'transfer funds now' and fill in the required banking information in the spaces provided. The agreement for delivery of services will then be finalized. Do you comprehend everything I have said to you so far, Ms. Lewiston? Please indicate the extent of your understanding by saying yes or no."

"Yes," Delilah replied.

"Now please note before I terminate that, if you should decide to contract for confidential services with the firm, your monies are nonrefundable. You also need to know in advance that Brown River Enterprises makes no representation or warranty whatsoever that your cargo can be located and delivered to you at a specified time or, for that matter, that your cargo can be located and shipped to you at all. In the event, though, that BRE is able to arrange for a shipment, you will receive notification via e-mail once it arrives in your designated port. You are required to respond to that communication within twenty-four hours and to personally appear at the appointed time thereafter, for the purposes of inspecting and identifying the contents. Once the contents have been positively verified, you will take physical possession immediately, no questions asked, whether or not the condition of your cargo is fresh or spoiled. Please indicate that you fully understand this disclaimer and these instructions by saying yes or no."

Oh, god. "Yes."

"Goodbye then, Ms. Lewiston." (click)

Murder and Mayhem Are Us, Incorporated—Delilah had heard of Brown River Enterprises, of its plots, its coups and its for-hire assassins, long before she clicked the "transfer funds now" button and finalized the contract with them. That was well over a million dollars and a year ago with no word yet and her excitement and hopes had, since then, faded considerably.

Nevertheless, although the instructions on the website had expressly forbidden it, she sometimes sent an e-mail to the address she had been provided that day, asking the firm for an update. These were deemed "undeliverable" and always returned to her a few hours later marked as "mail delivery subsystem failures."

BRE's website, she discovered, had also vanished without a trace: "The page you are searching for has expired." And, "the website has either been moved or no longer exists."

If someone else was indeed looking for Helaine Kristenson, she wished them the best of luck, though it was obvious that such a mission required a great deal more than that.

Chapter 5: Lydia Beaumont-Kristenson

Reality is the loose configuration of the past, present and future. Which means that Lydia Beaumont-Kristenson was, despite it all, completely lucid. Most of the time anyway.

Whatever her state-of-mind, whatever her activity, Lydia was cognizant of just about everything. She knew today, for instance, that more than two years had come and gone since Helaine had disappeared. That's what the numbers on her calendar said. Exactly twenty-seven months, sixteen days and another dawn.

Another awful dawn.

The morning sun, with its garish light and harsh shadows, can be brutal on a woman in her middle forties who spends most of her time in sorrow. A mirror, unforgiving. She stood at the bathroom sink brushing her teeth this morning, wondering if she should put on some makeup.

She had an appointment with Delilah this afternoon in the city. Delilah had been nagging her lately to find an apartment there. Not necessarily to live in full-time, she said, but a place where Lydia could maybe spend a weekend now and then, a place where she might be able to mingle with the living for a change, if only to watch them from a window.

So Lydia was going to placate her friend on this very tired subject and go apartment hunting with her. Just the two of them, Delilah had promised, and a real estate agent.

"You'll like Shelly," she had assured. "She's a great gal, Liddy. Very hip."

Very hip—okay, better plan on wearing makeup then. "Hi, Mom."

"Lydia Ann, how did you know it was me?"

"Oh, I have my ways." (And Caller-ID.) "What's up?"

"I called to see what you planned on wearing today for your outing. What are you planning on wearing today?"

Lydia laughed to herself. "Nothing too fancy, I think. Blue jeans and a sweatshirt. My beat up old sneakers."

"Oh, sweetheart...why don't you put on something nice for a change? One of your suits? Do you think Delilah's going to be wearing a sweatshirt and sneakers? Do you think the real estate agent's going to be wearing a sweatshirt and sneakers?"

"All right, Mom. I'm only teasing you. What am I going to wear today?"

"I'll be over in an hour."

"You're going to drive in this weather?"

Spring had been making a spectacular comeback this month, but during the night winter had snuck in again, bringing with it a blanket of snow. The gains of the daffodils from weeks of warm sun were either held in abeyance for the moment, or lost forever in the sudden cold. She wouldn't know which until the snow melted.

"Roy's bringing me. He's got all-wheel drive on his brand new truck and nothing can deter that man."

That's for sure. Good old Roy will plow the driveway for her, too. And wouldn't he be really something if he could tackle this mess? "I'll see you in an hour, Mom," she said, knowing that in an hour, if she didn't attempt to tidy things up a bit, she would have to contend with her mother's woeful face.

The lake house had been Marilyn's pride and joy. So many happy summers she had spent here with her kids. Swinging on the porch. Digging in the gardens. Rowing. Memories like that are so precious, and they only get more valuable with years. Who cares if her children had been squabbling the whole time? That they hated each other's guts? Who cares if her husband was never around? That he had always been at the office?

Lydia set the phone down on her desk in the living room and shut the computer off. All work and no play. All work and no play. All work and no play. An hour would not be enough time to thoroughly organize the lake house so that it would pass her mother's inspection, she realized, taking in the evidence of last night's binge. But she could at least clean up the kitchen for her guests, throw together a breakfast for them, she decided, hastily picking up plates and silverware from the floor, the pile of sweats and dirty socks from her sofa.

Socks go in the hamper. Plates go in the sink. The living room looked instantly better but oh, shit, just look at that kitchen.

From the kitchen window Lydia could see her tracks in the new snow, cutting a path to the dock on the shore. Everyday when she got up, whatever the weather, she walked to that dock and stood on the edge of it, staring out across the water as she sipped her cup of coffee. She had an affinity for water, for the sound of it flowing, the feel of it on her body when she swam. Water was so powerful, so potent. Nothing could stop water. Nothing, of course, but winter. She filled the sink to wash the dishes. How she hated to see snow outside her kitchen window again. How she hated winter.

But the days were getting long once more, her mom had announced last week, as if it had been a big secret, as if Lydia was incapable of noticing such things on her own. Yes, she had noticed the lengthening days. The shadows were taking longer to creep across the lake in the evenings and the lake itself was no longer frozen, not even this morning, in spite of last night's dip in temperature.

She popped a bagel in the toaster and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. The coffee maker dripped and gurgled. She yawned.

Geesh, her bedroom, she remembered now, with a jolt. Someone had dropped a bomb in there. Better fix up that bedroom, too, or she'd never hear the end of it.

It'll be good to get away from here for a few hours, she told herself, as she was making up her bed in the guest room, for the first time since who knew when, actually putting on clean sheets and pillowcases, turning the bedspread down exactly as her mother did. Yeah, a change of scenery was definitely—"Good morning, Mom. That wasn't an hour, was it?"

"Well, Roy was itching to go. He's plowing right now so your driver can get in. What time is he coming for you?"

"Noon."

"Noon? We'd better get busy then. Oh, just look at your hair, Lydia!"

She'd seen it. "Coffee, Mom?"

"Coffee's a good start—the place looks lovely, honey. I must say, I was expecting...well...something different."

"This is really nice," Shelly oohed. "I must say, I was expecting something totally different."

"We wouldn't steer you wrong, would we, Liddy?" Delilah said cheerfully, unaware that hipster Shelly was *totally* draining her friend.

"No," Lydia forced herself to answer, as she dropped herself into a chair. "We wouldn't do that."

They had looked at only two apartments today, but it had taken all afternoon to accomplish this. Delilah had worked up an appetite and invited the real estate agent to join them for dinner at a little place she knew around the corner called Lucky's Den.

Lucky's looked like a dive, but it wasn't, as was the case with most of the establishments on the waterfront. The little hole-in-the-wall had been a favorite of Lydia's and Delilah's when Lydia had lived in the city. Weekends in the summertime, they would come to sit outside on the sidewalk, sipping their martinis and gnawing on potato skins, speculating about the customers entering and exiting Cicero's Jazz Club, the seedy all night joint across the street from them.

It was too cold for that activity now. They chose a table inside, instead. In front of the big picture window.

"Well, ladies," Shelly said, once they were situated. "Talk amongst yourself. I've got to go visit the little girl's room."

Delilah waited until Shelly was out of sight to ask, "Well, what do you think, Liddy?"

"What do I think? I love it down here, but I could never live on the waterfront."

"No, no, not the apartment. I was talking about Shelly. Isn't she something? So upbeat. So positive."

Shelly laughed too much. Nothing could be that funny all the time. "She's...very dynamic, Del. That's how I'd describe her. Very dynamic."

Delilah noted Lydia's exhaustion without comment.

"Start you out with something from the bar?" the waitress asked.

"I think not," Delilah said, sending Lydia a wary look. "Some sparkling water, if you have it."

"Sparkling water. And you?"

"Oh, let's kick up our heels," Lydia said, grinning and bearing. "Sparkling water for everyone. Three, please."

"Sparkling water it is. Here are your menus."

Lydia buried her face in one.

She had actually liked the waterfront apartment. It was cozy with plenty of sun, perfect for a single person. But she could not imagine living on the waterfront. Not here where there were so many memories flying about. Memories of jogging. Of eating. Of shopping. Of dancing. Memories of Helaine.

She could never live here where Helaine had once lived, on again and off again, as she had said, for seven secret years with her super-model, notorious Sharon Chambers. The notorious and cunning and vindictive Sharon Chambers, who had made so much trouble for them in the beginning, dragging them through the mud and into the courts, onto the front pages of all the newspapers. All for palimony! Sharon Chambers, opportunistic Sharon, who had waited only seven months after Helaine had vanished to release her raunchy kiss-and-tell-all, *Playing Doctor*, stirring things up again with sex and the press.

And no one could stop it from happening, Robert Keagan had sadly concluded. Helaine had been pronounced dead by then and was "buried," and she was the only party whose rights would have been affected by Sharon's trashy novel, the only one who had any legal standing to prevent its publication. If she was alive, that is.

Robert and Kay Keagan. It had been an eternity since Lydia had seen them. She remembered Robert's stricken face the last time they had met, Kay struggling to be cheerful. Robert had been Helaine's attorney of record. He represented her in the palimony suit, in a marriage contract, in the settlement of her estate. He had lost more than just a client, Lydia understood. Robert and Kay and Helaine went back a long, long ways. They had been Helaine's best friends since university.

No, she could never be at peace here near the water. The waterfront was making all this stuff as vivid as if it was only yesterday.

"There she is," Delilah said.

Lydia glanced up from her menu.

It was only Shelly, returning with their waitress, having ordered something pink from the bar. Of course it would be pink, Lydia thought. Well, a pink drink wasn't anything to be jealous of, she consoled herself, though she really could use some gin. "I'll have a chef's salad," she said, faking a smile for Delilah's sake and for that of little Miss Dynamo. "And throw in a bowl of clam chowder, while we're at it."

"I think I'm going to take that apartment," Lydia said, once she and Delilah had ditched the real estate agent and gone back to Delilah's place.

Delilah had capitulated and was serving up Irish coffees, complete with homemade whipped cream. "What did you say?" she yelled over the blender.

"I said, I can't do another day of this hunting thing so I'm going to take that apartment!"

Delilah turned the blender off. "You are?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"The first one we looked at."

The first one they looked at was nearby, in this familiar neighborhood that, not so long ago, Lydia had also once called home. This was the financial district. Midtown. It was near Delilah. Near the Keagans. Near Frank's Place. Near Soloman-Schmitt. It was a plain old apartment with four plain old rooms, not large and luxurious like her penthouse had been, its dissimilarity there perhaps its greatest attribute. It was a plainly plain apartment whose plainness was unlikely to be disturbed even by the most flamboyant of decorations or the most eccentric of tenants, but it was in a quiet and secure building, and the quiet and secure building came equipped with a nice quiet doorman, and the apartment itself had a view, albeit a narrow one.

"But, Liddy, why didn't you tell Shelly that? She's busy scheduling three more places for tomorrow."

"I just decided it, Del. Call her for me, won't you? Tell her I've made up my mind and to bring the papers tomorrow, instead of...I don't want go trudging in the cold again looking for an apartment. It's...I don't know...depressing."

The kitchen smelled of coffee and whiskey and milk. Delilah handed Lydia a hot mug of it. "You're placating me, aren't you?"

Lydia took a sip and smiled. "Del...of course I am."

Chapter 6: Marilyn

Twenty-seven months, sixteen days and another dawn had passed since Marilyn Sanders Beaumont had officially given Edward Beaumont II, her wayward husband, his ring back. That brought to an end one of the world's longest, if not its most unhappy, mismatches to date and left Marilyn finally free to exchange new vows with the lake house's master carpenter, Roy Mann.

Being that she was in her seventies and Roy in his sixties, it had not been Marilyn's original plan to wait to remarry but, in light of her daughter-in-law's tragic disappearance, Marilyn felt it best to postpone the wedding until Helaine could hopefully be found and, if not found or if found dead, then buried. Under those circumstances, the plans that she and Roy had made for a public ceremony and reception were scrapped completely, to be revived, they had promised each other, only in the event that Helaine returned home safely.

As regards the funeral for Helaine six months later, ultimately, it was Marilyn, with the assistance of Helaine's friends, who made these arrangements. Lydia was, by then, unable to focus on such a matter and was still unwilling to accept the findings of the Federal investigation which concluded that the jet plane had experienced some kind of technical malfunction about halfway into the flight and that it had subsequently crashed into the ocean, killing everyone.

A few weeks after the funeral, Marilyn and Roy exchanged vows in a private, no-frills ceremony before the justice of the peace and, instead of flying away to some exotic place for their honeymoon, they spent a weekend in bed at Roy's log cabin.

He was getting her too cheap, he had complained, but a simple celebration was all that Marilyn had desired. She would never get into another airplane again, she told him, and, indeed, she never did.

Twenty-seven months and sixteen days had gone by so quickly for her. On cloud nine since her divorce. Without flying.

Like her daughter, Marilyn did not think much of airplanes and was pathologically afraid of flying. From the very beginning, when Helaine had first announced her world tour and listed the cities she would be flying into and out of, the continents and the oceans she would necessarily have to cross to get to them, Marilyn had begun wringing her hands. When Helaine had privately requested that she speak to Lydia and help to allay *her* concerns about the trip, Marilyn had steadfastly declined.

She would always remember that conversation, as perfectly as if it were yesterday, remember the fears she had expressed and the gentle way that Helaine had laughed them off.

"I've flown so many times," she'd said, in a soothing and understanding tone. "Spent so may hours in the air, Mom, without a single incident. And they say it's safer to fly today than it is to drive an automobile."

"Hush, my girl," Marilyn had responded to that, "or you'll tempt the devil."

Gentle Helaine. Gentle and decent Helaine. Marilyn could not picture her harmed or drowned. Dead! Yet she knew immediately that something awful had happened when she disembarked from her own flight on that day and met Roy's downcast face at the airport. It was Helaine, she just knew it.

"Where's Lydia?" she'd asked, before he had even spoken.

"I don't know," he hated to say. "She must have turned her mobile off."

In the car, Roy had told her what little was known at the time and Marilyn softly wept to hear it. "I need to talk to my daughter, Roy. We have to find her right away."

Mother and daughter had planned to rendezvous at the lake that weekend. Roy drove directly to the lake house and they waited there for Lydia, drinking coffee till after midnight to stay awake, but she didn't come and she didn't call until later the next day.

For the record, that was the first time Roy and Marilyn had actually slept together. Sleep, though, is all they did.

Sleeping in the small guest room, in the small guest bed with someone, with a man, with Roy, felt so odd to Marilyn. She hadn't slept beside a man in so many years. His large arm around her waist and the sound of his heavy slumber was a consolation she had not expected that terrible night. How beautiful it was at last to be with him. And how sad, too, on such an occasion.

In the morning, when she woke, she found him in the kitchen, breaking the eggs for French toast. The lake house was still under renovation then and, although the kitchen was picture perfect, no one had christened it yet, and Marilyn knew that there was no food in the fridge or in the cupboards. He must have gone to his house, she realized, or to the store and back, in order to make her breakfast.

Why, she asked herself, thinking of her daughter's plight afresh, couldn't life be as simple as this: Your mate waiting for you, safe and sound in the kitchen, hand whipping eggs to some old song on the radio, and wearing a silly apron and a good-morning-grin? She kissed Roy's craggy face that morning as if it had been hers forever to kiss, and stood close to him as he cooked, just in case forever disappeared.

Lydia called that same evening, disoriented and, as might be expected, quite despondent. She was hiding from the press at the Treadwell mansion, watching the case on TV as it developed and checking for hourly news updates on the internet. She had just gotten off the phone with her father, she said, which was comforting, but she desperately needed to see her mother. She needed her mother.

Marilyn had met both of the Treadwells before, at a benefit dinner for the Kristenson Foundation. Dickie, she felt, was a real human being, shy, sincere and well-meaning, but that Paula...well, Paula Treadwell was something else.

She turned down Paula's offer to chopper her to their estate that night. No, no airplanes ever again and no helicopters, either, Marilyn had said. Paula seemed to understand those sentiments. She offered to send her driver and limo as the next best thing, but that would take too long, Marilyn decided. Roy drove her there instead and they arrived just before midnight, in time to find Lydia awake, but in a state of utter despair and intoxication, the televisions and radios blaring at full volume, and Paula with her phone headset on, barking orders into it as she banged out her e-mail directives on the computer.

"A MASSIVE ALL OUT SEARCH EFFORT FOR THE WRECKAGE OF DR. HELAINE KRISTENSON'S PRIVATE AIRCRAFT IS STILL UNDERWAY TONIGHT IN THE WATERS OF HAWAII, LITTLE MORE THAN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS AFTER THE DOCTOR'S PLANE MYSTERIOUSLY DISA—"

Command central was in complete chaos, Dickie explained.

"—OM RADAR AFTER TAKING OFF UNDER CLEAR SKIES YESTERDAY FROM HONOLULU INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT AT APPROXIMATELY ELEVEN IN THE MORNING, PACIFIC TIME."

Roy left promptly, out of his element and overwhelmed.

"Where's my daughter's room?" Marilyn asked, raising her voice to be heard above the din. "She needs to go to bed now."

"FAA INVESTIGATORS HAVE CONFIRMED THAT ALL RADIO COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE PRIVATE JET WERE LOST AT APPROXIMATELY TWO IN THE AFTERNOON YESTERDAY AND THAT, SHORTLY THEREAFTER, THE AIRCRAFT ITSELF DISAPPEARED FROM THEIR—"

"Upstairs, next to the library," Dickie replied, taking Marilyn's coat. "Have you eaten already? Can I get you anything?"

"No. Please don't fuss."

"WELL, WE ARE, UH, ABSENT ANY DISTRESS SIGNALS, HOLDING OUR BREATH RIGHT NOW, OPTIMISTIC UNTIL WE, UH, IT'S NOT A TYPICAL SCENARIO FOR THOSE WATERS AND, WELL, A PLANE DOESN'T USUALLY, UH, WELL, YOU DON'T USUALLY LOSE A CRAFT SO LATE INTO IT'S FLI—"

"Mom..."

"It's okay, sweetheart. We're going to go to bed now and rest. Everything will be better in the morning, I expect."

She half dragged and half carried Lydia up the stairs.

"—WERE TWO PILOTS AND FIVE PASSENGERS ONBOARD THE PRIVATE JET, ACCORDING TO OFFICIALS IN HONOLULU."

There must be a television in every damn room, Marilyn cursed in her head. Each one set on a different channel.

"—INCLUDING THE FAMED LOVE DOC' DR. HELAINE KRISTENSON. AT THIS POINT IN TIME, SEARCHERS FEAR THAT, IF THE SMALL PLANE DID CRASH INTO THE PACIFIC OCEAN, THERE MIGHT NOT BE ANY WRECKAGE OR SURVIVORS TO FIND, BUT THE SEARCH FOR THEM IS STILL ONGOING AND IT'S STILL CONSIDERED A RESCUE MISS—"

"Mom...they're playing the same damned thing," Lydia complained, her speech slurred. "Over and over again...the same photos and the same...look there...you see?" she said, pointing at the television on the night stand.

"—LAINE KRISTENSON IS SHOWN HERE ADDRESSING HER AUDIENCE IN GENEVA, SWITZERLAND EARLIER THIS—"

"They show Helaine's picture and then they show my picture...and then there's some film of us right there...of our...and then look...voila...there's Sharon...Sharon and Helaine together again...and I never saw that photo before, Mom...the one of Sharon with Helaine...but they keep on doing that. Me and Helaine and..."

"—TENTIOUS PALIMONY BATTLE OVER SIX YEARS AGO WITH THEN FORMER LOVER AND SUPER-MODEL, SHAR—"

"That's because they don't know anything," Marilyn said, with disgust. "Or know any better, apparently."

"But why...why are they doing this to me? What does Sharon have to do with—"

"FOR AN UNDISCLOSED SUM, BELIEVED TO BE IN THE MIL—"

"Turn this stuff off, honey. The peace and quiet isn't going to hurt you any."

Lydia stood motionless, watching the screen without blinking.

"Lydia...turn the television off and come to bed."

"—BEAUMONT-KRISTENSON'S WHEREABOUTS ARE, AT THE MOMENT, UNKNOWN AND—"

"Lydia."

"—COULD NOT BE REA—"

"Lvdia!"

"—IN TIME TO COMMENT FOR TONIGHT'S BROADCA—" (click)

The bed had been slept on, Marilyn recognized by the swirl of the bed sheets in the middle of it, but it had not been slept in. She turned the covers down and fluffed the pillows without speaking, the sudden silence humming in her ears.

Lydia came and sat on the edge of the it.

"I brought some garments," Marilyn said to her. "They're not fancy. Just for sleeping in. Lounging around."

"Garments, Mom," Lydia murmured. "Mom, they're not...they're...they're clothes. You brought me some clothes."

"Clothes then, Lydia Ann. Now put them on for me and I'll comb your hair."

A long sleeve T-shirt and drawstring pants. Lydia took them from her mother and lay them across her lap with a sigh. "Will you?"

"Will I...?

"Comb my hair?"

"Of course," Marilyn said, touching her daughter's cheek.

"And hold my hand...like...tell me a..."

Marilyn took her hand.

"Because I can't sleep, Mom. I can't," Lydia sobbed.

"I know, I know."

"I can't sleep. I'm...I'm having a nightmare."

"I know, sweetheart. That's why I came."

"And I can't wake up—I can't wake up!"

"Your sister's made up her mind to buy an apartment in the city."

Eddie, looked up from his dinner, surprised. "This is delicious, Marilyn. When did she decide that?"

"Yesterday. She phoned me from Delilah's. Did you ever meet Delilah?"

No, he hadn't. Lydia didn't trust him around her friends anymore. "No, I haven't," he said into his plate. Roy shot him a curious glance. He wasn't very impressed with Edward Beaumont III. Something of a scoundrel about the man. "Pass the salad over here, Eddie, would you?"

Eddie passed him the salad without looking at him. "Well, I think that's probably a good thing for her, an apartment. Yeah, I think so," he said. "You must be relieved about it."

She was very relieved and grateful to Delilah for suggesting it, dragging her daughter out of the tomb she had made for herself there on the lake. It was time to make a move. It was two years now. More than two years. "I'm thrilled," she replied. "It's an excellent sign."

Roy nodded in agreement.

There was nothing Eddie wished to add to this and the subject of the city he hoped to avoid. "The dinner is top notch, per usual. Thanks for inviting me to dinner."

"Oh, you're welcome any time, honey. You know that. You don't need an invitation."

She glanced at Roy. He seemed particularly quiet tonight. He was always this quiet, she observed, whenever Eddie stopped by.

Roy winked at her and chewed politely, so as not to distress Sir Beaumont beside him. Such a fancy boy, Sir Beaumont was. White shirts. Expensive ties. Perfume. "Well, Marilyn," he said, patting his stomach with pride and true satisfaction. "I think I'm going to put this plate to bed now and have a cigar out in the moonlight. Feel like howling at the moon with me, Eddie?"

"No, thank you," Eddie mumbled. "I'm not the howling type."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot."

"Tell me what you're up to these days," Marilyn said, when her husband had left the room. "What happened with the girl in the city?"

Same thing that always happens, was what he didn't want to discuss with her. Almost the same thing anyway, with a rather weird twist this time. And, actually, he was trying not to think too much about the girl in the city. He was sort of miffed at her. "It didn't work out, Marilyn. She doesn't want to see me anymore."

"Oh...now that's disappointing. Did you try sending her flowers? Apologizing?"

"Apologizing?" he replied. "For what?"

Marilyn served him a dish of pie and poured the tea. "Well, I don't know. You know how you are sometimes. Couldn't hurt to say you're sorry, Eddie, if you like her that much. If a woman's enough to pout over, son, then she's definitely worth an apology."

"Mom...it's way more complicated than that."

Marilyn frowned. Eddie was always finding complicated women somehow. Finding them and leaving them. "Meaning she's pregnant?"

Eddie plucked a slice of apple from his pie and gulped it down.

"Is it that kind of complication, Eddie?"

His throat felt dry. He cleared it. "Actually...yeah."

It was Marilyn's turn to pout. "Would it kill you to settle down with someone before you...? All these babies of yours, and here I am with no grandchild. What an awful shame."

He didn't reply to that. It was a different situation this time. The girl in the city was very hot and he hadn't tired of her by any means, though settling down with someone was, as his mother should know by now, out of the question. Especially if she's pregnant and insists the baby isn't his. "It's not mine, I don't think. I'm not certain it's not, of course, but I have pretty good cause to doubt it."

(Pretty good cause, like: I'm done with you, Edward. I'm pregnant. I have no further need for you to be in my life. It's not yours. Get out.)

"Well," Marilyn said, wistfully. "That would be simple enough to prove, if you wanted to."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

Now why would he want to do that? He shook his head and wiped his mouth. "But I don't want to," he told her, avoiding eye contact. "Besides, I'd make a lousy father," he added "It's in my genes."

Chapter 7: Mariah Angelo

Nine pounds, twelve ounces. A bouncing baby girl. Cute as a bug and named after her grandmother.

"But why is she crying like this? Is there something wrong? I just don't understand."

"She's crying because she's a baby, honey, and that's what babies do. Could she be wet, I'm thinking?"

Venus put her hand in the diaper. "Oh, yuck."

"Does that mean yes?"

No. It was worse than wet. "Mama, I'm just not getting the hang of this."

"Ha, ha, ha, smartypants...you're doing just fine."

Chapter 8: Joint President Beaumont

The speculation around the water coolers at Soloman-Schmitt today concerned JP Beaumont and the possibility that she had been spotted in an elevator. If so, it would be the first time she had stepped foot on the premises in over two years.

The place was abuzz with excitement over it.

"Are you sure—how did she look?"

"Same, I heard."

"No, she certainly did not. I was told she looked quite pale."

"Pale? How pale?"

"She was always pale, wasn't she?"

"Someone said she was looking very thin."

"Well, but she was never this pale."

"When you say thin, what do you mean? Anorexic thin?"

"No, I mean thin thin. As opposed to...to healthy thin."

"My sources tell me she looked the same, frankly, except that she wasn't smiling."

"They didn't say she looked a little pale?"

"She was always thin, I'm telling you."

"Trim, maybe, but not thin."

"Well, what's to smile about anyway?"

Indeed, what was there to smile about, JP Beaumont asked herself, pausing for air outside the presidential palace and feeling conspicuous just standing there. She tried on a couple of practiced grins, but they didn't feel right to her anymore and she didn't like the sensation. Smiles are for happy people or people selling something, and Lydia was neither, just the humble joint president at the end of her hiatus.

Her name, the humble joint president could see, was still nailed onto the door, glittering there on a bright gold plaque just beneath Paula Treadwell's. She traced it lightly with her fingertips, hesitating for a moment to study her fun-house reflection in it, and then lifted the door handle and walked inside.

"Good afternoon, John," she said, as she breezed past his desk. "Please tell Paula I'll be there in a minute."

"Good afternoo..." John began his address, but she slipped around the bend before he could finish the sentence. Now that looked just like Ms. Beau—he put his coffee cup down and dialed the other president.

"Go ahead, John."

"Um, yes, Ms. Treadwell, I, uh...Ms. Beaumont's just arrived...yes, she sure did...yeah, it looks it...in a minute, she said...all right, I'll do that...will do...yup...got it."

The office look virtually untouched, Lydia observed. No dust, though, she saw, sweeping the desktop with her hand. So Paula was having it regularly cleaned in her absence, in anticipation that one day she would be occupying it again. How sweet of her, really, Lydia thought, closing the blinds and sitting down behind the desk. There was a sweet side to Paula that people rarely got to see. Or at least a very sweet aspect.

"Coffee. Black with raw sugar, Ms. Beaumont. Can I get you a donut to go with it?"

"John—thank you, no."

"Ms. Treadwell's expecting you then," he said, taking his leave.

She took a few sips of the coffee and followed after him.

Paula greeted her at the door with half a hug, half a handshake, "Welcome to Battlestar Soloman-Schmitt," she said in a particularly jubilant tone.

All the VP's were present and accounted for, but one, Lydia noted. "Where's ...where's Venus?" she whispered, startled by her disappointment and trying to mask it.

Paula caught it anyway and brushed it off. "Something cropped up at home," she replied obliquely. "She couldn't make it."

"Oh...well...better brief me here so I don't fumble for us today. I'll admit, I'm a little rusty."

"Don't worry about that. It's just the same old, same old," Paula assured her. "The same old typical crap."

Yes, it was the same old typical crap, Lydia thought, staring out her small apartment window down to the busy street below, watching the people walking by on the sidewalks and the yellow cabs weaving through the traffic on the congested avenue. Some things, indeed, will never change, no matter what happens. Taxes. Death. Soloman-Schmitt.

She was looking for her driver down there, and a few tufts of blond hair, as well. A big black limousine was coming to the rescue today, coming soon to take her back to the countryside. With Delilah, if the woman would ever get here.

She glanced at the time. The clock on the wall said that her friend was only late by ten minutes. It felt much longer than that, waiting for her here in this empty room, in this empty strange apartment.

The apartment was convenient. Delilah was right about that. It would make her work easier in the long run, too, and help her to maintain her "corporate presence" better, as Paula had so eloquently worded it. "That's rule number one: You've got to be viable, she always emphasized. Plausible viability," she deemed it. Lydia laughed out loud. Paula spoke the truth, though, like it or not. It's difficult to uphold a corporate presence, or come off viable for anything, when you're lounging around in your jammies lakeside with a hangover.

She smiled with chagrin at this image of herself, acknowledging that it wasn't all that funny. Or, for that matter, attractive.

Plausible viability. So now her feet hurt from high heels and she was choking on her starched white collar. She sat down on the window seat and pulled off her shoes to inspect a brand-new blister. Those feet were very tender. She massaged them and felt the blood rush into her toes again.

High heels and a monkey suit!

She had surprised herself about Venus, blushing in public for the first time since she couldn't remember when. Paula was a meddler, giving her the eye about it and a sly what's-up-with-that look for the rest of the meeting.

What's-up-with-that was very simple. Delilah had been bugging Lydia about Venus for two weeks straight now, planting those kind of thoughts in her brain, ever since Lydia had taken the apartment.

She looked around her new dwelling with its bare walls. She should attempt to furnish it. Decorate a little bit. An apartment requires more than just two chairs and a table, a bed, a computer, a desk. She should go online and order a couple of sticks of furniture when she gets home. A leather couch would look nice, she thought, squinting to try and picture it there. A leather couch or a suede one and, while she was at it, a coffee table. Maybe even a matching recliner.

She loosened her collar and leaned back, emitting a melancholy sigh into the atmosphere. She should do something, all right. Everybody was probably right about that, too. Everybody. Marilyn, Paula, Delila—

BZZZZZZZ!

That must be Delilah now, she thought, running to the intercom. "Yes?"

"Delilah Lewiston's in the lobby. Shall I send her up?"

"Yes, of course. You don't have to ask for her again. Is my driver here yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Buzz me twice when he comes, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She waited by the door for the sound of the elevator stopping.

Ding!

"Over here, Del."

"I remember—how you doing, kiddo? Sorry I'm late. I didn't notice your driver downstairs, though."

"Yeah, it looks like a lot of traffic out there tonight. He's running late, too."

"Well? So how'd it go today?" Delilah quizzed, dropping her overnight bag in the corner by the door and looking for someplace comfortable to sit. "Ugh, look at this place. My kingdom for a couch, Liddy," she chided, settling for a perch on the padded window seat. "So tell me what happened. Tell, tell."

"It went off smoothly, I think. You'll have to ask Paula for her opinion, but I think it—"

"Not the meeting, Liddy! Who the heck cares about that? How'd it go with Venus? Did you get to talk to her?"

Lydia grabbed one of the chairs from across the room and dragged it over to the window. "She wasn't there, Del," she mumbled.

"What?"

"She canceled. Venus wasn't there."

"She canceled? Get out, Liddy. You are such a coward."

This, Lydia wouldn't deny. "Please pass me my shoes there, would you?"

"Did you—here—did you at least say hello to the woman? My god, Liddy! I hope you were able to squeeze out one little hello...?"

"She wasn't there, Del. No lie. Why are you so keen on this Venus thing anyway? You know it's impossible. I've told you that a million times."

Canceled. Delilah scratched her head, puzzled. "Why am I so keen on it? Because she always asks me about you, that's why. How you're doing and all. Whenever I run into her, she asks me about you."

Lydia slipped her shoes on gingerly, wincing as she did. She'd have to soak her feet tonight when she got home. If her driver would only hurry up and get here.

"And you know why else, Liddy. I'm not going to say it again," Delilah added defensively.

Lydia scoffed under her breath. The shoes felt a size too small now, pressing hard against her blister. She stood up in them. Oh, it hurt to stand. "And when was the last time you actually ran into Venus?" she asked.

Delilah looked thoughtful for a moment and finally replied, "Six months ago maybe. Yes, it was. Six months, I think. I ran into her at Cicero's. She had just come back from Paris."

Lydia felt the blood come to her cheeks at this piece of information, blushing for the second time today. "Paris!" she blurted. "She's got a—Venus has a woman in Paris, you dope."

Delilah didn't know that. Lydia had never mentioned it to her before. But then, there was a lot about the Venus matter that Lydia had refused to disclose to her. Something had happened between them, or it had nearly happened, and that was the hunch that Delilah was going on, that there were still some sparks remaining between the women. She thought she could detect them still in Venus and, at rare moments, like the one right now, she thought she spied them in Lydia, too, but she didn't know what to say about there being a woman in Paris. That was news to her. "You know this woman, Liddy? This woman in Paris has a name? Or do you merely imagine she exists? Or, worse, hope that she does?"

Lydia spun on her heels and faced Delilah, her cheeks flushed and her eyes shining with rage to hear about Paris again, to have to think about Venus in Paris with that woman. Venus was a dog, a punk. Hounding and taunting her about the French woman and cornering her one day at work, demanding to hear how she felt about it. Lydia had slapped Venus then, shocked by it all and by her jealousy over it. She couldn't remember now ever really speaking to Venus after that incident.

How many years ago was that? Was it three years ago? More? Had things been left this way between them? Had a slap punctuated their friendship and an otherwise perfect working relationship? Lydia couldn't recall. It certainly felt like it had.

"Is there really a woman in Paris?" Delilah pursued, knowing full well she was heading into dangerous territory, helping to dig up a long buried passion that Lydia had never been comfortable with.

"Del, I...."

Yes, there is such a woman. And, yes, she knows her name. Her first name. That's all that Lydia does know about her. And that she was younger than Lydia was. And that she was beautiful.

Gloating Venus. Such an awful cad. Lydia had been so uncomfortable with the revelations of that day, and she was not prepared to deal with them this evening either. "Venus wasn't at the meeting, Delilah. She was probably avoiding me, so let's just leave it at—"

BZZZZZZZZ! BZZZZZZZZ!

"Okay, here's my strategy then," Delilah said, attempting to slice the thick air of the limousine with some conversation. An hour was too long to sit in such closed quarters and not speak. Not drink.

Lydia was stretched out on the opposite seat, her feet up and shoes off, eyes shut tight, pretending to be asleep.

"Liddy...?"

"Yes, Del."

"Do you want to hear it?"

"Another one of your schemes?" Lydia murmured, still not moving. "I don't think I'm up for anymore schemes."

"This has absolutely nothing to do with you. This has to do with me and Hercules. What do you bet that's actually his name?"

Lydia laughed and propped herself up on her elbow.

The plan this weekend was supposed to involve a certain rugged looking dough boy with a Dick Tracy jaw line, massive tattooed arms, exquisitely long eye lashes, and a permanent five o'clock shadow.

"What I figure is, we invite your mom and Roy to dinner tomorrow and, since neither of us can cook worth shit and they both know it, then we have dinner prepared for us by...what's the name of the restaurant again?"

"Tony's Home-Style Italian Restaurant and Takeout Pizzeria."

"Egad," Delilah said to all that. "Anyway, so Tony's will make dinner for us, the works, and we'll have lambie-chops there deliver it to the lake house for an extra fee, after which we invite him in to help us eat it. That'll be safe and respectable, don't you think?"

Lydia rolled her eyes. "It's a stupid plan, Del. He doesn't make deliveries. He makes pizza. What do you want with a big lug like that anyway?"

"Do I really have to explain it to you, Liddy?"

Lydia lay back down again. Delilah was obsessed with Italian food lately. "What if he's a psychopath? Did you ever think about that? And he flips out and hacks us all to pieces."

Delilah scowled. Lydia always had such apprehension about these things, no sense of adventure. It was an obstacle in the way of a good time. Delilah's only genuine concern about Hercules was whether he was under-age. "So we'll ask him for ID first, then we've got his name, just in case, and his birth date, and it'll all be legal, WE HOPE, and I'll live happily ever after. So what's wrong with that?"

There was nothing wrong with that. Lydia gave a tiny nod of approval and opened her mouth to speak. Who doesn't like a happy ending, she was going to say. It was highly unlikely that the pizza man was underage and she very much doubted he was a psychopath.

"Come on, Liddy. Just say it."

Lydia took a deep breath. "Her name is Claudine," she said.

Chapter 9: Claudine

"Claudine?"

"Yes, Claudine."

Sharon Chambers looked rather skeptically at a fuzzy photo of the woman called Claudine. "You got something bigger than this?" she asked. "I can't make out her face."

The man rummaged in his briefcase and produced a larger print, though it was still out of focus.

Okay, she could see her face better. Looked like Lydia Beaumont in a way, except that the hair was bobbed and she was perhaps an inch or two shorter. But that was definitely a street in Paris and that other woman was definitely Venus Angelo.

Hah—Venus Angelo! She was stealing a kiss. Sharon could see that, too. On the mouth? The cheek? Hello? Goodbye? I love you? These important details she couldn't decipher. "Lovers?" she inquired.

The man shrugged. "I think so."

Hell hath no fury like Sharon Chambers scorned. "You think so? I need to know so. I need way more than this to act on."

The man said nothing to that. It had taken him all this time to get even this much on Ms. Angelo. She was very elusive and very crafty about guarding her privacy, employing numerous stop-gap measures to confound spying and to foil the snoops like him. He had gotten lucky with this shot and it was the best photo he had.

"What's her last name?"

"Reseigner," he answered. "It's her married name."

Ooh. Sharon smiled wickedly. "She's married?"

"Was."

Was. Shit. "What else?"

"Nothing much. She married Paul Reseigner in her teens. He was already an old man then and an exceptionally wealthy one at that. A tea merchant. She's had a few affairs with married men since. Some women, too, they tell me."

"Now that's good to hear. How old is this beauty?"

"She's almost forty. Doesn't look it, but she is."

"Hmm. Is he dead, her husband?"

"As a doorknob," he answered. "Ten years now. She split his money with three children from his first marriage. She was younger than all of them. And she never bothered to remarry."

"No, she didn't have to, huh?"

Again, no comment. He had found next to nothing on Claudine Reseigner, save for that she was very discreet with her affections and quite pretty. Spoke fairly good English.

"There's got to be more," Sharon pressed. "What's her maiden name?"

"Marchand. A good French name. Solidly middle class. Socialists."

Socialists! Who the fuck cares about her family's political persuasion? "Tell me what you think you saw here, the day you took this photo. You followed them afterward?"

Did he? For almost a whole year! Tricky Venus Angelo. "I saw lovers being discreet," he said, without smiling. Lovers being discreet and not bothering anyone. Except Sharon Chambers, apparently. Good thing she paid well, because, in truth, he disliked his client very much. She was trouble. A rotten kiss-and-tell. Very vindictive.

Sharon bit a nail pensively and studied the stolen kiss. Yeah, she detected a pair of discreet lovers, too. Claudine was obviously scandal proof, she realized, so if she was being discreet, then it was for the sake of

our high-ranking corporate executive here. "And what new do we know of our American when she's not sneaking around the alleyways in Paris?" she asked. "Recreationally speaking?"

Venus Angelo's recreational activities stateside were still somewhat of a mystery to him but, as his client already knew, she had links to people whose pastimes were not nearly as secret: Dr. Helaine Kristenson, of course, sitting on the board of her foundation as its director, and that enigmatic recluse, the doctor's widow, Lydia Beaumont, were the two most prominent. These connections tied Ms. Angelo in with one Anna Grisholm, too, a former board member of the Kristenson Foundation and the manager of the famed Lavender Lane Hotel, an establishment that catered to the LGBT community worldwide. That's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered, for the uninitiated. Ms. Grisholm was a rather flamboyant and controversial personality, he had discovered, being openly homosexual and politically active in the historic downtown neighborhood known as the waterfront. That's where her hotel was situated and where she resided full time. But he had yet to connect any of these dots to form an incriminating picture of Ms. Angelo and, if she had any private contact with Beaumont or Grisholm, of the nature that his client was searching for, he was unaware of it.

"Any new information?" Sharon repeated.

"Nothing," he had to admit.

"And what about that hotel?"

"Dead end." He'd sent some associates there on one occasion, but they were turned away at the door. "It's an elite establishment and you've got to know somebody or be somebody to get in."

Naturally. Sharon already knew that. "Did you get a photo of that guy you mentioned the last time you called me? Did you find out his name?"

"I've got a photo of him, but not his name. That was a fling, judging from the looks of it. A couple of months and then, bang, it was over with.

Banging some mystery man for a couple of months. Not too scandalous these days. And look, another grainy photo. The investigator was a terrible photographer, that's for sure, but look at this. Doesn't this fella here look like Lydia Beaumont, too? What's with that? A trend? "He has no name, Mr. GQ? How can that be?"

"He didn't stick around long enough to get one," was all the man said. The mission, as he understood it, wasn't about men anyway. That's not what his client was digging for.

"And what about my colleague, Sebastion Jones, over at PM Entertainments? Is she still dating him?"

"I can confirm that they do see each other, but rarely, so I'm concluding that they're simply friends now. As I've indicated, the only real romantic tie she might still possibly have is with that French woman, but she hasn't been to France in over six months so I don't know what kind of a romance it could possibly be."

Six months—this was one big pile of shit! All she had so far were a few fuzzy photos to go with her sneaking suspicions and a long-standing grudge against Venus turned vendetta. What lousy photographs these were. They wouldn't prove a fucking thing. This one of Claudine and Venus was the only one of interest, but it was merely a tiny crack in an otherwise flawless facade, and it wasn't letting enough light in to actually see anything. "What do you think?" she wanted to know. "What's your instinct telling you?"

He had given this matter a lot of consideration lately. The Angelo woman intrigued him. He'd had a few cases like this one before, a slippery target, constantly looking over her shoulder, savvy and secretive. There had to be a pretty good reason for it, he knew from experience. Nobody acts that way for naught. He hadn't been able to find it out yet, her deep, dark secret, but he was close, he thought, having stumbled upon Madame Reseigner. After all, he had seen the two women kissing on the boulevard, and it was just a crappy photograph, that's all. And, yes, Angelo had run him ragged, he wouldn't deny that, but there's a funny thing about human beings, no matter how smart they think they are, no matter how careful, they always fuck up.

The taste of the chase was in his mouth and lingering. He licked his lips and swallowed. "I think I'm going to nail her soon. She's going to goof up and when she does, I'll be there to see it. Then you'll have your evidence and we'll be done."

She didn't feel this was just a bluff or bravado. He had produced results and was a very determined man, a competent investigator. She rose and went to her desk. In the top drawer there was nice fat envelope for him with twenty thousand dollars in it. Twenty grand to nail Venus for snubbing her and returning a diamond necklace without even opening the goddamned box to look at it. Another twenty grand. She took

the envelope from the drawer and handed it to him. "My daughter will be home shortly," she warned. "I want you gone before then."

He pocketed the cash and left promptly.

Across the ocean, thousands of miles from here, Claudine lay sleeping in a ball, dreaming contentedly of fine chocolates and sweet sex, as oblivious and indifferent to revenge motifs as the spoiled little cat nestled under the blankets with her. As oblivious and indifferent but, unfortunately, nowhere near as immune.

Even farther away, beyond the sea, beyond the sun, another woman has begun to stir. She sits up and slowly places her bare feet, one at a time, on the soft grass mat beside her cot, rising, though she is still fast asleep. Down to the beach she will wander in her trance and stand in the wet sand, weary. She is inexplicably searching for something out on the water, something invaluable that she can't quite put her finger on. She seeks for this thing day and night, awake or asleep, conscious or dreaming, seeking it as desperately as she is herself, unknowingly, sought.

A song. She hears a song playing now, but there is no song playing. People. She hears people softly speaking to her, people singing along with the music, but there isn't anyone else on the shore.

No one is speaking. No one is singing. No one is playing her song.

Chapter 10: Jane Liddy

She is not doing so well today, Li whispered to his wife, who was lying beside him quietly, but not sleeping. He put his fingers into the mop of her silver hair and brushed some strands away from her face and out of her eyes. He knew she couldn't possibly be asleep because she wasn't snoring. "Nien...?"

Nien didn't answer him, but took his hand and patted it gently. She, too, had heard Jane Liddy cry out again in the night and then leave her bed to go walking. Li had gotten up immediately to hang a lantern for her on the pole by the garden gate and to light the kerosene lamps in the kitchen. Their sleepwalker would follow the lamplight home when she was good and ready, Nien knew. She always did, gravitating toward the light like a moth to a flame or flowers seeking sunbeams, but Li worried about her nevertheless. He could be such an anxious old man sometimes. He worried that Jane Liddy would fall down. Or that she might drown in the lagoon while bathing. Step on a jellyfish at low tide or meet up with a shark when she was swimming alone in the ocean. Stray too far. Get shot.

Don't worry, Nien finally said to him. Just put the tea on and heat up the wok.

He grabbed his shirt and went outside to do it.

He would be going fishing today. All day. He wished he could tie Jane Liddy's leg to the light pole so she wouldn't wander off and hurt herself while he was gone. That could happen when she got this way. When she fell under the spell.

His wife was too petite to physically restrain the tall woman, not that Nien would attempt to do that anyway. Nien's approach to the situation was different than his own. Sometimes she just traipsed after Jane Liddy and led her back by singing. Li, on the other hand, at least in the beginning, would try to waylay the woman, yelling and clapping his hands to wake her, but that rarely worked and when it was successful, it almost always caused her to faint. He didn't know which was worse. The sleepwalking or the fainting.

Morning was breaking on the horizon, he observed. He stretched his tawny arms up toward the sky and yawned. There would be a pink dawn coming soon, he could tell. As pretty as the petals of a rose. As delicate as a teacup.

Oh, and the fish would be search for his nets!

That's what the Fishing God had promised him last night. That his boat would be teeming by sunset. He'd have to be extra careful with such a valuable load, he realized. There were plenty of pirates these days on the South China Sea, stealing anything and everything they could get their filthy hands on. Soldiers and mercenaries, too. All of them equipped with insatiable appetites and semi-automatic machine guns.

They might steal his catch before he could get it into port tomorrow afternoon.

The Fishing God had made no mention of these perils in his dream, of course, but Li didn't need any god or anybody to warn him about ruthless and insatiable men. He had met squadrons of them in the jungles of Cambodia when he was young, a conscripted soldier. Imagine that, he still sometimes marveled, a city boy, afraid of snakes and of wild animals and of dying, fighting hand-to-hand combat in the jungle! And with the very same hands he had used before to hold a book and read to his mother, or to caress his bride and lead her to bed for lovemaking.

He put his hands behind his head now and closed his eyes tightly.

War had turned his hair white before he had been old enough to don white hair, before he ever even had a single wrinkle. It had changed him in so many other ways, too, he acknowledged, his face darkening with the thought of it. Places you couldn't see at a glance.

And now fishing was starting to feel the same for him. Dangerous.

Li didn't like to dwell too much on this aspect of it, the multitude of dangers one could encounter nowadays by simply casting a net, trying to make a meager living from the sea. There were risks with anything, he had learned, and you didn't have to be a soldier or take a bullet to end up mortally wounded. But just in case, he had painted the hull of his boat bright red for good luck and he kept a gun hidden onboard with an adequate amount of ammunition. He knew how to use a gun if he had to and, so far so good, he'd been a lucky fisherman. He could plan for the worse no better than this, he assured his wife, each time he went out fishing.

Anyway, for right now, for Li, none of these things were important. The sky was turning rosy and he felt as hungry as any honest man could possibly be. For his morning meal.

He loaded some kindling into the stove outside the front door and lit a fire, blowing on the embers so there wouldn't be too much smoke drifting into the windows. It was a primitive contraption, the surface of it just large enough for a kettle and a wok, if they were crammed tightly together. He put them both on top of it and then poked his head inside the house to see if Nien was up yet.

She was making the beds already, clucking her tongue as she worked, clucking for her fancy laying hens. Eggs or not, how he hated those chickens. Digging in his herbs and cabbage and shitting everywhere they went. But that's why they were so tasty, his wife constantly reminded him. Eating all his fresh vegetables.

Nien glanced up at him and smiled. He bowed slightly to her and then waited outside in the garden for the water to boil.

Beyond the garden gate, Li could hear Nien's flock gathering for their breakfast, cackling loudly and pecking at each other and at the wooden slats of his fence. They were gluttonous creatures, full already from their early foraging and yet still demanding to be fed sweet grain. He peered into the shadows to count them and was surprised to see Jane Liddy coming up the path behind them.

He froze, so not to frighten her.

She was carrying Ming, the rooster, and humming one of her English tunes as she pet him. Ming looked quite satisfied with himself today and with the impromptu lullaby, happy to be doted on by someone, happy to have so many wives at his feet.

So there was Jane Liddy, safe, after all, despite his worrying, and standing serenely in the lamplight. Li grinned at the picture of the two of them, her with that long, yellow hair and Ming with those iridescent feathers, the brilliant plumage of his neck and his tail glittering as if sprinkled with gold dust. Li was fond of this arrogant fellow because he didn't crow too much and he was beautiful, like the painting on a teapot he'd seen once in a museum on the mainland. Ming was the reincarnation of the emperor's prize cock, he bragged to just about anyone on the island who would listen to him. Sometimes Li even claimed that Ming was the emperor incarnate. He certainly looked it this morning in Jane Liddy's arms. Dignified and imperial.

She set the bird on the ground and lifted the latch of the gate to enter the garden. She was still asleep when she came to join him by the fire. He unfolded a chair and held it for her without speaking as she sat down in it.

She was, to Li Yang, a piece of porcelain. Fragile and elegant. A piece of porcelain with a little tiny chip in it. On the left side of her forehead, near the temple.

Chapter 11: Nien Yang

She had not been blessed with any children, but she had been given many lives and this was the best one yet, to grow old with the boy she had fallen passionately in love with when she was only nine years old.

Nien did not fear for her husband as much anymore, now that he only fished in the ocean once a week. In all, Li would be absent from her for just two days at a time then. One to fish, the other to take his catch to market and to shop for their groceries while he was at it.

Why should she fear for Li Yang anyway, a man who went to fight in the deadly jungle and was so clever and so smart he never even had to fire his gun once or kill anybody? A man who came back to her from war just as he had promised, all in one piece, alive?

She had given Li a list of things yesterday that they were short of to bring back with him from the market this week. Grain and corn for the chickens, tea leaves, biscuits and rice. Opium, if he could find any on such short notice. That was for Jane Liddy's nightmares. Opium in her tea helped to tame the nightmares she had sometimes.

This morning, as with yesterday, the sleepwalker had been down to the shore and back again before dawn. Nien fed her noodles and fish for breakfast and put her straight to bed.

It was heartbreaking to see her suffer again, wandering around dazed, as if her catastrophe had just happened. She was doing better, though, in the big picture, because these episodes were becoming rarer and rarer, and when she did snap out of them, she was quickly herself once more, alert and helpful. Smiling, too. Even in her eyes.

She was easy then, her green eyes bright and clear, no veil clouding her vision, no underworld beckoning her, forcing her to listen to its lies.

Nien had grown fond of Jane Liddy. She liked to cook for her and sew for her, to care for her when she was troubled. She was different than the other westerners Nien had come in contact with. This one was warm and unpretentious. Elegant, even in regular old clothes, even barefoot.

Jane Liddy would happily wear the plain clothes that Nien sewed for her, without concern that they weren't fashionable, without griping if they didn't quite fit. Their simple patterns and ordinary fabrics did not seem to displease her in the slightest, though it was evident by the dress that she had arrived in, albeit torn and bloody, that she was used to far better things than muslin or denim.

Silk and satin, Nien imagined. She could easily picture her in that.

The humble house. The modest furnishings. Nien and her husband were peasants. This was obvious at a glance. As obvious as the fact that Jane Liddy wasn't. But Jane Liddy never let on that she felt her accommodations were beneath her or in any way inadequate. Indeed, she was a perfect guest, if one could, at this point, really call her that.

Their perfect guest would, without hesitation, eat the raw fish and seaweed Nien prepared for her, too. The bamboo shoots, watercress, octopus, fish eggs, rice, eel...she ate whatever she was served and with a gracious attitude about it, instead of complaining or acting squeamish, as most foreigners were wont to do. And as far as westerners were concerned, Jane Liddy seemed to have no craving at all for red meat or alcohol or cigarettes. That was convenient for the Yangs because they never indulged in such excesses and didn't have them to offer to their fine guest. Cigarettes and alcohol could be gotten at the market readily enough, but they were very expensive. And meat was hard to keep on the island without electricity and scarce in any event, save for the fish in the ocean and the chickens or, for the more adventuresome, the wild pigs that lived in the wooded parts, and the rats.

Pigs and rats.

Nien had hoped Jane Liddy would be well enough to help her collect the eggs this morning. She didn't see as well as she used to and the hens liked to hide their nests in the sand or in the bamboo that grew like

weeds behind the house. Sometimes they covered their eggs completely to protect them and Nien would step on a nest by accident. Jane Liddy's eyes were good and she would usually find these mounds before Nien did.

In any event, it was more fun to go egg hunting with Jane Liddy, Nien thought, tying the strings of a wide brim hat under her chin and grabbing a wire basket. It felt like a chore now without her.

But that was all right. She would let the poor woman lie in peace until she felt better and, as for herself, if she found enough eggs today she'd make a large vat a soup for their lunch and supper and leave it to simmer on the stovetop for Li, when he came home tonight.

Lydia stood on the dock at dusk, sipping from a glass of merlot and counting the stars as they hatched one by one in the darkening sky. There was a rippled moon slowly spreading across the surface of the lake this evening, full and blue. It was Sunday. It was cold. She shivered.

Delilah was gone. Back to the city once more, back to "slave" at the bank for the rest of the week. She'd left bleary-eyed and battle-weary this morning. Lydia had sent her back with the limo, pink with a conquest and head-over-heels in LUV with the pizza boy/construction worker/artist she'd finally snagged, whose name, as it turned out to be, was not Hercules after all, but Marcus.

Lydia was happy for her.

And, as it turned out, Marcus not only tossed pizzas at Tony's Pizzeria but, if properly persuaded, he clearly didn't mind making deliveries either, which he did for them when his shift was through on Saturday night, making dinner a little later than everyone had been anticipating.

No problem, though. Marcus was a hit.

Roy had instantly recognized the young man the minute he got out of the delivery truck. He was one of his crew, he said. Part-time and summers. So Delilah's plan to swoop him up in her nets worked out just fine and, in truth, Marcus was a pretty good catch. Strong, silent, single, thirty-two and never been married. Wow. And with a thing for older women, apparently. Who could ask for anything more? Delilah was secretive about her age, but Lydia knew she matched his criteria perfectly and he seemed pleased with himself and his spur-of-the-moment date.

With Delilah gone, Lydia had spent the rest of today in and out of Helaine's room, toying with the idea of retrieving a few articles from it in order to transport them to her new apartment this week, but she couldn't find what she was specifically looking for, namely two small drawings she had purchased years ago in an antique shop on the waterfront.

There were so many other items in there she could have chosen from instead, but by evening, dusty and depressed, she had abandoned the idea entirely. That meant she would return to the city empty-handed again on Wednesday and delay her plans to furnish the place for yet another week or two.

It was a big week ahead for her.

From Wednesday to Friday, Lydia was going to be posing atop the shitheap once more, looking presidential, if she could possibly manage it. Three whole days in a row at Soloman-Schmitt would feel like an eternity, she acknowledged. It already did, just standing on the dock and contemplating it.

There was a vehicle approaching the house, slowly winding down her driveway. She watched its lights appearing and disappearing from behind the evergreens that lined the narrow gravel road and kept the lake house well-hidden and private. She was not expecting anyone, but it wasn't out of the ordinary for her mom and Roy to stop by without calling. Just to check on her from time to time. To see if she was all right. If she had enough food in the fridge. Etceteras.

She stayed where she was and waited for it to pull up in the yard, listening to the stones popping under its tires as it advanced toward her. She wasn't worried about unannounced visitors anymore. No one had been able to find her out here since she went into hiding, so it probably wasn't a reporter. That was her biggest concern, reporters hounding her, gawking and prying.

The car came to a standstill, idling a few yards from where she stood on the dock and flicked its highbeams at her twice, blinding her. She shielded her eyes and swore under her breath, waving the driver to move on, to park over there by the porch and turn the lights off.

The car pulled over by the porch, did a three point turn, parked, and turned its lights off.

Now what? she wondered, as a man got out of the vehicle, opened the back door and closed it again. He paused for a moment beside the car to adjust his coat and fix his tie, smooth back his hair with his hands. She could see his breath rising into the air, miniature clouds of it, but she couldn't make out his features from this distance. She had a strange sensation, though, as she watched him approaching. A creeping dread was coming over her and she could feel warmth flooding into her face, into her hands.

Who could this man be? "Belladonna," she thought she heard him say.

Belladonna? Was it Antonio?

"Belladonna," the stranger called softly to her again, stepping onto the edge of the dock.

Oh, it couldn't be Antonio, she thought. It just couldn't be. She dropped her glass. Words were forming, a reply to this long awaited greeting, but she stood, unable to utter them.

"Belladonna?" he asked, halting in front of her, a small parcel tucked under his arm.

"Antonio?" The dock swayed gently beneath her. She took a step backward to regain her balance. "Is that you?"

"Si."

Antonio. She waited with dread for him to speak again.

"I came," he said. "I told you I would come if...and I'm here now."

She didn't know whether he could see her eyes or not, that they were glistening, or if he could hear her heart pounding in her chest. She pulled her hand back and struck him in the face. "Why?" she cried. "Where have you been? What took you so long to get here?"

He lowered his head and examined his parcel doubtfully.

"We found some things last month," he finally said, offering it to her. There was broken glass under his feet. He kicked it into the water. "This was as soon as I could get here."

She took the package and ripped it open.

There were photos in it, an object. She felt it with her fingertips. It was rough on both sides with a jagged edge. "What is all this?" she asked. "I can't see it without my—"

"Photos of some wreckage, Lydia. A piece of the airplane. They had been salvaged by some eyewitnesses, some islanders. They saved them as souvenirs."

Airplane wreckage? Souvenirs. Her heart sunk at the idea of it. "No...you lie."

Antonio wasn't lying about anything. He put his hands on his hips and faced her, his posture denying it.

She had lost weight, he noticed, wasting herself on grief, on waiting too long for some good news to arrive. He hadn't any, and she would try to hit him again, he expected. He readied himself for it and continued. "There was a mid-air explosion. We don't know yet what caused it. The plane was off course well before then and some of it fell into the South China Sea, between the Philippine Islands and Vietnam. We're still investigating that area and the surrounding islands."

"The South Chi..." she took a step closer to him to look into his eyes, those dark brooding eyes of his, as Helaine had once described them, once upon a time when there was still a Helaine in the world and he was supposed to be protecting her from harm. When he was her bodyguard.

He dropped his arms and stood his ground.

No, she could see he wasn't lying. She closed the parcel up again and held it to her breast. "And?"

"Well, the explosion was...some pieces washed onto shore, others fell onto land. We were able to track a few and photograph them for you. That one there we managed to—"

She lifted her hand to silence him.

He fell silent.

The South China Sea would adequately explain the may-day signals in Japan, in the Philippines. And an explosion. That would explain...everything. "Is she dead?" she finally asked him. It was obvious that Helaine had to be dead. "Is that what you came to tell me?"

They were an arm's length apart now and he was mindful of her free hand. The moonlight reflected off of her ring finger. He kept an eye on that ring. Rings can cause some serious damage.

"Is she dead, I'm asking you? Tell me."

"Based on our...on the anecdotal accounts...those eyewitnesses...we calculate an eighty-three percent chance that there were no survivors, Lydia."

"An eighty-three percent chance?"

He nodded.

"Eighty-three percent," she repeated with disdain. He was here then to collect on their bargain, she understood. It had taken him well over a year to get anything worth bargaining with. For all that time she had been waiting and she did not want to hear about percentages from him now. She wanted to know exactly what he had found. "Did you find her dead, you bastard? Tell me what you found."

Her hand had become a small hard fist and she was slowly inching toward him. "We found no one," he replied, bracing himself. "Nothing but—"

"We?" she interrupted.

"Yes, we. We found no one. At least not yet."

They had found no one because they were all blown to bits and pieces, like the piece she had right here, and the others he had photographed. Blown to smithereens and scattered all over the South China Sea, to sink to the bottom of it. "Who's we?" she demanded to know. "You told me this would be confidential."

"I cannot operate alone in that region. There are too many factions there. It is all confidential, though, I can assure you."

There was broken glass under her feet. She kicked it into the water. She needed to get by him, so she could run into the house, slam the door in his face and lock it. Weep.

"It is confidential, Belladonna. You have my word on that. My pledge."

A man and his word. Please. "Let me pass, Antonio. I'm cold."

"Let you pass?" He made a wide sweep of his arm and dared her to do it. "I'm cold, too," he said, "and I've come a long way to see you. Pass by me then."

She didn't act on it. "I can pay you for your time and trouble, Antonio. I've always said that I would. That I preferred it. To pay. Money."

"Ah," he murmured, speaking something Italian to the ground.

She didn't speak a word of Italian and he damn well knew this. "What did you say to me?"

"I said, if the joint president of a major American corporation doesn't keep her word, why should I, Antonio Barbaras?"

He glared at her, his nostrils flaring. He was a very handsome man and he knew it. She despised him.

"I have lived for this one moment, mi amour. I have risked my life for it. Do you know what that's like?" he asked her. "Living for just one moment?"

Yes, she did.

Chapter 12: Venus Angelo

Okay, so she had the hang of it now: Baby cried whenever she was wet, baby cried whenever she was soiled, baby cried whenever she was tired, baby cried whenever she needed to nurse, baby cried whenever she wanted to be turned over, baby cried whenever she wanted to be held, baby cried whenever she woke up, baby cried whenever she was frustrated, baby cried WHENEVER.

Piece of cake.

"Over here, Mariah. Look at your Uncle Sebastion. That's a good little girl. What a pretty baby. Thatta girl, look right into the camera here. Boy, you're even prettier than your mommy, you are. Don't tell her I said that, though. Oh, oh, oh, hold it, right there! That's right. No, no, this way, Mariah. This way. That's it. Now smile for your Uncle Sebas—"

"Quit with that shit," Venus said. "Or I'll make you change her diaper."

"Diaper—I don't have to change her diaper, too, do I?"

"No, you don't, you just have to keep her qui—all right, there's my phone now. Here's the buzzer. Take the buzzer and just sit by her playpen over there and smile a lot. It'll be fine. This is a conference call, so please don't yell, just buzz if there's something wrong."

"Wrong? Like what? What's going to go wrong?"

Venus had some trepidation about this scheme, but the phone was ringing in her office so it was too late to rethink it. "Nothing's going to go wrong, Sebastion. Just keep her quiet for an hour, if you can." She kissed the child on the top of her head and scooped up the paperwork from the kitchen counter. "And I truly appreciate this," she added, over her shoulder. "Really, I do. I mean it."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," her baby-sitter muttered, situating himself near the playpen and grinning through the bars at its tiny occupant. "You see how she is?" he complained to Mariah. "See how your mommy treats poor old Sebastion Jones? And do you think he'll ever get any action out of this? The answer is no, he won't. He will get no action out of this whatsoever."

She smiled a toothless grin at him and squealed and he put a finger to his lips, "Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

"Yes, hi...quite well today, Paula...okay...and good afternoon to you, Lydia. How are you doing?"

"I'm...I'm doing very well, thank you. Yes, I'm...thank you, Ms. Angelo."

She should be used to this stupid greeting by now, but Venus winced at it anyway. Ms. Angelo this and Ms. Angelo that. Always Ms. Angelo. Crap. So what on earth was Delilah talking about yesterday? Venus wasn't even on a first name basis with Lydia anymore, let alone actually asking her out on a date. "I, uh, I went over the documents you forwarded, Paula, and there appear to be some entries missing from them. Could you review your e-mail attachment again and then resend or deliver the other pages to me? That way I'll be able to take a more thorough look at the problem."

"Other pages? Let me check on that, Angelo. Are there entries missing from your e-mail, Ms. Beaumont?"

Venus strained to catch her answer.

"Ms. Beaumont says there's no...I don't see any entries missing here...oh, they are...they're missing from mine, Angelo. It's my mistake. I didn't catch it."

"You've got them there?" Venus asked. "Then why don't you just e-mail them to me now? Maybe we can get this out of the way."

"No, they're not here. Ms. Beaumont will resend it and phone you later. You'll both have to resolve it at that time. Sorry for the inconvenience, Angelo. Now what's next on the menu?"

Ms. Beaumont will resend it and telephone her later. Excellent, but Ms. Beaumont doesn't have the phone number so, "Lydia...?"

"Yes, I'll—I can—I'll resend that. I...I can...and I'll phone."

Oh, Jesus.

"Oh, Jesus, you two. Give her your number, Angelo, and let's just move on with this!"

Venus gave her the phone number and the rest of the teleconference proceeded at roughly the same faltering pace. An excruciating hour later, Venus emerged from her office, flustered and agitated. She found Mariah sound asleep in Sebastion's arms, her head draped over his shoulder.

He was singing to her, 'In the goddadavida, baby, in the goddadavida," over and over again. "In the goddadavida, baby..."

A sleeping baby, what a relief. Venus smiled at the sight of them together. Him so tall and dark and handsome, her so small and white and gorgeous.

"In the goddadavida, baby..."

"I thought the words went, in the garden of Eden, baby," or something like that?" she whispered.

"Hey there. Is she asleep?" he asked.

Venus took her from him and placed her carefully into the pen. "Yup. Good job."

"Swish," he said, grabbing his raincoat. "Now back to the office for Mr. Mom."

"Sebastion?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't mention it," he told her.

"That you have spit on your collar?"

"Spit? Oh, man. I thought you were going to thank me, girlfriend. Ugh. It is spit. It's spit."

"Hah—thank you, Sebastion. You're a doll."

She lay on the couch beside Mariah's playpen after he left. When Mariah slept, Venus slept. There was no other compromise available but that one. She closed her eyes and tried to nap but, despite her exhaustion, she couldn't. She was too tired, perhaps. The baby had kept her up late last night, fidgeting and crying and being her typical impossible self. Venus had spent the night in a rocking-chair in the nursery, hoping beyond hope that the child would eventually doze off, but it didn't happen soon enough. She had carried on until three in the morning.

Perfectly normal, Mama insisted. "This will go on till she's about twenty-one," she said.

"Twenty-one months?" Venus had exclaimed.

"No, honey. Twenty-one years."

Hahahahahaha.

Everybody's a regular joker these days, she discovered. Everybody who knows about Mariah, that is. Fortunately, considering the constant razzing she was getting from them, that didn't amount to more than a handful of people.

Only her family, her doctors, Sebastion and, of course, her boss, actually knew about the baby. Venus was keeping her a secret from everyone else, doing so for a variety of reasons.

She had almost spilled the beans to Delilah yesterday at the club, but she'd come to her senses at the very last minute. It was difficult to not shout about Mariah, though. To not blurt, I've got this beautiful, little baby girl. Come right now and see her.

They had, she and Delilah, at some considerable length, discussed the plight of a certain Lydia Beaumont. A widow, still grieving. Venus could swear that she had been hunted for at the gym. It was not the club Delilah usually attended and, quite frankly, the woman looked absurd in that brand-new exercise outfit she was wearing. Not a drop of sweat to be seen. Her hair and nails, perfect.

She got the twenty-questions from Lydia's best friend, a bona fide Q-and-A session. Most important revelations: No, Venus wasn't seeing anyone at the moment and, yes, she still had "the hots" for the joint president of Soloman-Schmitt, even if Lydia couldn't seem to remember her name anymore and had developed that ridiculous speech impediment, stuttering and stammering all the time.

"Liddy's bought an apartment nearby," Delilah informed her.

Venus liked Delilah Lewiston. "Oh?" She was honest and frank.

"Mmhmm"

"That's good," Venus replied. "That's a very big step."

"I agree. A humungous one. So when," Delilah pressed her further, "could we arrange for a tryst?"

Venus had declined to make any projections on that. "Maybe I should clear it with my therapist first," she had jested, leaving the matter up in the air for the moment.

Well, maybe that's what she should do, consult her therapist. Maybe the therapist would give her the goahead, Venus thought. She probably would. And if so, then when? When would she ever be willing to put her neck on the chopping block again and ask Her Royal Highness out for a date? When would she risk that kind of rejection?

When?

Venus fell asleep pondering it.

She awoke with a jolt at seven, the telephone and the baby screaming in unison for her attention. Priorities, priorities. Her blouse was completely soaked through and her breasts full and heavy. She left the answering machine to do its job and took a fussing Mariah to the nursery to change her dirty diaper, nurse her and put her to bed.

She went to sleep like an angel tonight, thanks to Sebastion. Venus took the baby monitor, grabbed a clean sweatshirt and went into the office to check the answering machine.

No messages. One e-mail. Ms. Beaumont.

At some point, Venus knew she'd have to hire herself a reputable nanny. She didn't know how old a child should be to qualify for professional baby-sitters or even how one went about finding such people, but she would require a nanny soon if she wanted to go back to work full time again. If she wanted to go out for dinner once in awhile. If she wanted to date.

CHI +0.78 CGM: 37.41 +2.08 CFX: 41.05 -0.63 CMTD: 32.56 -1.90 CNSW: 16.62 +1.16 DAA: 38.7 -1.19 DAF: 36.31 +2.58 DCE: 39.76 -1.24 DDX: 35.46 +0.73 EMO: 23.56 -2.56 FIK: 71.03 -1.79 FIR: 12.04 -0.38 GAAG: 27.47 +0.93 GGG: 29.84 +1.81 GGRI: 56.07 +2.13 GTB: 37.89 -1.03 HAOM: 17.40 -1.21 HMI: 54.71 +0.65 HVA: 37.03 +1.64 HVUV: 12.57 +1.43 IBC: 34.86 -0.73 IBN: 22.21 -0.25 ICC: 49.03 -1.27 IDIM: 67.97 +1.08 IDD: 34.29 -2.46—rrring...rrring...rrring!

"Hello?"

"Hel—this is—is this Venus?"

"Lydia?"

"Yes, I sent you—did you get my e-mail?"

"I just got—I was just loo—do you—I'm wondering would you like to come over? I mean, I just...I was thinking maybe it would be easier if we went over these figures together, perhaps? It would only, I think, maybe take us about an hour...maybe two...maybe?"

A most inarticulate proposition, to which there was no reply. Venus kicked herself in the head. "What I'm trying to say I guess is...is...Lydia?"

"Right now, you mean?"

"Yes. Yes, now, if you'd like to. I can...if you want to...yes."

Static and then, "I'd...I'm not in the right frame of mind tonight for numbers, I'm afraid."

"You aren't? Oh, I see. Meaning?"

"Meaning that I've been..."

Drinking, it just occurred to Venus. Of course she was. Lydia had been drinking or she wouldn't have the courage to make the call tonight. Venus switched the phone to her other ear. "I'll send a cab for you then."

There was silence on the other end of the line. Lydia was actually considering it, she thought. Venus glanced over at the playpen in the corner, at the baby toys scattered across the floor. Damn. Better fold that thing up and put those away. "What's your address, Lydia? I'll call you a cab right now."

"Venus, I...would you rather we just meet somewhere, instead? Bring the paperwork with you? Someplace where we can think?"

Yeah, she'd love to do that but, "I can't really, Lydia, I'm...I'm just making dinner here." (Shit.) "Yeah, I'm making dinner. Why don't you come and join me?" she said, opening the freezer door to survey the instant possibilities. There were a couple of gourmet meals in there. Perfect. She could pop them into the microwave and serve them on the nice china. "Just come, Lydia. There's enough for the two of us and then we can get these accounts squared away. Paula would be...just say yes and I'll get you a cab. Both ways."

"Venus, I don—"

```
"You don't eat anymore?"
```

"The word you're searching for then must be yes. Yes, Venus, I still eat food and I would be delighted to come and have dinner with you tonight." Venus glanced at the time. It would take her about ten minutes to collapse the playpen, put it in the closet, pick up the toys, check on Mariah, call a cab, notify the doorman, set the table, throw the frozen dinners into the oven, get the paperwork organized, change into some decent clothes, and put on a little bit of makeup. No problem. "Lydia?"

```
"Are you sure you're—"
```

"Yes, I'm sure. Hang up and I'll call you a cab."

"Venus?"

"Lydia."

"I can call myself a cab, I think."

"Okay."

"Okay. Then I'll be there in a little awhile. What's your address?"

"You're really coming here?"

"I am."

Swish! Venus gave her the address.

"You know I won't be able to...I've got a meeting tomorrow. I've got a meeting in the morning."

"You've got a meeting? Oh, I understand. Meeting's cool, Lydia. Call the cab now. I'll see you in ten minutes."

"All right."

Five minutes.

Ten.

Fifteen.

Twenty.

Twenty-five.

Thirty.

Thirty-five whole minutes later and suddenly there she was, that pretty pair of golden handcuffs that kept Venus Angelo chained indefinitely to Soloman-Schmitt.

Venus was too breathless for a sensible greeting. "Lydia?"

Lydia stood at the door sporting a wet umbrella, a damp briefcase and her trademark bewilderment.

"You're...you're soaked, Lydia."

"Yeah, I got the bright idea to walk here," she explained, putting her things on the floor and removing her coat. "It's raining, but I...I thought I could use some air."

Venus took the raincoat from her. "Here, come on in," she said. "Come stand by the fire and dry out."

"Ah," Lydia murmured, clutching her briefcase again and following her. "A fire."

The fire had burnt down to a single flame. Venus laid the coat on the chair nearby and put another log on for her guest. "I'd almost given up on you," she said, casting her a sideways glance.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't in the mood for a cab ride."

The fire gasped and sparks flew up the chimney. Venus waited for the wood to fully ignite and then put the screen in front of it. "There you go," she said. "I've got to check the oven."

"You really made dinner?"

"I did. Unless, of course, I burned it."

"Oh." There were fresh lilies in a vase in the center of the dining table. China and linen and crystal. Lydia colored at the notion. Flowers and a romantic dinner. "I thought you were just kidding."

"Kidding? No. It's almost ready, so you'd better be hungry."

Lydia looked past Venus, avoiding her eyes. She was hungry, now that she could smell food. "I am," she replied. "I'm...do you have those papers handy? Maybe I should get us started while you—"

"No, no, let's eat first," Venus suggested. "It'll be done in a minute."

Lydia acquiesced with a slight nod of her head and, once again, averted her eyes.

She was thin and pale, self-conscious when she spoke, and nervously playing with her wedding band. She was also somewhat intoxicated, Venus observed, but she'd been expecting that. She had never seen her

[&]quot;No, I... of course I do. It's just that—"

quite so thin before, but then, she hadn't seen Lydia Beaumont in years, had she? And people do change. Grief can change them quicker than anything else. Those eyes and lips were the same, though. Marvelous and mesmerizing. She wanted to put her arms around the woman and kiss those lips again, to see if her mouth was as soft as she remembered, to see if— "I'd better check on our dinner," she said.

Dinner was not burnt. She set it steaming on the counter. From the kitchen she glimpsed the bright pink baby monitor that, in the flurry of cleaning, she'd forgotten on the mantle of the fireplace. "How's the new apartment?" she quickly asked. Where could she put that so it wouldn't be obvious?

"Oh, it's fine. Different than what I'm used to. Small, you know? I'm trying to adapt to the place, but I'm...your penthouse is spectacular, Venus. It's so lovely here."

"Thank you."

"This photograph? Is this Jasmine all grown up?"

Photo of Jasmine, on the mantle, right next to the baby monitor. "That's her all right," Venus answered, trying to think of a distraction. "Although 'grownup' is debatable. She's still a brat."

"Hah. She's such a beautiful girl, though. Beautiful, just like her..."

Venus sent a smile across the room, acknowledging the unfinished compliment. "Dinner's ready now."

They ate their dinner without another word and when they were done, Venus whisked the plates away, loading them into the dishwasher while Lydia stood with her back to the kitchen, as close to the fire as possible again, and to her raincoat.

She was contemplating fleeing, Venus could tell. So some things were not so different, after all. "I'll get those papers now," she said, rushing to the office and hesitating for a moment at the door to the nursery, which was quiet and peaceful.

She hurried back with the files, happy to find Lydia still there, making a strenuous effort to relax on the couch, her legs crossed tightly, twiddling in her nervous hands a pair of reading lenses.

Those splendid legs were the same, too, Venus quickly noted. "I've been reevaluating," she said, depositing everything onto the coffee table and plopping down beside them.

Lydia dropped her glasses. "Oh, Jesus," she muttered, bending to find them.

"Let me," Venus offered, nearly bumping heads with her in the process.

"Thank you, I...my coordination isn't what it ought to be, I guess."

The color had come back into Lydia's face again and her lips were red and moist. Venus took a quick breath and handed her the glasses. "Here they are."

Lydia stood up and went to the fireplace again.

"Listen, Lydia. If you're not up to this tonight, I completely understand."

"No, let's do it. Reevaluating, you said. You were reevaluating."

She had been reevaluating everything. Their positions. "I took the liberty to reevaluate everything. Our historic positions."

Lydia turned around. "And?"

"The bonds, too, of course, and some of our other holdings."

"That's a lot of work."

"Well, it was overdue, really, what with the market being so soft."

Lydia came and sat on the couch beside her again. "That it definitely is."

"The yield spreads are...well, as I'm sure you're aware, too, they're just..."

"Spreading wider and wider everyday."

"Yes, that's it. And there's a heightened desperation lately that concerns me," Venus continued. "I feel it even at Soloman-Schmitt."

Lydia was up on her feet again, heading for the corner this time, examining a piece of sculpture that had suddenly beckoned her there. "That's understandable, I should think. Everyone's strapped for...everyone's strapped these day."

"Yes."

It was a curious piece. She puzzled over it. "But it's only serving to exacerbate things, don't you agree?" "It is."

"Venus, what is this?"

The sculpture was a Primitive that Venus had purchased during her trip to Johannesburg last year. It was a fertility carving, half a man on the bottom, as could clearly be seen, and half a woman from the torso up.

"That's a...I got this piece in South Africa last year, Lydia. I was there for awhile on some business. I thought it was kind of interesting."

"And these masks, too?"

"Kenya. And this one from Japan. I was in Japan last year, as well."

Kenya and South Africa and Japan. Venus still seeing the world. And what had she done last year? Hid from it. Another year lost hiding. Lydia abruptly returned to the couch. "I'm sorry I'm so distracted tonight," she said. "Please continue."

Venus went to the hearth and poked at the fire, slipping the baby monitor behind Jasmine's picture while she was at it. Lydia was bothered now, she could tell. "Can I get you anything?" she asked her. "Some water?"

"No, I'm fine, Venus. Thank you."

"Lydia?"

Lydia looked up at her.

"Can I ask you something? I know it's none of my business but...are you seeing anybo—"

"No. I'm not."

Venus drifted back to the couch then and sat down.

Lydia reached past her and selected a folder from the stack on the coffee table. "Did you get a chance to analyze this one yet? I was wondering what your thoughts were about it."

Venus looked over at the account in question. "That's the one involving the pending merger?"

"Yes."

"It's a wait-and-see affair."

Lydia set it aside, took another file and spread the charts out.

Venus leaned closer to her. "And regarding this one, with all the options, I concentrated on those indicators right there. The old stuff."

"Oh. Very practical."

"So then I reevaluated them for us. Over here."

Lydia glanced up. She was flushed. Her hair hanging in her eyes. "Yes, they're...we've definitely overvalued them, I see."

"We did," Venus replied. "And, as I said, I...our bonds are, too."

"So what are you recommending?"

Venus had never seen Lydia's hair so long before. She wanted to run her fingers through it. "I'm sorry?"

"You were saying about our bond, Venus. The bonds, I mean. What do you recommend we do?"

"Our bonds. Right. I'm thinking maybe we should straddle them for awhile. That is, straddle some of them for awhile and then, once the market recovers, which I believe it will do soon, we could even attempt a strip."

Options. Lydia considered straddles and strips in silence. They'd have to pass all that by Paula Treadwell first.

"Or even a horizontal spread," Venus added. "For some modest gains."

"But what about staying power? You know how Paula is. Would this threaten our staying power if we did what you're proposing?"

"We've—we've held on for years, Lydia. We can risk it now."

Lydia opened a new folder and spread its contents out on the coffee table.

The fire was roaring. Venus listened to it hissing and sputtering and to the sound of papers rustling beside her.

"This is a standard deviation you're applying?" Lydia asked, without looking up.

Venus leaned over and examined the chart she was holding. That was such a familiar perfume and her heart skipped to smell it again. She finally wondered, after all these years, what it was.

"Venus?"

"What?"

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

"This is a standard deviation?"

It wasn't. "No, it's not, Lydia."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Yes. I'm positive."

Lydia shut the file, pushed all the files away from her and cleared her throat. "If it's none of my business then I apologize for asking, but are you seeing any—"

"No, I'm not. And it is your business, so don't be sorry."

Their legs were touching. Venus felt her stomach dip and put her hand over it to calm it.

"Is that the truth, Venus? I need to be sure of this."

Venus pressed her cheek against Lydia's. In her soul, she could feel this constant yielding to her, the desire to surrender all the time. She was hopelessly single now because of it. "That's the truth," she whispered into Lydia's ear. "There's no one in the world who compares to you."

Chapter 13: Dr. Kristenson

Dr. Helaine Kristenson was the leading authority in the field of psychosexual relations and the best-selling author of the how-to bible, "Keeping Mr. Right," when her private jet burst into flames one day and plummeted toward the ocean. Contrary to popular conspiracy theories, however, this tragedy was not an act of sabotage or an assassination. Nor was it the result of falling debris from a defective spy satellite, as the United States government had conjectured and worried. The accident was due, instead, to a major technical malfunction in the airplane's cockpit, the total blackout of the pilot's instrument panel, coupled with his lack of experience in flying a craft without the use of technology. As to what caused the blackout itself, that was the fault of a solar flare.

Solar flares are explosions that occur on the surface of the sun, explosions the size of at least a million atomic bombs going off all at the same time. They're completely unpredictable events and, if they're large enough—say ten million atomic bombs—then they can cause some significant electrical interference on our planet. This one proved powerful enough to cause scattered electrical outages on the continent of Asia. Powerful enough to damage a spy satellite in the skies above Pakistan. Powerful enough to bring down a passenger plane over the South China Sea and, apparently, powerful enough to end the life of Dr. Kristenson.

Dr. Kristenson's popular self-help book, however, is still a bestseller today, the proceeds from its sales going directly to the Kristenson Foundation, which disburses them to various charities world wide, just as the doctor had prescribed in her last will and testament.

Her best friends, Robert and Kay Keagan, had been the executors of her will, distributing for the doctor, in accordance with her final wishes, every single penny she had at the time of her death, with no objection whatsoever from her wealthy widow. That left only the penthouse and its furnishings, which the doctor and Lydia owned together, midtown, as the last remaining asset of her estate.

That penthouse had originally been Lydia's before she had married and, with the deeded right of survivorship, it became hers alone again. So, ultimately, it was this final act—Lydia selling the penthouse and fleeing to the countryside with a few of their possessions—that rendered the doctor penniless.

On the day that Dr. Kristenson was to collide with her fate, Li Yang the fisherman was patiently waiting for a disaster to unfold in the relatively placid waters of the South China Sea, just as he had been instructed to do during the night by his sacred God of Fishing.

No high-tech gadgetry to rely upon in his modest vessel, he was only a half hour early and off course by less than a mile when he finally saw the ill-fated craft appear as a bright glint on the horizon. It was a beautiful clear day. Perfect for fishing. But he had no nets.

The airplane was already on fire when Li spotted it, the engines cutting out. In its last few seconds of flight, he noticed its nose was pointed downward and that part of it's left wing was missing. Two sinister plumes of smoke trailed behind it like kite tails, one black and one white. He saw a flash, he heard the explosion, and then the plane was gone, having never reached the water. At least not in one piece it didn't.

The spectacle he witnessed when he came upon the wreckage was pretty much what he had already seen in his dream the night before, so he remained calm and poised, despite his gruesome find, and quickly recovered a body before the sharks got a hold of it.

The woman had been floating face-up in a life jacket. She must have had the good sense to jump just before the plane blew up, he speculated. He found no other survivors.

49

On the day that Dr. Kristenson collided with her fate, Nien Yang was patiently waiting on the beach for her husband; armed, as he'd instructed earlier that morning, with bandages and hot water and opium, a pot of green tea brewing on the stove in the garden. Some supper.

Jane Liddy arrived that evening in pretty bad shape, although Nien discovered right away that the blood, for the most part, was superficial. She had a head injury, though, and a gash near her temple revealed where she had suffered the impact.

Jane Liddy! Nien did not agree with her husband that this was the sleepwalker's name. Why on earth, she tried to reason with him, would someone call out their own name?

Jane, Jane, they had heard her saying over and over again in her semi-conscious state. Then, Liddy, Liddy, alternately through the night, as she slipped in and out of a coma, a condition which was to last for almost a year without end.

Jane Liddy. No, that wasn't her name, Nien had privately decided. But then, they had to call her something, didn't they?

Chapter 14: Lydia

"So? Did you score, Liddy? I want to hear yes from you. Tell me yes, Del, I scored big time."

"Del...grow up, please."

"Uh-oh. That means no. I don't like no, Liddy. No sucks."

Lydia peered over the edge of her menu at her lunch companion. "I thought we agreed that this is none of your business?"

Delilah waved this away with her hand. "Well, if I did say that, I was speaking euphemistically, of course."

"Of course."

"Of course you got laid?"

Chef's salad sounded pretty good today. And a bowl of soup might hit the spot. "Yeah, Del—euphemistically speaking, of course."

Delilah and Lydia were meeting Daddy Beaumont at the club this Saturday and he was late again, a pattern for him that had been developing slowly over the past few years. He was getting forgetful, too. Nothing major for an eighty-something year old man, but Lydia worried about him anyway.

"You are a coward, Liddy, and I'm sure you know that. Are we being stood-up here or what? What's taking your father so long? I'm starving."

Distracted by a skirt somewhere, Lydia was certain. Habits like that are hard to part with, even when you're too old to indulge them. "I wish Edward would carry a cell phone. It'd be so much easier to keep track of him that way."

"Edward's fine, I'm sure. Tell me what happened with Venus the other night."

Nothing...really. They went over the paperwork together. Essentially. "Nothing, really. We went over the paperwork together. I told you before, it was just business. Speaking of papers, did you happen to see my photo yesterday in the daily rags?"

Yes, indeed. Delilah had seen Lydia's photograph in all the papers yesterday, under headlines such as LOOK WHO'S BACK and HI, JANE DOE. This was exactly what Lydia feared would happen. "Yup. I saw it. It's a nice shot, though. You looked good. Don't worry about it."

Hmmph. "Hasn't even been a month yet and the parasites are already—"

"Want to know how my date went?"

Del and Marcus sitting in a tree. K...i...s...i...n...g. "No, not really."

"Oh, Liddy. Pooh with you. Did you make it to first base at least? I mean the woman only worships the ground you walk on."

"Really? How would you know that?"

"Hi, ladies. Ready to order?"

"I have a special gift for such things, Liddy—I think I'm in the mood for a big, bloody steak and a nice, dry martini," she told the waitress. "Bring me my liquids first, please. Else I perish."

"Well, we can't have that. And what can I get for you?"

"I'll have the soup du jour, the chef's salad and a nice, dry martini, as well. And bring me my soup first, please. Lest *I* perish."

"All right, ladies. Shall I leave this menu?"

"Yes, my father will be joining us shortly. That is, he's supposed to be joining us, I think."

"Okay."

Delilah waited till the waitress was out of earshot to interrogate. "So tell me, once and for all, Liddy. What happened? Did you make-out?"

"Look, I was...I was kind of nervous, all right? Now drop it."

Nervous was to be expected. "You were nervous. And what? You fainted?"

"I did not faint, Del."

Delilah's drink arrived. She took a gulp.

Lydia's soup arrived. It was too hot. There was a dark, green island of parsley floating in the middle of it. She studied that island in silence.

"Let's put it this way then," Delilah ventured. "Is she going to give you a second chance? Or has it been hopelessly botched?"

Venus was definitely willing to give her a second chance.

Lydia nodded.

"Good," Delilah said, lifting her martini. "Then all is not lost—cheers."

All is not lost yet, would be the best way to put it. A toast was premature.

But Venus had been sweet about it all. So much softer this time, Lydia thought. So much more gentle and more patient than Lydia had remembered her to be. Maybe the girl had finally grown up in these past few years. Wasn't it funny, though? She would have almost preferred to be treated the other way, the young and impetuous way that deprived her of making a decision. She almost wished now that Venus had cornered her, just like she used to do in her bolder days. Lydia wished, this afternoon, that Venus had been bold, taken more than just a few kisses.

"And when, might I ask, will you undertake to waste your second chance then?" Delilah inquired.

Lydia's martini arrived and she plucked an olive from the pink, plastic sword in it. It tasted pickled with gin already. Ah, gin. She swallowed it practically whole and then took a giant swig of her favorite thirst-quencher.

"When did Venus want to see you again, I asked?"

Venus was expecting Lydia tonight, actually. She wasn't planning to share that information with Delilah because she doubted she would accept the open invitation Venus had given and she didn't want to be pressured about it, which Delilah would undoubtedly do.

"When, Liddy?"

Of course, she didn't necessarily have to go tonight, either, if she couldn't get it together. She could go to her any time, Venus had said. Day or night. Night or day. Whenever she wanted to. Whenever she was finally ready to take off her wedding ring, was Venus' only stipulation. Lydia glanced at it self-consciously and shrugged.

Delilah glanced at it, too. She'd been meaning to advise her awkward friend about that ring. The ring had to go. It was a real deal-breaker and she was curious as to whether Venus had said anything about it. "Time to lose that, you know?"

The soup was cooling. Lydia took her spoon and sunk the island.

"Do you know what I'm talking about, Dame Beaumont?"

A martini with mushroom soup. What an interesting combination. "Yup."

"I'm totally serious, kiddo. You'll never see any action with that thing on. Unless that's your strategy."

The soup was perfect. "I have no strategy, and it shows."

That it did. "Never mind being strategic then. Getting laid is what counts," Delilah replied. "Just focus on that ambition. Getting laid is the only—"

"Queenie!"

"Daddy—where have you been? You had me worried."

Dapper Edward Beaumont pecked his daughter's cheek and sat down with an old man's sigh. "I'm sorry I'm late. Good afternoon, Del. You're looking as tempting and forbidden as ever."

"Hah," she answered him. "You, too, handsome."

"A whiskey sour, please," he said, winking at their attentive waitress. "Just look at this place, will you? Only the men seem to age in here. All the women stay young and beautiful. Now how can that be, I have to ask?"

"Glasses," Lydia muttered. "And whiskey sours."

Delilah giggled.

"What did you say, Queenie?"

"I said, have you eaten yet, Daddy? Here's your menu."

"Actually, I did. I happened to run into a colleague and his wife today at the festival downtown. There's a festival on the waterfront, by the way. They're old friends of yours, Queenie. Robert and Kay Keagan? My god, I haven't seen Keagan in years. Have you?"

No, she hadn't.

"They both asked about you. Saw your picture in the paper, they said. I told them you were, indeed, back in the city and they wanted you to call them, have dinner or something. I told them that you would."

Yes, she would. Of course she would. "I've—I've been meaning to. I will call them. Thank you."

After lunch, Edward took a cab back to his apartment to nap and to, "dream of his glory days." The ladies headed over to Lydia's apartment so she could change into, "something more casual." They had decided to check out the festivities downtown and she felt like a stuffed shirt dressed in black and high heels. Dinner with Venus, if she could make it, would not be until six so she had plenty of time to kill, ample time to mull it over and talk herself out of going, which she had already half accomplished.

"Whoowee, it's starting to feel like a real home in here, Liddy. What's that? Leather?"

Leather couch and matching armchair. Tadah. Two brand-new additions to the otherwise sparse living room decor. Off-white. Italian. "Comfy, too," Lydia said. "Try them."

"Ooh...very nice, very nice. Is that a fake plant?"

Nope. The rubber tree was real. A gift from Mom. Something her daughter couldn't choke with neglect, even if she tried to. "It's real. A housewarming gift from Marilyn."

"And what the hell is this in here? Is this your bed, a mattress on the floor? Oh, Liddy! What is it...a twin-size?"

"It's a double. Close that door, please."

"A double—now isn't that romantic? Oh, and cardboard boxes in lieu of a dresser! How imaginative. Why don't you just move your desk in here, too? Give it that genuine dorm room ambiance."

She had considered doing this, but the room proved too small. "Why don't you just close the door?" Delilah closed the door with a huff of disgust.

Just down the hall was a walk-in closet with even more boxes stashed into it. In one of them was the turtleneck and trousers that Lydia had planned on wearing this afternoon, the thick soled shoes she liked to go stomping around in sometimes, and a nice, wide, kidskin belt. She wanted to find that belt today, feel it hugging around her hips. "Wait in the living room, please" she said, hoping to ward off Delilah's opinion of the closet situation. "I need to get dressed, Del. I'll just be a minute."

One half hour and an awful lot of thrashing later, Lydia emerged, dressed in the outfit she had preselected. It was still basically a black motif, however, except for her gray socks, but it was definitely more casual. "Well?"

"Very handsome, girlfriend. You're ready?"

She was ready.

They walked downtown, no cab, despite Delilah's protests.

The waterfront, when they finally got there, was an absolute carnival, complete with clowns and jugglers, hucksters with their shell games and their quick cards, cotton candy and candied popcorn, balloons and beer gardens.

It was a Spring festival and what a day for it, sixty degrees and clear blue skies, the cherry blossoms exploding overhead like fireworks and hosts of golden daffodils for sale in large, white, plastic buckets lined up along the promenade.

Lydia bought several bunches and stood on the wharf with her arms full of flowers, watching the sailboats zip by while Delilah flirted with one of the street vendors.

She should flip a coin, Lydia was thinking, as she stared out across the ocean. Heads, she will go to dinner tonight. Tails, she will not. Heads, yes. Tails, no. Heads. Tails. Heads. Tai—

"Lydia Beaumont? Is that you, Lydia?"

That voice. Lydia would know it anywhere. She turned to answer it.

"It is. It is! I heard you were back. I just read it in the papers."

"Anna...what a...how are you?"

"Doing very well, thank you. And how is Lydia faring these days? Where are you hiding, my flower girl?"

Anna Grisholm hadn't changed much. Still attractive and, clearly, still attracted.

"I'm—well, I'm—I'm not hiding. Not really. Well, maybe I am. A little, maybe."

"A little hiding maybe. Ah, look at those cheeks. Listen, Lydia, I can't chat now, I'm expected someplace. Master of ceremonies around here, you know? What are you doing for dinner tonight? Would you care to dine with me at the hotel later on? Say seven o'clock?"

Lydia shifted her weight from one foot to the other and watched her feet carefully as she did it. "Um...no, I'm not...I...can't."

"Oh, you can't," Anna said. "That's disappointing. Here then," she said, undaunted by can't. "Take my card. Call me whenever you think you can. We'll have a very nice, quiet dinner together."

Lydia's hands were too full to take the card from her. Flowers began spilling onto the boardwalk. "I can't get it. Can you...?"

Anna suppressed a laugh and stooped to recover the wayward daffodils. "Lydia," she said, as she placed them back into their bouquet and tucked the card into Lydia's side pocket. "Please do not hesitate to call me."

"No, I—I won't."

"Well, then, I'm running late. It's a pleasure to see you again," Anna said, taking her leave just as abruptly as she had appeared. "It's always a pleasure to see you," she said, over her shoulder.

Lydia watched her walk away without responding.

"Wow, she's pretty. Who's that?" Delilah asked, through for now with the pretzel man and intrigued by the episode with Anna she had just witnessed.

"Her, you mean?"

"Yes, her, Liddy. Who is she? You seemed to know each other."

"I, uh, she's, um, a friend of Helaine's. I mean, an old friend of Helaine's."

"An old friend of Helaine's? Okay. Hey, you look hot. You want to sit somewhere, have a drink and cool down?"

She felt hot. She could use a drink but, "Martini, you think?"

Martinis were probably the only thing that would loosen those lips, Delilah thought to herself. There were too many questions that had been left unanswered. Too many questionable answers, as well. "Hell yeah. Why shouldn't we?"

So that's how they ended up at Cicero's this evening, chasing down their gin with hot and spicy chicken wings and some lively rhythm-and-blues.

"What time is it?" Lydia asked, shouting above the wail of a saxophone.

"What did you say?"

"The time, Del! What time have you got?"

"It's still early, only half past seven!"

Hmm. Half past seven meant that it was both early *and* late. Lydia swallowed the rest of her drink and tried unsuccessfully to stand.

"Where you headed off to, Liddy? Got a hot date or something? Hah, hah, hah!"

"Actually..."

"I'm sorry-what?"

"I said, I need to get out of here, Del, I can't think!"

"You said you've got a date?"

"No, I said I—I said I can't—"

"You're kidding, Liddy! What time?"

"What time is it? It's almost eight, you said."

"An eight o'clock date! Then we've got to get out of here!"

"Hi."

"Hi."

"I'm, uh—"

"Late. That's all right."

"Plus I've also been—"

"Drinking. Yup, noticed that, too. Those are for me, I hope?"

Lydia hovered near the elevator door, debating with herself anew about this situation and dripping in daffodils. Should she stay or should she go? She felt so goofy being single again. "Yes, they're for you."

"Come on in," Venus said, leading her by the arm into the living room. "Have you eaten anything?"

"I did," Lydia replied, piling the flowers on the coffee table and cautiously sitting on the couch. "I had some junk-food at Cicero's. I'm sorry about dinner, Venus. I just get so..."

She gets nervous. Venus knows this. She sat down beside her and caught a whiff of her breath. "That's gin," she guessed correctly. "Well, gin ought to get rid of the shakes, huh? You want some coffee? Or can I just take you and all these flowers to bed with me now?"

Lydia didn't need any coffee. "No. No, thank you."

She wasn't entirely opposed to going to bed, however. But she had a lot of apprehensions about it. Delilah had hurriedly tried to dismiss them for her in an impromptu pep talk on the way over here tonight, but those doubts were lingering, nonetheless, coupled with a pesky lack of self-confidence.

"No thank you to coffee?" Venus asked. "Or no thank you to bed?"

Lydia crossed her legs and uncrossed them, tugged at an earring. "Venus, I'm...it's been such a long, long time since...I'm avoiding it...you know?"

"Mmhmm. I know."

"Well. I guess it's not that huge a secret, huh?"

Venus leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. "I'm going to get these flowers some water. Relax. I'll be right back."

She returned immediately with a large vase and a pair of scissors to trim the stems. Lydia quietly helped her arrange them, rolling over clever things in her head as she worked, things that she might say to somehow redeem herself with, but she wasn't feeling very clever. Being clever wasn't Lydia Beaumont's specialty.

So many daffodils, she marveled, snipping off the ends one by one and handing them to Venus. What could she have been thinking buying so many? The vase was already overflowing with them. "Overkill with the flowers, I guess," she said. "Way too many."

"No, they're just enough. They're stunning."

They were. Proof that spring was here at last. The end of an endless winter.

"Exactly how long has it been, Lydia?" Venus suddenly asked, not looking at her.

Lydia leaned back to admire the bouquet. "How long?"

"Since you've been with a woman."

"Oh." Lydia parsed her words in her mind and opted out of the question with a shake of her head, a scowl on her lips.

"How long?" Venus pursued. "Since...?"

Yup, that long. She set the scissors on the table and rubbed her hands together. "Yes."

The flowers were glowing like a lamp, picture perfect now. Venus bent down and removed Lydia's shoes without commenting.

"It's because I'm messed up, Venus. You must know that."

"Yeah, maybe," Venus hedged, comparing the left shoe with the right. "But shy, mostly, and you'll never get over that."

Painfully shy, Lydia would have to admit. Especially around women. Being shy can empty a dance card in a hurry, her father had often warned. "I guess I've been, well, sort of busy underachieving in that arena, I think, and I would, I mean, completely understand, Venus, if you didn't want to—"

Her lips were red and full and poised in a half-pout. Venus leaned over and kissed her again, kissed her warm cheek and her neck this time, too, kissed the hot palms of her hands, her fingertips. "Thank you for the lovely flowers," she whispered into her ear. "My favorite color. Yellow."

Yellow was her favorite color. Lydia didn't know that. What else, she worried, didn't she know? All the things one has to learn again. All the things one has to remember. All the things one must, in order to move on with their life, somehow forget. "You're welcome," she said, feeling much too old to be starting over again.

"Go on," Venus urged her. "You were saying?"

"I was saying...what I was trying to explain to you is...to be perfectly...I'm not at all confident that I'll be—"

"I have a great deal of confidence in you, so don't worry about that."

Lydia sat back and closed her eyes. She was still intoxicated. That wasn't helping matters, either.

"These gym socks, by the way, are very sexy," Venus teased, rolling Lydia's socks into a ball and tucking them into the shoes.

"I'm sorry how I'm dressed tonight. I wasn't sure if I was coming."

"And what made you change your mind? The gin?"

Lydia averted her eyes. "I'm sorry about that, too."

"Well. Don't be. Something bad happened to you and you fell down, that's all," Venus said, massaging that tricky knee of Lydia's. "Happens to the best of us."

Lydia nodded skeptically. She couldn't picture it happening to Venus. "I don't know."

"You fell, Lydia, and now we're going to get you on your feet again," Venus said, slowly unbuckling the soft, wide belt on Lydia's trousers.

Lydia stopped her. "No, not fell, Venus. Falling. Present tense."

Venus clasped her hand. "Fall for me then. I can catch you. If you let me."

She was already feeling caught by her. It wasn't a bad sensation, Lydia acknowledged, feeling caught by Venus Angelo. Pretty Venus Angelo. So pretty and yet so handsome, and all grown up at last. "I'm too old for you, I think."

"Don't you even," Venus laughed. "This ain't no blind date."

Lydia smiled.

Then Venus looked serious again. "Let this be as far as you fall, though," she added. "Fall right to me. I want to be the one who catches you, be your soft landing."

The couch was more comfortable than her own bed. She let her body to go slack against it and allowed Venus to slide between her legs. "I might just let you do that," she said, gripping her with her knees.

"Catch you?"

"If you can."

A dare. Venus liked dares. She was pretty sure she would catch her this time. She pressed her lips into Lydia's open palm and finally undid the belt buckle. "Let's start by taking this off for me," she said.

Lydia withdrew her hand as if it had been slapped.

"Please," Venus asked her again. "Do it right now and then...then the awful deed is done with."

Take off her wedding band for Venus. Lydia closed her eyes tightly, contemplating it for what must have been the hundredth time today.

"Do it quickly, Lydia. You promised me."

"Venus," Lydia began. That ring meant a lot, she could see. Meant a lot to the both of them. She wrapped her arms around Venus' neck. "Don't worry about it."

Venus braced herself against the arm of the couch and shook her head no. Through the tight turtleneck sweater that Lydia was wearing, she could see her nipples standing erect. She could feel her arching toward her with her hips, as well, her body rocking, her legs tensing and then relaxing again. She slid an arm around her waist and lifted her up slightly, tugging at the zipper on her pants.

Lydia moved to accommodate her.

"Take that off for me, Lydia. Please, or I'll—"

"Then you better stop what you're doing, because I can't. I can't do it. I've tried to all day."

"You can do it and you will. There's only the two of us now and that's the way it has to be, the way I want it to be," Venus said, unzipping the pants quickly and slipping her hand into them.

Lydia was wet. So wet.

"Lydia."

"Venus."

Venus laid her face beside Lydia's on the pillow. There was that perfume to wonder over again. "Hurry," she told her, "because you need me."

Lydia lifted up the turtleneck for her.

No bra. Venus swore under her breath. "The ring first."

"Venus, I'll—" but she wasn't sure she could get it off even if she wanted to. She had never taken it off. Not once in all the years she'd been—"can't we discuss it later? Wouldn't later be more appropriate?"

They had already discussed it the other evening, so no to that. The ring had to go and they both knew it.

"No," Venus said, licking the hard nipple and blowing across it. "I don't want to have to discuss this with you ever again."

Lydia squirmed.

Venus put more weight against her. "Lydia, you're so-"

"Then do it, just do it."

"I will. Take the ring off, I said."

"I can't, Venus. I can't."

She can't, she can't, she can't. "Then I can't," Venus said, holding her down and sucking her.

"Then we better not do this. Stop it, Venus. Don't tease me anymore," Lydia said, trying to shove her mouth away.

Don't. Stop. Don't stop. Damn, what beautiful breasts.

"Venus!"

Venus stopped and hid her face while Lydia tried to free herself, her elbows poking everywhere.

She had imagined this moment at least a thousand times, the two of them here together in her penthouse, entwined in a love knot, just as they were. In her fantasies, she had taken Lydia quickly and ravished her, like a man might have who, having been teased too much, couldn't wait any longer, who, after having waited too long, wouldn't hold anything back. The desire to do just that was growing stronger and stronger by the minute, made more so by Lydia's willfulness and by the bone of contention between them.

A ring on a finger.

"Let me go, Venus."

Venus held her tighter. Why, she wondered, did she love this woman so? This woman who struggled against her all the time and beneath her? How did this happen? And never mind that predicament, how on earth could she let her go now? Now that she had her here at last?

"You want me, Lydia?"

"I'm not ta—"

"Answer me," Venus said.

Lydia fell quiet and lay still in her arms.

Venus extricated herself and stood up. "Do you want me?"

Lydia covered her ring finger and looked away.

Venus' terms were reasonable. She knew that they were. But Venus could be so willful at times. Tyrannical. And a horrible tease. She had long ago learned that about her. She suspected she would be forever on the bottom with princely Venus Angelo. Always on the bottom, never on top. Not unless she could negotiate it. She fixed her gaze on her again, haughtily standing in the middle of the room, with her hands on her hips, waiting for an answer.

"Do you want me?" Venus asked again.

She wanted Venus on top of her, yes. That was Venus' fault, of course. Dashing Venus, who was no longer indifferent to the meaning of a ring, apparently. Another sign of her growth. "I thought it didn't bother you that I was married? Once upon a time, if I recall right, it didn't."

"I lied—do you want me, Lydia, like I want you?"

Lydia adjusted her hair, pulled down the front of her shirt and zipped her trousers back up. "Yes," she answered, fumbling with a loose belt. "Yes, I do, Venus," she said, resting her head once more on the pillows behind her. "I do—God help me."

Venus hesitated at this declaration. "God help the both of us," she finally replied. "I'm going to bed now. I'll see you in the morning."

"In the morning?"

"In the morning, gorgeous."

Lydia was on her feet. "And what about—where am—"

"There's a blanket on that chair," was all Venus offered.

"A blank—!"

Venus turned the living room lights out without another word and headed down the hallway, glancing into the nursery first before entering her own bedroom and shutting the door quietly behind her.

Lydia watched her in puzzlement as she disappeared and then threw herself in a heap on the couch again, fuming and frustrated.

She shouldn't haven't come tonight. And she certainly shouldn't stay. She should just get up right now and walk home, she thought, fingering her ring anxiously. It couldn't be very late. She pondered that resolution, sneaking home in the darkness with her womb still aching and her sex throbbing between her legs. It was unfair! She put her hand down there, rolled over on her side and held herself.

It had been an eternity since she had felt this way. She knew she didn't think well in such a state, didn't make very good decisions. Probably she should have given in, she berated herself, just taken the ring off, if only for this one occasion. Delilah crossed her mind again. She would be disappointed by the stalemate, Lydia realized, having gone to such lengths to deposit her here tonight, on Venus' doorstep, having been so optimistic. The grilling she expected to receive from her tomorrow would be unbearable, something to dodge, if she could.

Friends and lovers and women and...Lydia focused on the flowers and examined these sticky issues from the couch, turning them over and over again in her mind for what must have been hours and, eventually, she fell asleep, drained by all that disquiet.

She slept a fitful sleep, though, dreaming, as she nearly always did, of Helaine. Helaine walking down the street, weaving in and out of a crowd, her long hair flowing behind her. Helaine on the waterfront, on the beach. Only it wasn't Helaine visiting tonight. It was merely a blond that Lydia was foolishly following. A case of mistaken identity. Just a blond-haired stranger. Just a look-alike.

Damnable dreams they were, bordering on nightmares.

Sometime just before dawn, Lydia did, indeed, abandon the couch in the living room, found the door to Venus' bedroom ajar, and gingerly made her way to the bedside.

"Venus?"

"Lvdia."

"You're already awake? I woke you?"

"No. I didn't sleep," Venus whispered, hoping their voices wouldn't rouse the baby. "I was listening for the elevator. I was curious to see if you were going to leave me or not."

"Mm."

"I'm happy you stayed."

Lydia felt heavy, not happy. "You know, I...I really can't get this off, Venus. My finger must be swollen."

She stilled reeked of gin. Venus pulled her closer. "You drink too much," she said, pushing the hair from Lydia's eyes. "Drink and think too much, I fear."

Her touch was warm and inviting. Tender. "Well, I'd better go home now. I just wanted to-to apologize."

Venus reached out for Lydia's hand, brought it to her lips and wet the ring finger with her tongue. "Try that."

It was looser now. Lydia twisted it until it finally slipped off. She held it awkwardly then in her palm, a belated offering, she supposed, a terrible betrayal.

Venus was silent.

"What should I do with it?" Lydia asked, her heart in her throat.

Venus took it from her and placed the precious metal in a china cup on the night stand. She had won her by default, she fully recognized. Won this beautiful woman with the sapphire eyes, whose psyche had been disfigured in a plane crash.

She lay her down gently and claimed her.

Chapter 15: Kay Keagan

Before her, there had been Helaine Kristenson, Robert's big heart throb, his college flame. Kay didn't know the stunning blond very well at all in those days and she resented her very existence, the way he stammered whenever he spoke of the girl or how he acted when they ran into her at the frat parties and the football games.

Those were wild times they'd spent at university, wild and experimental years and, even now, Kay couldn't exactly remember how it all had happened, how the three of them managed to wake up in bed together on that one fabulous day.

Thereafter, it was a kind of love affair that had developed between the three of them, quite passionate and quite rare, though it soon became, as it naturally had to become, a much higher love than that, a purely platonic one in nature.

Robby and Kay. And beautiful Helaine Kristenson. What a great love they had all found together. A great love that would last them a lifetime, they realized. A love, they were to learn over the subsequent years, that could survive anything. Even death.

"You'll never believe who's on the phone, Robert."

"The president?"

Kay laughed. "Close."

"Close to the president? I give up," he said.

"Lvdia."

Lydia. He felt her name wrap around his heart, lodge itself in his throat. "You're kidding? She actually called?"

"Pick up the phone," Kay told him. "Let's meet her someplace for dinner tonight."

He cleared the papers on his desk first and then lifted the phone to his ear.

"Robert? Are you there?"

"Lydia. How have you been, Lydia? I hear you're back."

"Yes, living not very far from you again. Part time, anyway. I'm sorry that I haven't...I've been trying to acclimate."

Dinner, Kay pantomimed. Ask her right now.

"What are you doing for dinner, tonight? Care to join us at Frank's maybe...or you can pick it...wherever?

"Frank's? Well, Frank's...actually Frank's sounds great. I haven't been to Frank's since...yes, that would be wonderful. What time were you thinking?"

What time, he lipped to Kay.

Early, she signaled. Say six, maybe?

"We were thinking around six o'clock. Is that too early for you, Lydia?"

"No, six is perfect, Robert. I'll see you both then."

"Ms. Beaumont. Ah, Ms. Beaumont. What a pleasure this is. We've been expecting you."

"Hello, Harry. My friends are here already? I came a little early."

"Your friends?" the maitre-de replied. "You have reservations then? I didn't see your name on the list." "Yes, with the Keagans."

He checked his list and looked suddenly cross. "It's the window seat. Let me change tables for you."

The window seat. This was pregnant with meaning for the two of them. That's where she had first glimpsed a certain blond, one that Harry had also been acquainted with, one that he had been terribly fond of. Harry the matchmaker. Lydia and Helaine had been his greatest success and, she could see now by his

expression, that they had also become his greatest failure, that he blamed himself. But that table by the window would hold no such significance for the Keagans, Lydia knew, and, as important as it was to her and Harry, it was doubtful that they had ever known a thing about it. "Harry, leave it as it is. I'll be fine. It'll be fine. We'll take the window seat."

He escorted her over there. "Let me get you a cognac while you're waiting," he said, once she was finally seated. "Or a glass of merlot, perhaps?"

Merlot was her usual here and probably what she should go with tonight, because a cognac in Frank's Place was also a sacred memory to her, and one she didn't wish to disturb. "A glass of merlot, please. Merlot will be lovely."

"Merlot, it is," he said, leaving the menus.

She wouldn't have thought she could do it, to sit here where Helaine had once sat, to sit right here in this very spot where Helaine would dine with only a glass of red wine beside her and a book in her hands. Lydia had found her sitting right here. The love of her life. After losing her, she thought she could never do it again, never come back to Frank's Place. She glanced around the dining room guiltily tonight and took it all in once more.

She had avoided this restaurant for years, but it looked unchanged in her absence, felt and sounded and smelled exactly the same as she'd remembered. There were the same posters on the walls and the same plants over there, the same tables and chairs, the same music playing. It was all the same without her. It was all the same without Helaine. That didn't seem quite possible to Lydia somehow. How could anything in this world remain the same without Helaine in it?

"There she is, Robert—Lydia!"

And there they were. Good old Robert and Kay Keagan again. Looking virtually the same as when she had last seen them.

She raised her arm to wave but her hand felt suddenly naked. She hid it in her lap.

Chapter 16: Sharon Chambers

"Where did you get it?"

"In front of her building."

Sharon grinned. A blunder at last. Clever Venus Angelo had fucked up. Fucked up big time. She recognized the woman leaving her residence by dawn's early light, those famous blue eyes of hers shining with fireworks.

Lydia Beaumont—Venus was screwing Helaine's widow! Sharon chuckled bitterly to herself. She should have guessed as much. "And this one here? Where'd you take that?"

"I took that one on the waterfront this weekend," the detective said, with a certain amount of pride. It was a good photo and it had been a hard shot for him to get. Angelo had been more than a little anxious about meeting her lover in public for the first time and he had captured that anxiety beautifully. Clearly she was placating the woman by risking it, constantly scanning the room and watching the door between her I-love-yous. "That's a little diner across from—"

"Across from Cicero's. I know the place. I used to live down there, remember?"

Yup. Cicero's would be his next haunt. He had a hunch about the waterfront now. "That's right. That funky old jazz club."

"And just how long has this been going on?" Sharon asked, her mouth twisted, the taste in it suddenly sour.

"A little while."

"A little while? Can't you be more specific than that, considering how well I pay you?"

No, he couldn't, because it had escaped his attention before. He'd missed all the signs, obviously, and he wasn't sure when it started blooming. "This month," he replied, only speculating.

"This month. Meaning a week? Two weeks? Three?"

Three sounded right. Maybe. He lifted his hands in the air. "I don't know."

"Never mind then. Where else do they meet? How many times so far?"

Four dates total. That included two pajama parties. But that was just the beginning, he was sure. "At her place. At Angelo's. About a handful of times so far."

"So Ms. Beaumont's calling on Venus...not the other way around?"

That's what it looked like to him. "Yes."

"I see. So where's the former Mrs. Kristenson living these days anyway? I just read in the papers that she's back."

He didn't know this, either. He was hoping Venus would lead him there, but she hadn't done so yet. "I don't have that information," he admitted. "Soon, though, I expect."

"Venus doesn't go to her place ever? I find that hard to believe somehow."

So did he. "It's too soon to tell. She's so tricky, you know? She could be leaving from a different exit or in a car or even in disguise. I don't know yet."

Sharon gnawed at her bottom lip. She despised Lydia Beaumont, Ms. Passive-Aggressive, Ms. Stealth-Bomber. This was the very same way she had stolen Helaine from her. In a sneak attack. "So she's chasing Venus? What does she bring her when she comes to call? Flowers, I suppose?"

"Flowers, yes, and sometimes wine. Sometimes just her briefcase."

Wasn't that cute? Sharon wanted to rip up these photos of the woman, rip them into tiny shreds, but they were her only copies, all she really had to show for the last twenty grand she had paid him. "What kind of flowers, goddamnit?"

What kind of flowers? He shrugged. What the hell did he know about flowers? Only that they were yellow or pink or white or red. "She brought her ones on tall stalks," he said, demonstrating their length with his hands. "Yellow flowers on stalks."

Gladiolas.

Sharon went to the window. "Is this serious, you think?"

Jesus, he thought to himself, now how could he know that? He doesn't get paid to know whether people are serious or whether they're just having sex. "A spring fling, perhaps?"

A spring fling. Sharon doubted it. She wanted the man to leave now. He was a dope about these subtle aspects of the case and she had no further use for him at the moment. "Well, you've done a good job. Now I suppose you'll be wanting more money?"

Who couldn't use more money? "The more the merrier," he answered, his expression characteristically wooden.

He was not the merry type, but Sharon gave him an envelope with ten grand in it anyway. "Have fun with it," she told him. "It'll hold you for awhile, I think."

He pocketed the dough without smiling and left.

He was happy enough, though, even if his face didn't show it. He was happy to have another ten grand, too. That kind of money would burn a hole in any man's pocket, make him want to go out and paint the town red, but not so for Detective Hammerman. Making merry had never been his cup of tea. He was a diligent and serious man and privately he knew that this entertaining case, with its fascinating twists and bends, had all the indications of being his last. Chasing beautiful women around the globe and trying to purloin their deep, dark secrets—you simply couldn't ask for a bigger or better finale before retirement. It had been more fun than he'd expected, too. More fun than he'd had in all his forty years of professionally stalking.

He took his client's money directly to the bank and deposited it.

The following rainy Thursday evening found him discreetly sitting at the bar in Cicero's, taking in a little vintage jazz and snooping around while he was at it.

"Hello there," he said, to the well-dressed, middle-aged fellow sitting next to him with no briefcase, busy, it seemed, at trying to read his fortune in his drink, having given up, apparently, on the financial section which lay on the counter beside him, rolled up like a baseball bat.

The man glanced over. "Good evening," he replied, sounding surprisingly sober and friendly.

"I'd say, judging from the looks of it, there's a woman at the bottom of that glass," Hammerman said, in his most convivial manner.

The man drained his drink and pushed it away. "Yes, she was," he said, with a good-natured grin, "but she's gone now."

"Well...they do that sometimes, don't they? Disappear on us?"

"Mine do," the man answered, sounding too sorry for himself to be believed. "Edward," he said, offering his hand.

"George," the detective said, shaking it. "Buy you another?"

"Nah," Edward replied. "I'm an ugly drunk."

He was exaggerating, George could tell, but he did act like a regular here, which was of interest. "I'm looking for a woman," he ventured. "A very pretty one."

Edward snickered. "Join the club, man," he said. "Aren't we all?"

George laughed. "No, but really. Mine's tall and dark. All legs, if you catch my drift. Short-haired. In her early thirties."

"Wow. She sounds just like the one that got away on me," Edward said. "Sorry for you, buddy."

George nodded sadly. "What happened to yours?" he asked, trying his best at some empathy, some male bonding.

Edward contemplated this question, glanced at his wristwatch and then rose from his bar stool, ready to call it a night already. "Well, George, to be blunt, she went and got pregnant," he replied. "They do that sometimes, too, you know? They get pregnant."

"Ah, she's pregnant," George answered, trying to delay the man. "So you're going to be a daddy, eh? Congratulations. I'd offer you a cigar, but I had to give them up. Doctor's orders."

Edward buttoned his raincoat, grabbed his umbrella. "A daddy. That's funny. It's not mine, she says. So what do you make of that?"

"Says—so you're still seeing her then?"

Edward paused. What was he doing talking to strangers in a dingy old bar downtown, reminiscing about some dame? He had a train to catch. "Nah, that's ancient history. It was nice talking to you, though, George. You seem like a real good listener. I regret I don't have more time to gab."

George waited for Edward to leave the club before striking up a conversation with the bartender. "You know my friend that was just sitting here...Edward?"

"Yeah, I know Eddie."

"I'm getting old, I guess, and it's completely slipped my mind. His last name's Beaumont, isn't it?"

"Yessir, it is. Eddie Beaumont. Actually, Edward Beaumont the third."

"Are you humming again?" Paula asked. "What's with the humming, Ms. Beaumont? You're driving me crazy with it."

She was humming to herself again. Color came into her cheeks.

"At least think of a different song, for Pete's sake!"

This humming thing was getting on everyone's nerves lately. Delilah was the first to notice it, and then Marilyn said something, and then Roy did, and now Paula was complaining about it, too. "I'm sorry. It's a tune I got stuck in my head, I guess, and I don't even know what it is. Or that I'm doing it."

"Well, I don't know what it is either, but can you make an effort here for me and just knock it off? I'll tell you, between your humming and Angelo's whistling these days, I swear, I'm going to throw myself out the nearest window. We've got shortfalls galore, and a credit crunch, and the goddamned mortgage market's not just going soft on us, it's rotting into the ground, and now the dollar's taking an extended holiday, and here's the two of you clowns just sitting around, twiddling your thumbs and singing "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" or whatever the wretched song is. I simply cannot concentrate!"

Lydia grew even redder at the mention of Venus' name. Thankfully, Paula was too preoccupied to notice this. "I'll bring these spreadsheets back to my office then. Give you some peace. How's that sound?"

What a month. "Sounds like an excellent idea—hey there, John. Can you bring me some heroin and a really sharp blade?"

"Hah. All I've got left in my medicine hag are pins and needles, Ms. Treadwell. Settle for coffee with a couple of aspirin?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Where'd all the bulls go, I want to know? Where are they when we really need them?"

"Don't you know? The bears ate 'em up last week."

"That must be it—oh, and Lydia...Lydia!"

Lydia poked her head back in. "What?"

"Board meeting tonight, remember? I can't lie through my teeth without you anymore, so please don't be late."

Shit, the board meeting. She had, indeed, forgotten about it. That would mess up her plans with Venus tonight. "Right, the board meeting. Seven o'clock. Don't worry, I'll be there."

It was calmer in her office. Paula was a wreck and there was no fixing it. Not unless the markets recovered.

"Hello?"

"Venus, I—I can't come tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because I've got to work late."

Venus didn't respond. She had found Anna Grisholm's card in Lydia's pocket the very first night they had spent together and, although dismissing the possibility of it at the time, she had, since then, dwelt on the meaning of that card for too long and she was no longer a hundred percent confident.

Lydia had no idea Venus had found the card. She had forgotten all about Anna, in fact. "Venus?"

"Did you get a better offer, Lydia?"

"Did I get—? Of course not! There's a board meeting tonight. I forgot about it."

She could hear Venus rifling through papers then, probably a calendar. She swiveled her chair around and lifted the blinds on the window. It was a brilliant afternoon, springtime in the city, but the building across the street lay in shadow. She dropped the blinds down again.

"Oh, you're not kidding. There is a meeting tonight. Can you come over when you're done, Lydia? I really want to see you again."

Ditto. But things were very shaky these days at Soloman-Schmitt and the meeting would inevitably drag on, Lydia knew, just as the other two emergency meetings had before it. What's more, in the morning, she was picking up Delilah for a three day weekend in the country. It looked unlikely, therefore, that she could salvage their date this evening. "I don't think so. I've got to get up at five in the morning tomorrow. I'm leaving with Del for the weekend. Did you forget?"

"Damn, I did. Just come for a little bit then. I promise to throw you out when I'm done with you."

"I—I'd like to say yes, of course, but we—I, uh—you tend to keep me up late, Venus."

"Hah—you quitter."

"Oh, honey...never. A little rusty, perhaps."

"All right. So when will I see you again?"

She didn't know. "Venus, I—"

"Hang up the phone, Beaumont. I'd like a word with you."

Lydia spun around in her chair. Paula was filling up her doorway, looming there larger than life, very, very displeased with her top girls now and what she felt certain she was hearing.

"Is there someone there, Lydia?"

"Paula, I didn't realize—"

"Yes, I realize you didn't realize. Say goodbye to her then. Tell her I need to talk to my co-president."

"Shit, Lydia...I'd better let you go."

"Hang it up, I said!"

Click.

Chapter 17: Sunev

"It's just Suney, I keep telling you. I'm a friend of hers. Call her and ask."

Just Suney, no last name. The concierge checked the list again that Ms. Beaumont had provided him with, but Suney's name was definitely not on it. "Let me call and see if she's up there," he said.

"Brilliant plan," Sunev answered, ready to climb the walls if he had to. "Why didn't I think of it?" "Hello?"

"A young man who calls himself Sunev is asking for you. He's down here in the lobby. Shall I send him up, Ms. Beaumont?"

"Su—? Yes, yes! Send him up, please. Right away."

Sunev flashed a victorious I-told-you-so grin and rushed to the open elevator. "Peace," he said, as the doors were closing.

Punk, the concierge thought to himself, reluctantly adding Sunev's name to the guest list. These young people were so surly and insolent today. Downright disrespectful.

Upstairs, Lydia met Sunev in the hallway, halting at the sight of him. She had not seen that swagger in years, that suit or the hat. It took her breath away.

He half walked, half ran to her, leading her by the elbow back into the apartment and locking the door behind them.

"I'm sorry, gorgeous," he said, "but I desperately needed to see you again."

"Wow, that's some apology," she replied. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with it."

Her rooms were small and cozy, just as she had described to him, and there was an overnight bag in the living room. She was packing, still dressed for the office, still wearing her high heels.

"Lydia," he whispered, pinning her against the wall and stealing a kiss. "Did you just get home?"

She threw her arms around his neck. "Pretty much—do that again."

He kissed her again. "They kept you late, huh? Trouble at the office?" he teased.

She bit his lip.

"Ouch."

"Some. Do you really want to hear about it?" she asked.

"Um...can we talk about it afterward?"

She laughed. "After what?"

"After—after I take you to bed?"

"Uh-oh. You're too late for that, I regret to inform you."

He hesitated, not sure if she was joking. "I am? Why's that?"

"Well, because I'm seeing somebody. You might know the woman. Tall, dark and handsome. A real babe."

"Ahh," he said, relieved. "Is it serious, I hope?"

"Mmhmm."

"Well, that's her problem then," he said, jauntily. "Here. I brought you a present. See?"

He was hard. She pressed against him. "That?"

"Yeah...you like it?"

She pulled his hat off and tossed it behind him. "You're very rude, young man."

"That means she likes it. I ordered it special for you," he bragged. "Custom fit."

"Uh-huh," she said, licking his lips and crushing them with a kiss. "You're very bold, too. You're going to feel foolish when I throw you out of here."

"Hah. Did you have a drink today?" he asked. He couldn't smell any alcohol on her breath or taste it. "Nope."

"Ah, good girl, good girl. That's seven days in a row now, isn't it?"

Seven days had passed without a drink and she had barely noticed. It was a record. "Sometimes I do as I'm told," she whispered, mussing his hair and grabbing him by the belt.

"That's good to know—unbutton your blouse then."

She did this for him without hesitation, one hand working the buttons and the other, for balance, resting on his shoulder.

"Oh, Christ," he murmured, when she was done. "Christ," he repeated, cupping her breast and slipping the blouse down past her shoulders.

She pulled at his belt buckle.

"Pop it," he told her. "Pop my thing."

"Stupid boy," she whispered, pulling down his zipper and reaching into his pants. "You're fresh."

"Well...?"

"Well, what?" she said, withdrawing her hand.

"Perfect, ain't I?"

He was perfect. "Yes," she said, with a chuckle. "It's a pity you have to go now."

"Yah! Get rid of this blouse for me before I rip it."

She took her blouse off. "And this, too?"

"No, leave the—" she was wearing a ring once more on that finger, he just noticed. A tear-shaped stone in it, surrounded by diamonds. "Leave the bra on. I've never seen anything more exquisite."

"Never? You flatter," she accused, wrapping her arms around his waist and offering him, with a sly smile and swollen lips, some cleavage. "How's that, my little fetishist?"

"Thank you, God," he said, raising her skirt high above her stockings. "I see you got some exercise in, too...that's an absolutely amazing gam."

His hands were warm and her legs weakening. "I'm a good girl?"

"Not too good, I'm hoping." There was an eye-hook on the back of her skirt. He undid it.

"And I see you're good with women's clothes," she said, letting the skirt drop to her feet and stepping out of it.

He glanced around him, searching for somewhere soft to take her. The leather couch was the closest thing available. He guided her over there. "Lie down, Lydia," he urged, quickly removing his pants. "Lie down, please."

She lay down, pulling him with her. "Will you stay with me tonight?" she asked. "I want you to stay with me."

She was so soft. Her neck, her breasts, her stomach, her lips, her thighs.

"Sunev?"

"No, I can't stay tonight."

"You can't? What do you mean? Are you just kidding?"

"No, I'm sorry," he said, feeling her suddenly go tense on him. "I'm not."

"Suney," she said, trying to rise. "You can't stay? You're on your way out, you mean? Is that why? That's why you're dressed like this?"

He pushed her down again. "No, no. I have to go home afterward—lie back, Lydia."

"Home," she said, lying back again. "You have to go home? Is that the truth?"

She was wearing the thong he had just bought for her the other day. Black, silk lace. "Scout's honor," he said, tugging at it playfully. "Come on now. Take this off for me."

She took it off for him.

"Lydia...Lydia."

She didn't answer him.

"Here...open them, please," he whispered. "Open your legs, baby."

She spread her legs for him and he placed himself gently between them. "Tell me this is mine," he whispered in her ear.

"Tell me you're going straight home," she answered.

"I'm going straight home," he quickly said. She was slick to the touch, but tight now. Too nervous. "Lydia. Just relax for me. You have my word. Don't worry."

"I have your word—I want you to stay tonight. Why did you come here if you can't?"

"Because I needed to see you again, to be with you. I love you, Lydia. I love you."

She tied her arms and legs behind him. "You love me, eh?"

"I do."

"Or do you only love this?"

He lay still for a moment, in the prison of her limbs, wondering what he could say to the sitter if he didn't come home tonight. "I've—I've always loved you, Lydia. You must know that."

"But you can't stay?"

"No, I really can't."

"Oh, Venus. Venus."

"Venus, what? Say it."

"That better be true or...or I swear, I'll never forgive you. Never, do you hear me? It better be the truth you're filling my head with these days, Venus Angelo."

It was. "It's no lie," he promised her. "I'm not trying to fool you, Lydia. I wouldn't put you through that"

She sighed now, sweet and sad, and turned her face from him, her mouth in that pout that he adored. All the things he craved to hear would come from those two lips. He stroked them with his thumb and they parted. "I might not be able to stay tonight," he said to her softly, "but I'll never leave you, Lydia. Never."

He felt her open for him then and he thrust his cock inside her.

Saturday morning. A fine Saturday morning. Lydia was gazing out at the lake from the porch swing instead of from the edge of the dock today, a cup of black sweetened coffee and a tired out melody her only breakfast companions. The lovebirds, Delilah and Marcus, were oversleeping in her guest room and, having dozed off last night on the lumpy couch in the living room, Lydia had been walking around the lake house on her tippy-toes since dawn, in a strenuous effort not to wake them.

She had been cramped all night on that couch and she felt a little stiff this morning, the knee was aching. A walk around the lake later on might be helpful, she was thinking. Some exercise would get her blood circulating again.

The water and the sky were the same quality of blue today, the color of a Paris sky, she observed, and the lake was a sheet of glass, calm and peaceful, still much too cold, she knew, for swimming. She sipped her brew thoughtfully from a distance and studied the sunrise reflecting in it.

The view this morning was a postcard, the sky filled with cotton candy.

Mindful of the volatile markets of late, Marilyn had promised Lydia that she would take care of the grounds of the lake house if things got too hectic for her this week in the city. Things had certainly gotten too hectic in the city. The gardener Mom was so fond of had already attended to some of the flower beds and mowed the lawn this week. Lydia breathed in the lingering smell of cut grass. That lawn had been looking kind of thin and patchy before she'd left, but it had miraculously healed itself in her absence, thickened all up again. It was, once more, a great big emerald blanket.

And all the flowers were yellow this spring, she thought with amazement, as yellow and as bright as the sun shining down on them. Forsythia and tulips and daffodils and dandelions. Lydia had never seen so much yellow in her whole life. It was truly a yellow spring this year. A real dandy.

"Hmmm hmm...hmhm hmm...hmm..." That darn song was back again. She resumed her humming of it, lost in her morning reverie. "Hmm hmmm hmhmhm hmm..." It would be so nice if Marilyn dropped by for a visit today. She needed to confide in her mother. I think I'm in love again, she wanted to tell Marilyn. I think that I'm in love with Venus and Sunev, she would attempt to explain. "Hmm...hmhm...hmm..." But Venus and Sunev wouldn't want her to do that, Lydia realized. Venus and Sunev were intent on keeping everything a secret. "Hmmm hmm...hmhm...hmm..." Venus and Sunev. Her heart jumped at the thought of them. "Hmmm hmm...hmhm hmm hmmm..." Oh, but for the secret keeping!

"Here we go again. What is that anyway?" Delilah whispered from under the sheets.

"What is what?" Marcus asked.

"That thing that Liddy keeps humming. You hear it? What's the song she's always humming?"

He hadn't noticed any song. He propped his pillow up and leaned his head closer to the window screen, straining to listen.

"It's such a familiar tune," Delilah drawled through her yawn. "And it's driving me cra—"

"Shh."

They quieted and put their heads together, listening.

"Hmmm hmm...hmbm hmm hmmm...hmm hmm hmm hmhm hmmm..."

Marcus began humming along with it.

"Oh, Jesus," Delilah moaned. "Not you, too."

He shushed her again.

She shushed.

"Hmm hmm hmm hmmm..." Lydia hummed on, completely unaware that her guests had awakened.

"It sounds like a swing tune," Marcus declared.

A swing tune made sense. She'd probably heard it at Cicero's, Delilah thought. "Well, you're a big fan of swing. What the heck is it?"

"Hmmm hmm," he hummed, "hmhm hmm hmmm—oh, it's a Bobby Darin song," he blurted. "Somewhere..."

"Bobby Darin?"

"Yeah. It's, 'Beyond the Sea.' It's Bobby Darin."

Delilah rolled over on top of him. "Can't say I know that one," she mumbled, kissing his naughty mermaid good morning.

"Oh, I'm sure you do," he said, stroking her hair and enfolding her in his massive arms. "You've gotta know that one—somewhere...beyond the sea...somewhere waiting for me...recognize it?"

"Oh, my god, I do-my lover stands on golden sands..."

"That's the ticket," said Marcus, "and watches the ships that go sailing...you sing it much prettier, though," he told her. "Sing it for me," he asked, nudging her gently.

She wasn't much of a singer but, "Somewhere, beyond the sea—" ooh, Delilah suddenly thought, stopping short.

"Go on, Del...she's there watching for me..."

She shuddered. "Stop singing it," she begged.

"If I could fly like birds on high..."

"Marcus, please."

"Then straight to her arms...I'd go sail...ing."

Chapter 18: Lana

Jane Liddy was not her name. That much she had known almost from the very moment she had regained consciousness, but she was too weak at the time to protest or to recollect things properly, so she went along with it anyway, because she had to be called something, didn't she? Besides, it was taking an eternity for her to piece everything back together again, and her name—what's in a name?—was only a small part of that puzzle.

From the fisherman's drawings and from her terror at the sound of low-flying planes, from her spells, her confusion, her fainting episodes and the sleepwalking, she had managed to decipher the meaning of the small scar on her forehead. Beneath it, she could feel bone that had been cracked and then healed badly. She had some knowledge of medicine, she discovered, enough to know that the tiny mass under there wasn't a very good sign. It meant that she'd had head trauma, she realized, and that could take forever to mend. If at all

A plane crash. Perhaps there was something merciful in forgetting about that, she figured, but she felt forever braced against this inevitable recollection.

Sleepwalking and blackouts and fainting. Christ.

She was making progress, though. She was Lana Kristenson, she had, at last, remembered. She is Dr. Lana Kristenson. A doctor and an American. But the price of this particular remembrance, unfortunately, had been the grand mal seizure that had put her in a semi-coma condition for nearly all of the past twelve days. A setback in her otherwise steady, but slow, recovery.

She sat on the edge of the cot this morning, listening for Li or Nien. There was a basin of water at her feet, a slice of sea sponge floating in the middle of it. The water was still warm and sudsy, so they couldn't be too far, she reasoned. They would be happy to see her up on her feet and she was eager to find them, for their company. The recent breakthrough—her name and occupation and nationality—had opened a floodgate, however, and she was dealing with a barrage of visions now that she couldn't interpret fast enough, finding it exceptionally difficult to stand.

Mental activity like this one was prohibited, she understood, or at least it had to be kept to a minimum. Yet she felt so pressed for time now and there was no one else to think for her if she couldn't do it, no one to safeguard those memories so they didn't get lost in the interim, no one to tell her, for her, who she really was.

Who was she really, she asked herself this morning. Just who in the world was this Lana woman anyway, now that she finally knew her name? Who was she? Who was Lana? Who is Dr. Lana Kristenson?

Lana Kristenson is married. That had been an easy one. She'd deduced that right away, from her wedding ring. And she'd been married quite awhile, judging from the white band of skin underneath it.

She was wedded to the mirage at the lagoon, she had finally ascertained. To the mirage or the hallucination that always waited for her there, that beckoned her to come and bathe in the shallow end of the pool when Lana was, herself, almost too exhausted to achieve it. *She* was Jane or Liddy, Lana was certain, that beautiful woman with the limpid eyes who stood so alluringly on the other side of the water, watching over her.

That mermaid. Was she a Jane? Was she a Liddy? No matter anymore. That was her wife. Lana knew this by the matching wedding ring on her finger and by the feelings that the woman could so easily inspire.

Naturally, she didn't reveal this information to Nien or Li, the fisherman.

Communicating with Nien or Li was difficult anyway. Not just because of the head injury, but also the language barrier, the culture clash. Oh, but sweet Nien and Li Yang. The gods had been merciful to one Dr. Kristenson, helping her to find them.

As best as she was able to glean, the Yangs were Chinese, but they had lived in other places, too, according to Li's crude map. Vietnam for the most part, but also Cambodia and Thailand. Those places were bigger than this remote, clump of sand, but they all had one thing in common, she knew somehow. They were all in turmoil and impoverished. What the Yangs must have seen in all their years of wandering and how generous they were, despite it! She loved them. The stoical old man and his doting wife.

We are all wanderers in some way. She must have been wandering, too, she realized. English-speaking Lana Kristenson was very far from home these days, wherever it was that she had once called home, beyond the shore, beyond that sea, in America.

Speaking of English, she hadn't heard any English since she couldn't remember when. English was out of the question here—she spoke it only to herself or to the chickens or to the woman at the pool—but the Yangs knew a little bit of French and so did she apparently, albeit she was considerably less fluent in it than they were. That was only logical. Vietnam, if she remembered her history right, had once been occupied by the French, so Nien and Li had probably been forced to learn that language when they lived there, whereas she had picked up hers on vacations in Paris.

But this trivia was all she could remember about any of that stuff, and the only thing she could be sure of at this very moment, was that Paris was a long way off, not only in terms of its physical distance.

What else, she wondered, didn't she know? Maybe that was an easier question for her to tackle this morning.

She did not know where she was, precisely. She was on a small, desert island. That's all she knew. What that great body of water out there was called was still a mystery, too. Was it the Pacific Ocean? Was it the Indian Ocean? Was it a bay or a sea? She couldn't tell for sure from Li's drawing. There were always so many ships on it, though. All kinds of craft, including Li's.

Li did not like her to spend too much time on the beach. It had something to do with all those ships, Lana had learned from Nien. Those ships made him very, very uneasy.

He didn't want her roaming the island, either, which she sometimes liked to do. "Dangereux," he would scold, shaking his gnarly finger at her and bringing her back home again.

Dangerous. It was much too late for that. She had already been hurt, she wanted to scream, but she tried to heed his warnings, nonetheless.

She was so dizzy this morning and she couldn't get free of the cot. The marks on the wall that she had made, counting the days and the months and the...were nothing but a blur. They had become nonsensical to her anyway. Through so many blackouts, signifying nothing.

Oh-god, these terrible flashbacks!

Up, Lana. Get up. Hurry, daughter.

Her father was here, once more offering his assistance but, if she ever wanted to join the living again, she knew she could no longer embrace this vision of him that so frequently came to visit. Her father had been dead for over a decade.

But the woman at the pool would be waiting, she told herself, so she needed to get up, just as he was saying. The room was spinning, though. She put her head in her hands in frustration.

Hurry, Lana. Rise and shine, I say. The morning is nearly gone.

"I'm...I'm trying to," she finally answered, refusing to take the hand that he was offering.

Listen. Your Ming is here.

Ming was at the bamboo shade. She could hear him pecking on the other side of it. The emperor missed his number one wife, she thought with a faint smile. She dragged herself from the cot, went to the window and let him in.

"Coo, coo," he cooed at her, tapping his beak on the window sill.

"Good morning to you, too, your majesty," she said, trying to sound cheerful for him.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck!"

Oh, the stars were out this morning, swimming in her aching head. She was having another one of her horrible migraines. Now where had she left that piece of charcoal?

"Cluck, cluck," Ming chattered on, waiting at her feet while she added yet another mark to the wall and then circling her as she searched for a pair of dark sunglasses. "Cluck, cluck," he said again, once she

had finally found them. "Cluck, cluck," she heard, as he ecstatically led her outside into the garden and down to the beach.

There were hundreds and hundreds of marks on that wall, she thought miserably, standing in the golden sand with her rooster and watching the ships that were sailing. Years, it had been, she was aware. Well over two whole years, nearly three, that she had been missing.

She scooped up Ming in her arms and held him to her breast. Surely Lana Kristenson must be taken for dead by now, she worried.

Chapter 19: Jane Doe

"Where did you get it?" Venus demanded.

"It was uploaded to our site anonymously," Sebastion answered. "We have that feature," he added sheepishly, "and it's become, uh, kind of popular."

PM Entertainments and their soft porn and skin mags. She glared at PM's vice president. "For profit, was it?"

He looked at the floor and said, "Yup."

Crap. This was a very troubling development. Venus shut the DVD player off and paced the living room, burping Mariah as she walked and trying not to get the child too riled even though she was, herself, extremely agitated.

Sebastion was supposed to be babysitting Mariah tonight. Venus was going on a double-date to Cicero's, meeting Lydia and Delilah and Delilah's new beau. Cautious Venus had been reticent to do this, to be seen in public with her lover, but Lydia had convinced her it would be all right. All right to come out for a just a couple of hours with some friends.

Venus was running behind schedule now.

She'd thought to use this unique occasion to share a little secret with Lydia. A seventeen-pound secret that giggled a lot and gurgled when she tickled it, but she would have to keep that secret under her hat for awhile, she could tell. The illicit DVD Sebastion had just delivered was a far more pressing matter and it had to be speedily resolved, if it could be. "How long?"

Sebastion sighed heavily and took one of the stools in the kitchen.

"Don't give me them eyes, Sebastion. How long has it been up?"

"At least a month."

"A month?" She looked at him incredulously. "It's porn. What took you so long to discover it?"

The DVD of a somewhat younger Lydia Beaumont and her unidentified gentleman friend having a go at it, would definitely qualify as pornography. The company had pulled it the second they caught wind of the situation, but there had been a ton of hits on it well before then, thousands of downloads made, thousands of purchases. Whoever was responsible had made a boodle with his hidden camera and PM Entertainments had made a quick buck with it, as well. They were frantically investigating. "We don't review every item that's uploaded. Not unless it's, well, you know, in demand."

"And this was in demand? Please tell me it wasn't."

Sebastion stared at his shoes. "Are you going out dressed like that again?" he asked, instead of giving the obvious answer. "Don't you think it's sort of risky?"

She was sending Sunev to pinch-hit this evening. "Damn, of course a thing like that would be in demand," she muttered. "Yes, I'm going out like this. Boy, oh, boy, Sebastion, if that DVD falls into the wrong hands, then there'll be a real media frenzy about it. You know, she just got back into the swing of things again, not to mention that I'm in love with—"

"I know that. I'm sorry," he said, taking Mariah. "We're hustling with it, Venus, believe me. We're tracking the account information right now and we've already reported the matter to the police."

She was fifteen minutes late already. "We'll, that's a very good start," she reluctantly agreed, grabbing a jacket and tie from the closet. "I'll see you guys in a couple of hours then," she said, kissing them both goodnight and forgetting her hat as she was leaving.

She walked downtown, hoping to work out some of that excess adrenaline from her system. It had to be the guy in the video, she mused on her way there. It was probably that malicious sleaze-bag Lydia used to go out with. Mr. What's-his-name from Soloman-Schmitt. His name escaped her right this minute. He'd hidden a camera somewhere in his apartment and taped himself with Lydia just as they were...what a fucking creep,

she thought, clenching her fists without knowing it. He had gone to prison for securities fraud, she recollected, but he certainly couldn't have accomplished this feat from a jail cell, so he must be out by now, a free man. Free to work a little mischief and make some money while he was at it. What a clever man he must be. She hoped they'd find him soon. Throw his ass in the slammer again.

She could hear Cicero's before she arrived there. It was hopping tonight, she discovered, and she entered the place almost forgetting that she was in drag.

Lydia had been watching for her date from the corner of the room and her mouth dropped open when Venus—that is, *Sunev*—finally appeared at the club entrance.

It was Sunev Angelo, then, who winked and waved at her as he wove through the crowd toward her table.

"Is this seat taken?" he asked, his hands shoved into his pockets, his collar up and a shock of hair hanging rakishly over one eye.

"Uh-oh," Delilah said, recognizing the brash young lad from several years ago, that one drunken evening at Cicero's that she and Lydia had agreed never to mention again. "Well, where've you been hiding, Valentino? Haven't you heard? The lady's already spoken for."

Marcus was bewildered. He was certain that Valentino was a woman. A very pretty one at that.

Sunev kissed Lydia square on the mouth and sat down beside her blushing companion. "Hi, Del," he replied, making no effort at all to disguise his voice when he said it.

It was Venus, Delilah realized, in that instant. "Oh-my-god!" she blurted. Valentino was Venus. Which meant, of course, that he had always been! She looked askance at Lydia.

Lydia ducked the implications. "Please, Del. Keep your voice down."

Delilah lowered her voice, "Shit, Venus, I can't believe it. Just wait until Paula Treadwell finds out about this."

Sunev put his finger to his lips. "Don't you even dare. It has to be our dirty, little secret," he said. "In the interests of my lovely lady friend here."

He could be so full of himself sometimes, this arrogant and conceited boi-toy she was bedding. Lydia threw her head way back. The ceiling in Cicero's was made of tin.

"Oh, don't you worry," Delilah assured him. "Your secret's pretty safe with me, I should think."

Sunev grinned and glanced at Marcus who was simultaneously holding his breath and biting his tongue, clearly flabbergasted. "Hi," he said to him. "And you must be Marcus."

"Ummm...?"

Delilah was aware now of her date's confusion and, she couldn't help herself, she giggled out loud at his expense. "Sweetie," she said, leaning into him. "This is Venus An—gosh, what do you call yourself anyway?" she thought to ask. "Do you still go by Venus if you're in—"

"It's Suney," Lydia volunteered, remembering herself once again. "Forgive my manners, Marcus, this is Suney. Also known as Venus Angelo. Most of the time anyway."

Marcus extended his hand tentatively. "I'm pleased to meet you, Su—I mean, pleased to meet you, Ven—"

"Oh, never mind with that," Delilah said, coming to his rescue. "Let's just go and dance. Leave these two alone for awhile."

Marcus was all too happy to oblige her.

Lydia waited until they were out of sight to ask, "And just where are you coming from, I'm afraid to ask?"

Lydia was wearing that goddamned diamond ring again, Sunev noticed, smirking to conceal his perturbation. He'd have to do something about that as soon as possible, he decided, resting his hand on her leg. "You don't trust me, do you?" he asked.

She squeezed her knees together. "Not dressed like that, I don't."

"I see. Do you always sleep with people you don't trust?"

She took a sip of sparkling water and swallowed hard. "I've been known to sometimes."

He regretted the question. "I'm in love with Lydia Beaumont. I want to whisk her into some dark corner right now and feel her up."

Lydia smiled at last. "Which one?"

Monday morning began, for certain select corporate officers, with a refresher course on corporate ethics and Soloman-Schmitt's own policy regarding fraternizing and inter-office relations. This was conducted by none other than Joint President Paula Treadwell, herself.

"...the end. Any questions, Angelo?"

VP Angelo had no questions. She shook her head and glanced in Lydia's direction.

"And how about you, Ms. Beaumont? Does my co-president have any questions?" Paula asked. "Anything I can further elaborate upon?"

JP Beaumont had no questions, either. "I'll see you for dinner tonight, Venus," she said, indignant. And, with that, she left the conference room.

Later that afternoon, Paula materialized in Lydia's office, still not satisfied. "You're mad?"

"I'm livid. That was humiliating. Please go away."

"Livid, you say? She's a womanizer, Lydia. A gallivant, just like your Joseph Rios was. No better than a man."

Like Joseph Rios. Lydia hadn't thought of Joseph Rios in years. "No comment."

"Bullshit. Another womanizer. Deny it."

"Was," Lydia emphasized.

"Oh, really. Was? I don't think that's something you just grow out of, Ms. Beaumont."

"Paula, I told you before, I don't want to dis—"

"I'm not done yet. It's peaceful around here, despite the deluge in the markets. It's become nice and calm at Soloman-Schmitt. I aim to keep it that way because it's in our best interests. I warn you, Lydia, things are very unstable out there and heads are starting to roll. Now is definitely not the time for controversy."

The telephone rang. Lydia picked it up. "Yes?"

"Vice President Angelo's on line one, Ms. Beaumont."

Lydia glanced over at Paula.

"Take the call," Paula said. "Tell her dinner's off."

Lydia hesitated. "Tell her I'll call her right back."

"Okay."

Paula got up and went to the door. "You tell her I'll call her right back, too. I want this nonsense stopped."

"But it's not nonsense to me, Paula. I'm in love with her."

Paula grasped the doorknob, her knuckles white.

"I said, I'm in love with VP Angelo. So what do you have to say about that?"

Paula flung the door open. "I'd say, after all these years, I would've thought you'd gotten over it by now. Good day, Ms. Beaumont."

It was in VP Angelo's office, however, that Paula met with the most resistance. She hadn't been quite expecting that.

"I don't see how it's any of your business, Paula."

Paula sneered. "Don't you? Have you told her about the baby yet or is that just our little secret?"

"Actually, if you must know, I had planned on doing so tonight."

"Really? What a coincidence, then, that I should be bringing it up. And just what exactly are you going tell her about Mariah? I'm curious."

"Tell her? What do you mean? I got pregnant, I had a baby. There's nothing more to tell. What's so mysterious about that?" The mere mention of Mariah seemed to be making her breast swell, the milk flow. Five hours. It was hard for Venus to be separated from the child for this long, both physically and mentally, she was discovering. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She had stayed later today than she had intended to.

"And she's not going to ask who the father is? Wow, what a lady!" Paula exclaimed. "No wonder you want her so bad."

Of course Lydia would ask who the father was. Venus couldn't think of anything to say about that. In her head, she could only hear an infant screaming now. Grandma would know how to pacify her, but she'd only have a bottle to do it with. "What are you saying, Paula? Get to the point, please."

"I've said it. I don't want you screwing Lydia Beaumont. Who's the father, Angelo?"

"Paula, I—I don't know that."

"You're a liar."

She was. She was lying about this.

"You're a liar, Angelo, and you've got a real mess on your hands."

Venus stood up. "You tell me who Mariah's father is then. Are you saying you know who the father is, Paula?"

Paula grasped the doorknob, her knuckles white.

The telephone began to ring. And it rang and rang and rang.

"Go on," Paula finally said. "Answer it."

Venus answered it. "VP Angelo here."

"Joint President Beaumont's on line three, Ms. Angelo. Aren't you going to take her call?"

She glanced at Paula.

"Take the call, Angelo. Tell her dinner's canceled tonight. You understand me?"

Venus hesitated. "Tell her I'll call her back, Kate. I'm in a meeting right now."

"Okay. Will do."

Her hormones were getting the better of her. Venus wanted to cry with frustration. Her chest felt damp. "Go home, Angelo. After you cancel that dinner."

Venus sat down again. "I'm not canceling it," she said, folding her arms. "I'm in love with her and I don't care about the consequences."

Paula's expression was grim. "You don't care about the consequences, because you don't know what they are yet. You're too young to know."

"Is that it, Paula? I'm too young for her? Too young for your top girl to be involved with? That I'm just some punk, a wannabe, even after all these years? A punk even though her wife is long gone now? Dead!"

Paula flinched at the reference to death.

"Is that it?" Venus pursued, her eyes watering. "That I'm just not good enough, not old enough for your top girl yet?"

"Not quite," Paula replied, flinging the door wide open. "It's because she's not just my top girl, you Casanova. That's not all she is!"

The sound of the door slamming reverberated along Venus' spine. She cringed with discomfort and grit her teeth. She shouldn't have sparred with her boss on this topic. Shouldn't have said a word, just listened. She should return Lydia's call right this minute if she hoped to save their date tonight. She picked up the receiver to do just that, but she had lost some nerve. "Kate?"

"Yes, Ms. Angelo?"

"Is she still out there? Is Paula gone?"

"She's gone. Is everything okay?"

Is everything okay? That would depend. What's everything? Your job? Your child? Your family? Your girl? Your privacy? And let's define okay, while we're at it, What's okay? Your job, your child, your family, your girl, your privacy? "Kate?"

"Yes, Ms. Angelo?"

"Can I ask? Did you happen to overhear Paula just now?"

"I did. I'm sorry, she was shouting. It got my attention."

She would have to trust Kate then not to repeat it. She thought she could trust Kate by now. "Can I ask you another question then?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Do you think it's true? That I'm a Casanova?"

"Umm...well...you really want me to say, Ms. Angelo?"

"I think so."

"Well, you're...I don't feel qualified to answer that, really."

"Please. Answer it for me. I value your opinion, Kate. Be candid."

"I'll have to say yes, then. A little bit. But it doesn't make you a bad person. You know?"

Venus covered her face in embarrassment. So Paula was right about her—always right—and she'd become, in everyone's eyes, nothing but a Casanova. How pathetic. Especially since she'd only ever loved one woman. One woman who was finally hers. Hers to lose, it might prove yet. Venus glanced over her shoulder. The building across the street was blocking her vision. She wanted to see beyond it right now, far into the future, if she could. What becomes of a Casanova? What's the future of one who keeps too many secrets? Why was she keeping so many secrets anyway? Is this what growing up was all about? Sneaking around, lady-killing, being secretive, hiding her baby from everyone, from Lydia? How on earth could she do that, hide Mariah from the world? Mariah! She was her little love-child, wasn't she? As close as one could get to it these days. And her father? He was a secret, too. An absolute stranger she'd met in Cicero's one night. A stranger with an awfully familiar face. She had recognized his features instantly, knew who he was even before he had told her his name. Those eyes and hair and nose and chin. The mouth. He was the spitting image of someone she had known quite well, someone she thought she might never see again. Only he wasn't as shy or as hesitant. He was the true Casanova.

The clock on the wall warned it was quitting time. Her breasts were full of milk and her soul heavy. She needed to be with her baby again. Mariah would be antsy for her, too, tiring her poor old grandmother.

She would have to postpone dinner tonight. Lydia would probably prefer that alternative. She had been frazzled by Paula, Venus could tell, and it was best to let things settle down a bit. Paula Treadwell was a loose cannon, completely unpredictable, and Venus was not ready to surrender up any secrets just yet. Or to have them pilfered by a disgruntled boss.

"Okay, Kate. Thank you. I appreciate it."

Chapter 20: Lana Kristenson

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The Yangs woke sharply to the rumble of cannons this morning. Nien jumped right up and went to the other bedroom, but the sleepwalker wasn't there.

BOOM! BOOM!

Stay here, Li barked, grabbing his shirt and running outside.

He found the woman standing on the beach.

"Bon matin," she said, pointing quizzically at a cluster of ships on the horizon. "Qu'est-ce que c'est?"

"Allons-y!" he yelled at her, ignoring niceties. "C'est guerre! Guerre!"

War. She scooped up Ming and followed Li back to the garden.

Nien was waiting anxiously for them by the front door, inquiring what to do about their tea and breakfast.

Cook inside, he told her gruffly.

She seized Jane Liddy's hand and brought her into the kitchen. Her husband filed after them, his face dark and his jaw hard.

Li had just returned from the mainland. He had been to the markets while he was there so he shouldn't have been surprised to see that a fleet of battleships was gathering on the ocean. There had been rumors of war briskly trading in the marketplace, warnings of growing tensions. Gossip is free and he had taken plenty of the fear-mongers' theories back with him, sharing them privately with his wife, of course, but not with his guest. He didn't want to alarm Jane Liddy.

She cast him a beseeching look across the kitchen table, but he didn't offer her any further explanation. Gunfire and smoke was, he felt, self-explanatory.

On her behalf, he had secretly gone to the US embassy this time and waited for hours and hours amidst the growing crowd of refugees and foreign nationals that had begun to collect there. But the gates never opened for them, not once, and some people were claiming it had been abandoned.

It looked it to Li.

Médicins Sans Frontières had moved its headquarters, as well, and he wasn't able to locate them anymore. He was angry with himself that he had put it off until it was too late, that he hadn't sought these doctors out sooner when he had the chance. He could have surrendered Jane Liddy to them months ago, as she was almost well enough by then to travel, to be in a boat for that long and to accompany him there for that purpose. He was confident that they would have taken the westerner from him without hesitation. With no questions asked. Even if she had no papers.

Now he had to worry, if war was official, that she would be stuck permanently in limbo, stranded forever on their vulnerable and isolated island. Two old people living here like this would have been of no interest to any of the warring factions involved—Li knew that from experience—but Jane Liddy would be in true peril if she was ever discovered here. All three of them would be now.

He was heartsick about the situation, sleepless.

So was Nien.

"Well hello, Paula. What's up?"

"Sit down, Ms. Lewiston. Can I order you a cocktail this afternoon?"

Delilah had spent enough time at the club today and she was eager to get back to the bank, to close up shop for the weekend. She had only stopped to chat because Paula had hailed her over. "No, thank you," she replied, pulling up a chair. "What's going on?"

"I was curious, that's all. Did you ever find out anything? You know, about the private eye stuff we talked about?"

She hadn't and, in fact, the matter had almost entirely slipped her mind of late. "Confidentially, I did hire somebody," she confessed. "But I haven't heard a word from them since. Not one."

"Oh. Nothing, huh? That's too bad."

Paula looked extremely troubled this afternoon. Perplexed. It occurred to Delilah at that moment that it was her, perhaps, that Paula Treadwell might be the other person who was searching for Helaine. Could she be the one that Armando Twelve had indirectly referenced by accident? "How about you? Have you found out something?" Delilah asked, careful not to give anything away.

Paula shook her head and slid this morning's paper across the table. "Take a good look at that."

Delilah read the headlines. An article about the crisis in the Asian currency markets? She knew all about it. That was a long time in the making, but what did unstable currencies have to do with Helaine? She didn't get it.

"War's breaking out over there, Delilah. An all-out fucking tempest."

That was to be expected, too, Delilah thought. But, the truth was, that she had already given up Helaine Kristenson for dead. The woman had obviously perished in a plane crash in that region. War sucked, to be sure, no matter where it occurred on the planet, but Delilah wasn't worried for her friend's safety anymore. Helaine wasn't going to suffer two deaths now, was she?

That sentiment must have been palpable. "Well, then the matter's put to rest, at last," Paula said, with a hint of sadness that caught Delilah off guard. "Our dear doctor is truly dead. The end."

It was such a heavy proclamation. Delilah felt burdened by it for the rest of the day.

Evening found her playing internet sleuth again, poring over one final time the Dr. Kristenson files she had book-marked, revisiting those sites she had added to her "favorites" list, and surfing the web for more information in the event that she had overlooked anything before, hoping to stumble upon a recent update, a breakthrough in the case.

No recent updates in the Kristenson disappearance. No late breaking news.

And, just as she had expected to find, Brown River Enterprises website was still not functioning, either. Still unavailable, for some mysterious reason. Ditto for locating their new e-mail address. A search on them revealed that they were still in business, however. Busy in every other hot spot on the globe. Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Israel, Pakistan...but no indication, whatsoever, that they were participating in the Chinese conflict, which probably meant it was an unwinnable contest. Worse even. That there was nothing to win.

The whole wide world was each other's throat, it looked like. It was so depressing. And everything Delilah was coming upon tonight was leading her to the same exact conclusions that she had already reached before, the very same dead-ends. There was only one thing glaringly obvious about the doctor's disappearance: Nobody was in agreement about how it happened.

Midnight, a red-eyed Delilah finally terminated her investigation and reluctantly deleted all the file folders. Marcus would be arriving bright and early tomorrow and she had planned to take him with her this time for a visit with her mother at the nursing home. Feisty Mom with her wicked sense of humor; Delilah would have to be on her toes so Mom didn't put her feet in her mouth and alienate him. God forbid he be alienated. She was thinking of making Marcus an offer he couldn't refuse someday. At least she hoped he wouldn't turn it down.

BRE! Never mind the money she had wasted on them, it was just so frustrating, she thought, dragging herself away from the computer and climbing into bed. How could a plane just disappear from the sky anyway? I mean, really. What happened to Helaine Kristenson?

What happened? Li frowned and rolled his eyes heavenward, refusing to answer. Tell me, Nien urged. What's wrong? He did not like to complain about Jane Liddy, but she was not listening to his warnings anymore. She was taking too many risks, he said, and he had enough to worry about lately, didn't he? Chinese warships were out there on his ocean, he reminded his wife, a whole big fleet of them, bobbing out there day and night, restless for an engagement. They were sending out their patrol boats full of trigger-happy soldiers, too, uniformed thugs in his opinion, taking potshots at unarmed vessels first and asking questions later. War was coming and here was Jane Liddy, sneaking off to the lagoon by herself all the time. Just to go bathing! Had she no fear? Was she crazy? It didn't make any sense to him. She could bathe right here, he told Nien, go for a quick dip on the beach right here. Why make me worry so? I'm a tired out old man!

Nien understood her husband's frustration these days, made worse by the fact that he hadn't gone fishing in awhile. He loved to fish, to go to market, and he was feeling useless without this vital activity. Useless and old. But the westerner was fond of the warm waters in that pool, she told him, fond of her private baths there and her peaceful meditations. It was a ritual for the woman by now. Restorative. Stop worrying about her so much, she assured him. It was not that far from the house. Nothing would happen.

Meanwhile, back at the lagoon, the woman of the hour sat soaking in her miseries. There was a dark cloud hanging over the island these past few days, not just for herself but for everyone, and she was not as oblivious to what was going on around her as it might seem. Those were battleships that Li kept peering at from behind his binoculars and, while she may not know exactly where she was in terms of geography, she had a pretty good idea of her destiny if those ships did not disappear soon.

Li was beside himself about it, succumbing to his fears for her well-being. He and Nien had burdened themselves over this matter for almost three years now. Three years, she'd been encumbering them. That's what the math equation on her wall had eventually revealed. She needed to leave this place, to free them, take her weight off their shoulders somehow.

If she could only just recover.

She was not fully recovered, of course, but she was healing rapidly now, she could feel it. The migraines weren't as severe as they used to be and her memory was steadily coming back to her, reappearing before her eyes in sudden brilliant flashes this week.

Some of these images were quite grisly, unfortunately. Painful. The one of Carlos was the worse, yet. Dear Carlos, with half his face blown off, helping her into a life jacket, clutching her closely to his chest as they plunged from a burning airplane, using his own body as protection, to buffer their impact.

How far had they fallen?

She had heard his neck break this morning when she woke up, breaking as they both hit the water together. Carlos Montague, her devoted private secretary, breaking his neck to save hers. How awful was that? He must have died instantly, she realized, his life ending with that one loud crack. She heard that sound over and over again this morning and wept.

Crrrack!

It was the same sound as the limb of a tree snapping, just like the one in her front yard that had been struck by lightning, the one that had pinned her beneath it when she was only ten.

Crrrack!

Dry lightning, striking out of nowhere, hitting the ground repeatedly and, finally, the tree where she had been swinging. Her father thought she was dead. "Up, Lana," he had yelled, when he lifted the branch and saw that she was still breathing. It was an electrical storm of unprecedented magnitude. She had barely escaped it. "Hurry, daughter," she could remember her father saying. "Get up."

She had been frightened senseless that day, frightened by the tone of his voice, the fear in it, and by the deadly weather. That event had been a buried memory for Lana Kristenson, buried intentionally by Helaine.

Crrrack!

"Get up, Helaine. Give me your hand," Carlos was saying.

She remembered the burning plane once again, everything in it a projectile, something striking her in the forehead. She remembered reeling backward then and falling down, remembered Carlos struggling to get to her, coming to the rescue, missing half his face. She could see the horror so vividly today and embraced those images of it, knowing that, once unearthed like this, she would never be able to bury them again.

"I love you," Carlos had uttered, as they fell toward the ocean. "I love you, Dr. Kristenson."

So there she was at last. Here she was. She was Dr. Helaine Kristenson. The head doctor! Now wasn't that ironic?

The doctor was examining her own head today, sorting through the scattered memories in it, frantically trying to reorganize a filing system in serious disarray. Those files were all in there, in her head somewhere, the contents of them randomly tumbling out of her psyche. Tumbling and shredded. She was chasing after them like butterflies, snatching them up with an invisible net. She had to catch as many as she could, she told herself. Those memories had made her who she was, made her who she is today. They had made her into Helaine Kristenson.

She was coming across plenty of good stuff in there, too. The stuff of life that makes it so worth living. Those are things that she had never intended to forget. The woman who used to meet her here at the pool, for instance. She was not a Jane, after all. She was not actually a Liddy, either. She was Lydia. Of course she *is* Lydia. She's Lydia Beaumont-Kristenson. Her beautiful wife.

Lydia had gone away. She hadn't been there for awhile now. Where, Helaine despaired, had she gone to?

Chapter 21: Mariah

There are these two women. One whistles and one hums. They've known each other for years, but they don't know this about each other yet, because they never whistle or hum when they're together. Which is a lot lately.

One woman is a city girl, born and bred, and the other is from the countryside, chiefly suburban. Originally from the countryside, anyway. That country girl has gradually been citified over her forty-some-odd years, though, but, for various reasons now, most of them quite private, she currently only resides in the city part time.

City Girl is considerably younger than Country Girl is, but she doesn't think this is all that important, even if Country Girl is a little self-conscious about it sometimes.

They have other differences, too, but they're trying to work them out.

"I can't come there, Lydia. I get hay fever. Real bad."

Hay fever her ass. "Venus, that's pure baloney. There's no hay out here anyway. I'm sending my driver for you. He can be there in less than two hours."

"I'm serious, girlfriend. Me and the country don't get along. Come here tonight. I'll cook for you again."

Lydia wasn't hungry for a home-cooked meal and she didn't think it necessary to discuss her actual cravings. She hung up the phone, instead.

One hour later: She e-mailed an ultimatum to Venus, complete with directions to the lake house. It was Saturday afternoon, the e-mail began. If one were to leave the city now, they could be in someone's arms in only a matter of hours. If not, so be it, suffer the consequences. Whatever Lydia decided they should be. She hadn't gotten that far yet.

Two hours later: Good luck with that. There was still no reply to her message and no Venus on her landscape, either. Lydia fell asleep in the hammock on the porch, swinging and fuming and irritated.

Four hours later: Tweet...tweet...tweet...she could hear a bird singing in her dreams...tweet...tweet...or a bunch of birds singing...tweet...tweet...yeah, it was a bunch of birds she was hearing...tweet...

She scrambled to answer it. "Hello?"

"I'm lost, I think. All I see are naked Christmas trees. Hundreds of them."

"Venus—they're called evergreens—where are you?"

"Mississippi, I'm thinking?"

"Hah, hah. What do you see out your car window?"

"A long row of Christmas...of evergreens."

They were the trees that flanked Lydia's property, lining her long and winding driveway. "Those must be mine. Are you driving or being driven?"

"I'm driven, baby. Driven mad about you and you seem to be the only one who doesn't know it."

Lydia laughed. "Tell your driver to keep following those trees. They lead right up to my house."

"Okay—she says we're on the right road so just keep on driving—Lydia?"

"Yes?"

"I'm bringing a—I've brought a surprise for you so be prepared for it, okay?"

"Prepare for a surprise? You're being fresh with me again?"

"No, it's for real. I've got a surprise. A very big one, Lydia. Prepare yourself for it, okay?"

"That's not fair, Venus. Is it bigger than a bread basket?"

"Uh, I'd say so, yeah. Quite a bit bigger than that even."

"Okay, I'm preparing myself for it."

She was beginning to believe it. "Thank you for coming." *Click*.

"A baby? You've got to be kidding me?"

George Hammerman was no kidder. He had other important revelations for Sharon, as well, and one last stakeout to make. Thereafter, he would consider his obligations to his client fully met.

"There's more. Ready for this?"

"I'm ready."

"It's very likely, short of a DNA test, of course, that the father of the baby is Edward Beaumont the third. That name sound kind of familiar to you?" he asked, with a very slight grin. "That's the fella in the photograph. Remember him? The one she briefly dated?"

You bet she remembered him. "No, shit," Sharon said, with a whistle.

"No, shit," he repeated.

So that was Lydia's brother, huh? Looked just like her. Venus had slept with Lydia's brother—now that's obsessed! And she had gotten pregnant, too, had his baby. Holy shit! She loved this guy, this relentless detective of hers. "What else?" she asked him. "I can tell by your face there's more."

There was. A real doozie.

"Tell me everything, George. I've paid enough for it."

He handed Sharon a photo instead, because a photo, as they say, speaks a thousand words.

She was speechless.

"Well?" he asked. "What do you think of that?"

"This is...? This isn't her twin brother, is it?"

"No." Venus Angelo had no brother, twin or otherwise. He gave her two more shots, close-ups he had recently taken at Cicero's. "Recognize our boy's date here?" he asked.

Sharon studied the photographs and whistled again. Nice one of Lydia Beaumont. Nice legs. "I've got you, you sonofabitch!" she screamed at the picture of a dazzling Venus Angelo out on a date in drag. "This is fucking beautiful, man. Do I owe you anything?"

"Well...not really. Not yet."

"What's next on your agenda?" she inquired, her mouth already watering. "Is there more you can get on this chick?"

"I'm going to nab Angelo at that hotel, I think. It's just a hunch, of course, but if she's cross-dressing and hanging out like that in Cicero's, then the Lavender Lane Hotel is only a hop, skip and a jump away. Catching her there would seal it, make it useless for her to struggle, and finish this job like a cherry on a cake, don't you agree?"

Yes, it would, indeed. Finish off Venus Angelo's high-powered career in finance along with it. Fuck her up with that Lydia, too. That's what would get her the most, Sharon bet. Losing Lydia. She must have been her passion all along, working together for those many years at Soloman-Schmitt. Probably been after Lydia forever, even when she was married. And just look at that jubilant Venus here. She thinks she's got her at last. Just look at that face. Of course she does. Thinks she's finally snagged Helaine's bereaved widow. She's got big plans for them, Sharon could tell. Planning a happy-ever-after with Lydia. Sharon could see all that in just one photograph. A happy-ever-after was in the works, till-death-do-we-part and all that bullshit. Well, ladies, we'll just see about that.

She gave Detective Hammerman some more cash and encouragement. "You've truly outdone yourself this time," she told him. "Absolutely outstanding."

He grabbed his coat. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Leave me everything you got here," she said. "Just in case."

He left her everything.

[&]quot;All right then, Lydia. I'll see you in a minute. I got to hang up now because I think I'm going to sneeze."

[&]quot;Sneeze—you can be such a jerk sometimes, Venus."

[&]quot;I know that. But this jerk loves you anyway."

Lydia watched from the porch swing, her thoughts everywhere. This, then, was the explanation for everything, for all those things that had given rise to her misgivings. This harmless thing was the reason for it all. This wondrous thing that Venus had been hiding.

Did Paula know about it? Who, she wondered, did?

"You should see your face," Venus said, the baby at her breast, nursing there peacefully, a cherub for a change.

"You should see yours," Lydia answered. "You look so beautiful, Venus. A picture. The both of you together."

Venus smiled a thank-you and Mariah squeaked.

Mariah. A beautiful name. And as beautiful as her mother, while she was at it. Mariah Angelo. A light-skinned baby version of Venus. Who, Lydia wondered, was Mariah's father? Had she a right to know this? She didn't dare ask. He was history, was all that Venus hinted about him. It had been a whirlwind romance. And then he had left. That was good, probably. Excellent. But he must have been a specimen, she thought, admiring the infant again. Good genes he had certainly left them with. "I need to make love to you, tonight. I want to make love to you, Venus."

"Okay."

"Because I think I'm finally...that I'm ready."

Venus shifted the baby. "Okay."

"I'm sorry if I...I've had a crisis of confidence."

Venus nodded.

"I love you and I want you to know that," Lydia said.

Mariah was falling asleep. Venus tucked the blanket around her. "Okay."

"Your sister's seeing someone, dating again. I think it's serious, too. You know how she gets."

"Good for her," Eddie said. "Have you met him?"

"It's a woman," she said. "Someone she knows from work. That's all she would tell me about her, of course. Doesn't want to jinx it, she says."

Another woman. It was a trend. "I'm thinking of doing some traveling, Marilyn. You might consider a house-sitter while I'm gone. Keep the place lived in."

Marilyn wasn't pleased to hear that. She was getting used to the idea of her children being close to home.

"Did you hear me, Mom? I'm going abroad again."

"Eddie...why?

Because Edward gets restless. Because he thought he saw someone following him, too. There was still that nasty business hanging over him. A would-be-bride in the orient and a family striving to make her into an honest woman again, to give her illegitimate baby a surname.

The young lady's family had been after him forever and ever, and forever and ever he had been giving them the slip, but he was positive he had seen one of their goons trailing him in the city the other day. He had ducked into the underground and lost them down there. It was a very narrow miss, though. Too close for comfort. "It's just a brief excursion," he answered. "I'll be gone a couple of months, that's all. Not more than a year."

Gone another year? Not another year. He'd be fifty someday soon. "What happened, Eddie? Who are you running from? That girl in the city?"

Marilyn could be so astute at times, or else his sister had suggested this to her. His sister and he never got along and she always acted suspicious of him now. She was a pain in the ass with her suspicions and her theories. Always seeing through him. "No. I told you the truth about that one. She dumped me the minute she found out she was pregnant. Why don't you believe me, Mom?"

That must be the truth then. Why would be admit such a thing if it wasn't? "Where are you going?"

He wasn't sure yet. Europe, perhaps? Russia? He was running out of places to run to, maybe. He'd decide his destination tomorrow at the airport. Whichever was the first flight leaving. "I'll let you know when my plans are finalized," he said.

"You'll let me know when you get there, you mean?"

Yeah. That's precisely what he meant.

"And are you going to say goodbye to your father, say goodbye to Lydia?" she asked, her face contorted. He hadn't intended to.

"Your father's...he's getting old, Eddie. He'd love to see you again."

His father was not his favorite subject. Eddie got up from the kitchen table and put his dinner plate into the dishwasher, washed his hands. "I will try to do that," he lied. "I'll give the old man a call before I leave. How's that sound to you, Marilyn?"

Sounded like a lie. She adjusted her son's collar and stared deep into his eyes. "If they catch you, son, then you marry her. Whoever the woman is. You'd be surprised how nice it can feel to be caught by someone. Promise me you'll give it a try."

Eddie took her hands in his and kissed her furrowed brow. Look at that white hair, he thought to himself. How old they were all becoming. "I will do that," he gave her his promise. "But they've got to catch me first, Mom."

Chapter 22: Joint President Treadwell

Damage control. Her specialty. It often seemed to Paula that there was nothing that she couldn't fix and nothing she wasn't required to. She could fix just about anything. With just a few notable exceptions.

She would attempt to tackle the current problem head-on, although it had come to her attention a trifle too late to neatly dispose of. She didn't have any choice but to act, however, because it concerned her copresident.

The board had been skeptical about Lydia's ability to remain at the helm of Soloman-Schmitt after Helaine had died. It had taken a lot of skill to keep her there. Paula had been patient with the woman throughout the grieving process, encouraging her to hang in there, tolerating her mistakes. She had never made mistakes on the job before. Not in all the years she had known her. It was, as Paula understood well enough, only her sorrow that had generated them, clouded her head temporarily.

She was glad to see Lydia on her feet again. It had taken forever and, frankly, long enough that she had begun to worry it might never happen. She was happy about it. It was a good thing. But she did not approve of Prince Angelo's romantic ambitions. She had never approved of them. That was no secret. The end.

It was this issue that she had been concerned about. The vice president and the joint president's entanglement. She knew that the budding love affair was something that the board, if they learned of it, would blanch at, grumble over until someone made a stink about it and did something behind her back. She did not prefer things to be done behind her back. Things done behind her back almost always became things that could not be undone. That's why she was coercing Venus to back down now. To quit while they were all ahead of the game. Before anyone actually found out.

But the Angelo-Beaumont matter would seem quite tame to the one that sat before her today. This was a major curve ball, she was willing to admit. It would have major repercussions, too, especially for Lydia.

Lydia had never made mistakes on the job. That was certainly true. But she had slept with a few and one of her bad pennies was finally showing up.

Paula wrung her hands this afternoon. She had less than twenty-four hours to figure out what to do now. It may be, she thought, that there was, in fact, nothing she really could do to fix this one. Boy, she hated that nagging suspicion. "Go ahead, John."

"Ms. Angelo's here."

"Terrific. Send her in, please."

"Okay."

"Good afternoon, Paula. Now what have I done?"

"I'd really like to know, but I suppose I can just wait until I read about it one day. We have a situation developing at the moment that concerns you but, at least for right now, only on the periphery. Would you like to hear about it?"

Venus sat down. "Let 'er rip," she muttered.

"I've been contacted by the police concerning your Lydia Beaumont. It appears she's become a porn celebrity without her knowledge. Or her consent."

Venus groaned. FUCK. Everything was unraveling around her. UNRAVELING.

"Yes, well. I presume that you probably know a little more about this than I do since it does involve your boyfriend's firm, PM Entertainments."

"He's not my boyfriend, Paula. You know that. Have they contacted Lydia yet?"

"No. She's at her hideaway lake, apparently."

Lydia hadn't heard about it yet. Venus was relieved.

"No one ever seems to be able to find that bunker of hers. No one except maybe you, huh? Delilah sometimes."

And the Keagans, once in a blue moon. She was with the Keagans this week. A mini vacation. "What else, Paula?"

"They're ready to swoop, make some arrests, they say. She's going to have to make a statement to the press condemning the video and denouncing pornography and invasions of privacy and all that fun stuff, in general. Perhaps file charges of her own in the matter. That's what I'm recommending, by the way. That she press charges."

"Against Sebastion?"

"Good heavens, no. Against one of PM's employees. We used to call him Rio Joe when he worked for us. He's a real bad egg. Her ex."

It was Joseph Rios. Venus just remembered the twerp's name. "She's not up to this, I can assure you, Paula. They don't need her to take him into custody anyway. They've got plenty on the man, I'm certain."

True enough, but Lydia had to do something other than hiding her ass, Paula knew. Things had gotten too complex for that solution. "CMN's got the video, Venus. They've asked me to confirm that the woman in it is, indeed, the joint president of Soloman-Schmitt, which I haven't done, as yet. They're going to be broadcasting the story tomorrow, with or without my input, they tell me. That is if the internet doesn't beat them to the punch."

So that's what Sebastion was relentlessly calling about today, why he wouldn't leave a message. Venus sighed. If she had returned his calls she could have at least been prepared for this. "Where exactly is Mr. Rios?" she asked. "Why isn't he under arrest already? He's made a fortune on his creepy video."

"The authorities delayed arresting him because they had to coordinate with other agencies on this. Seems Mr. Rios has been under investigation for years now, ever since he got out of prison. Money laundering, wire fraud, etc. She'll have to come forward and speak to the press, Venus. That is the only damage control afforded to us at this point, unfortunately. It'll look much better to the board of directors if she did this, and did it swiftly, I believe. It's all I can think of doing right now, at the eleventh-hour. Try and make the situation look better than it actually is. Make it seem that we've got things under control."

Appearances sake. Paula's specialty.

"I authorize you to go out there, Venus, and apprise Ms. Beaumont of this situation. Do this right away for me. It's company business."

"You authorize me, do you? I'll tell her that, Paula. Paula authorized me to come here and crash on your cloud, Lydia. That'll make it okay, won't it?"

Paula took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes. She had a splitting headache now. It would be very convenient if Venus would comply with this simple request. She didn't want to go out to the lake, herself, but she would if she had to. "Does that mean no?"

No means no and yes means yes and it's very rare that anything falls in between these definitions. Venus arrived at the Beaumont bunker several hours later, greeted at the front door by Robert Keagan.

Goo, goo, google, and a big yahoo! He had just logged in for his e-mail and seen the scathing Beaumont coverage on all the home-pages of his online accounts. He was slipping into his attorney-for-the-plaintiff mode now, interrogating Venus.

"She went to town," he said. "She had to see her brother off at the airport. Is she expecting you? She didn't mention that you were coming?"

Lydia's brother was leaving town. Some good news then. She wouldn't have to worry about running into Eddie Beaumont anymore. He wouldn't be back for years, she bet. "Uh, no, not exactly. I mean, I was invited, but I couldn't come. That is, at the time I couldn't."

Mmhmm. Videos and Joes and—was that a baby he just heard? He looked beyond her, squinting at the limo parked by the lawn, its passenger door wide open. "You're car is squawking," he said. "It's making a funny sound."

Venus went back for Mariah and grabbed her baby bag while she was at it. "I need to use a table," she told Robert. "She has to have her diaper changed."

Videos and Joes and a baby! Very informative. "Kay!"

Kay emerged from out of nowhere, unaware that Lydia had just received a visitor. Unaware, so far, of everything. "Venus! How wonderful to see—and who's this little one?" she asked. "What's your name, pretty baby?"

Mariah gurgled a hello to the friendly lady and stretched her arms out, beckoning her with them. Kay took a step forward and stopped. That little nose and the chin, and the shape of her pretty eyes. So familiar. The sparkle in them. How strange, she thought, accepting the baby into her arms and planting a kiss on Venus' cheek. "You had a baby, Venus. What's her name?" she asked again.

Robert was taking mental notes in his imaginary legal pad. Pretty Venus Angelo was all grown up now. She was a woman. She had been to the lake house before. She was not surprised to find them here, too. She knew that Lydia had a brother. She was relieved to hear that he was leaving. She was nervous. She was on a mission. She had probably seen the video. She was eager to speak with her colleague. To speak with her friend. Her lover?

"Mariah," Venus replied. "Her name is Mariah."

And she had a baby.

Mariah glanced at her mommy when she heard her name being spoken. "Eeeeeeeeeeyah," she cheered, at the top of her lungs. "Yeeeeeeeks!"

Robert smiled, despite himself. Yeeks was right. He invited Venus to come inside. They would just have to wait for Lydia then. She could explain everything.

She would have a ton of explaining to do—Her Highness. And say what she wants to about it, she can't deny that it's her. There's no denying she's the woman having sex in that video.

Hot Lydia Beaumont and sweet, sweet revenge. He had pimped her ass with that video. Made an easy fortune.

Joseph Rios sat staring at his computer screen, anxiously waiting for his final upload to complete. It might be his last stand, it occurred to him. After that he would have to see where the chips landed.

Something was up, he finally figured out, because he hadn't been able to access his website or his account at PM Entertainments' for days on end now. *Access denied*, was the message he got each time he attempted to log in. His PM product page had been deleted, as well. He wasn't sure when that had happened. That wasn't a very good sign, he realized. He could get his accounts nabbed again. Even get his ass thrown back in jail, if they ever found out he was behind all this. If that happened, he could add pornography then to his inglorious list of achievements. His criminal offenses.

No matter what happened, though, he was through working for PM Entertainments. Peddling ad space in skin mags, in an economy like this one, an economy going belly-up, that was nothing but a big fat zero. A dead-end.

In fact, he hadn't bothered to show up at PM for weeks now. Not since the dough started to roll in from his DVD sales there. Ah, success. Thank you, Lydia!

The upload was complete. He filled in the new account details and clicked the "publish now" button, clapping his hands together once he did it, rubbing them together with glee.

His greatest hits would be live once again, on a different site this time, streaming live in twenty-four little hours. He chuckled to himself and signed out.

Lydia plopped her groceries unceremoniously onto the kitchen counter and entered the living room expectantly. Robert and Kay where in there, looking much gloomier than when she had left them. "Hi," was all she said.

"Hello," they said in unison, exchanging questioning looks with each other. Neither could think of anything more to add to their greeting.

Those meaningful looks weren't lost on Lydia, but that can wait, she thought. She had spied a telltale baby bag on the kitchen floor and her heart was fluttering. "Where's Venus?" she asked.

"Napping," Robert replied, adding a few more observations into his notepad. "With Mariah."

She evaded those raised eyebrows of his and aimed for the bar.

Robert cleared his throat to say one more thing, but she interrupted him. "I know all about it," she said. "That bastard."

Well put, he thought, glad that he wasn't the one who had to break it to her.

Lydia had taken Eddie to the airport, a last minute thing. He was cutting out fast and didn't want a long drawn out goodbye with Roy and Marilyn, but he still needed a ride there, nonetheless, and he had wanted to talk to his sister before he boarded the plane. She had quietly listened to her brother's woeful confessions like a priest this time, with patience and understanding, except without as much sympathy.

Woe is him. He felt alone at fifty, he said, never having been in love, not once, never having started a family, no career, either, to tie him down anyplace. And the women. Oh, his women. So many, he bemoaned, that he couldn't tell them apart anymore, remember their names or their faces or where he'd met them. The countless children, too, that he had sired. That was making him feel bad, lately. Babies paying the consequences for all his indiscretions. Poor little things.

The plight of Edward's fatherless children. What an epiphany.

He had brought this all on himself, Lydia did not want to say, but he acted as if he finally knew this without having to be told by his family. His remorse, or expressions of it, that was a step in the right direction, she thought, progress of some kind he was making. She had hugged him goodbye at the last minute. Just in case.

Eddie didn't know where he was going to end up, he claimed, though he had purchased himself a one-way ticket to Ireland, she noticed. He would call her, though, he promised, once he was settled again, call her every once in awhile just to check in, so Mom wouldn't worry herself sick about him. Okay, she had said to all this, but she doubted they'd hear from him anytime soon.

Her brother had exhausted her. She'd stopped at one of the airport kiosks after his plane took off, just for a quick cup of coffee. That's when she saw the news headlines, Rio Joe's film directing debut.

"That fucking bastard," she muttered, punctuating each of her syllables with a loud drop of an ice cube into a way too tall cocktail glass.

It was all in the timing, Rio Joe knew, pouring a shot of whiskey for a toast. He was congratulating himself again.

Timing was everything and it had been well worth the wait, every single excruciating minute of postponement. If he had jumped the gun, released the sex tape sooner, when all the world was watching the devastated Mrs. Kristenson in mourning, there would have been too much pity for her then, an outcry.

But now was the right time. No doubt about it. He had seen Jane Doe's baby blues plastered all over the dailies recently and he'd heard through the grapevine that she making a major comeback, living somewhere in the city again, showing up to work once more at Soloman-Schmitt. Good for you, Jane Doe. Dating would be next. She would be dating soon, he knew. Picking up the pieces of her life again, starting over.

Save for that steamy sex video.

It was a thing of beauty, Rio Joe thought, sneering like he used to in the old days, sneering like he used to before she had wiped that sneer completely off his face, before she had dumped him and got married, before she had sent him up the river, sent him to jail for securities fraud, before she had gotten him banned for life so he couldn't work in finance anymore, never be a trader again. Not legitimately anyway.

"Cheers," he said, downing the whiskey.

"Cheers," Lydia said, gulping a triple scotch and looking particularly grim.

Scotch on the rocks for dinner. They couldn't really blame her. The Keagans watched on, dismayed and silent. Lydia had a love/hate relationship with the news media, they realized, and, at every opportunity that presented itself, the press was trying to clobber her, bringing her to her knees sometimes.

She was holding her side as if in pain, Robert noted, and favoring one leg. She was taking this much better than he had expected her to, though, considering that she wasn't in a fetal position. "We're going to need to issue a statement to the press about this, Lydia. We should come up with a response and do that right away."

Lydia looked aghast at the idea. Actually talking to the press again. "No way."

"Yes, we should," Kay agreed. "Issue a simple statement."

"I'd rather cuddle up with rattlesnakes," Lydia said, the scotch burning her lips and tongue. "I have no intentions to—"

"I agree with the Keagans so you're overruled on that," Venus said, entering the room with Mariah on her hip. "And this isn't going to help anything," she added, seizing the glass from Lydia's hand and emptying its contents into the ice bucket.

Also notable. Robert and Kay sat down on the couch together, satisfied that Lydia was outnumbered.

"Mmmm, mmm," Mariah said, the minute she recognized Lydia. "Mmm, mmm," she said squirming to be free of her mother's arms and smacking her lips, as if she was talking.

Lydia took the child from Venus. "Oh, Mariah. Tell your mommy I desperately needed that drink."

"You're quite mistaken," Venus replied, pouring her a glass of water instead.

Robert glanced at Kay. Kay ignored him.

"Drink that," Venus ordered, trading a glass of water for one bouncing baby. "Aren't you surprised to see us?"

Water wasn't going to do the trick, though. She wasn't thirsty. "Well. You were invited, Venus. Of course, that was before I became an overnight smut queen sensation. You're slumming now, I fear. You, too, Mariah."

Venus was invited. Robert's eyes narrowed as he watched them.

Lydia's face was lit up now She looked relaxed again, radiant. Venus' face was lit up, too. She looked relaxed as well, radiant. Lydia tugged absently at her ring, the tear-shaped one that Kay had commented on. Venus couldn't take her eyes off it.

So there was nothing remaining unfinished for him then, Joseph Rios felt this evening. Nothing more for him to do, but to pack.

There were just a few more articles left in his waterfront apartment to move, a couple of chairs and a table, some half-filled boxes. He would haul the rest of this stuff to his new place tonight uptown, and drop the key to this dump in the mailbox.

Things were looking up at last. It had taken long enough.

The closed accounts were a worrisome matter, of course, but if they were gone then that was too bad. He could replace the lost revenue easily enough, he knew now. He had a best-seller on his hands.

Public tender. Lydia was annoyed, overwhelmed, but in good spirits. "You're taking this pretty well," Venus said to her. "I'm relieved to see that."

"Yeah," Lydia replied, with a scoff. "I'm a real role model."

Venus smiled. "Paula will be happy to hear that you're okay, too."

Paula? Lydia's expression changed. Evidently, she hadn't thought that far ahead. So it was Paula who was really behind this surprise visit then. "Paula knows about the tape?" she asked.

Of course she did. Paula Treadwell knows everything. Venus had meant to hold back on that information till later, but a foot was in her mouth already. She was practically gagging on it.

"Venus?"

"Um...ves."

"And you talked about it together?"

"Mmhmm."

The ladies locked eyes.

Kay made a motion to get up from the couch, but Robert prevented her.

"So she's the real reason you came then, isn't she?" Lydia asked. "You're just here on company business, aren't you?"

"Not so," Venus quickly replied, casting an apprehensive glance toward the Keagans. "Not only."

"Right—to persuade me to do what, Venus?"

"Lydia...she thinks you should press charges against him. Make a statement to the press."

"Oh." An arrest was out of the question. That would just make the situation worse, Lydia reasoned. Make it a goddamned circus. "Doing Paula's bidding again, Prince Angelo? She must be terribly proud of you."

"Gosh, how is Paula these days?" Kay suddenly inquired, attempting to ward off Lydia's mood swing. "We don't see much of her anymore."

"Same," was Venus' terse response. "I came to offer you my assistance, Lydia. My—"

Lydia set the glass of water on the bar with a bang. "Has Paula seen that tape?"

It didn't matter if she had. Kay elbowed Robert to say something.

He didn't.

There was a wide range of emotions registering on Lydia Beaumont's face, all of them perfectly readable to him, and all of them in conflict. He could see she was happy that Venus was here, and happy to see the baby with her, too. She was angry now at Venus, though, and disappointed. Becoming embarrassed. She was doing a dance with the woman. They both were dancing around each other, dancing around the room together. It was a ballet of sorts. A waltz. A boxing match. He watched them carefully moving into each other's personal space and then moving away again. Pulling themselves away. Too soon.

"Has she seen it, Venus?" Lydia asked again. "Does she have it?"

"I don't know," Venus fibbed. "We didn't discuss that."

Lie. Lydia leaned against the bar and hung her head at the sound of it. "I overheard PM Entertainment's name being mentioned...that he works for PM...true?"

Mariah was getting restless, digging her fingers into her mother's hair. Did PM have a role in this? It was an inevitable question that begged an answer, but Venus wished it hadn't been asked. Especially not in front of the Keagans, who didn't like or trust PM's new vice president. Sebastion Jones, always turning the charm on to get what he was after, which was usually a nude cover for one of his skin mags, or a salacious quasi interview. "Lydia, I..."

She should never ask a question that she already knew the answer to, Daddy had always schooled her. "Is it true?" Lydia asked again, knowing Venus wouldn't tell her no.

"Yes," Venus finally replied.

PM's complicity was news to Robert and Kay. Venus hadn't divulged it in their prior conversation. That put her in an awkward position, didn't it? They scrutinized her together.

"Tell me something, Venus. I need to know."

"Yes, Lydia?"

"Have you seen the tape yourself? The truth."

"Honey, I'm...I did...I've seen it."

Lydia went ashen at the prospect. She looked away.

Duly noted: They were lovers then. "We have to seize it," Robert intervened at last. "Pull that tape down this instant, even from the networks. I've heard there's no question that it's X-rated, so there's absolutely no excuse for anyone to be playing it. I'll draw up the motion papers pronto and go to the court tomorrow to have the judge sign them. It'll be done by the end of the day."

Lydia walked to the window and gazed out at a spectacular sunset. The sky was on fire this evening, ablaze in hot pink and red. Yellow. "Okay."

An old Volvo. That's what Rio Joe was using for a moving van. That's what he had been reduced to. An old Volvo station wagon. Rusted. Beige.

A new car was next on his list, something that would complement his swank new address. He was dreaming of a Mercedes sports, naturally, like the one he used to have. Bright red.

"We deplore and condemn this blatant and vulgar exploitation of Ms. Beaumont-Kristenson. The possibility that someone could, in this manner, exploit a prominent and respectable woman, the head of a Fortune 500 corporation, no less, is alarming and disgraceful," Robert's statement read. "We intend to

prosecute to the fullest extent of the law, in both civil and criminal venues, any and all parties involved in it's creation and dissemination, be they legitimate media outlets, or otherwise."

Signed, Robert Keagan, Esq. Attorney for the victim.

Up and down. Up and down. What a humbling experience to live in a building with no elevator. What a drag to be moving furniture without one. Rio Joe took a break and sat on the floor in his old apartment, panting.

Not much really fits in the back of an old station-wagon. It's a stupid design, really. As a result, he'd been required to disassemble the big oak table and shove the chairs into the back seat. There were some antique bookshelves he'd wanted to take with him, as well, but they wouldn't fit into the car on any account. He'd lugged them downstairs and back up again, once he discovered this, working up a nasty sweat.

Sweating in a tee-shirt and beat up jeans. Cheap sneakers. How degrading. This would be the end of such humiliations. No more—

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

Someone at the door? "Who is it?"

"Joseph Rios?"

That was his name. "Yeah...?"

"Are you Joseph Rios?"

"I said yeah. What do you want?"

"Police, Mr. Rios. Open up."

"We, at Soloman-Schmitt Incorporated, strongly condemn this heinous and disgraceful exploitation of one of our highest-ranking corporate officers. We are currently working side by side with law enforcement officials, including the FBI and other federal agencies, in order to apprehend the party or parties responsible for it and to bring them swiftly to justice. We have no further comments to make at this time. The end."

"Open up, Mr. Rios. Police."

Rio Joe was calmly considering his other options, instead. They weren't very good. "It's open," he shouted.

"Well, just put your goddamned flippers on and walk down to that dock and get her for me, Angelo. I need to speak with her this instant."

Venus didn't see the use in that right now. Pushy Paula was just going to make Lydia feel worse about everything. The urgency she was conveying no doubt had something to do with the board of directors, Venus guessed. The Beaumont feeding frenzy was well underway by now and it was highly unlikely the board members hadn't heard about it. "Actually, I don't see her out there anymore, Paula. She must have gone for a walk. I'll tell her that you called," she said, hanging up in her ear.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Rios?—read 'em his rights."

"Come to bed now, Lydia. I hate to sleep alone."

Lydia wasn't sleepy tonight. Not even with her muscle relaxants, a last minute remedy for the limp that had returned with a vengeance. Muscle relaxants absent scotch and soda, of course; Venus had eradicated alcohol from the house this evening, every single bottle of it. Probably dumped them all out right here, when she wasn't looking.

Venus stood behind her on the dock, wondering what she would do if the woman actually dove in. There were things in that murky water, things that jumped and bubbled, and she had never gone swimming in a lake before. She had taken a good look into those muddy waters when it was still light outside and it had made her skin crawl. She couldn't see the bottom of it. "Not thinking of jumping, are we?"

She was, but for the frigid waters. She glanced over her shoulder, past Venus, up toward the house. There was a light on upstairs in the guest room, the one next to the master bedroom, Helaine's room. The Keagans were still up. She felt sorry for them and their ruined vacation. Hardly out of her seclusion and here she was, steeped in controversy again, scandal, and they were good friends to offer to help her out of it. Help her, if they could.

So was Venus. "I can't sleep, Venus. I'm furious."

"Fine. So then we won't sleep. Come to bed anyway. I'll seduce you."

The lights went out upstairs. What must they think of her, a thing like this happening, having been involved with the likes of Joseph Rios in the first place? And that video. How monstrous. Who could you trust, if not the one you're sleeping with? She had grossly underestimated him. He must have plotted this years ago. Even before he went to prison. "I'm mortified."

"Well, don't be on my account. It doesn't turn me off in the slightest."

Venus was opening her arms to her. Lydia stepped into the embrace. "I might lose my job over this, you realize? Then what would I do with the rest of my life?"

She could lose her job, it'd be a shame, but she didn't really need that job anyway. There are plenty of other things a woman of independent means might do besides work. "You could lie around my place all day and wait till I get home. Baby-sit Mariah while you write your memoirs. Watch her grow."

That smacked of a proposal. It was met with silence.

[&]quot;You have the right to remain silent and to refuse to answer questions. Do you understand?"

[&]quot;Fuck you," Joseph muttered.

[&]quot;Anything you do say may be used against you in a court of law. Do you understand?"

[&]quot;I said, fuck you. Do you understand?"

[&]quot;You have the right to consult an attorney before speaking to the police and to have an attorney present during questioning, now or in the future. Do you understand?"

[&]quot;FUCK YOU."

Chapter 23: Helen Chambers

Helen's mom was different than most moms. Helen's mom was beautiful and famous. Helen's mom had been a super-model once. Helen's mom had also written a book. Helen's mom didn't always get dressed in the mornings and eat breakfast when Helen did. Helen's mom didn't walk her to school like her friends' moms would either. Helen's mom sent her to and from school in a limo, instead.

Helen's mom could be rather intense sometimes, as well, and sometimes she seemed obsessed with television and newsmen.

"Hi, Mom. Whatcha watching?"

"Shhh."

"An arrest is rumored to have been made yesterday in the case of the unauthorized sex video of Lydia Beaumont-Kristenson, joint president of financial giant, Soloman-Schmitt. Authorities are waiting till the suspect is fully arraigned to issue a statement, but the man shown here being led away in handcuffs by federal agents last night is believed to be Joseph Rios, a former employee at Soloman-Schmitt and a former love interest of the victim. The suspect is already known to state and federal law enforcement officials, having been convicted several years ago on securities fraud and embezzlement. Neither Ms. Beaumont-Kristenson nor her attorney could be reached for comment in time for this broadcast."

Yeah, you can't find the victim because she's off somewhere humiliated. "Hah! You think this was embarrassing, Mrs. Kristenson. Just you wait!"

Helen turned the TV off and climbed into her mother's lap to get her attention. "Why don't you like Lydia Beaumont, Mommy? She seems like she's probably a nice woman."

Sharon paused to consider an answer. "It's too complicated," she finally told her daughter. "Grownup stuff, you know?"

Grownup stuff. Spite and revenge. "Like that other woman? What's her name again?"

Venus is her name. "Where's your cello, little girl? Why aren't you practicing?"

Helen giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"It's a violin, I keep telling you. I quit the cello last year."

Sharon rolled her eyes. Violins and cellos, what's the difference anyway? They both have strings. "Mommy's got a date tonight," she said.

Helen contemplated this. "Guy or girl?" she finally asked.

"That's none of your business, wise-ass. You going to be good for the baby-sitter tonight? Go to bed when she says to?"

Helen nodded. "Of course," she replied. "What did she do to you, Mommy? Lydia Beaumont?"

Precocious Helen and all her questions. "She stole something from your mother, Helen. Something very important."

"Oh."

Sharon braced herself for more. There was always more.

"And the other one, Mommy? What did she do?"

The other one refused to take something from her. Sharon passed on explaining that to her daughter. It was just too abstract, too complicated. "Next question, 'cause I know you got one."

"Was it a guy or a girl?"

"What?"

"Lydia Beaumont. Was it a guy or a girl she stole from you?"

"Aw, you're smart, aren't you? It was a woman, Helen. A beautiful woman. What do you want for dinner tonight?"

"The woman you wrote about?" Helen asked. "The one your book's about?"

Sharon put her arms around her daughter and squeezed her gently. "You didn't read it, did you, Einstein? I told you, you can't until you're thirty."

Helen hadn't read it yet, but she'd heard plenty about it from the other kids she went to school with. They probably hadn't read it either, but their mothers had, she was certain. "Of course not. You know I can't read stuff like that."

Can't read stuff like that yet.

"Stuff like that pays the rent, kiddo. I'll never apologize for it, so don't ever expect me to. What do you want to have for dinner, I asked?"

Helen sat up and searched into her mother's eyes. They were black tonight. Preoccupied. Perhaps she was thinking of her date. Or maybe her mother was thinking of those women in the photos she had come across last week, the ones that were hidden under the bed. Such interesting photographs, they were. Such beautiful women. Almost as beautiful as her mother was. "I think I want marshmallows," she decided at last. "Marshmallows and sushi."

"Oh, yuck, Helen. Not again?"

Helen chuckled under her breath. "Or you can cook supper for me, if you'd like."

Now it was Sharon's turn to laugh. "Marshmallows and sushi, it is then."

Chapter 24: Ms. Beaumont-Kristenson

"It's been too long. You've only been put on probation not exiled, so I don't want you hiding under the rocks anymore about this."

"Paula, I'm not hiding. I'm in retreat. Why should I be on probation anyway? Everybody has sex now and then."

Paula might agree with her about this if it weren't for the fact that, "You were video-taped at it and it was distributed all over the universe. That's very, very different, Lydia. Not everyone has sex on TV and the internet."

True, and she was never going to get over it. Even her mom was eyeing her funny. It must be a disconcerting thing to have to see, your daughter having intercourse on the six o'clock news. "For how long?"

"For how lon—oh, your probation? A few more months, at least. The board's concerned about a repeat performance, and the current brouhaha made them suddenly remember your predilection for scandal."

"I have no predilection for scandal, Paula. I have a tendency for being scandalized. There's a significant difference."

"Are you still seeing Angelo? I just want to know in case I need to cook up your defense when that goes prime time."

"What does Venus say?"

"She denies it, of course, but she's lying to me, I'm sure. Am I right about that?"

There was no confirmation from Lydia. Nothing at all. Paula could hear squawking in the background. "What's that ruckus, I'm hearing? Where the hell are you? In the jungle?

"They're birds, Paula. Mating in the plum trees. You should smell the blossoms this year. They're absolutely intoxicating. I think the birds are drunk on them."

"And you? How are you doing with your drinking thing? Met any good martinis lately?"

"Not really. Got it under control now, Paula. You can thank Venus for that."

So there. She had her answer. "I'll remember to make a point to," she said. "First chance I get."

Chapter 25: Madame Reseigner

"Claudine? What is it? How have you been?"

"Venus—très bien—why did you send such pictures to me? Je ne comprends pas. Why did you send them?"

Pictures? Now what could this be about? Venus got up and closed the door to her office. "I didn't send you any pictures, Claudine. What are you are talking about?"

"Oh, Venus, I have received some photographs today. One of you and...and one with a man. You are in your suit, Venus, with your woman, with your Lydia. And you are also in this one, with this man. I do not know him, but he looks so familiar, je pense. What is this about, mon ami? I do not comprehend its meaning."

And neither did Venus. Not entirely. "Is there a return address, Claudine? Anything written on the photographs?"

"There is a name on the back of this, the one of you with the man. Edward trois," it reads. Do you know him, this man, Edward three? It was mailed from you, Venus, from America. I think you send them to me—mais non?"

Non, and Venus had no idea who had, which was even scarier. "Claudine...merci. Merci. I have to go now. I'll have to call you back.

"When?"

"Ce soir. As soon as I get it figured out. Au revoir, Madame."

"Venus?"

"Yes?"

"This is because of you and me? I did this thing to you?"

"Claudine, no. Nobody did this to me. I did it to myself."

"Venus...bon chance."

Luck, Venus had run out of. "Merci," she said, hanging up.

This was not cool. Not cool at all. Someone knew about Eddie. About her and Eddie. About Sunev and Lydia. About Claudine.

Was it Paula who sent the photos overseas, perhaps? And, if so, why had she sent them? Why would she bother to send them so far away? Why send them to Claudine? Why hadn't she just sent them to her, instead? Why?

"Kate?"

"Ms. Angelo—what is it?"

Venus hovered beside Kate's desk, feeling faint and certain that she must look it.

"What's wrong, Ms. Angelo? Is everything all right? Did something happen with the baby?"

"Kate, I...I need to cancel my appointments today."

"Cancel your appointments? All of them?"

Someone knew about Edward Beaumont III. About Lydia. About Claudine. About Sunev. Did they also know about Mariah then? "Yes, all of them."

"Should I reschedule them for this week then? What should I tell everyone?"

"Tell them I—I don't—I'll have to get back to you on that."

"Okav...?"

"Is Paula in the building today, Kate? Do you know? Is she around now?"

"I can check. Do you want me to call upstairs for you?"

But that was wishful thinking, at best. Paula wouldn't have sent Claudine those photographs. That was just not her style. Paula Treadwell would have confronted her vice president with them herself. She would have done that right away, not shared them with anybody. "No, never mind, Kate. Don't bother her. Forget about it."

Kate was very concerned now. "Tell me how I can help, Ms. Angelo. That's what I'm here for. How can I help you?"

She can't, she understood. The photos were some kind of a threat, a warning. Whoever was behind them was telling her something. They were saying, "Gotcha, Venus Angelo," that's what. They got four birds with one stone, they were demonstrating. All her deepest and darkest secrets. Eddie and Claudine and Lydia and Sunev. It was over, Venus realized, the great charade. Four birds with one stone. She was busted.

"Ms, Angelo?"

"Get Lydia on the phone for me, Kate. I need to speak to her."

"She's on hiatus. Remember?"

"Try her at these numbers then."

Venus wrote a bunch of phone numbers down for Kate to call. "Hurry," she said. "I need to see if she's still talking to me."

Kate hesitated, puzzled by her instructions. "Are you sure you want me to call on the company's line? I thought I wasn't suppos—"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Venus snapped. "It's all blown to shit, Kate!"

Oh. So that was it. "And should I leave a message for Ms. Beaumont if she doesn't answer?"

Venus shook her head with an emphatic yes. "Leave a message for her everywhere. I'll be in my office waiting."

Kate left Lydia messages everywhere and only a half hour later she was returning them.

"Venus, what's wrong? Are you canceling dinner tonight? Why did you have Kate call me?"

"Lydia—I—are you all right?"

"Are you? Why are you calling?"

Clearly Lydia was oblivious about the photographs. Oblivious so far, anyway. "I had a weird feeling and I—I was concerned. We're still on then? You're still coming for dinner?"

"Yes. I'll be there at seven. Is something wrong? Do you need to cancel? Is it Mariah?"

"No, nothing, Lydia. I just had a funny feeling, that's all. But it's gone now, now that I...hear your voice again."

"I'll see you at seven."

"Lydia, don't hang—I love you, Lydia. Lydia?"

"And I love you. Why do you sound so odd this afternoon? Did something happen?"

She wanted to tell her everything, get it all off her chest. But that was impossible. She needed to tell someone, though. But who? Who could she trust with all those secrets? Kate? Her shrink? The stranger lurking in the shadows with a camera? The stranger, or strangers, threatening to undo her with their pictures, to shatter all that she'd accomplished in her three decades of existence, including her secret romance with Lydia?

"Tell me what it is, Venus. What happened today?"

What were they really after? Was it money they wanted from her? Was it revenge? No one was asking for money. But who would want revenge? She had no enemies. Or did she? Was she just being naïve about that?

"Venus!"

"Lydia, I'll see you tonight. We'll talk tonight, all right?"

"I'm not hanging up until you say that you're okay. Tell me you're okay, Venus. You've got me worried."

"I'm okay. Don't worry."

"And Mariah, too?"

Paula. She should seek Paula out for her confidant. Paula would need to know it all anyway. "Everything's fine, Lydia. Forgive me for worrying you. I didn't mean to."

"Angelo? I don't know if this is at all possible, but you're looking kind of pale to me. Sit."

Pale, Venus could believe. "I need to talk to you."

"Go ahead. Is this about IBC's account? I haven't looked through it all yet."

"IBC? No, that's junk. Junk bond status. It's not about that."

"Not about IBC. What then? You look terrible."

"I need to ask you something, Paula. It's something kind of personal. Something...very private."

"I see. It's about Lydia. Let's go to the conference room then. That's as private as we can get."

They passed by John's desk on the way. "Don't let anyone disturb us, John. Ms. Angelo and I need to chat. We might be awhile."

Neither Paula nor Ms. Angelo were carrying any papers on them, but they looked grave, nonetheless. Especially the vice president. "No one will bother you," John assured them. "I guarantee it."

There was a full bar in the conference room, some snacks. "I don't usually do this, but I want you to pour yourself something to drink first. That's an order, Venus. And eat something. You're looking dreadful."

Venus poured herself a cognac and drank it in one swig.

Paula made herself comfortable. "Before we begin, if something happened between you and Lydia, I want to remind you that I cautioned you before you leapt. Is there a problem now with Ms. Beaumont? Because I know that you're still seeing her and I'm not going to reveal to you how I know that."

"There's no problem with Lydia. Not yet, Paula."

"Not yet? Okay. I'm happy for you then. Please proceed and I'll see if I can assist you."

Venus poured herself another cognac and sat at the table with it. "Something bad is about to happen, Paula. I can't give the precise date, naturally, but I wanted you to be prepared for it. It's...going to make some waves."

"Tidal, I hope not?"

"A tsunami, I'm afraid."

Mmhmm. She'd been worried about this. "Venus, I know you've got a lot of secrets. You're too young for as many as you've got, but it's probably too late now for a lecture, isn't it?"

"It is," Venus conceded.

"Secrets, as I've mentioned many times, my sweet prince, are a liability. Has someone found out some of yours?"

"They did, Paula. Every single one of them."

"I see. And Lydia knows about this, too?"

"Apparently not," Venus replied, toying with the glass of cognac. "But I have good reason to believe that she will very soon and then..."

"Okay," Paula said, with a sigh. "Then we have a problem developing that I might not be able to solve for us. Are they blackmailing you? Tell me yes, because that's our best case scenario here. We could have them arrested before there's a leak to the press."

"I don't know what they want, Paula. I haven't been contacted yet. Not directly, that is."

"But indirectly you have?"

"Yes."

The breath that Paula took now was big enough to suck all the air out of the room.

Venus went to the window and clutched her chest. She was suffocating.

Beyond the waterfront down there, beyond the sea, Claudine was waiting for Venus to call her back, nibbling anxiously on her chocolates and fighting off sleep, a spoiled cat drowsing indifferently on her lap.

Oh, Henrietta, she thought to herself, as she stroked the cat's head. Our Venus is in trouble, I think. Trouble with her woman now. I hope we're not the cause of it.

She fell asleep in the chair, waiting.

Thousands of miles away from the sleeping Claudine, Helaine was crouching low to the ground, hiding herself amongst the reeds that surrounded the sleepy lagoon she liked to bathe in. From that vantage point, she could still observe the armed soldiers she had just spied on the beach without being discovered.

One, two, three, four solders approaching the Yangs' garden. Chinese, she thought.

Why had they come on land, these four?

She strained to hear what they were saying to the Yangs, but could only catch strands of their words on the breeze, and these few snippets she couldn't translate.

"Papier!" she heard Li shout to his wife. "Papier!"

Paper? Why was he speaking French to her?

Nien went into the house and came out again with something in her hands. It looked like a piece of paper she was waving. Papers! That's what they were. Li was warning her, the one in hiding, not to come down from the lagoon yet. Warning her in French so she'd understand. The soldiers must be asking for identification from the handful of residents scattered on the island, she realized. The Yangs, on the farthest tip of it, must be their last stop before going back to their vessel out there.

The Yangs showed the soldiers their identification papers. The soldiers merely glanced at them and handed them back again. A formality.

Lazy soldiers, just as Li always claimed soldiers to be. They didn't even look in her direction, or bother to conduct a search beyond the premises. She waited and waited in the reeds, watching them with anguish as they filled their boat with the Yang's provisions, the salted fish Li had hanging in one of his thatched sheds, a couple of Nien's fattest chickens, and this morning's eggs.

Ming was angry, kicking up the sand at their feet and circling them. Proud Ming. She hoped they wouldn't hurt him.

The ground beneath her feet was soft and she was slowly sinking in it, up to her ankles now in mud. And she was dizzy. Too much excitement. She could feel her pulse racing. Hurry up, she told them in her head. She would help Nien find more eggs once they left.

"Bien!" Li suddenly called. All was well, he was telling her. Stay down. Don't worry.

Don't worry! She knelt in the mud, her legs trembling.

"Très bien!"

Very good, the boat was leaving. The soldiers were finished pillaging from the poor island residents, from old peasants, stranded, as she was now, on a scruffy island that had nothing to offer anyone but dry land and a meager subsistence, at best. She had secretly spied on the Yangs' distant neighbors and knew that for a fact. No one here had even enough to feed themselves, let alone an army.

"Excellente!"

Great. The spoils of war were departing. She hoped the soldiers' boat would sink from all the weight of their plunder. Sink right to the bottom of the deep, blue sea. With them in it.

"Au revoir, au revoir!"

"Goodbye, Mama, and thank you for watching her. I can't talk now."

"Venus? What's wrong, honey?"

"Mmmmm...mmm," Mariah interjected. She was happy to be with her mother again. Zealous to nurse.

"I have to get her home. It's just some problems at work, Mama. I'm running late now."

Lots and lots of problems at Soloman-Schmitt, Mama knew by now. "That TV thing still? With your president?"

Venus scowled. "Mama, I can't. We'll discuss it later."

A nice, quiet, romantic dinner was out of the question tonight. Nothing would be ready. She'd have to order it. Maybe from Frank's. Maybe just get a pizza. There would be no explaining this to her date. Just an apology.

Venus stepped inside her dark penthouse and opened her shirt for Mariah. Mariah's dinner at least would be taken care of. Wasn't that convenient?

"Allo?"

"Claudine, I woke you?"

"Non-what did you discover, Venus? What do I do?"

Lydia would be coming soon, so she didn't have long to discuss this. "Destroy the photos. Shred them and then burn them for me, please. That way no one else will stumble across them."

"Mais oui, I will do this thing, but can you tell me what is happening? I worry for you, Venus. I do not sleep in my bed."

"Lydia will be here shortly. I'm supposed to have dinner ready. I just need to know that they're destroyed. I promise to call you again when I've figured everything out, Claudine, when we can talk more. You're very sweet to worry."

"Ah, Venus. I will burn them for you. Enjoy your dinner. We will speak soon?"

Six o'clock already. She had little more than an hour to pull herself together. "We will speak, Claudine. Very soon. Au revoir."

BZZZZ! BZZZZ! BZZZZ!

(Damn.) "Yes?"

"Venus, I'm here. I came straight form the lake house."

"Lydia—come on up."

"It's okay? I can stop over to the apartment first, if I'm too—

"No, it's all right. Come up. I have to put Mariah to bed now. Just walk right in."

Lydia walked right in to find mother and child in the nursery, Mariah trying to squirm her way out of bedtime and Venus a vision with her shirt wide open, those perfect breasts of hers a little sore looking. "You bite your mommy, Mariah?"

"She bites when I rush her. Lydia, I just got—we might have to call out for dinner. I haven't started it vet."

"I'm not really hungry," Lydia said, removing her jacket. "But you can put me to bed," she teased. "I promise I'll be good."

Lydia's eyes were afire this evening, sapphires. And she was in a tight black dress, stilettos. Venus' mouth dropped open and Mariah put a sticky finger in it before she could remark.

"Oh, Mariah," Lydia said. "I so wanted to hear that. It took me hours to pick out this dress."

A black strapless dress with a pair of bitching heels can work miracles on a troubled soul. It took another half hour for the baby to surrender to the sandman and then Venus tucked Lydia in next.

In! In!

Li was shouting at Helaine and pointing at a storage hole, a root cellar of sorts that the soldiers hadn't known about. "Dans!" he ordered, but she wouldn't have any part of hiding in a hole in the ground, in something that looked like a grave.

"Non," she said. "Morte."

He threw his hands up at that. She must, if they come again, he appealed to Nien. She will not be so lucky next time. Next time they could all end up *morte*. Dead.

Nien wasn't sure about the hiding place either. We will see, she told her husband. Maybe they won't come back.

Maybe they won't come back, he retorted. Maybe, maybe, maybe! "Je me lave le mains, Jane Liddy!"

I wash my hands of it. He didn't mean it, of course. Helaine put her arms around the old man's neck and held him until he calmed down once more.

Nien put the kettle on inside.

"Inside...go inside," Lydia urged.

"Tell me that you love me first."

"I love you, Venus."

I love you, Venus. Such magical words. She licked the throat that uttered them. "Say it again."

"Venus...you're awful...make love to me. I don't want to talk anymore."

I don't want to talk anymore, Li told his wife. I just want to sit here in peace and have my tea.

Nien poured his tea, her mouth clamped shut. Helaine sat opposite him, staring out the window at the warships and feeling suddenly lightheaded. "Oh, god," she said, just before she fainted.

"Oh, god, Venus. God."

"Should I stop?"

"No. Don't. More."

i, siic sa

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

"Like that, more?"
"Like...yes...that more...yes...yes..."

Chapter 26: Sunev Angelo

He wasn't surprised to get the package of photographs. He was just hoping that they wouldn't come, deluding himself into believing that they might not, after all.

He looked pretty debonair this evening, clad in an off-white, raw silk, three-piece tailored suit and bow tie. Strapped. He was almost ready to leave, to meet his girl at Cicero's when the messenger had arrived. He had a sneaking suspicion now, though, that his girl was going to stand him up tonight.

"Hello?"

"It's—do you want to talk about this?" Sunev asked his mouth quivering.

"Why, I'd be delighted. Meet me at Frank's in one hour."

"What I meant was—"

"Frank's. One hour." (Click)

Frank's. One hour later. Sunev stood at the door by the coat check, looking dashing, as usual, but nervous.

"Suney," the waiter said, in a hushed tone, "We weren't expecting you tonight. She's not here, you know?"

"I know that, Harry. I'm just stopping in before I...I'll just sit at the bar."

"Oh. I see."

The bar was especially crowded tonight. Sunev had hoped to sit where he could watch the door in the mirror, but he was crammed into a noisy corner instead, his view of anything, but the cognac he was sipping, obliterated.

"Buy you a real drink, tiger?"

Sunev was afraid to look up. "No, thank you," he said. "This one's just fine."

"It's crowded here, Venus. Let's see if we can find a table."

"Look, I can't stay. I thought we'd just—"

"A private table, Harry. For me and my guy."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said. "Follow me."

Sunev avoided the waiter's eyes and followed after them.

"Very good, then," Harry said, when they were both finally situated. "A drink from the bar, Ms. Chambers? Menus?"

"A Bloody Mary for me," she said. "And what does Venus Angelo drink? Bring him another one of whatever that is."

That is hemlock, Harry thought, judging from Sunev's expression. "Another cognac. Excellent."

"You're very photogenic," Sharon said, when the waiter had left them. "I thought that the minute I first saw you. You were on the cover of that magazine of Sebastion's. Remember?"

Yes, he did, and he truly regretted it. "You left your card in the envelope. I only called you because I...I only came to find out what you wanted from me."

"And I shall tell you that, but first, you tell me. What did you think of my photography? Think I'll do well with these photographs?"

He was a mouse. She was a cat. He didn't answer.

"Hmm? Think that they'll be marketable? Were they a good likeness? Did I do my subjects justice with my camera? Give me some feedback."

"Did you send them to Lydia?"

"I did, Venus. This very day, in fact. And with a great deal of pleasure, I might add."

Sunev attempted to rise and she prevented him. "I'm not quite finished with my drink here. This conversation isn't over yet. Sit down."

Sunev stayed in his seat.

The waiter appeared again, with a tray this time and a stern face. "One cognac. One Bloody Mary. Anything else tonight?"

"No. Just leave us," Sharon said.

The waiter vanished.

"Are you blackmailing me, Ms. Chambers? I need to know what your motive is."

"Please. Just call me Sharon."

She was a wicked woman. Wicked and beautiful and vicious. Carnivorous. A Venus fly trap. "Sharon, I have a...I have to leave. Are you blackmailing me?"

"I suppose so. I guess you can call it that."

"Then what good was it to show those pictures to Lydia? I don't understand."

"No good, Venus. It was something evil that I just felt compelled to do. It actually made me wet."

Sunev shook his head at that and drained his glass.

Sharon reached under the tablecloth and groped his lap.

Sunev shoved her hand away.

"Spoiling Mrs. Kristenson are we? Is she good in the sack, I take it? A greedy lay?"

"She's not Mrs. Kristenson anymore," he said. "In case you haven't heard."

"Oh, yes she is, pal. Yes, she is."

He scanned the room for the waiter and eyed the exit.

"You think I'm evil, don't you, Venus? With my photographs?"

Those evil photographs. Lydia would be devastated by them. He needed to find her and find her fast. "I have to go, Sharon."

"She won't see you again, you realize? It's over, Venus. Your big romance just went kaput on you. That's tough luck, Romeo."

He had no doubt she was right. "How could you do this to her? She was just getting on her feet again. It was...unnecessarily cruel."

"She stole something that belonged to me. She deserved it."

"Helaine did not belong to you, Sharon. People don't belong to people."

"Then Lydia didn't belong to you, either. So you couldn't have lost someone that wasn't yours, could you?"

Touché. "Lydia is wounded and Helaine is dead. Surely someone with your flare for revenge must be satisfied with such a conclusion."

Sharon flinched at this. "I don't know if I believe that."

"That she's not wounded? Or that she's not wounded enough, as far as you're concerned?"

"Neither. I'm not sure that Helaine is dead."

Sunev shot her a curious glance, his stomach sinking.

"You didn't answer me, Venus. You think I'm evil, don't you? Not just cruel or sadistic."

He was wasting precious time here, hanging out in this happy crowd. He needed to be alone with Lydia, devastated Lydia. Talk sweet to her again. Let her shoot him down, if that's what she needed to do, if that's what it took to get past all this. He had to get the hell out of here. "Indeed, Sharon, at the risk of pissing you off even more than I already have, I don't think of you at all. Now what do you want from me? I have to find Lydia."

Sharon glared at him. "You're very rude, young man, and foolhardy, too. I'm eager to see for myself what you're backing all that attitude up with. I want to see it tonight, *Sunev*. At my place."

The cognac tasted bitter tonight. He glanced at Harry, before rising. "I think you know what I'm backing it all up with, Ms. Chambers. And, if you don't, you'll just have to imagine."

She grinned at his challenge. "Nine o'clock," she said. "I'll be waiting for you with bated breath, in the event that you should come to your senses. Nine o'clock sharp, Sunev. You've got my card there. I strongly advise you to use it. After all, you've still got a brilliant career in finance left. Some secrets. Or don't any of those things really belong to a person, either?"

The cognac had gone to his head, perhaps. "Fuck you," he said, as he was leaving.

Chapter 27: Anna

Pride goeth before a fall, they say, but the struggle to maintain it can be very entertaining.

Sunev had gone directly from Frank's Place to Lydia's apartment, only to find that his name had already been removed from the guest list. So advised, he was then instructed by the concierge, in no uncertain terms, to leave the building, which he promptly did.

Back at his penthouse, he had hung up his suit in the closet and donned an evening dress, called a cab.

That was a nice try, but the woman, formerly known as Sunev, had also been banished, Venus discovered.

Lydia could be so thorough at times. "Is she home?" Venus asked a flabbergasted doorman.

"Well, uh...?"

A fifty dollar bill helped to confirm what Venus had already guessed.

"She left here about an hour or so ago," the doorman informed her. "I think she was going out tonight because she gave a waterfront address to her driver."

Gosh, what fifty bucks will buy you these days. She pried him for more. "The waterfront? Do you remember the name, perchance? Was it Cicero's?"

"No, it wasn't Cicero's. I would've remembered that place 'cause I go there myself sometimes. Great jazz at Cicero's, man."

Yeah, yeah. "Think hard," she said. "Where did Ms. Beaumont tell her driver she was going?"

He thought hard on this, but he couldn't recall the name or address. "It was some hotel. That's all I know."

Some hotel was plenty. "Thanks," she said. "I know which one it is. Hey, there's another fifty in it for you if you get me a cab right this second. Deal?"

"Deal," he said, and within ten more minutes, Venus was standing at the front gates of the Lavender Lane Hotel.

No one saw him. He was sure about that. Everybody in Frank's Place was too busy having fun this evening to notice him there. Everyone except Venus, of course. She looked like she was suffering from a snake bite.

"Did anybody see you, John?"

"Nobody, Ms. Treadwell, but there's something else I need to tell you. Something I'm betting you don't know."

"Be quick about it. I have to go. Dickie's calling for me."

[&]quot;Did you record it?"

[&]quot;I got it, but it was noisy tonight. It's not the best quality."

[&]quot;We can doll it up, I'm sure. Is it juicy? We need to nail her."

[&]quot;Well, um...it's pretty raw stuff, really. Wouldn't want it to get into the wrong hands."

[&]quot;It won't. Did they see you?"

[&]quot;Nope, a little to preoccupied, I'd say."

[&]quot;Did anybody see you?"

[&]quot;She was in drag."

[&]quot;What did you say?—just a minute Dickie, I'll be right there. Say that again, John. I didn't hear you."

[&]quot;Drag, I said. Venus was in drag tonight. She looked like...just like a boy. Or an effeminate young man, if you will."

[&]quot;A young—? Oh, for Pete's sake. You're kidding me?"

"I wouldn't do that, Ms. Treadwell."

"Full drag?"

"Complete with bow tie and a cap."

"A cap? Crap! So, I guess she wasn't telling me everything, huh? I should have known as much. She's so sneaky sometimes. Where did she go next?"

"Ms. Beaumont's."

"Of course she did. And? Did Lydia let her in?"

"No."

"No, huh? That might mean we're too late, John. And what did our boy think of that? What stupid impulse did he act on then?"

John had hung around just in case, on a hunch that Venus wouldn't give up that easily. He was right. "She went to her penthouse, changed her clothes and came back again. She was wearing a dress this time."

"Mmhmm. And that was an act of futility, too, wasn't it?"

"Yup."

"Do you know where she went after that, John?"

"She got in a cab. I couldn't follow it."

"Ugh. What an idiot."

Well, eccentric, in any event. With an eye for beautiful women. Or else a terrible weakness. "I'll see you tomorrow with this, bright and early. I'm going home now. Play a couple rounds of solitaire and go to bed."

"Atta boy. Keep your nose clean. I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Ms. Angelo? How nice to see you again."

Fifty dollars gains admittance through the private entrance of Lavender Lane, too. "Don't call up to her," Venus told the door woman. "I want it to be a surprise."

Surprises will cost you extra. "Very good. You still know the way then?"

She knew the way to Anna's room, all right. She had been there so many times. That was years ago, though. Anna wouldn't be expecting her anymore. "Yes. By heart."

She entered the elevator and followed her heart to suite number four again.

"Who is it?" came a familiar voice from inside.

Venus took a quick breath. "Room service."

"Room service? I told you not to disturb us. Leave it at the door."

"I—I can't. I have a message for you. It's, um, kind of private, Ms. Grisholm. Urgent."

She could hear footsteps approaching, the latch turning, and then the door jerked wide open.

Anna stood there in her lingerie, glowing this evening, but terribly vexed. "Ah, look at this. It's lovely Venus Angelo. How enchanting. Why aren't I shocked to see you here?"

Venus didn't have time for this. "Is she with you, Anna? Is Lydia here?"

"She is, and I appreciate your offer of assistance, but I believe I can handle things on my own, thank you."

"Anna, she's mine and I need to talk to her."

"She's yours, Venus? She didn't mention that."

"She is. I need to see her, please."

Anna stepped aside. "You have a visitor, Lydia."

Lydia was on the couch, wearing that dress again. Her lipstick blood red and smeared. Her eyes as black as her satin. A different kind of fire smoldering there tonight.

"Lydia, I've come to take—"

"How dare you? You leave me be, you hear? I don't want to see you again! Now get out!"

Anna went to the closet and put a bathrobe on, making herself comfortable in a chair by the door. "Rule number one, ladies: There will be no throwing things in here," she said. "Do we understand this rule? I'm very fond of every item in my collection."

I'm sure you are, Venus resisted saying. "Nobody's going to throw anything tonight. I've just come to take my girl home. She's tired and she needs to go to bed."

"I am not your girl," Lydia said, "and I'm not going anywhere with you. Never again."

Anna folded her arms patiently. "Rule number two is the same as number one. Now, can I get anyone a beverage before we begin? I'm feeling a little parched suddenly."

Anna waited, but evidently no one else was thirsty because no one answered. "Okay," she muttered. "May the best woman win."

"You found me. You know where I am. You can go now," Lydia said. "It's been real. Really real."

"Lydia, I...I can explain everything, if you'll only let me. I know it all seems extraordinary to you, but I can ex—"

"Save it for your memoirs," Lydia interrupted. "It'll make for interesting reading someday. Goodbye, I said. And good riddance."

Venus glanced at Anna. "A cognac, if it's no bother."

"It's no bother at all, Venus. What else am I here for, if not for the comfort of my guests?"

"Yes, Ms. Grisholm?"

"Send up a glass of cognac, please. And a bottle of sparkling water while you're at it."

"Cognac and water. You got it."

Lydia rose from the couch, the back of her dress open. She reached behind her for the zipper and lost her balance.

Venus took a step toward her. "Let me help—"

"Don't touch me!"

Venus halted.

Anna went over and quickly zipped up the dress.

"Tell her to leave," Lydia asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," Anna said. "She just got here. Besides, drinks are on the way," she added, sitting again.

"If you don't leave now, Venus, then I will," Lydia threatened.

"That'll suit me fine," Venus answered.

Lydia scowled and sat back down again. "Who sent me those photographs of you?"

"Sharon did."

"Sharon did?"

"Sharon."

"Now wait a minute," Anna interrupted. "I don't know any Sharon. Who's Sharon?"

"Sharon Chambers," Lydia said. "And did you fuck that witch, too? Is that her problem?"

Sharon Chambers? Yikes. Anna waited for Venus' answer.

"You know I didn't," Venus replied.

"No, I don't know that, Angelo. I don't know anything anymore!"

"You know that I love you."

Lydia's hands were shaking. She was trying not to cry. "I took my ring off for you, you fucking—you punk. How could you do this to me? How could you?"

So the wedding ring had come off for Venus Angelo, did it? Anna cast her an admiring look.

Venus ignored it.

KNOCK, KNOCK!

"Who is it?"

"Room service, Ms. Grisholm."

"Bring it in, please."

Room service entered, masking bewilderment.

"Leave it there."

They left a tray on the coffee table next to Lydia.

"I'd claim that drink, Venus, before she throws it," Anna warned.

Venus cautiously went over to the table and claimed her cognac.

"Now, if I haven't lost my place, I believe it's your turn, Venus," Anna then said.

It was Venus' turn, but she couldn't think of anything to say just yet.

Lydia stood up, slightly teetering.

She had been drinking again, or else the knee was inflamed. Venus winced. Either way, the woman was in pain. "Let me take you home," she said.

"Go to hell, Angelo. Where you belong."

Anna got up now, too, and poured Lydia a glass of water. "I think you'd better drink that, dear," Anna said, wiping a smudge of Lydia's lipstick with her thumb.

"I don't want it."

"Drink it," Anna coaxed. "You'll feel better if you do."

"I sincerely doubt that," Lydia slurred, taking the glass from her hostess, but not drinking from it. "But thanks anyway."

Anna quietly took her seat again. "Proceed, ladies. I don't have all night to accommodate you or to negotiate a truce."

"Lydia, I just want to—"

"Go away, Angelo. What about, 'I never want to see your fucking face again,' don't you understand?"

"Oh, Lydia, I do. I do understand. Just let me see you home safely, then. Please."

"See me home safely? Safe from what, I'd like to ask? Safe from liars and womanizers? From cheats? From fiends?"

Fiends was deserved, perhaps. "Come on, Lydia. Let's go home."

"Why? Why should I go home with you, Angelo? Just so you can get in my pants? You've already done that, so move on, I said."

"Lydia, I—"

"Don't you Lydia me! My own brother, for godsakes! My brother, you creep! What could possibly be the meaning of that? Sleeping with my sleazy brother!"

Her sleazy brother? Anna was wide-eyed. "Venus?" she said, softly. "You didn't?"

She certainly did. "What did they tell you about him?" Venus asked.

"They? What did they tell me? There are photos of you and—together and—they didn't have to tell me anything. I'm not stupid! How could you do that to me? How could you sleep with my brother?"

They'd sent her the photos, but clearly they hadn't told her anything else about it. At least not yet. "Lydia, let's just go," Venus begged. "We can discuss all this in private."

"This is as private as I'll ever get with you again. Now go away, I said!"

More bitter cognac. She would never, ever drink cognac again. "Okay, Lydia, okay. That's fine," Venus said. "But this is a matter of a very private nature and I think we should go somewhere else to discuss it, that's all."

Anna blew air through her nose. "Look, it can't get anymore private than this, Venus, as you well know. What happens in Lavender Lane, stays in Lavender Lane. Now answer her questions. The woman has a right to some answers, so give them to her. Or else you better go."

Venus studied the floor and then the doorknob. Anna was right, she realized. She owed her lover some answers. She gulped the rest of the cognac and Anna retrieved the empty glass from her, keeping an eye on the one that Lydia was still wielding.

"I know how this all looks to you, Lydia," Venus began. "I do. But I can explain everything," she said, her voice laced with a definite uncertainty. "It's not quite as it might seem, you should know. If you'll just calm down, then I can attempt to explain it to you better. But you have to calm down first."

"Oh, you can explain it to me, can you? You mean there's some benign explanation for sleeping with my brother? How many times did you do it, Angelo? I'd like to know. How many times did you screw around with Eddie?"

"Lydia, please, calm down and I'll answer."

"I will not calm down! Don't you talk to me like that, like I'm a child. Were you screwing him when you were fucking me? You were, weren't you?"

Anna glanced up from her chair. She was running out of judicious things to say to her unexpected visitor. She placed her hand gently on Venus' sleeve. "Venus, just get it over with," was all she could think to say now.

"I wasn't screwing him when we—"

"Oh, how honorable! She wasn't screwing him when she was screwing me! How many times did you sleep with him?" Lydia pursued. "Answer me that. I want to hear it from you, Angelo, not my brother!"

They had slept together about a dozen times. Nearly a dozen times too many, Venus had thought, wrongly concluding that Eddie was sterile and, thereafter, sending him walking. Nearly a dozen times with Edward Beaumont the third, but Lydia wasn't going to hear that from Venus. Not ever. "I love you, Lydia. I have since the day I first laid eyes on you. I'm in love with you and that's all I can tell you. I love you with all my heart. I always have and I always will."

Lydia had, ever so slowly, been closing the gap between them. "Love is it? For me *and* my brother? Two for the price of one?"

Anna moved to the other side of the room.

"How many times did you betray me, you bastard? I'm sure he won't hesitate to tell me."

"I've said, I'm not going to answer that, Lydia. It was well before we—"

"Ten times, Angelo? Twenty? A hundred?"

They were only an arm's length apart now and Venus was bracing for a slap. "Enough times, Lydia. Okay? Can you be satisfied with that?"

"No, I can't—enough for what? Enough to break my—"

"Enough, I said."

"I heard you. For what, I ask? Enough for a world record?"

"Enough, now just leave it."

"Enough to hurt me—that many times, you prick?"

"No, Lydia. Never that."

"Then what was it enough for, if never that?"

"Enough times to get pregnant."

Lydia stopped dead in her tracks.

Anna nearly swallowed her tongue. "What did you say?"

"What did you say?" Lydia asked.

"I slept with your brother enough times to get pregnant. I desperately wanted his baby."

Anna whistled under her breath.

"His ba—pregnant? My brother? You did what? I don't understand."

Anna understood. She dialed room service again.

"I wanted to have your brother's baby, Lydia. Feel a Beaumont growing inside of me. One I could have for the rest of my life, if I couldn't have you instead."

"Yes, Ms. Grisholm?"

"Prepare a room for my guests, please. A room for two."

"To have Eddie's baby? My brother's...?"

"Yes," Venus said, conscious of the glass of water in Lydia's hand.

"A room for two coming up, Ms. Grisholm."

"Thank you. Buzz us when it's ready."

"Will do."

"What are you telling me, Venus? That you got pregnant with my...?"

"Yes, that's what I'm telling you."

"You did...with my brother...?"

Venus nodded. "I did," she whispered.

"Wait! What was the answer to that?" Anna asked. "I missed the answer!"

Lydia was reeling. "And...what...?"

"And I have your brother's child now."

Anna did hear that. "I'm sorry, you have a child, Venus? You had a child with her brother?"

"I have a child, Anna."

Lydia went pale and stepped back. "You have my brother's...you can prove this?"

Venus advanced. "You are the proof, Lydia, if need be. I can prove it to you, if you wish."

"Holy shit," Anna said.

"I am? I am the proof of it?" The glass slipped from Lydia's hand. "I'm the...I would be...wouldn't I?"

```
"Of course," Venus said.
    The coffee table was right behind Lydia. She tripped over it.
     Venus caught her before she fell.
    "Let me go," Lydia whispered. "Please, Venus."
    "No," Venus said, feeling her clinging. "Never."
    "Venus, you...Mariah's my...?"
    "Yes, Lydia. She is."
    Oh, my, god, Anna thought.
    "Oh, my god." Lydia murmured. "Mariah."
     Venus held her tight now. "Did you sleep with, Anna, Lydia? Tell me that you didn't."
    "Oh, Venus, I—"
    "She didn't, Venus. She's a good girl. Don't worry about that."
    "Venus, I—"
    "Let me call you a cab now, Lydia. Take you home."
    "You won't be needing a cab," Anna said. "I'm preparing a room for you both."
    A room was a better solution than a cab, Venus acknowledged. "Thank you, Anna. We have a room
here, Lydia. Shall we go to it now?"
    "Venus, I—I didn't under—"
    "It doesn't really matter anymore. Marry me, Lydia. Will you marry me?"
    "Will I? Marry?"
    "Yes. I'm asking you to marry me."
    "I...I can't think...I need to think...let me go."
    "No—marry me."
    "Marry you?"
    "Marry me. Please."
    "I'd—but how, Venus? Venus, what would you tell your fam—"
    "I'll tell them that I love you, tell them everything. They're going to find this all out anyway. Pretty
damned soon, I suspect."
    "They will? Oh, no. From Sharon?"
    "From Sharon, Lydia."
    "Because why?"
    Venus wouldn't say why. It was no longer important.
    "Because you...you wouldn't sleep with her, would you?"
    Sharon Chambers. Anna shuddered. Sharon Chambers could make a lot trouble for a woman. Anna
stayed forgotten in her corner, for the moment, understanding everything.
    "That's correct," Venus said.
    "Then you should have, Venus, you should have," Lydia murmured. "Is that what you're thinking?"
    "Hardly, Lydia. She's no fan of yours either, so it isn't just about sex, is it?"
    "It's revenge then," Lydia said, wrapping her arm around Venus' neck to steady herself.
    Venus steadied her and stole a kiss.
    "Why didn't you tell me about Mariah?" Lydia asked.
    "I didn't know how to. I never thought we'd...you know?"
    Neither did Lydia. "Oh, me either, Venus, and, Venus, I just—I don't know how to—"
    "Just say yes, Lydia. Please just say yes, you'll marry me or I'll die."
     Anna dialed room service one last time.
     "Yes, Ms. Grisholm...?"
    "Um, make that the honeymoon suite, I think. Is that one still available?"
     "Yes, I think so. Let me check for you."
    "Marry you? I don't know what to say, Venus. I'm just so—"
    "You're just supposed to say yes or no. Just tell me yes. Or tell me no."
     "Yes, it is, Ms. Grisholm."
```

To wear a wedding ring again. Was it yes or was it no? Lydia brought her hand to Venus' lips.

Venus kissed her palm. "Marry me, Lydia. Please say yes."

"Yes," Lydia whispered.

"Yes?" Venus asked. "You said yes?"

They were tangled up in the center of the room.

"I said yes, Ms. Grisholm. The honeymoon suite is still available."

"Just a minute—did she say yes to you?"

"Yes. I will marry you, Venus."

Yes, she said yes to her.

Venus whooped.

"And just what are you in such a good mood about? The end of your life, as you know it? Stop that whistling. What is that anyway?"

Sinatra. Lydia's favorite. "I'm getting married, Paula."

"Oh, you're getting married. Is that before or after your career takes a nose-dive? Because that's what it will do when that tarantula's through with you."

Venus stopped whistling.

"Why didn't you tell me she wanted to meet with you? And why did you go? And why did you go in drag? And why do you go anywhere in drag? And what's with that anyway? Pick a question, any question. I need some answers, Angelo."

So many questions these days. Venus couldn't answer everything. "How do you know all that?"

"You don't answer a question with a question. I know all that because I had you followed. We had the wherewithal to tape your enlightening conversation at Frank's Place."

Ulp.

"And goading her, telling her off, Angelo. Why did you antagonize Sharon Chambers? That was as foolhardy as she claimed."

"She was extorting me, Paula. It was a very hostile takeover attempt."

"Cleverly put. Who are you getting married to, pray tell? Lydia?"

"Yes."

"That's wonderful. Then I'm through with the both of you. You'll have to fend for yourselves on this."

Chapter 28: Mariah Angelo-Beaumont

DNA is a many splendored thing, easily disposing of any doubts one might have concerning a child's true parentage. Everything else, unfortunately, still has to be taken at face value.

"A prenuptial, Lydia?" Robert raised his eyebrows at his client. "But you didn't have a prenuptial agreement with Helaine?"

Lydia squirmed, uncomfortable about bringing her late wife's name into this. "But I didn't have a child with her, either," she explained. "And there's something more you should know about that."

"Like what?"

"Like, she's a Beaumont. My brother's child."

"Ah-hah," Robert said, taking this in stride. "I'll draw up one immediately."

There were lots of fascinating things the world was discovering about Venus Angelo of late, but Mariah and her interesting genealogy wasn't one of them. Sharon was evil, perhaps, but she was also a mother, and she had spared the child's public exposure, knowing from experience that overexposure of this type can endanger a little one. There were kooks out there, obsessing on celebrities. There was no need to put a baby at risk. Besides, she had plenty of other goods on Venus to have fun with.

As might be expected, the nonstop media blitz was very disturbing to Lydia. Photos of Venus in drag, photos of her in Paris—grainy photos of Paris, kissing a woman, presumably Claudine—photos of Venus with Eddie outside her apartment building, holding hands with him in some restaurant, Venus at Lavender Lane, even a few shots of Sunev with Sharon at Frank's Place. Lydia was confused about it all. Torn to pieces, just as Sharon was hoping she would be.

But to hell with Sharon, she was going to remarry anyway, remarry with a prenuptial this time, which her mother was requesting she obtain, just to stay on the safe side. The grandmother-to-be had fallen instantly in love with Mariah, and she wanted everything perfectly legal and in writing.

"Because things can happen, sweetheart. Things like sickness and death."

That was true. So true. Lydia had learned that the hard way.

"And because I don't know yet if I can trust your ladies' man," Marilyn added. "I might be rushing to judgment about it, but I fear that she and Eddie may be two of a kind, better suited for each other, if you don't mind my saving so."

She did mind, but Marilyn's reservations, in light of Sharon's smear campaign and the child's lineage, were understandable.

Lydia's father, less inclined to be enthralled with babies born out of wedlock, was still quite taken with Mariah and her beautiful mother, turning a deaf ear and a blind eye to all of the controversy surrounding Venus. Notwithstanding that, he too urged Lydia to get everything in writing.

"I'll be frank with you, she's gorgeous and she knows it," he said. "That's a deadly combination in a girl. It's a very big world out there and a woman like that can open an awful lot of doors. With all this hoopla going on, who could really blame her if she just takes that baby one day and runs? She's got to be tied down, Queenie. She wants you to marry her, so she's asking for it. Tie her down."

Daddy and his pearls of wisdom had made Lydia blush, but he was a lawyer, retired or not, and he knew what he was talking about. She would get everything in writing and leave the outstanding issues to trust.

The bottom line was trust, however, and Lydia did trust Venus, hoopla or no hoopla. Of course, she preferred no hoopla, but that wasn't realistic anymore. The press was out of control now, busy trying to ruin the woman.

Venus was a very private person and she was handling the press coverage terribly. Worse than Lydia ever had. She was awkward and stiff when the two of them were in public, when they were caught together and being photographed.

"Ms. Angelo! Ms. Angelo! When's the wedding?"

"Is it your business?" she would ask, throwing her arms up in disgust. "I don't think so," she would answer herself.

Sometimes she would just give them the finger.

These reactions made her quickly unpopular with reporters and made Sharon's game a lot easier to win, and, judging from how frequently Venus was shown to be razzed in public, Sharon could definitely declare victory.

Lydia kept her mouth shut for the most part and made a point to smile all over the place. Sharon wasn't winning against Lydia Beaumont, those smiles said, so just drop dead.

Indeed, Sharon wasn't winning over Lydia. She was happy, despite being harassed.

But there was an additional pressure on Venus that Lydia didn't have. Venus' family was just coming to terms with their daughter's sexuality. It was a difficult concept for them and they were very displeased with the constant coverage about it. Venus was inexpertly hoping to thwart the media's attention, in a misguided belief that she could actually get rid of them and, thus, take the heat off her parents and off of Jasmine.

Raging against nosy reporters, however, was only serving to make them more determined. Venus was interesting to them. She was beautiful. She was articulate and intelligent. And she was making herself public property with every single misstep she made in front of the cameras.

"She's fired, Lydia. That's not how it's going to read on her expensive discharge papers, naturally, but she has been, in effect, fired today."

"But, Paula, it's only been a month. Why is everyone being so hasty?"

"Because her rapport with the press leaves much to be desired. In fact, it's downright appalling. In other words, she sucks at it."

"But she's only trying to get them off her back. Things will settle down, Paula."

"It isn't going to settle down. We can see that now."

Well, maybe not. "But I'm still on probation for the last matter and the current one has something to do with me, so how come I'm not fired, too?"

"That was seriously considered, so don't push your luck."

Luck, she was sure, had nothing to do with it. This was money talking. "Bullshit, Paula. Why aren't I fired, too?"

"Lydia, they wanted to get rid of her years ago, over that Saudi incident, but so long as she was keeping a low profile, they were all right with it."

"Why didn't they fire me, too, Paula?"

"Why didn't they? Okay, I'll tell you why, but not to embolden you—keep in mind nobody's totally scandal proof. It's because, whether you've noticed it or not, Ms. Beaumont, you've become a fixture here, scandals and all. We watch the polls, you know, and you're very popular, no matter what vortex you manage to get yourself sucked into. That makes you indispensable to us, a veritable mini-institution, and your unsinkable popularity translates into strong investor confidence. Whereas, the media's current romance with your self-sullied fiancée only erodes it and breeds nothing but concern for everyone. Her not-so-private life is a mess and anything under the belt these days ends up on the top fold, as we all know. As to those personal quirks of hers, she's become an enigma and therefore a liability. Accordingly, she's being removed. I warned her. It's a shame."

"Where is Venus? Does she know this yet?"

"She knows. She's home. Probably waiting there for you in her fireman's outfit or whatever it is she's decided she'd like to be today."

Venus was not dressed like a fireman when Lydia got there. She was dressed as Sunev, waiting patiently in the bedroom.

"Well, hello there, sailor. Long time no see."

"Hi, beautiful. Any reporters downstairs?"

"Three," Lydia said, removing his tie. "Why? Are you planning on going someplace?"

"Yeah, I'm fired. Plenty of time on my hands now," he said with a smirk. "Haven't you heard? Some dame has dashed me on the rocks. Or so my mama thinks."

"Funny, that's what my mother says about you. You don't seem too upset about losing your job, I see."

"Nah, still able to maintain an erection. That's what really counts. That and Lydia."

"So damn the torpedoes then?"

"Yup, and this one's ready to launch, so you better lie down. Let me show you how much I missed you."

"Ah—watch the leg, please."

He was careful with the leg. "By the way, my lawyer sent your lawyer the paperwork this morning. So I'm signed, sealed and delivered. Did you show those bloodsuckers down there this fabulous smile, I hope?"

"The reporters? I sure did."

"God, I love that mouth, Lydia. I want to make love to it."

"Mmmm...so do you feel tied down now, Sunev? Signing all those papers? Being jobless?"

"I do and I'm loving it. I want to tie you down, too. Have you ever been tied, Lydia?"

"Tied? Oh, you mean tied. That's naughty. No, I haven't. Why? Are you thinking of tying me up now?"

"I am. I want to tie Lydia up and make love to her mouth, tease her out of her mind. What would you do if I did that?"

"Why, your lady would struggle, milord. I'd put up a fight."

"I'm sure you would. A lot or a little?"

Lydia wrinkled her nose. "Very," she said with a laugh.

Sunev pinned her to the bed. "Very, huh? Very what?"

"Very little."

"Mom?"

"Eddie—where are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm in transit. But I'm fine."

"In transit? Why? Where are you going to?"

"They snagged me, Marilyn. I'm being unofficially deported, I guess you'd call it. Escorted back to the Orient to take a bride."

"To the Orient? Oh, Eddie. Is that where the girl is?"

"Yes, but don't worry. If I marry her, it'll all work out fine. I'll actually come out ahead. And she's very pretty, my butterfly."

"Eddie...have you seen the papers yet? Lydia's—"

"That's why I'm calling you."

"Venus is the girl you were seeing. She's the one in the city?"

"Marilyn, it's...it's all right."

"But, son, there's a baby involved. It's yours. You're a father, don't you care?"

He could silence her on this father theme, bring her to task on his own father, a man purposefully never around, neglectful, even at times competitive, but that's not why he'd called. "There's a baby waiting for me in China, too," he replied. "And you know how I feel about children in general."

'Is she a good woman? Venus? I don't understand any of this. Your sister says she's known her for years, but she's never mentioned her name before. It smacks of a whirlwind to me. I'm worried."

"My instincts tell me that's not the case, so don't lose any sleep over it. I believe they do know each other, and very well. As for me and Venus, I think she just needed a...Venus is sensational, Mom. Just give her a chance."

"Then why not you, Eddie? They're getting married soon."

"And they have my blessing. Why should I interfere? Because of a child? It means nothing to me, Marilyn. You ought to know that."

"But you can't go back on this, son. You won't be able to. Your sister's filing adoption papers."

"Smart move—just a minute, please. I'm talking to my mother—I've got to go, Mom. I'll call you again."

"When, Eddie?"

"After my shotgun extravaganza, I suppose."

"And Lydia? Venus?"

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

"I told you, they have my blessing and I won't go back on that. Bank on it. Now I've got to go. There's a plane waiting for me."
"Eddie, wait!"

"I love you, Mom. Please don't worry." (Click)

Chapter 29: Venus and Lydia

And so, for better or for worse, in sickness or in health, till death do they part, they married.

"Del, I can't go through with it. I'm having nightmares."

"Then tell her that. Just say you changed your mind. No point in forcing yourself, Liddy. If you can't, you can't."

"But she's going to be so disappointed with me. She's been planning it now for weeks."

It was a helluva swell wedding reception and, afterward, Lydia and Venus were to board a plane and fly off for their honeymoon.

Venus had found it tricky planning a honeymoon destination for them. There were so many places that Lydia had crossed off the list, too many cities and countries she just couldn't see herself ever going to again.

"Madrid?"

Madrid was totally out of the question. Lydia wouldn't go to Spain. "No."

"Paris?"

Paris was a no-no, too. No, as well, to the south of France.

"Rome?"

No Italy. No Germany. No Belgium. No Netherlands.

"How about a tropical island?"

A tropical island, perhaps? Now that, Lydia was willing to consider. "Which one were you thinking?" "Maui?"

Maui sounded awfully nice, except she couldn't possibly go anywhere near Hawaii. "No, I'm sorry."

"Antigua?" Venus had desperately proposed in the end.

Antigua? Lydia thought she might be able to deal with Antigua. "Okay."

So Antigua it was to be then. Their luggage was packed, their tickets in hand and the limo was waiting out front of the hotel ready to take them to the airport.

But no Lvdia.

Venus bid her adieus to the lingering wedding guests, telling them to eat, drink, and be merry as long as they like, as she scanned the reception hall for her blushing bride and kept a watchful eye on the time.

"Hey there, Venus."

"Hey, Del. How's the cake?"

"Sticky,' Delilah said, with her mouth full.

"Have you seen Lydia?" Venus asked. "We're going to miss our flight."

"That's what I came to talk to you about. It's time for a conference," Delilah said, leading Venus by the arm to the open bar and being sure not to get any cake on that fabulous wedding dress.

"Is there something wrong?" Venus asked.

"She doesn't want to go," Delilah said, getting straight to the point. "Martini," she told the bartender.

"One martini coming up. Gin all right?"

"Gin's the thing—she's not going, Venus."

Venus thought she had heard wrong. "I'm sorry—what?"

"Perfect, thank you—Liddy's afraid to fly. Terrified. She's changed her mind, Venus. She doesn't want to go to Antigua anymore."

Doesn't want to go to Antigua? Okay. "I'll have one of those, too," Venus said to the bartender.

"Gin?"

"Vodka, please—where's Lydia now, Del?"

"Well, she was tuckered out so she went upstairs to bed."

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

"Here you go, Ms. Angelo. A vodka martini."
Venus took a few sips and stood up. "She's got a room here?"
Delilah smiled. "Yup."
"For two?"
"Yup."
Then screw Antigua. "Goodnight, Del."
"Goodnight, Venus. And congratulations!"

Chapter 30: Venus Angelo-Beaumont

She's a stay-at-home mom. That's not necessarily what she had envisioned for herself when she was a young girl, when she was leaving college, when she was pursuing a lucrative career in finance, but it's fine for now, fine until she can figure out what she wants from the rest of her life. Everything she ever wanted she's gotten anyway, so she knows it's really just a matter of regrouping and setting her sights on a new goal.

In the meantime, she couldn't be happier, or she certainly can't ever recall being this happy. She has a beautiful wife now, someone she had wooed for years, that she had once despaired of ever obtaining. A beautiful wife. A brilliant baby, brilliant and beautiful, just like she is. It's pure bliss, her situation, despite the clamoring reporters that wait down on the side walk for her day and night, and the negative coverage they often give, and the lack of a genuine private life that extends beyond four walls. It's pure bliss. It's heaven. It's happy-ever-after.

"Venus?"

That's Lydia Beaumont calling. She's Venus' wife. The prize. The catch. Lydia's very happy, too. She's remarried and she loves her second mate. The truth is that, deep in her soul, she's probably been in love with Venus for a long, long time, well before their courtship, but she doesn't allow herself to dwell on that possibility. She only knows that she has the right to love her now and so she loves her madly.

Lydia's sold her midtown apartment. She lives now with Venus and Mariah in Venus' exclusive penthouse. Sometimes Lydia still goes out to the lake, but not very often lately, because, between having a wife, raising a child and working at Soloman-Schmitt, she doesn't have a lot of time to spend there anymore, and if she does go, she takes her new family with her.

"Venus? Where are you?"

Lydia's used to Venus being there when she comes home. It's still a new routine for them, of course, they've only been married a few months, but some things people take to right away, some routines spontaneously develop between them because they find those routines so fulfilling.

They feel fulfilled. They should, because they were made for each other. They complement each other. They're good for each other.

"Ven—oh, there you are. Hi, Mariah. My pretty baby. What's wrong, Venus?"

"Something's...something's happening, Lydia."

"Something's happening? What? How do you know?"

"Look there."

There? At the television? A boat at sea. It's a boat. So what? "What is it, Venus? What's happening? I don't understand?"

Venus took the remote and turned the volume up.

"Taking advantage of a temporary cease fire in the South China Sea, a massive salvage operation is currently underway there for what is believed to be the wreckage of the private jet plane of Dr. Helaine Kristenson, which disappeared over three years ago after taking off from Hawaii en route to Australia. US officials confirm that they are cooperating and coordinating with the Chinese military operating in that region in order to retrieve two large sections of an American nonmilitary passenger aircraft that closely resembles the make and model of the plane which was carrying Dr. Kristenson and her entourage the day it disappeared from radar. Salvage experts on the scene report that they have identified a fuselage and a large portion of the cockpit on the sea bottom and that efforts are being made to raise them for further testing. If the theories are correct, it would indicate that the small aircraft carrying the famous doctor had gone considerably off its course in its final hours of flight, passing over the Philippine Islands and crashing into the sea before it could reach Vietnam."

"Turn it off," Lydia said, in a tortured tone.

Venus turned it off.

"I'm home, Venus. Now where's my hello? I've kind of gotten used to hearing that."

"Hello, Lydia."

Chapter 31: Lydia Angelo-Beaumont

She was at her desk when the cell phone began to ring, playing that ring-tone melody she had thought she would never get to hear, the one she had stopped waiting for. She listened to it in awe now. It was the song that was always stuck in her head:

Somewhere, beyond the sea...

The phone was in her briefcase, in the corner.

Somewhere, watching for me...

She opened it.

My lover stands on golden sands...

But JP Beaumont didn't answer.

And watches the ships that go sailing.

She waited for it to stop, instead, letting it go to voice mail and when the phone was still once again, she picked it up and played the message.

"Ti amo," a man's voice said.

Antonio.

"Ti amo," she repeated. Their code. Per agreement.

What does that mean?" she had quizzed him the night he had come to the lake house. "Don't be cryptic with me. You know I can't speak Italian."

Ti amo means I love you in Italian and Antonio knew she wouldn't understand it. "It's just a coded message," he said. "It's our code."

"I realize that it's the code, but does it mean something in Italian?"

He slid his arm beneath her and hid his face in a tousled mass of perfumed hair, nestling his face in her breasts. "It simply means that my mission has been accomplished, Belladonna, that I've found her. You won't have to answer it. I'll text you with the drop-off location."

He was so full of shit, she had thought. Full of himself and too much machismo, stringing her along for the sex. But she was mistaken about this. He had accomplished the mission, the message said. Antonio had found Helaine, just as he had boasted he would that night.

Ti amo.

She went to the window and lifted the blinds.

Had he found her alive then, or had he merely found her corpse, a skeleton? What was going on now? Could Helaine be alive again, after all these years? Or would she still be only dead?

She gripped the cell phone in her hand, looking pale and dazed, and locked up her office.

The place was empty. No one was here. Shit.

"Two figures on the beach approaching. Do you read me, Tony? Two figures on the beach. Both believed to be women. Do you read?"

Two figures on the beach! Antonio ran back to the beach. There were, in fact, two figures approaching him. "Yes, I see them. I see two women. I read."

One of the women he recognized instantly, her long, blond hair billowing in the breeze like a ship's sail. "Dr. Kristenson!" he called out. "Dr. Kristenson!"

The women lifted the brims of their hats and froze.

The other woman was an oriental, he could see now. Old, maybe seventy. He ran over to them. "Dr. Kristenson, you have to come with me," he told her, holding out his hand. "Please, we have to hurry."

"Looks like a patrol boat coming, Tony, hurry. Do you read?"

"I read you, loud and clear. Cargo. Fresh. Confirm?"

"Cargo. Fresh. Over."

The speed-boat was a hundred yards up the beach. That's why the women hadn't seen it yet. He turned and hailed the driver with his gun and listened anxiously for the motor to start up again.

She found her sapphire earrings on the kitchen counter or, rather, only one of them. But no Mariah, no Venus.

How curious that they weren't here, she thought, holding the bauble up to the light and dangling it.

Venus had bought these beautiful earrings for her years ago. Years ago when she shouldn't have. When Lydia was married. When she was *first* married, that is. When she belonged to Helaine.

"Hello, Mrs. Angelo, it's Lydia...yes, I am...good, thank you...I was wondering if Venus was there, if you saw Venus today...no, no, it's just, well, she's not here and usually she's...yes, a little bit...oh...I see...okay then...yes, I think so...I'll call back then...or that's good, too...yes, I'm home now, tell her that if she comes in...I appreciate it...yup, thank you."

She laid the cell phone down on the counter and backed away from it with a peculiar kind of dread.

Now where was that other earring?

This man was speaking English to her. English, precise and fluent, but Helaine couldn't place the thick accent. It was German, perhaps. Italian? She should know which, but she couldn't remember. "What do you want?" she asked, clutching Nien close to her and squinting at him, eyeing the smooth brown skin of his outstretched hand and the smooth gray steel of his machine gun.

"Guerre," Nien whispered to her. "Soldat," she said, dropping a basket of eggs.

"Dr. Kristenson, I have a boat," he said. "Is there just you here?"

"Soldat, Jane Liddy. Soldat."

He might be a soldier dressed like that, a muscle shirt, black boots and camouflage pants, but his face was so familiar. Helaine thought she might know him. "Non, je ne pense pas," she said to Nien, letting go of her arm and pointing in the direction of the house. "Please let my friend pass," she said to the man. "She's old and can't harm you."

The old woman was clearly of no interest to him. He stepped aside and Nien scurried back to the house without looking back.

"I have a boat, doctor. We have to go now."

He had come in a small boat. Helaine could see it drifting slowly toward them. There were two more men in it, dressed just like he was. Armed, too. She glanced beyond them toward the horizon and wondered if Li was okay.

All the battleships were gone for now, so Li had decided to chance it this morning, take the boat out for the day, do some fishing. The women had breathed a sigh of relief to be alone once more and, to celebrate, threw caution to the wind and went egg hunting. The eggs they had collected lay broken at Helaine's feet now. She glanced from them to the dark-faced man who knew her name. "I know you, don't I?" she asked.

"Si. Is there just you, doctor?" the man replied. "I've come to take you home."

"There's two boats, Tony," one of the men called out. "We've got to make it quick."

His name was Tony? No she didn't know any Tony like this man. That wasn't his name, Tony. It didn't match. "Home?"

He went to take her hand and she pulled it away.

"How do I know you?" she asked.

"Grab her, Tony, or we're all going to be stuck on this fucking island."

"I don't have time to explain it to you, doctor. Just come with me."

She knew him, knew his speech pattern and his posture, the way he handled his gun, his love for it. She pulled her hat off to see him better.

His tracks were everywhere in the sand, crisscrossing from the beach to the house and back again. He had been looking for her, she could see.

"Shit, Tony, they're coming fast!"

"Is it just you, Dr. Kristenson? Is there anybody else here?"

Those dark eyes of his. He was Carlos?

"What's taking so long? Just grab your cargo and let's split!"

No, he wasn't Carlos. Carlos was dead.

"There's something wrong with her, I think. She doesn't recognize me."

Carlos with a broken neck.

"Then just pick her up, Tony!"

Tony was her bodyguard? The one from Australia? The strong, silent Australian, who didn't speak, but to say hello to her and goodbye again?

Give me your hand, daughter. Hurry.

No. Not Australian. But it was her bodyguard. He was the other one. The one who did speak. The one who was saying her name.

"Dr. Kristenson, don't you know me?" he asked.

"I do," she said, feeling lightheaded. "I know that I know you."

"Of course you do. I'm—"

"Antonio," she finally said, grabbing his arm. "You're Antonio."

"That's right, that's right. We have to go, doctor. Are you the only one that made it?"

She was the only one who made it, she nodded. "Antonio, it's just...it's only me here," she told him. "It's just me. Our plane crashed. It caught on fire."

"I know. We found the wreckage."

"Everybody is...Carlos is dead, Antonio. Carlos saved—"

"Here they come, Tony!"

Give me your hand, daughter. Hurry."

Now she could see the patrol boats, too, closing in on them fast.

"Give me your hand, doctor. Hurry."

"Where, though?" she asked.

"Home," Antonio replied. "Lydia's waiting. We've got to go home."

"But my friend" she said.

"There's no time for that, doctor."

"Nien!"

Nien came to the doorway.

"Au revoir, Nien!"

"Dr. Kristenson, give me your hand!"

She gave Antonio her hand and he helped her into the boat.

"Get this motor started boys!" he shouted. "Go now, goddamnit!"

The motor started and the boat lurched ahead. She staggered backward and grasped for the handrail.

"Stay down, Dr. Kristenson!" Antonio yelled. "Stay down!"

Crrrrack!

She heard a gunshot and ducked down, but Antonio didn't.

Crrrrack!

It was the second shot she heard that killed him.

She did not come home and he never sent the text. Lydia fell into a restless sleep waiting in vain for both to happen.

At dawn, she heard Venus finally returning, Mariah babbling cheerfully. "Venus, where have you been?"

"Beaumum," Mariah cooed, wanting to switch mommies now. "Beaumum," she repeated, thrashing her legs when Venus refused to hand her over.

"Venus, she wants to come to me. Where have you been? I have a right to know."

"I want you to pack your things, Lydia, or I'll pack them for you."

"Pack my—Venus, why? Where have you been, I asked?"

Venus looked awful. Lydia had never seen her look like this before. Eyes puffy, cheeks drawn and her mouth pursed.

"Beaumum! Mmmm, mmm, mmm!"

"Mariah, come to—"

"Leave her be, Lydia! I just want you to go today. I'll pack up your things myself if I have to, but you're going!"

"Robert, honey. Wake up, please. Wake up. Come on, Robert. You have to get up."

"Kay...?"

"Get up now. Here's your robe."

Robert rubbed his eyes and fumbled for his glasses. "What's going on? You look like you've seen a ghost?"

"Robert, there's somebody on the phone. You have a very urgent phone call."

"At five in the morning—tell them to leave a message," he said. "It can't be that important."

"It is. Put on your robe and take the call in your office. It's urgent, Robert. Come on."

Robert slipped into his robe and stumbled to the office, Kay following close behind.

"Good early morning. Robert Keagan Esquire here. How may I help you?"

There was static and then a faraway voice.

"I can't hear you," he said. "You'll have to speak up."

"Robert? Can you hear me now?"

His heart stood still and he nearly dropped the phone. "Who is this, Kay? What is this about?"

"You tell me," she said, her voice taut.

"Robert?"

"Who is this, please?"

"It's me, Robert."

"Kay, is this—?"

"I believe so," Kay said.

"Robert? Can you hear me?"

He could hear her perfectly now, but it must be a prank, he thought, a hoax. "What do you think you're doing? Who is this?"

The speaker went silent, but was still on the line.

"Robert, did they hang up?"

"No—who is this, I asked? Identify yourself, please."

"Robby. It's me, Robby. I'm not a prank."

Robby. The color drained from his face. That was a secret name, a pet name. No one called him Robby anymore. He slid the chair out from behind the desk and fell into it.

"Robby, don't you know me?"

He hadn't heard this nickname since his university days. Not since...university.

Kay hung quietly beside him.

"Helaine?" he said, in a sob.

"Yes, Helaine...it's okay. It's me."

"Is it really her, Robert? I wasn't sure."

Yes, it was really her, but how, in God's name, could that be? They had finally found her plane wreckage. She couldn't have survived the crash. Where? On the bottom of the ocean? "Helaine? How could it be you? Is it really you, Helaine?"

"Oh, yes, yes, it's me, Robert. It's really me."

"But...where are you?"

"I'm in the hospital."

"Where is she, Robert?"

In the hospital, he whispered. "We'll be right there. Which one?"

"I don't know exactly. I'm in Paris."

"Venus? What have I—"

"Haven't you see the news, Lydia? It's all over the news this morning. Wake up. How could you miss it? There were already rumors yesterday. Now I want you to get out!"

"Venus, the news? What are they saying I've done? It's a lie whatever it is, you must know that by now!"

"No, Lydia, it's not a lie this time! It's the truth, so get out of your bubble and turn the television on, for godsakes. It's all there for the whole frickin' world to gawk at! And then I want you to pack up some things and get out of here, right away!"

Mariah started to whimper.

"Venus, please, let me hold her."

"Don't!" Venus warned, flicking the TV on and cranking up the volume.

"—is shown here arriving alive and well today at De Gaulle International Airport. She was immediately transported to a Paris hospital for further observation and testing. Doctors there are reluctant to release any information concerning her medical condition at this time, but some hospital officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, say that it does appear from preliminary X-rays that Dr. Kristenson may have sustained head trauma, but that she does seem to be in relatively—"

"Look there, Lydia. Hold her! She's come back to you and she's more beautiful than ever, isn't she? Now get out, I said! You git, goddamnit!"

Lydia gazed in wonderment at the woman on the screen, tan and blond and smiling weakly. She was attempting to disguise herself, trying to hide behind sunglasses and bodyguards and policeman. Oh, but she would recognize that blond woman anywhere. "Oh-my-god," Lydia mouthed. It was Helaine. The blood rushed to her head and then trickled back gently to her heart again.

"Good morning?"

"Delilah Lewiston?"

Delilah moved Marcus' arm and sat up. What time was it? Did that say six o'clock? Could it be six in the morning? "Look, I'm trying to be on vacation here. Who's calling, please?"

"Is this Delilah Lewiston?"

"This is she."

"This is Armando Twelve, Ms. Lewiston. Don't speak. Just listen. You have been sent an e-mail with a link. Your web page is up again, log in. We will hold your page for only one more hour. Log in now." (Click)

Her page is up? Log in? Armando Twelve?

Holy shit, Armando Twelve!

Delilah ran to her computer and checked her e-mail. That must be it, right there. A message from *Donotreply. No subject heading.* She clicked the link in it and logged in.

Cargo: fresh. Arrival: today. Port: alternate. Click here for shipping details and instructions.

Fresh? Holy shit!

"Marcus! Marcus, wake up! Get up, you big lug!"

"What is it?" he asked, groggily. "Has something happened? What time is it?"

"I got to go, Marcus," she said, hastily getting dressed. "You have to leave now, unless you want to come with me."

"Come with you? To where?"

"To the airport."

"To the airport, Del? Where are you flying?"

"Paris."

"Venus, don't do this to me. I love you."

Venus was throwing shirts and skirts and underwear into a suitcase she had spread open on their bed, ransacking the bedroom in the process.

"Talk to me, Venus. Please. What will I do?"

"Eeeeeey!" Mariah squealed.

The suitcase was too full. Venus tried to zip it.

"Venus?'

"I don't know, but you better figure it out soon, Lydia. You've got everyone curious now."

"But I won't be able to. I can't!"

"You can, Lydia, and you're gonna!"

"I can't deal with something like this, Venus. You know I can't. Help me."

"I am," Venus said, finally zipping the bag.

"But how? How does this help me?"

Mariah was weeping in Venus' arms, her face contorted and wet. So was her mother's, but Venus held her head low so Lydia wouldn't see it. "Because this is how it would end anyway," she said. "So we're ending it on my say-so, instead of you creeping off one night and never coming back to me. I couldn't bear that."

Lydia knelt to the floor. "Please, please. Where will I go now?"

"Go to her. She needs you."

"She does, but you don't, Venus? You don't need me?"

Venus slid the suitcase to the floor and it landed with a loud thud. It would be too heavy. Lydia would never be able to manage it. "Shhhh, Mariah, it's okay. Hush, baby girl. It's okay. Mama's sorry for shouting. Shh, shh."

Mariah finished her crying with a succession of hiccups and then was calm once more.

"Look at me, Venus, I beg you."

Venus turned and faced Lydia, crumpled in the corner of the bedroom. "Stand up," she told her. "I got you back on your feet, now you stand up. I have something important I need to say before you leave."

Lydia struggled to her feet.

"Mrs. Beaumont-Kristenson—"

"Venus don't do—"

"Let me talk," Venus said, her voice sounding small and strangled. "You were the right one for me at the wrong time, Lydia, but I will never grant you a divorce. Never. And if anyone attempts to annul our marriage, to challenge its legality, anyone at all, I don't care who she is, I will fight them to my very last penny, to my very last breath. Hear me. I will never divorce you and don't you ever ask me to. Our marriage will be left standing till death do we part. I know you're upset right now, but do you comprehend what I'm telling you?"

"Yes."

"Now take your bag and leave us and good luck."

"Can you get that phone, Dickie? It's my day off."

"It will be my pleasure, dear heart," he said, rolling over with a groan. "Good morning? Yes? No, I'm sorry, she's not. Well, she's sleeping, but I can take a message for you. Oh? I see. I see. Just a minute then. Paula? Paula, it's for you."

"I'm asleep, Dickie. Be firm, huh?"

"Too late. It's very important, the man claims. Confidential."

"Confidential? There's no such thing. Who is it?"

"Some guy with a rather silly sounding name. Armando something or other."

Paula emerged from beneath her pillow, suddenly wide awake. "Armando Twelve?"

"Yeah, that's it."

Lydia left the penthouse with just the shirt on her back, so to speak, yesterday's work clothes and an overcoat, her briefcase, the cell phone, an earring.

In her confusion, she had forgotten about the handful of reporters that were usually hanging out in front of the building. She was mobbed this morning by dozens of them.

"Ms. Beaumont, Ms. Beaumont, over here!"

```
"Hey Ms. Beaumont, how does it feel to have two wives now?"
```

She took his hand. "Oh, Daddy."

"It's all right, Queenie—out of the way, please, let us through—it's all right, it's all right."

"Look there! That's Edward Beaumont! Mr. Beaumont! Will you be representing your daughter in this matter?"

"No, I will not. I'm retired. Get out of our way, please."

"Ms. Beaumont! Are you planning on going to see Dr. Kristenson at the hospital soon?"

"Ms. Beaumont! Has Venus heard the news?"

"Daddy, she threw me out."

"Of course she did. Don't say anything more about it until we're in the car."

"Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont!"

Father and daughter got in the car and it pulled away slowly from the curb, the reporters chasing after it, rapping on the windows.

"Daddy, Helaine's a-"

"Everything's going to be all right, Queenie. Don't you worry."

She wasn't too sure about that. "Why did you say of course?"

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"Because Venus is a natural-born winner and she doesn't know how to lose. It's not an option—drive us to my apartment, please."

"Yessir."

"Mommy, wake up. There's somebody on the phone wants to talk to you. He says it's really important."

[&]quot;Ms. Beaumont, are you going to Paris?"

[&]quot;Ms. Beaumont, have you heard, the doctor's asking for you?"

[&]quot;She's—? Leave me alone."

[&]quot;How do you think this will effect the status of your marriage to Ms. Angelo?"

[&]quot;When are you going to see your wife, Ms. Beaumont? Are you leaving for Paris today?"

[&]quot;Get out of my face, I said."

[&]quot;Can you give us a brief statement this morning, anything?"

[&]quot;Queenie!"

[&]quot;What about Venus Angelo, Ms. Beaumont? How's she taking the news today?"

[&]quot;Daddy?"

[&]quot;Ms. Beaumont, look over here! Look this way!"

[&]quot;Queenie, I'm over here. I've got a car!"

[&]quot;This way, Ms. Beaumont! Atta girl!"

[&]quot;Daddy!"

[&]quot;Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont!"

[&]quot;Hurry, daughter, give me your hand."

[&]quot;Are you her father? Hey, I think this is her father!"

[&]quot;Boy, haven't I heard that before. What time is it?"

[&]quot;Eight-thirty."

[&]quot;In the morning?"

[&]quot;Mmhmm."

[&]quot;Oh, crap...why aren't you at school yet?"

[&]quot;Cause it's parent/teacher day. Aren't you going to talk to Mr. Twelve?"

Eight-thirty in the morning. What asshole would call someone at eight-thirty in the morning? Sharon swore under her breath. "Tell whoever it is to leave a message, Helen."

[&]quot;Okay."

Chapter 32: Helaine

What makes a woman beautiful? Is it the shape of her face? Is it the color of her hair, of her eyes, of her lips? Is it the way that she moves? The length of her legs? How she walks? What she does with her hands? Or is it her voice, perhaps? The lilt in it when she speaks? Her laugh, the things she says, her sense of humor, her patience, her mannerisms?

"Vous-parlez Français?"

"She wants to know if we speak French, Robert."

"No, we don't speak any French. We're American. What room is Helaine in, s'il vous plait? Where can we find Dr. Kristenson?"

"Are you the family?" the doctor asked, speaking now in English so flawless that she had almost no perceptible accent.

"Helaine doesn't have—"

"Yes, we are," Robert interrupted Kay. "We are her family."

"Très bien. The doctor is resting comfortably at the moment. We've had to sedate her, of course. Too much excitement."

"What's her condition?" Robert asked. "Is she okay?"

"Her condition is very good. She's had a skull fracture at some point in time, however. A concussion. Presumably from the accident. There is no disfigurement, though, just a small scar on her forehead. It's evident that somebody took very good care of her. Ultimately, she came to us via the Red Cross, the circumstances of which remain confidential."

"But who would have done that, taken care of her in the meantime? All those years before that?"

"She hasn't divulged this yet. But she is aware of what's happening around her, and she knows about her injury, too, of some minor damage. With respect to that, her prognosis is pretty good. The injury is healing well and it doesn't seem to have affected her memory, although there's no way for us, as perfect strangers, to absolutely make that determination. Her coordination, reaction time, is within low normal range and is probably improving gradually. She has reported seizure activity to us, however, some of them grand mal by description, as well as other related disturbances. Bouts of insomnia, fainting and sleepwalking. These symptoms are troublesome, but they may fade with time. They may also remain permanent disorders. Chronic in nature. Especially if she is stressed."

"When can we see her?" Kay asked.

"You may see her now," the doctor said. "Follow me."

They followed her and stopped at the end of a long hallway.

"As I've told you, she has been sedated, so she may not seem alert to you. That's due to the barbiturate and not the head trauma. This is her room," the doctor said, gingerly placing her hand on the door. "By the way, where is the wife? She's been asking for her wife."

"Her wife," Kay murmured. "Robert?"

Robert and Kay exchanged glances.

"She's coming," Robert answered. "She'll be here soon."

The doctor hesitated before opening the door. "A word of warning then," she said. "The operative word in a case like this is rest. Stress, therefore, is the enemy. It can delay Dr. Kristenson's recovery, possibly impair it, or even cause a setback. Please make every effort not to distress my patient."

"We understand," Kay said.

"Entre," the doctor then said, opening the door for them.

They entered.

There was a policewoman on the other side of the door, and a nurse sitting beside Helaine's bed, both of them silently keeping vigil. Helaine lay with her head propped up, her eyes closed. They let the policewoman frisk them and went over to the bed.

"Is she sleeping?" Robert asked the nurse, but she only shrugged, indicating she couldn't understand him.

"Helaine," Kay whispered. "Are you awake?"

Helaine's eyes opened slightly and she smiled when she recognized them. "Kay...they've got...Robert...I'm as high as a kite, I'm afraid."

There were two chairs next to her. The Keagans quietly sat down in them.

"Kay," Helaine said. "Oh, Kay. Did they cut off my hair, Kay? I begged them not to."

Her hair was all there, bleached white from the sun, her skin a deep tan and glowing. "No, Helaine, it's all there. You look wonderful. You're so tan."

"Hah...a long way to go to get one, huh?"

Kay folded her hand in hers. "But you're almost home now. And you're safe."

"Robert," Helaine said, sounding inebriated to him. "It's okay. Tell me how Robert's doing."

"Helaine, I'm do...I'm so—" His voice cracked. He swallowed and started again. "I'm so glad to see you, Helaine. I'm so glad. How do you feel?"

"Besides stoned?" she replied, with a chuckle. "Very tired. Where's Lydia? Did she come with you? Our phone is disconnected?"

Kay waited to hear what he would tell her.

"She's been delayed," he said. "You just sleep now, Helaine. She'll be here soon."

"Just sleep now," Helaine repeated softly. "To sleep, perchance." She closed her eyes again and she slept.

"Call us when she wakes," Robert instructed the staff, as he and Kay left the hospital. "Our hotel isn't very far away."

They had gone to bed directly after that, attempting to get ahead of the jet lag that was settling in, but their phone rang around midnight. "Yes?"

"Mr. Keagan?"

"Speaking."

"Delilah Lewiston. I'm here in Paris to see Helaine."

"Ms. Lewiston? Do you know what hospital it is?"

"I do, but I didn't get to see her. Security's tight."

"Is that the hospital calling, Robert?"

"No, it's Delilah Lewiston—what's going on there tonight?"

"Seems they're only allowing family to visit. The staff gave me your number, so that's why I'm calling. Is she okay?"

"She's doing great, but she's heavily drugged—how did you know to come, Delilah? Have you heard anything from Lydia yet? Does she know about all this? Helaine's asking for her and I'm not sure what I can say."

"I haven't, no. I left as soon as I got word and wasn't sure if I should call her."

"Who contacted you then?" Robert asked.

"Um...I can't really say. When will you be going back to the hospital? Tomorrow?"

"Unless they notify us earlier."

"Will you call me when you go to see her again? Can I accompany you there?"

"Of course you can. What hotel are you staying at?"

He took the name and number, said goodbye and scratched his head.

"What's going on?" Kay asked.

"I don't know how she knew to come, but they won't let anyone else in to see Helaine now. Only the immediate family."

"Oh. Good thing we lied, eh? And what about Lydia?"

He shook his head.

No Lydia. Kay frowned. What on earth were they going to tell their friend about Lydia? "Robert...?"

"One step at a time, Kay. This is a totally new experience for me and it's got the feel of a bona fide acid trip. So let's just try and get some sleep right now."

They slept fine, considering, and the hospital didn't call them until morning, just around ten o'clock.

"A situation? Really?" Robert said, incredulously.

"Oui, and she's making quite a spectacle here. We need it stopped or the patient will have to be transferred to a different location in the city."

"What's going on now, Robert?" Kay asked.

He held up his finger. "And what does this woman look like who's creating such a spectacle?"

"Dark hair. Very pretty. Could this be the wife, we wonder? If so, we'll have to let her in. But those reporters...she'll have to get rid of them, Monsieur Keagan. They are not acceptable."

Could that be Lydia, he speculated, making such a commotion? With a bunch of reporters in tow? That didn't sound like the Lydia he knew, but anything was possible now, he guessed.

"Can you come now and identify this woman for us? She won't produce papers and we hesitate to have her removed if she's the doctor's wife."

They don't need an international incident on their hands, is what they're really saying. "We'll be right there."

Outside the hospital, the reporters were angling, trying to get a better view of what was happening through the glass doors, banging on them and shooting off their mouths and cameras. The Keagans elbowed through the crowd. It was indeed a spectacle, of mammoth proportion.

They were stunned when they saw Sharon Chambers in the hospital lobby, but she was too preoccupied with ranting at the staff to notice them gaping at her.

"I have a fucking right to be here!" she was yelling at the top of her lungs. "I've come a long way to see her and I'm not putting up with this."

"Ms. Chambers," Robert said. "I'd like a word with you, first chance you get."

Kay hung back.

"Why what do we have here? It's Keagan. How the hell are you?" Sharon asked. "Tell these Cretans to let me in. I want to see Helaine."

"Ah, there you are, Mr. Keagan," Helaine's doctor said, with measurable relief. "Is this her? Is this the—

"No, she is not. She's Sharon Chambers. Have you ever heard that name before?"

"Ooh. Oui, I have—Madame Chambers, I must ask you to leave. Maintenant. And take those reporters you brought with you or we'll call the police to remove them."

"I did not bring them," Sharon replied. "They followed me here from the airport. Did you tell this ignoramus who I am, Mr. Keagan Esquire?"

"I did, Sharon. Now I'd like to chat with you before you go, I said."

There was a small cafeteria down the hall. Robert escorted her there. "Are you out of your mind?" he asked, once he was sure they were alone. "My client is trying to recuperate from a nightmare and you come barging in here as if it was one of your photo shoots, as if this was all about you. I don't know what you're doing in Paris or how you found out she was here, but I warn you, you stay away from Helaine. She has troubles but, thankfully, you're not one of them anymore."

Sharon gave him a toxic stare. "She has troubles all right, Keagan. Haven't you seen the papers, today? It's news even on this side of the Atlantic, where gossip is just so beneath everyone."

He hadn't seen the news yet. "Sock it to me, Sharon, and then leave."

Sharon pulled a couple of newspapers from her shoulder bag. BIGAMIST was splashed across the headline of one with a very large photograph of an unsmiling Lydia Beaumont just beneath it. "This is the British press, so that's means you can probably find your own copy on any corner in Paris."

"Journalism at its finest," was his response.

"But I like this one the best," she said, holding up another that posed the lofty question, LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER? It had a picture of Lydia fleeing in a limo with Edward Beaumont, photos of her two beautiful brides next to it.

"You were going to show her those?"

"Only if she asked about her wife, Keagan. How could I lie to her if she asks about her wife, huh? Can you?"

"And were you also going to mention your trashy book? I see it's on the bestseller list again, so what's your complaint?"

"All's fair in love and war, they say, Keagan."

"Love and war is it? You have no soul, Sharon. Now get out of here."

She wanted to give him a piece of her mind then, to inform him that her trashy novel, the profits from it, were what brought Helaine Kristenson back from the dead. He would go after that book now, she knew, try to pull it from all the shelves, and she thought to warn him not to even think of doing that, but she spun on her heel instead and left with a sneer.

Outside the hospital doors, the Paris police were busy clearing up the congestion, shaking their clubs in the air. The reporters were reluctantly disbanding. Sharon dodged a few stragglers waiting for her across the boulevard, hailed a cab, and went back to her hotel for her suitcase, foiled again, always foiled whenever it concerned Helaine.

But Helaine was alive once more and Sharon's soul, because she definitely had one, would travel lighter than it had in years, even if she was leaving in defeat, even if there was a Robert Keagan ready to condemn her. She did not feel she had to justify her motives or methods to anybody, especially not Robert Keagan. Boy-oh-boy, how she hated that man.

"Where is the wife?" Helaine's doctor asked. "I have seen the news this morning and it's a perplexing matter but, nevertheless, there will be a crisis if she doesn't come soon. Is she coming, Monsieur Keagan? Do you know this for a fact?"

He took a small gulp of air to issue one big lie but, "Has Helaine heard the news yet?" was all he could summon.

"We are doing everything possible to prevent that from happening, but she is getting agitated. Is the woman coming or not? My patient must be told this either which way, so she can get over this emotional hurdle."

Kay joined them at last. "Helaine is in the courtyard with her nurse exercising, they just told me. Good morning, doctor."

"Good morning, Madame Keagan."

"What is it, Robert?"

"Newspapers."

"Yes," Kay said. "I've already seen them."

"Where?" he asked. "Where did you see them?"

"Right over there in the waiting room." Kay said.

"Not good," Robert said. "That's not good, doctor."

The doctor's face filled with concern. "I didn't realize," she said. "It didn't even occur to me."

"We've got to get rid of them, Kay."

"How? They're all over the place."

The three of them ran to Helaine's room, just in time to find her in the midst of a major meltdown, two orderlies hopelessly trying to restrain her, her nurse cowering on the opposite side of the room, and the gendarme unsure if, or how, she should intervene.

"NO! NO!" Helaine was wailing. "Robert! Robert, I—let go of me—Robert, is it true?—LET GO, I said!—it can't be true! It isn't!"

Let go of her, the doctor ordered in French.

The orderlies let go and stepped back. The policewoman went and positioned herself by the door again.

"She couldn't have," Helaine moaned, listing in the center of the room, out of breath and dizzy. "It can't be."

"Dr. Kristenson, you can't react like this. You need to lie down," said the doctor. "You know as well as I do that you can't allow yourself to get so upset."

"When, Robert? When did she do it? How long did she wait for me?"

Robert looked to the doctor and Kay for some assistance.

Go find her medication, the doctor instructed the nurse.

The nurse left the room to get it.

"I don't need any meds. I don't want them!"

"Oui, you do, or I'll give you a needle and a drip instead. Now, lie down, Dr. Kristenson You need to rest."

Helaine slumped onto the bed. "Tell me it isn't so, Robert."

He could do nothing of the sort.

"Kay? Why didn't she wait?"

Why didn't she? The answer to this was simple and yet so complex. "Helaine, she...she thought that...we all thought it. You were dead."

"I wasn't dead! I'm not dead, Kay! Do I look dead?"

Her pupils were pinpoints.

"Helaine, you're going to hurt your—"

"Sit back down, Dr. Kristenson."

She sat back down. "Who was it, Kay? Who did Lydia marry?"

Now Kay was quiet, too.

The doctor put her hand on Helaine's shoulder. "Lie back, Dr. Kristenson. Put your feet up for me."

"I don't want to-was it Venus? Did she marry Venus Angelo?"

"Doctor, I need you to focus on what I'm saying to you. Put your legs up and take some deep breaths for me. I want you to breathe."

"Somebody speak to me! Somebody tell me the truth! Was it Venus? I want to hear the truth! Did she marry Venus Ange—"

"Yes, she did, Helaine. Lydia married Venus. A decision I laude over self-murder any day, wouldn't you agree? Hello there, Kay. Hi, Robert. I'm sorry I came too late to catch all the excitement. Get your legs up there, Helaine, so I can sit down. My feet are killing me."

Another person in her room. Yet another woman who wasn't Lydia. Now who could this one be? Helaine rummaged in her scrambled mind for the name that went with this vaguely familiar face, the overbearing manner, that confident voice and body language.

"Get your legs up there," the woman said again.

Helaine drew her legs up and the woman sat down beside her.

"Now take some deep breaths for your doctor and tell me if you remember me. You don't win anything but a hug for the right answer. Do you remember me, Helaine?"

Helaine took a deep breath and allowed the doctor to check her pulse and her blood pressure. "Of course I remember you," she finally said. "You're Paula."

"Hello?"

"Ms. Beaumont has just arrived."

"Better late than never. Send her up, please."

"Oh-kay."

Midnight. Ms. Beaumont is in the building. What to do about Ms. Beaumont now?

KNOCK, KNOCK.

"It's open."

The door swung open. Sad-faced Lydia. "Hello, Paula. I'm sorry I'm late. I got held up at the airport."

"Yeah, I saw it on the news. Where are your bags?"

"I just brought this one. I didn't have time to...Venus wouldn't...I still can't believe she threw me out, Paula. I can't."

They had already discussed this, albeit briefly, and Paula had no intention of discussing it again. Privately, she admired Venus for doing it. "Of course she threw you out. Enough with it already."

There was a coat rack by the door. Lydia hung her bag on it and stood bewildered in the center of the hotel room, her hands in her pockets. "Why do you say of course?" she asked. "Why am I the only one who seems surprised by this?"

"Because Angelo never lost at anything. What else was she going to do? Let you sneak off one night and shame her in public?"

Lydia shook her head. "I wouldn't have done that to her, Paula. I would never have done that."

"We don't know what we would do. That's what we have fortunetellers and horoscopes for. Sit down, please. You're making me nervous."

Lydia chose the chair by the window and pulled the curtain aside.

Nighttime in the City of Lights. Paris in April. She gazed wistfully across the street remembering a much happier time. A time when she and Helaine would come here and vacation. When they had a small apartment nearby and would stroll the ancient streets and alleyways together, hand in hand. A time when they were married. "How is she, Paula? Is she all right?"

Another day at the hospital with Helaine still despondent. Paula had rehearsed her lines for Lydia tonight. "She's doing remarkably well, Lydia. She's quite a gal."

"A gal? What does that mean? Is Helaine okay? Does she know anything?"

"Well, Lydia, she's so heavily medicated it's difficult to know what she knows, you know? But she's chipper when she's awake and the doctors say that she's healthy. They're very optimistic."

"Paula? Has she asked for me yet? Does she want to see me? To come to the hospital?"

"I'm trying to explain that to you. She's drugged, Lydia, and she's not exactly on top of things yet. She knows only that she's in the hospital and that she's destitute. She's needs a little more time. I would wait until they reduce her medicine to visit her. That's what I would do in your present situation. I would wait."

Lydia sighed. She was the waiter and the waited-for now, it seemed. "She knows she's destitute, but nothing else?"

All right, so it lacked a ring of truth. "She's had a head injury, Lydia. She just needs more time. I felt you should be here, if and when she asks for you. It's hard to believe that she won't."

"But what can I do besides, Paula? Why did you say to come if I'm not wanted here, either? I'm useless in Paris, as well."

Paula's face was grave. It would take more time than she had to resolve this predicament. Then again, it was possible, too, that there was no resolution, that it would take more time than anyone involved had to give it. "Well, Lydia. You'll have to make yourself useful somehow until we see how all this plays out."

Chin up, the answer to everything, according to Paula Treadwell. Lydia eyed the bag hanging by the door. "Does Helaine know about Venus?" she asked.

"Look, Lydia, I can't go around in circles with you. It's late now and I'm tired. I've only got two more days left to devote to this project. On Saturday I return to my husband and on Monday I've got to go to work for us. It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to hold down Fort Soloman-Schmitt."

"Does she know?"

"Oh, cripes, Lydia. I told you, Helaine is sedated, stoned out of her mind."

"She knows, doesn't she?"

Two single beds in a stuffy old room that wasn't the size of one of the smallest closets in the Treadwell mansion—spending the rest of the week in Paris with Lydia was going to be trial by fire, Paula realized. She took the bed closest to the bathroom and muttered goodnight.

"Fine then. Goodnight," Lydia replied.

Morning found Lydia still in the chair by the window and Paula creeping around so as not to wake her. An unsuccessful endeavor.

"What's the plan today?" Lydia asked. "Are you going to the hospital?"

A morning paper had already been deposited at their door. ONE DOWN. ONE TO GO, it said. Seemed everyone on the planet but Helaine knew that Lydia was wandering Paris homeless, and they had already placed their bets. Paula tucked the newspaper under her arm and faltered at the door.

"Should I come with you?" Lydia asked. "What should I do today?"

"I'm...I'm just getting some coffee, Lydia. I'll be right back."

Paris is an excellent place to find a good cup of coffee, but not necessarily in a hospital cafeteria. Paula gagged on hers as she scoured the newspaper for a crossword puzzle.

That's where the Keagans found her. "She's had a setback," Robert announced.

"A setback? What kind? A seizure?"

"No, thank God," he said. "But she's been sleepwalking all night."

Paula shivered. "You mean there really is such a thing as sleepwalking?"

Yeah, there really is.

The Keagans had brought their own coffee and croissants. They joined Paula at the tiny table for a hurried breakfast chat.

"How's Lydia coping?" Kay inquired.

"Same as she always does," Paula replied. "She's not. So the plan to transfer Helaine to the states is out of the question now? What did her doctor say about it?"

"It's not advisable. She needs more rest."

"Hmmm. How long are you two staying? I'm leaving in a few days."

So were they. "There's a lot to do yet in order to resurrect Helaine Kristenson," Robert said. "We start by expunging a bogus death certificate. She's going to need her identity again and we're going back to file the paperwork for her, get the ball rolling."

Identity papers. Good plan.

In the park just down the block from the hospital, recognizing she had been ditched once more by yet another woman, Lydia sat with her breakfast, watching the maintenance crew as they raked the sand for cigarette butts and weeded between the red and yellow tulips. It would be a spectacular spring day in Paris. She finished her coffee and trudged back to the hotel to sleep in a real bed again.

Midday she awoke with a start to the sound of a key turning a bolt. Paula again, with Delilah.

"Howdy, partner. Did you get my e-mail?"

"Del—no, I haven't checked my mail in days—what are you doing here?"

Delilah evaded the question. "Get up now, Sleeping Beauty. Let's go for a walk," she said, with a cheerfulness so forced that her eyes teared up at the sound of it. "I want to see the sights, Liddy."

"Del, she threw me out," Lydia said, dangling her legs over the edge of the bed. "Venus threw me out."

"Of course she did. Come on, let's paint the town, Liddy. We're in Paris."

"Paula, did you go to see Helaine? Did she ask for me yet?"

Paula and Delilah had put their heads together on this one. Yes, Helaine had asked for Lydia, but does it count if she did so in a trance?

"She was asleep," Paula answered. "I wasn't able to talk to her today."

"Oh."

"Boy is this room a wee bitty thing or what?" Delilah suddenly asked. "I'm feeling claustrophobic in here, ladies. Why don't we go get some sunshine?"

There was loads of sunshine to be had in the Luxembourg Gardens. The three of them huddled on a bench there in front of a spitting fountain and pretended to be only tourists, Delilah snapping pictures with a disposable camera and dismally failing at small talk.

"What am I going to do, Del?"

"Liddy, you're doing it, so just relax."

That was a darn good answer, Paula thought, refusing to contribute anymore to this particular conversation. "Del's got herself a real fancy hotel suite here and she could really use the company, so that's what I'd do right now. At least *you'll* both be comfortable. I'm flying back tomorrow anyway so what's another night in the Bastille to me—bed of nails or the rack, they'll never get my confession!"

Torture was an exaggeration, of course, but Delilah's rooms were quite luxurious in comparison. And the beds so soft and welcoming.

"Now you get some shuteye, Liddy. I'm going to run over quick and check on Helaine. I'll give you a complete status report when I get back. S'aright?"

"I will try," Lydia promised, and she did give it her best but, excluding a wild nightmare starring Sharon and Helaine, she simply couldn't get to sleep tonight.

"That's her. It's her! That's Lydia Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont! Can you make a statement for us tonight? Ms. Beaumont! Is it true she won't see you? Ms. Beaumont, can you confirm that she has refused to let you in?"

Ms. Beaumont gave the reporters the finger and the slip.

"Who are you?" hospital security demanded.

"I am Lydia Beaumont," she declared, "and I wish to see my...I wish to visit Dr. Kristenson."

Another Lydia Beaumont impostor trying to steal an interview and some pictures? "And you have your passport to prove this, of course."

She had her passport to prove it. "Yes."

The passport didn't do the woman justice, they could see but, notwithstanding a crummy photograph, she was Lydia Beaumont, in the flesh. They gave her the room number and let her pass.

"Liddy!"

"I'm sorry, Del, but I couldn't sleep a wink. Which room is it? I need to see her."

"She's not in any room right now. She's upstairs. There's a slight compli—"

"You are the wife?" Helaine's doctor interrupted.

"I'm...yes."

"She's been looking for you. Follow me, I'm her doctor."

Delilah attempted to join them.

"Just the wife," the doctor told her firmly. "I'm sorry. Come this way, Madame Beaumont. We'll take the stairs."

Upstairs, there was a small group assembled at the very end of a long corridor. Police and hospital staff, Lydia realized as she was approaching. Helaine wasn't among them. "Where is she?"

"Out here," the doctor said, pushing past everyone and sliding the door open cautiously. "She's on the balcony."

The balcony was made of stone and overlooked a courtyard.

"Over there in the corner," the doctor pointed, restraining Lydia with her other arm. "No, no. Way over there."

And way over there she was, indeed. "Oh, no," Lydia gasped.

There was Helaine, precariously perched on the ledge, her arms wrapped around her knees, her face upturned and absorbed. It was Helaine, illuminated by a spotlight. Or a statue of Helaine, if not for the breeze playing with her hair. A statue of a goddess moon-bathing. Lydia opened her mouth to call out to her, but the doctor quickly covered it with one hand.

"Her nurse must not have noticed that she was asleep," the doctor explained in a whisper. "So she wandered out here and—"

"Asleep? She's not asleep, doctor. She's going to jump."

"No, I think not, but she could fall if we startle her. She's sleepwalking."

"Sleepwalking? Has she lost her mind?"

"Hardly. It's only a sleep disorder, Madame. Relatively common and usually triggered by stress. It's called somnambulism. Did she suffer from this when you and she were—"

"Never."

Then it was post traumatic, the doctor concluded. "Well, she's under a lot of pressure now and she's still in the recovery stages of a head injury. She's been tested, so we can rule out the possibility of stroke. Small strokes can cause similar symptoms."

Strokes. "What are we going to do?" Lydia asked.

The doctor wasn't sure. "We've tried talking to her, to steer her back to her room. That usually works, but she was unresponsive this time. Your friend tried to help, too. So, perhaps it's providence then that you came tonight, non? I'm hoping against hope that Dr. Kristenson might respond to your voice, since she often asks for you."

"Well, let's try that. What should I say to her?"

"Nothing complicated. Your name, of course. You must speak slowly to her and not too loud. It may take her awhile to reply, though. If she does respond, ask her to come to you. Don't attempt to grab her."

Lydia glanced at the doctor and then to all the similar balconies across the way. They were filling with spectators. Patients coming out of their rooms to watch, with their attendants. "But what if she...?"

"There are people below. They're on standby. You must react quickly, however, if she loses her balance. Call down to them. Can you do this?"

Yes, she could. "Here, hold my jacket," Lydia said, and then she stepped out onto the balcony.

There was a scent of lilacs in the air outside and Lydia could hear pigeons cooing above her, a cat yowling below, jazz drifting in over the top of the buildings, smooth and melancholy. She took a few steps and stopped at the sound of her heels striking the stone floor.

"Madame, what's wrong?"

"My heels?" Lydia whispered. "Should I take them off?"

The doctor pondered this for a moment. "Do you usually wear them? Is it something she associates you with?"

"Oh, yes. I would think so."

"Leave them on then. She may recognize the sound of your walk."

Was that possible, Lydia wondered, adjusting the pleats of her skirt, straightening her back and walking toward her. How could Helaine recognize footsteps that she hadn't heard in years? Weren't those footsteps so much heavier now than they used to be? Didn't they sound more burdened? How did she walk before walking caused her pain? She tried to remember that walk again. It was there somewhere in her mechanical memory. Walks she would take on air to Helaine.

"Helaine?" she said, in a hushed voice, stopping within a few feet of her. "Can you hear me, Helaine?"

"Your name, Madame."

"It's Lydia, Helaine. Lydia Beaumont."

The goddess of the moon trembled and lowered her head.

"Helaine...? Why don't we go inside now? It's getting late."

Green eyes sparkled in the lamplight. Green, but empty.

Lydia shivered. The air was crisp tonight, the sky overhead black and blue. It was much too cool out here for just a hospital gown and a light cardigan. She wished she had brought her the jacket. "Helaine? Will you speak to me?"

"Yes, Helaine," Helaine murmured at last.

Lydia glanced over her shoulder at the doctor.

"Keep telling her your name."

"It's Lydia, Helaine. What are you doing out here? Let's go inside."

"Let's go inside," said Helaine. "I'm analyzing your handwriting, if you must know. It's on the wall over there."

Lydia held herself and then dropped her arms again.

"The stars are crossing tonight. Our stars are crossed," Helaine said. "Where did you go to?"

Someplace uncomplicated. "I just went for a drink of water."

"You needed water?" Helaine asked. "You were thirsty?"

"Yes, I was."

"But what on earth took you so long then?"

"Lana, I...can you give me your hand?"

"Lana's hand? You know Lana?"

"I do. I know Lana. Does she know who I am?"

Helaine nodded. "I'm Lana."

"Who am I?" Lydia asked her.

"You're...that mirage. Do you know what you do in your window?"

"What window?"

"Hah. She doesn't, but they all sing about her anyway. By night, by day, afield, at hame, the thoughts o' thee my breast inflame, and aye I muse and sing thy name, I only live to love thee."

Lydia inched closer toward the rail.

"Where did you go to?" Helaine asked again. "What took so long?"

"I went for a glass of water, Lana. I told you."

"Oh, that's right. She went for water."

"Can you come with me?" Lydia urged. "It's cold. Aren't you cold out here?"

"Ave. Are we going back to bed now? Am I cold?"

"Yes, you—we are."

"You see all that water down there?" Helaine asked. "Have you ever seen a plane crash?"

Lydia looked over the rail. "No, I haven't."

"Antonio and Carlos...everybody's gone."

Antonio's gone. That made sense. "We can talk about it in the morning, Lana. Come to bed now."

"Water, water, everywhere. Don't drink it, though, darling. It's salty. Like tears."

One, two, three. They were three stories above the courtyard. If Helaine fell into imaginary water, it could kill her, for real. "Lana, please. Let's go back to bed. I'm cold."

Helaine shuddered. "Tho' I were doom'd to wander on, beyond the sea, beyond the sun...did you go to the well then? Are you still thirsty?"

"Yes. Let's go inside."

"Yes? I can't understand."

In this light, this close to her, Lydia could make out a small scar on her temple, the only substantial difference in her features. How beautiful this woman was to her, scar or not. What made her so beautiful, she wondered, so handsome and still so pretty, so elegant? Those eyes? Her voice? Her lips? "I said, I am still thirsty, Lana. Come over here and give me some water."

Helaine smiled at the suggestion, but didn't take her up on it.

Venus was right, Lydia thought, admiring that smile. So right. She was still thirsty for this woman on the balcony. It would, she realized, not likely be quenched. She would have spied her somewhere walking down the street and followed her home again. So long as she was alive, seeing her alive, there was no doubt in Lydia's mind that she would do that. Wherever Helaine would go, she would have eventually followed.

Smart Venus. Poor Venus. Lydia felt suddenly ashamed. She was still wearing Venus' ring, and Helaine was still wearing hers. Two mismatched wedding bands gleaming in the lamplight. Hers of gold, brand-new. Helaine's of platinum, like mint.

"When I hold you close to me, I can hear your heartbeat," Helaine murmured. "It sounds just like the ocean."

Lydia was conscious of her heart pounding now.

"I do that?" Helaine asked. "Make your heart beat so?"

Simple. "Yes."

"Mmmm...methinks if the lady keeps blushing then I'll just have to kiss her. What is the answer?"

It was a riddle from the past, Lydia realized, from their courtship. Where had she heard her say this before? In a crowded café? In a bar? Oh, yes. In Frank's Place. "Then do what you must," she remembered to answer.

"Ah, better be careful what you wish for. You might live to regret it."

"Never. Give me your hand, Lana."

"She wants my hand already? You're asking for my hand?"

'I am.'

"I can't give it to you just yet. I'm missing my hairpin," Helaine replied. "We must have dropped it in the ladies lounge...I cover the waterfront...I'm...see the woman roller-skating?"

"No."

"She's so beautiful. So young. Not a scratch on her. She must never fall down."

"Lana? Where are you?"

"I'm walking by the park. There are men playing basketball...swish, swish, twang...that's what they play down here. Lots of games, you know? Lots of games on the waterfront."

Lydia passed her hand in front of Helaine's eyes. Clearly, she didn't see a hand there. "And where are you going to?" she asked her.

"Oh—tho' I were doom'd to wander on, beyond the sea, beyond the sun, till my last weary sand was run—I'm going to see Robert and Kay now. But I don't know that yet. Robert and Kay to the rescue."

To the rescue? "And what about me?"

"You? I'm going to marry you. But I don't know that yet, either. You're still a secret I'm keeping."

She was still Helaine's secret. "Okay," she said, reaching out for her.

"Isn't it funny, darling?"

"What?" Lydia asked, taking Helaine's hand in hers and pulling her gently from the rail. "What's funny, Lana?"

"That I can read your mind, but not my own?"

She was reading her mind, huh? Lydia believed it. She could always do that. "What am I thinking of then?"

"Don't you know?" Helaine teased, her arms around Lydia's neck now, her stomach pressing against hers.

There had to be a hundred people watching them. Lydia blushed. "No, tell me," she said, holding her by the hips. "What am I thinking?"

Helaine laughed. "Everything at once."

"Madame? Madame Beaumont?"

The room was dark. The open door cast a sliver of light onto the bed. Helaine lay in it sleeping beside Lydia. Asleep at last in the crook of her arm. No more resisting it, no more playing and, more importantly, no more walking around in a trance.

"She is asleep?" the doctor whispered.

"She's asleep," Lydia whispered back.

"You can't stay, I'm sorry to have to tell you. It's been over two hours. She needs her nurse and guard in here again. Just in case."

Lydia didn't want to part with Helaine now. "Just another hour?" she tried to bargain. "It's been so long, doctor, since we...another hour?"

"It's not you, Madame, it's her health, that I fear. Come back in the morning, non? We'll see how she's feeling in the morning."

Lydia trudged back to the hotel in the cold to find Delilah still awake, watching a Spaghetti Western dubbed in French.

"Hi, Liddy. Is she okay?"

"All's well that ends well. I talked her off the balcony and took her to bed. I got thrown out as my official thank-you, however, so I came back here tonight. The doctor says to return in the morning. Boy, I'm pooped now," she added, throwing herself atop an unmade bed. "Why didn't you tell me about the sleepwalking, Del?"

"I didn't want to worry you. You have enough on your mind. Did she wake up at all?"

"I don't think so."

Must not have, Delilah thought to herself, debating whether or not to come clean with that and turning the television off with a grunt. Should she describe to Lydia what happens when Helaine wakes up? "You're going to do that, Liddy? Go see her in the morning?"

Lydia vawned and closed her eyes. "Of course I am."

"Oh." No point then. "Then I'll go with you," Delilah said, turning the lights out and climbing into her own bed. "Goodnight."

What happens when Helaine wakes up: First, she is given her morning physical, her breakfast and her meds. Then, she goes for a walk with her nurse around the facility and, sometimes during these long treks, if she's very clever, which she usually is, she gets a hold of a newspaper.

There will always be something in a newspaper lately that is distressing, something about her, or the plane crash, or Venus, or Lydia, so her doctor has ordered the staff and nurse on duty to be extra vigilant about this activity, in order to avoid further aggravating her condition.

Sometimes they are successful in their efforts. Sometimes they are not.

"You can't go in there," the doctor informed Lydia. "She's awake and she's very upset. You, Madame, you can go in. See can you soothe her this morning."

Delilah entered Helaine's room grim-faced and Lydia stood out in the hall with the doctor. "And why can't I see Helaine?" she asked.

"Just listen and you'll have your answer," the doctor said.

"She has a baby, too, Del? Venus and Lydia have a—who's child is it? Tell me! I have a right to know. Who's is it?"

Lydia hung her head. The press had dragged Mariah into this, now. What should she do? Try to call Venus?

"It's Venus' child," Delilah answered. "Here, sit down, Helaine."

"Madame, you should probably leave now," the doctor told Lydia. "I don't want her to know that you've been here."

"What do you mean? I told her I would come this morning."

The doctor took Lydia's arm and led her away. "Dr. Kristenson was asleep when you were with her last night, you understand this?"

"She was as—you're saying she—she has no recollection of it? Is that what you're telling me? Helaine doesn't remember that I was here last night?"

"Correct."

"So she hasn't seen me yet, as far as she knows?"

"Correct."

"And when she's awake, she doesn't want to?"

"Correct."

"Hi."

"Hello."

"Where are you coming from, Liddy? You had me worried."

"I stopped at a café to feel sorry for myself and then I went to the bookstore to brush up on my Burns—what's that about?"

"Venus is in the news again."

"I can see that, Del. What's happening now?"

Delilah turned the sound up on the TV.

"—a move that surprises no one, the hoard of directors of the Kristenson Foundation unanimously approved an emergency resolution today, authorizing it to divert revenue from its coffers for the care and hospitalization of its founder, Dr. Helaine Kristenson, who is still recovering from her three-year ordeal in a Paris hospital. The motion was made by the foundations' director, none other than the flamboyant Venus Angelo, herself. In related news, rumors abound that Ms. Angelo has also given notice to the board that she will be stepping down as its director as soon as Dr. Kristenson is able to resume her duties there again. This news follows the most recent revelations concerning Ms. Angelo's daughter and the secrecy surrounding the child's birth and—"

"I don't understand why no one told me what was going on with Helaine, why I had to be humiliated today. I've only ever had two women in my whole fucking life and neither of them wants to talk to me anymore, not even to tell me they don't want to talk to me. I wouldn't have made such an ass of myself this morning, Del, if you had simply informed me in advance that she held me in such contempt."

"Helaine doesn't hold you in contempt, Liddy. She has some problems right now and she's trying the best she can to deal with them—there's Venus talking."

"—the Kristenson Foundation and for her generosity, helping millions of impoverished and destitute citizens worldwide in times of war, disease and famine. The foundation feels, therefore, that Dr. Kristenson's care and comfort in her hour of greatest need is a number one priority now and we intend to—"

"She's got that I'm-outta-here look, Liddy. She looks like she's had it."

"She's disconnected the phone or changed all the numbers already and she won't answer my e-mails. I don't know what to do, Del. I'm very overwhelmed."

"—ell us what the legal status is between you and Lydia Beaumont? Are you going to contest the doctor's—"

"But what about Mariah, Liddy? She can't just cut you off from Mariah."

"I have no comment."

"I don't know, Del. I don't like lawyers or public showdowns and that's not a secret to anyone, including Venus."

"Who is the child's father, Ms. Angelo? Why did you go to such lengths to keep her a secret?"

Geesh, what a mess. "What does Marilyn advise?"

"No, comment. I have no comment to make about my daughter whatsoever. Let me through."

"Patience, Mom keeps saying. Her prayers are with everyone."

"And what's your dad's opinion of that strategy?"

"Lawyers, guns and money are better than priests."

Night and day, those two. Delilah went to sleep confounded. She could stay maybe another week to help out, if she was really helping, but then she'd have to go home. The bank wasn't the real issue, though. She plum missed her man.

She dreamt of Marcus all night.

In the morning, she was headed to the hospital again, bleary-eyed and somewhat depressed. "Let's do something fun today," she suggested, before leaving. "It feels like a morgue around here."

"I'll think up something. Don't forget to take her the roses."

"Roses, almost forgot the roses. I'll see you at noon."

"And, Del, can you give this to her, too? It's just a little note."

Delilah slipped the little note in her pocket and hesitated at the door before leaving. "Liddy, I'd...I have to ask you something. It's not about the note. That's not a problem. I'll give her that, if she'll take it."

Delilah's face was so serious. "Ask."

"Which one do you want? Which wife? Helaine or Venus?"

It was an inevitable query. "I can't answer that, Del. It's just too painful to have to say and I love them both now. You understand?"

"I can't say that I do. It took me forever to find just one that sends me. You can only have one anyway, you realize?"

"I realize that. Don't worry."

"But you do know which one that is, right? It's not like you're flip-flopping between the two?"

"No. I know which one I want, Del. If she'll have me."

She knows which one she wants. Delilah left unconvinced, bearing flowers and a love letter for Dr. Kristenson, who just so happens to know how to read her own medical charts.

"How's she doing this morning, doctor?" Delilah asked, trying to mask a bad mood.

"She's concerned about her enzymes today. Other than that, she's doing pretty good. No sleepwalking last night, either. No nightmares, too."

"Excellent news," Delilah said, pushing the door open and closing it behind her. "Good morning, Helaine. I hear you slept well last night."

"Red roses, Del—I need to get out of here soon—you're an angel."

"Weeeeell, they're really from Lydia."

"Oh."

"Put them in the vase or the wastebasket, Helaine? It's entirely up to you."

"Vase," Helaine said, petulantly. "She's still here?"

"Yup, and lest I forget, she sent you this, too."

Helaine tore open the envelope:

Noon. Interrogation would take place at the carousel. Delilah was in better spirits now and, essentially, ready for anything.

"What did she think of the flowers?" Lydia asked.

"She loved them, Liddy. What woman doesn't love red roses?"

Venus. Her favorite is yellow. "Did you give her the note?"

Helaine had given Lydia's note back to Delilah, complete with the envelope. "Give that to your friend," she had instructed, as Delilah was about to go. "Make sure she gets it."

Delilah knew that wasn't a very good indication, but she didn't bat an eye over it. "Will do," she promised. "I'll see you tomorrow morning then."

"Did you give Helaine the note, Del?"

"She gave it back to me, Liddy. Here. I'm sorry."

But she had read it at least. Lydia took the tattered envelope and removed the note she had written to Helaine last night:

By night, by day, afield, at hame,
—Lydia
The thoughts o' thee my breast inflame,
—Helaine

"Del, she answered it!"

"Wait a minute, Liddy. Where are you going to?"

"The hospital!"

Delilah ran and stood in her path, placing her hands squarely on Lydia's shoulders. "She's adamant. She doesn't want to see you," she said.

"But why? What have I done to her? I don't get it."

"You've remarried, Lydia. You have a child, someone's wedding ring on your finger. She knows this. What is it about being married to someone else now that you don't get?"

"But, Del—Del, it was a—she's my—I can't do anything about that!"

"You can and you must."

"No, you're wrong. Venus won't allow it!"

"Liddy? She threw you out, but she won't grant you a divorce?"

"No, she forbids it."

"Oh, Jesus. Then you have to file for one yourself. Or get it annulled. It's that simple. I understand your reticence, but there's no honorable solution waiting to reveal itself here. You have to do something, Liddy. You can wear two hats in this world, but not two rings."

"Is that what Helaine wants? Those are her terms?"

Power-plays and a tug-of-war and the possibility that the rope might snap. It was already frayed. "Yes, my friend. That's what she wants."

"Are those from, Lydia?"

"Actually, I brought them myself," Delilah fibbed.

"You did? Well, thank you, Del. You're kind to indulge me."

A rough night for Helaine, the doctor just informed Delilah. Nightmares and wandering the halls again, opening and closing doors. Searching.

"What's with that? What's going on?" Delilah asked the doctor in frustration. "Will it ever stop?"

Sleepwalkers usually have unfinished business they're trying to attend to. You can get them back to bed, but sometimes they'll just keep getting up, in hopes of fulfilling their mission. Such was the case with Dr. Kristenson. She was doing the same thing over and over again, without satisfaction, performing a task without completion.

"She's looking for her wife," the doctor said. "It won't stop until she finds that woman. Or unless she forgets all about her, but that's not realistic."

"But how does that reconcile with refusing to let Lydia visit?"

"It doesn't. That's the problem."

Oh.

"I hear you had a bad night, Helaine?"

"I think it's the medication, Del. Some medications can aggravate somnambulism. I'm going to discuss that with the therapist this afternoon. See what he advises."

"And what can I do for you, Helaine? Your wish is my command."

"I'm sick of lounging around, Del. I'm not the lounging type. And I'm tired of being in these pajamas all the time."

Delilah chuckled. "It shall be done. Pants, sweaters, that kind of thing?"

"And a plain, gray suit, please. White blouse. Heels. I miss my dresses. I desperately miss my...heels."

Delilah visited with her until lunch came and then got up to leave.

"By the way, is there a note for me today, Del?" Helaine inquired. "Did she send me anything?"

This was a damnable situation, Delilah had thought then. She doesn't want to see Lydia, but she won't stop looking for her either; and now this, passing letters back and forth like schoolgirls in study hall. "I didn't think you wanted her to write so I told her not to, Helaine. I was worried it would upset you."

"That was very practical. Thoughtful of you, Del. I appreciate it and I'm sorry for burdening you with this."

"You're not, Helaine. You're burdening yourself, though. She'd really like to see you."

Helaine didn't respond to that except to look sadly out the window. "Something professional, Del. I used to be a doctor, you know? A smart, gray suit."

"I'll see what I can do. You try to take it easy. I'll see you in the morning."

Lydia was waiting for Delilah outside the big doors of the hospital. She'd been there all morning. "Well?" she asked, when Delilah at last emerged. "How is she today? What did she think of the flowers?"

"She's tired of being sick, Liddy. We've got to go shopping for her. She wants some civilian clothing. You don't happen to remember any of her sizes, do you? I forgot to ask."

Oh, yes. She remembered every single inch of Helaine Kristenson. "By the way, did she mention me at all?"

Delilah ignored the question.

"Okay. I guess not then. Just thought I would ask."

"Did you get a hold of Venus, Liddy?"

"No. She hates me, too."

They spent the rest of their day in and out of boutiques, shopping for a new wardrobe for Helaine while at the very same time avoiding the topic of Helaine.

"I don't think you-know-who needs underwear like that, Liddy. Just a hunch that the hospital won't approve of it. Anyway, she asked for something professional. I don't want to have to tell you what profession that looks like it belongs to."

"For your information, Ms. Lewiston, this is what you-know-who prefers to wear under her suits. What do you think she's always smiling about?"

Interesting contraband. She'd have to smuggle it in somehow. Maybe stuff it into a pant leg. "She'll never know you had a hand in all this, I'm sure," Delilah muttered. "Buy it and get it over with."

The next morning, poised at the door with the shopping bags, Delilah said, "Okay, I'm on my way to the hospital. Let me have it."

"Have what?"

"The love letter you were up all night composing."

"It's not a love letter, Del. It's a harmless get-well-soon."

"I'm sure it is. Put it in there."

"Oh, Del!" Helaine exclaimed, at the sight of all those bags, the lingerie and the... "You bought this for me?" she asked, delighted, but skeptical.

"Yes?"

"You're very sweet—did she write me anything today?"

"A get-well-soon, she claims. I disavow any and all knowledge of this because I doubt your doctor would condone it."

Helaine went to the window with her perfumed envelope.

Lydia had added another line to the poem:

```
By night, by day, a field, at hame,
—Lydia
The thoughts o' thee my breast inflame,
—Helaine
And aye I muse and sing thy name,
—Lydia
```

"Well? What did she think of her new clothes, Del?"

"She oohed and aahed over everything. You knew she would. She was very grateful."

Lydia was pleased to hear it, happy this afternoon for some inexplicable reason. The sun was out. It was warm and muggy. The birds were flirting in all the branches, making the petals of the blossoms snow. How beautiful Paris is in the springtime. Perfect, with Helaine in it once more. "Did she answer my note, Del?"

"Gee, you don't want a lot, do you?"

"She didn't answer, did she?"

Delilah hated that crushed look. Lydia was so good at it and it she didn't want her to be crushed. "You should have seen that dress, though. Boy you were right on the money with that dress. She looked like a million bucks in it, just like Dr. Kristenson again."

"Was she smiling, Del?"

"I'm not even going to answer that. Hey, where do we pick up that tour bus there? I want to tour the city before I leave tomorrow. Take some pictures for Marcus."

Marcus wanted pictures of Paris. They toured the city on the top of a tour bus and afterward had dinner in Marais at some ritzy tourist trap. Bad food and overpriced, but Delilah was drawn like a moth to a flame to the big gas lamps that were heating the patio. Gas lamps and martinis were just the thing to chase away a cool night and the descending dampness, to chase away the gloom that was settling over her friend at the prospect of being abandoned.

"Is she ever going to ask for me, Del, or should I just go home, too?"

Home to where?—Delilah had nearly blurted, after the second drink, but she caught herself just in time. "I don't want to give you false hope, Liddy. It doesn't, at the moment, look very promising."

"Then what should I do?" Lydia asked.

"That's a matter you have to decide for yourself. Who's ring do you want to wear for the rest of your life? Maybe nobody's. You've got the whole world interested in the outcome of this, though. Per usual. That one's interested, too, by the way. See her staring? She seems quite taken with you. As well she should be, I might add."

Lydia glanced in the direction that Delilah was pointing.

"Gee, she could almost be your sister, Liddy. Uncanny resemblance, isn't it? Why don't you go say hi to her? She seems like your type."

"She's very pretty, Del. Listen to me. I don't want Helaine to be here all alone and I don't know when the Keagans will be returning. They're trying to get her papers in order again and they say they have no idea how much more time that will require. What should I do now? What would you do if you were in my position?"

"Liddy, I'd finish that drink, if I were you. You're acting as if it's poison. The rest, I have to admit, I'm truly clueless about."

Lydia's martini was virtually untouched, even the olives had been neglected. It was as clear as water but, make no mistake about it, it was a poison, Venus was always lecturing. A pleasant poison, attacking the central nervous system first, relaxing it and, ultimately, shutting it down. Venus and her medical books. She had wanted to be a doctor once, she had explained, but the glittery world of finance caught her eye instead. Brilliant Venus could have been anything she wanted, though. Anything she set her heart on. Lydia pushed the glass away, finished with gin for tonight.

This was a wise choice, because she was going to need her wits about her later.

"The hospital has been calling, Madame," the concierge announced, as the ladies walked into the hotel lobby.

"For me?" Lydia asked. "Are you sure?"

"Oui, pour vous, Madame."

"Go on over there, Liddy. I'll wait up."

"Don't wait up, Del. I probably won't be back till late."

She was right.

"Where is she?" Lydia asked the hospital staff. "Is her doctor here tonight?"

"Here I am, Madame. She is looking for you," the doctor replied. "I've been calling your hotel for over an hour."

"She's looking for me—asleep, you mean?"

"Oui. Follow me, Madame. We can talk on the way."

Lydia followed her. "Tell me what happened," she said.

"Dr. Kristenson almost slipped past security this evening, almost walked out of the building. They didn't recognize her until the very last minute."

"They didn't recognize her?"

"The suit she's wearing deceived them. They thought she was a doctor at first."

"Her suit. Ah, well. But she is a doctor."

"Of course. As opposed to our patient, Madame. There she is. Call to her. She's looking for you. She always is."

Dr. Kristenson was making the rounds tonight, trying every door and switching the lights on and off, her nurse impotently trailing after her. She was making the rounds, or she might have just come home from work, dressed like that, laid her briefcase down and gone searching for Lydia. That might be the case, with her hair done up like that, but for the faraway look in her eyes.

No matter. She was looking like a million bucks. "Lana?"

Dr. Kristenson paused and tilted her head slightly.

"Are you looking for me?" Lydia asked. "I'm sorry I'm late. I got hung up at the office."

"Are you looking for me?" Dr. Kristenson said. "I'm too late."

"See if you can lead her back to her room," the doctor whispered. "Ask her to come to you."

"Lana? Come here, won't you?"

"Come here, won't I? You need to see me about something?"

"Yes, I have to talk to you."

"Ah...well, your Lana's coming then," Dr. Kristenson replied. "But, darling, she doesn't want to talk tonight."

Lydia crawled back to the hotel around three in the morning.

Three in the afternoon already. Hot and humid.

Today was to be the big day. Everyone had left and there was only Lydia remaining in Paris, some members of the press still lurking somewhere in the shadows, but they couldn't find her, she figured, because she was able to roam more freely lately. She hadn't seen any reporters in days and days.

Today, she had decided, she was going to present herself to Helaine. The awake Helaine, not the sleeping version. It had to be done whether the hospital approved of it or not, whether or not Helaine, too, would throw her out on her ass. The woman should not be alone in a foreign land, recovering in a strange hospital, among strangers. It wasn't right, especially since her wife was here, whatever the legalities of that relationship might be.

As to those legalities, Lydia had spoken with her father about this recently and he had recommended she hire Stanley Kandinsky to look into it right away. It was a quagmire, he acknowledged, but, if it could be resolved, Stan would be the one who should resolve it for her, he insisted, well before there's a legal challenge made. It's not the kind of situation that can just mend itself, not something that'll just fade away with time, he warned her. Someone's going to make a move soon, they have to, and it might as well be her, he said. "So make up your mind, Queenie, and then call Stan."

Hawk-eyed Stan had helped the Beaumonts many times in the past with their domestic affairs and he had been expecting Lydia's call, but, while he had some ideas to offer her, even Stan had to admit he had landed in uncharted territory. Was her first marriage rendered null and void now that she had remarried, or was it the second, now that the first wife was no longer dead? Could the second one be annulled automatically, as a matter of law, or was it vice versa? Or could she now, in effect, simply pick which marriage contract she would actually honor and just be damned? He didn't know the answers to her connubial conundrum yet. In many ways, he mused, it might be more ideal if one of the other interested parties actually filed the suit. In that way he could pick apart their argument. Everything's in the argument, he knew, and sometimes it's easier to defend an action than it is to prosecute. "But I'd get all misty-eyed to see the parties agree by consent, to arrive at a compromise and not have to go through litigation. Wouldn't that be nice, Lydia?"

It would be nice but highly improbable, as Helaine had, herself, broached the same subject with her attorney, Lydia just learned yesterday, and Robert Keagan Esq. was none too happy to have to inform his client that he couldn't advise her on the matter because he was posed with a serious conflict of interest. That was his golden opportunity to confess to Helaine that he had written the Angelo-Beaumont prenuptial agreement and reviewed the adoption papers, something he'd been loathe to do before. Everyone had wondered when he would and how Helaine would take it.

"I'm sorry, Robert, she what?"

"Hung up on me, Lydia."

Uh-oh.

Those emotions were perfectly understandable, he asserted. He was going to let Helaine cool down before calling her again, finish with her documentation in the interim.

"See you in a couple of weeks, I guess. If you're still in Paris."

Would she still be here in a couple of weeks, Lydia wondered, and, if so, what, aside from alienating her friends, would she have accomplished by it? "Maybe I'll see you then," she had told Robert, without making any long term commitment.

Certainly she would accomplish nothing today, however, if she undertook to visit Helaine empty-handed, so armed with two dozen roses, all of them red, she marched herself over to the hospital, a speech in her mind that she had been practicing for days.

"I'm sorry. She is not here, Madame. It was necessary to transfer my patient this morning to a private facility and, moreover, she demanded it."

"Why? What happened?"

What happened was in all the papers by three o'clock, on the talk shows and the internet, but the doctor understood Lydia Beaumont better now, that she was not always with it about certain things, that she could be aloof and obtuse, even if it was to her own detriment, that she was a rather hapless individual. "There was a breach of security here. A breach occurred several weeks ago that we weren't aware of at the time. She has been transferred to a more secure location."

"A breach? Get to the point, please."

"Someone photographed you and the doctor on the balcony. It's in all the papers today. It's everywhere."

"And?"

"And, as you know, Dr. Kristenson had no knowledge of your visits and especially not that you and she—she was quite—"

"Mortified?"

"Oui, Madame."

Twenty-four long stem roses and the woman wasn't here anymore, embarrassed to be seen with her, even if only in a photograph. Lydia knew better than to ask for the new location. She would hop a flight home this evening and pour herself a nice stiff drink or two on the plane, jump in a lake tomorrow.

"Are you still her physician?" she asked.

"I am."

"Give these to Dr. Kristenson, won't you? And please tell her that I'm sorry."

The doctor took the roses. "Madame, wait," she said, as Lydia turned to leave. "She gave me a letter for you. It's in my office."

My love is like a red, red rose that's newly sprung in June. My love is like the melody that's sweetly played in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass, so deep in love am I. And I will love thee still, my dear, till all the seas run dry.

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

Till all the seas run dry, my dear, and the rocks melt with the sun. And I will love thee still, my dear, while the sands of life shall run...'

—Helaine

Chapter 33: Marilyn Mann

Dark curtains, motion sensors, gates on the doorway leading to the stairs, bars on the upstairs windows and a locked glass door that used to open to the widow's walk from the master bedroom. The lake house was undergoing yet another transformation and this one cast a pall over Marilyn. It was starting to look and feel like a dungeon inside.

Her daughter had gone mad, she worried, lost her mind over all the nonsense that was going on, over Venus shutting her out and Helaine giving her the cold shoulder, refusing to come back from Paris. And now there were bars and gates and locks everywhere in that beautiful old Queen Anne. Lydia had finally lost it. Gone crazy with trying to solve the problem of suddenly having two wives, of having both of those wives on the lam, of having neither one of them wanting her, of having neither one of them wanting to let her go, either.

Stalemates.

As with the prior renovations at the lake house, Roy was in charge of these new "improvements" as well, and he was doing the best he could to try to integrate them within the aesthetic confines of an older home, to make them somehow seem more attractive, if only for Marilyn's sake, so she would stop wringing her hands. But gates, whether they be of iron or copper or brass, are still gates and they have a way of imbuing ugliness, so he knew his efforts were wasted as long as they were to be permanent fixtures in there.

He felt bad. "She doesn't seem crazy to me, though, Marilyn. There's something else behind it."

But what?

"Well, well, look it here. It's the Count of Monte Cristo. Good morning, Lydia."

"You've been talking to my mother, Paula?"

"Yeah. You've got her worried sick, kiddo. What are you building out there next? A bomb shelter?"

JP Beaumont let the remark pass. "What did the board decide?"

"They turned it down, so don't ask again. What would you do without this job now anyway? Don't ask them again, Lydia. They won't accept your resignation."

She had kind of expected that. "This is a nightmare."

Paula agreed. "But if you're going to be putting in requests to anyone, then I'd send them certified mail to those women of yours. That's what you're avoiding. They're a pretty shrewd pair, the two of them, even if they are at cross purposes."

The coffee was mud this morning, bracken. Lydia scrunched up her face. "I know what I'm doing," she muttered. "I'm not going to sue anyone."

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"This is just stupid, Liddy. I'm siding with Paula and your dad on this. You've got to do something other than hide from reporters and convert your house into a fortress. If you don't, you'll never get laid again. Doesn't that matter to you? If not, I can't understand. It's such a waste of gonad."

The martini was bitter this afternoon, toxic. Lydia scrunched up her face. "I know what I'm doing, Del. I'm not going to sue my wives."

"I know what I'm doing, Daddy. I'm not going to sue anybody. I'm just not comfortable with that strategy." The soup was paste this evening, undrinkable. She put her spoon down and scrunched up her face.

"Queenie, that's not the smartest approach I've ever heard of. If nobody makes a move, then you'll be living in legal limbo for the rest of your life. How would you feel then? You won't even be able to date."

She could have a date in a snap, she didn't bother to reply. All the love letters she was getting. All those shoulders being offered for her to cry on. If she wanted a date, if that was her only ambition, she could realize it easily enough. "I don't want to date."

"Your mom's asked me to talk some sense into you, and Stan says you've got his hands tied, that you won't let him initiate the suit. You've got to do it, Queenie. It's obvious that your women want you to pick a wife. Smart cookies, they are, I might add, sitting in their foxholes, waging a war without lifting a finger. Not just talented and beautiful, huh? I'd divorce both of them, if I were you."

Nope. Not going to do that, either. Going to go home to the lake house, sit on the porch and meditate.

"You do beautiful work, Marcus," Lydia said. "You could make a fortune in the city."

Marcus was adding a delicate patina to the large gate at the bottom of the stair, antiquing it so it would blend better with the lake house interior, with the parquet floors of the living room and the wainscoting in the kitchen. "Nah, don't want to make a fortune," he said, with a laugh. "Just want to make it nice for Marilyn."

Roy cringed. He wasn't supposed to tell Lydia that. "Doing a nice job there, Picasso," he said, wanting to hit him in the head with a hammer. "Are you coming for dinner tonight, Lydia? Marilyn's cooking."

She'd subject herself to Mom after an evening swim.

"But it's so mysterious," Marilyn would begin her complaint with tonight.

"It's not mysterious, Mom. It only looks it to you."

"And why won't you tell me what happened in Paris? Why are my children always so secretive?"

"Nothing happened in Paris. I just want more security, that's all. It's a big house and now I feel safer in it."

"It's starting to come together," Roy intervened. "Getting really fancy again, Marilyn. You ought to see it this week."

So it's a pretty prison, what's the difference? "I want to see my granddaughter, Lydia. I want you to do something about all this so I can hold Mariah again. This isn't fair to her, both her mommies behaving like adolescents."

"And what do you propose I do, that I abduct her? The press is already having a field day with me. That's all they'd need."

"I think I'll go wash these dishes," Roy volunteered.

They didn't hear him.

"I propose that you call Venus."

"Call Venus. Mom, you're nuts. Forget it."

"I want you to call her and ask her to take you back. Clearly she's waiting for you to do this, and if Helaine doesn't want you, which is what it looks like to the whole world watching, then too bad for her. I love Helaine, she's my favorite, but...call Venus, Lydia. Talk to her. I want to see Mariah."

"That's a great idea, Marilyn. And what do I say about that balcony thing that they're constantly revisiting? I'm sorry, I was just making out with my late wife, it's no big deal, forgive me?"

"Yes."

"Yah—then you don't know Venus."

"I know your father did far worse to me and I always forgave him. There are some things that you just have to grin and bear in a marriage."

"Oh, really, Mom? Is that why Roy is here? Because you always forgave Daddy?"

"Lydia Ann...I just want to see my granddaughter again."

"Mom, I'm not go—"

"Will anybody be wanting coffee?" Roy inquired. "I'm putting coffee on now."

"No, I can't stay, thank—"

"Coffee sounds lovely, honey, and there's a pie in the fridge, too. Don't forget the pie. Sit down, sweetheart. Please. Let's not quarrel about this anymore. Let's just talk. Maybe we can figure out what to do about it."

Lydia took her seat again and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not asking anyone for anything, Mom. I can't deal with this situation and, honestly, I don't know anyone else who could either, save for Venus and Helaine, perhaps, and even that seems doubtful to me. Aside from them, though, no one's gone through this. It's my peculiar curse and this is how I'm dealing with it. I'm sorry about Mariah. I miss her terribly and I intend to resolve that in due time. She's my daughter after all, not just your grandchild, but I'm not going to drag her into this weird feud. I just won't do it. You can't make me."

I won't do it. You can't make me. A headstrong daughter's historic and unwavering position. Those had been Lydia's very first words, Marilyn used to joke. Not Mommy or Daddy, she claimed, but I won't and you can't make me.

"Found the pie and the coffee's brewing," Roy said. "Can I get you a nip of scotch or something to go with it, Lydia?"

"No, thanks, Roy. I'm trying to give up booze."

She was making valiant efforts to give up booze, but one toxic blend of java, pie and resentment later, she was pulling into her driveway and fantasizing about the liquor cabinet. It was a good thing, then, that Marcus had worked late. She found him on the porch, waiting.

"Marcus? I hope Roy pays overtime. Can I get you a beer?"

"Nah. I wanted to talk to you, though, if you had a minute."

"It looks serious. Sit down."

He sat and pulled his hat off with a sigh.

It was about Del, then, Lydia knew in an instant. Did they have a fight perhaps? She couldn't picture it. "Marcus?"

"Well, first, I lost the key to that upstairs bedroom. I don't remember where I left it."

A lost key is not important. "And? Second?"

"And second is about Del," he said, his eyes fixed now on the water.

"About Del. Yes...?"

"She's asked me to marry her," he said.

Holy cow. Lydia sat down, too. "Okay. Good. And is there a problem with that?"

He ran his fingers through his wavy hair and picked at a glob of paint imbedded on his pant leg. "Well, you know how she is, how she can be most of the time. She's such a kidder," he said, facing Lydia. "Is she just kidding me, Ms. Beaumont? Cause, if not, I'd really like to marry her."

Lydia laughed. If she'd had a drink in her hand she would have only spilled it all over herself, spilled it all over the two of them. "Well, shit, Marcus," she said. "Del's a kidder all right, but I guarantee you, she'd never kid anybody about marriage—congratulations!"

Chapter 34: Paula

"Ms. Angelo to see you."

Ms. Angelo had arrived. You could practically feel the earth moving. "Send her in, John."

"Good afternoon, Paula. How are you?"

"Very well and you? I hear you're off to Paris at the behest of the Kristenson Foundation. Don't those fools read the papers?"

"It's all about appearances, Paula. No one should know that better than you. I'm still their president, remember? We're presenting Dr. Kristenson with another fund check. It's nothing but a photo-op to showoff to our investors really, since she already has those funds, but she's agreed to participate and the board wouldn't allow me to bow out of it."

Paula smiled. "You're an amazing woman, Venus. Do you mind if I call you Venus, Ms. Angelo?"

"Truthfully, I find it very unnerving. Why did you ask me to come here today? I'm very busy."

"Busy doing what?" Paula asked. "Besides fundraising."

"I'm relocating, if you must know, but that's privileged information."

"To where, Angelo?"

Venus hesitated to share that with her ex-boss. "What did you want to badger me about, Paula? I have to pick up Mariah in an hour."

"How is Mariah? When can Lydia see her daughter again?"

"Once I know what's...you wanted to discuss Mariah with me? She's off limits until further notice."

"I see. No, not really."

"Then what, Paula? Why all the messages?"

Paula leaned back in her chair and peered at her former vice president over the rim of her glasses. "You will find her changed, Venus. Are you prepared for that?"

"Lvdia?"

"Not Lydia, Venus. That one will never change, she'll just age. Gracefully, we're hoping, right?"

Paula was baiting her. "How has the doctor changed, Paula? I've read and heard otherwise."

"Well, now, if I remember correctly, you did a little pre-med, didn't you? Before you went into finance?" "Very little, Paula. What's the point?"

"Did you learn enough to understand the ramifications of a head injury?"

Of course, but one didn't necessarily have to study medicine to know about that. "There are various degrees of head trauma, Paula, from a simple concussion to—"

"You saw Juliet and Juliet doing their famous balcony scene, I presume?"

Venus flinched. She had seen these photographs a million times and heard at least a hundred I-told-you-so's about it from her family. "Very romantic. Are you throwing it in my face, too, Paula? Cause, if so, you should know I'm heartbroken about it."

Paula's eyes narrowed. Only Angelo could be dashed and still look dashing, she thought. Tough break. "She was asleep in those photos, sleeping on the ledge of the balcony. Sleepwalking, Venus."

Sleepwalking out onto a ledge is pretty scary stuff. "But that's not necessarily from a head injury, Paula. That could be ordinary stress or even post traumatic stress. Doesn't have to be related."

"That's what her doctors claim, too, but that's just bullshit. Did she sleepwalk the night the three of you slept togeth—"

"Paula, don't. What else? How else is she changed?"

"In subtle ways. She was my therapist, so I would notice them. She doesn't have the patience that she used to for one, so don't expect her to be overjoyed to see you, and she tires easily, so don't fatigue her with that attitude of yours. You'll regret it."

Venus rose to leave. "Okay, thanks," she said. "I appreciate the heads up. I really do." "Venus?"

Venus was trying to leave at the most important part of their conversation, the part where Paula was going to ask her to concede to defeat. She was aware of this so, naturally, she didn't want to answer.

"Venus, please sit down. Permit me to finish."

Paris is something to sing about in April, but it's a completely different tune in the summertime. In summer, like the song says, it sizzles.

Venus doesn't mind the heat because she's young, but Helaine does, because she's not. She's almost fifty years old and the heat is making her feel sluggish and dopey. She'd like to go for a quick dip in the ocean to cool down or, in the alternative, take a leap into the Seine. The heat here is so oppressive, not like the heat on a tropical island, and there's only about ten air conditioners in all of the city, half of which are on the blink, none of which are located in the hospital where she's staying.

The hospital where she's staying is more like a hotel than a sick ward. She's got a private physician and a nurse round the clock, and a bodyguard. She's rarely seen without that bodyguard now. She just doesn't feel safe anymore without him. Of course, a bodyguard can give her some peace of mind while she's awake, but he can't protect her from nightmares or prevent her from sleepwalking. These things she's still plagued with.

But that's supposed to be top secret.

She wants to look beautiful today, her absolute best, because she's rendezvousing with a very beautiful girl this afternoon, but she is despairing of that possibility now, of wowing her, because it's just too damn hot. She'll have to settle then for just being stunning, even if she can't see anymore that she still is.

The Parisian heat is stifling her, she feels lethargic and depressed, but she's going to meet with Venus Angelo anyway, because it had taken a lot of background maneuvering to get the girl to come here at all. Understandably, she didn't want to. It was the foundation, ultimately, that arranged it.

Once upon a time, Helaine ruefully reminds herself, it had taken no coaxing at all to get Venus to agree to pop out of a birthday cake for her wife—her ex-wife—her wife—whatever—but things were different then and Helaine refuses to dwell on that folly at the moment. That was a lifetime ago and it won't happen again. Instead, she'll put on a suit and her makeup right now, do her long blond hair in a nice French braid and practice smiling for the cameras, her first public appearance in years.

"I do not recommend this activity for you. It's too taxing and it's hot. As your doctor, I want you to understand, I forbid it."

Helaine smiled patiently at her and glanced at the time. They were to meet at the restaurant in Venus' hotel near the Arc de Triomphe in less than an hour, so it was too late now to follow doctor's orders, too late to cancel. "I understand. Don't worry, I won't be long."

"Your car is out front, Dr. Kristenson," the bodyguard announced.

"Thank you, Stefan."

There's air conditioning in a car, thank god. Helaine told the driver to circle the hotel for awhile so she might cool down a bit. That gave Stefan an opportunity to scope out the terrain and conclude that the coast was clear. For now anyway, he said. They did expect to run up against reporters once inside the hotel, some had actually been invited to cover the event, but everyone had been given a warning not to be too rowdy or aggressive.

She found Venus already fielding questions when she got there. Or evading them, as the case might better be described.

"I'm sorry, but this meeting is not about airing our personal differences," she was saying. "and I cannot comment about those at this time. What I can say is that, the doctor and I are meeting today for the purposes of further advancing the mission of the Kristenson Foundation and that we do so at the request of the directors. I'm sure the doctor would agree with me that the foundation's work must continue unfettered and that such work takes priority over any private concerns that may exist between us. Next question, please."

"Ms. Angelo, do you really expect us to believe that the subject of Lydia Beaumont will not come up this afternoon?"

"I don't know what you believe and I have no expectations of you. Next question, please."

"Will you be relinquishing your position at the foundation now that the doctor appears to be ready to assume her role again as it's founder and chief executive?"

"I serve at the pleasure of the doctor and the directors and will do so until further notice from them. For the record, it has been a rare privilege and a great honor to be affiliated with this outstanding organization and I hope that those feelings are mutual."

"Ms. Angelo, have you heard anything from your wife yet? When was the last time you talked with Lydia?"

"Next question, please."

It took Helaine about a minute to realize that she would not be meeting with a girl this afternoon, but a woman. It took her only a couple more minutes to be noticed by that woman. Five more after that to read and decipher the emotions that began registering on that woman's face, and then fifteen more for the two of them to dispose of the foundation's so called pressing business and pose for photographs together.

"Dr. Kristenson, we're wondering, have you gotten a clean bill of health from your doctors yet? What is your condition?"

Dr. Kristenson hooked her arm in Venus' and Venus let her lean on her as she spoke.

"Well, my health is quite good, they assure me, though my condition has...it's slowed me down somewhat. It'll take some time to pick up the pace, I suspect. All in good time, though, gentlemen."

"Dr. Kristenson, you're looking very well. What's first on your agenda when you return to the states? Will you be meeting with Ms. Beaumont anytime soon?"

"Thank you. I have no agenda, though. One day at a time."

"When exactly will you be returning to the US?"

The doctor smiled thinly and glanced at Venus. "I'm sorry, I'm tired," she whispered.

"It's okay," Venus whispered back. "You're doing fine, Dr. Kristenson."

The reporter repeated his question verbatim.

"Yes, I heard you," Helaine answered. "It's just that I don't exactly have a timetable for my return. As I've said, I'm trying to take things slowly for now and, of course, I'm not too crazy about the idea of flying, either, you know?"

Laughter. Awkward and suppressed.

"Doctor, when is the last time you spoke with your...with Ms. Beaumont, Dr. Kristenson?"

The doctor blinked this question away, giving Stefan a beseeching look. He came and stood beside her and stared the reporter down.

The reporter abandoned the question.

"Dr. Kristenson, we see that *Keeping Mr. Right* is at the top of the bestseller list once again. Any plans to write another book? How about a memoir?"

"Hah. They tell me I'm too young for a memoir—Stefan, I'm going to need a chair, I think."

Venus intercepted the next question for her. "Dr. Kristenson and I are going to enjoy our late lunch now. We, and the Kristenson Foundation, thank you all for taking the time out of your busy schedules to come here this afternoon and we thank you for your important questions. That'll be all for today."

Just a few more photos and then it was Stefan's obligation, with some assistance from hotel management, to get rid of all the photographers and reporters who were still intent on lingering there, loitering around the entrance to the dining room slack-jawed and drooling, and hoping to see a cat-fight. But six-foot-four Stefan was the cleanup man. It didn't take him long to empty out the place.

"I would have made arrangements for us in my suite," Venus said, once they were comfortable at their table and the waiters had left them alone, "but I was afraid of the repercussions if I did."

"The dining room is just perfect, Venus. I've got cabin fever from spending too much time in hotel rooms lately. Too much time spent behind closed doors isn't good for a woman. This is just perfect. Thank you."

Stuck indoors or not, the doctor was still tan. Her skin freckled and her hair almost white from all those years of being in the sun. The green eyes were still as bright and as insightful-looking as ever, Venus noted, seeming to see right through her, just as they always did, with that same glint in them that promised to keep whatever she found in there a secret.

There was sorrow in there, not so hidden. Venus was sure the doctor would detect that, too, even if she was exhausted. "I'm sorry, Dr. Kristenson. This must be such a nightmare for you. I am so sorry about what has happened. Sorry about everything. I want you to understand that."

The doctor closed her eyes. Her head hurt. "You don't have anything to be sorry for, Venus. It's life and it's a thousand times better than the alternative. Believe me, I ought to know—did the foundation having any luck locating the Yangs or not?"

"No," Venus replied. "The Red Cross reports that those islands are impassable now, many recently abandoned."

The rest of their conversation was mostly medical.

Outside, on the street, or from stuffy hotel rooms, from taxis in traffic en route to the airport, the reporters were doing their stuff already, pecking out their messages on their cell phones and e-mailing glamour shots from their laptops. The story of Venus and Dr. Kristenson, coming face-to-face at last, and what the ladies wore, was the late breaking news of the day.

"—this meeting is not about airing our personal differences and I cannot comment about those at this ti—"

"Wow, nice dresses," John said. "I don't know which one I like best. Hers or hers."

"Be quiet," Paula replied. "I want to hear this."

"—the doctor and I are meeting today for the purposes of further advancing the mission of the Kristenson Foundation and that we do so at the request of the—"

"Board of directors," Paula blurted. "Jolly good for the board of directors!"

"I'm sure the doctor would agree with me—"

"Bet she wouldn't," John said under his breath.

"—continue unfettered and that such work takes priority over any private concerns that may exist between—"

"Paula...?"

"Uh-oh," said John, jumping to his feet. "Good morning, Ms. Beaumont. Can I get you some coffee?"

"Ms. Angelo, do you really expect us to believe that the subject of Lydia Beaumont will not come up this afternoo—"

"Good morning, John. No, thanks. I'm going home, Paula. I can't focus."

"I don't know what you believe and I have no expectations of you. Next question, please."

Paula scoffed. "You get her some coffee, John, and turn that thing off. You're not going home, Lydia, so grow up. You're only making cameo appearances here as it is. One full day isn't going to kill you no matter what's going on."

"I'll be right back," John said.

"Well, maybe if you got rid of those hell hounds out front I could come in more often," Lydia complained. "It's a long way to drive just to be harassed."

"I've tried to," Paula said, "but they seem to spontaneously generate. Look, we're meeting Del at the club at one and Del always makes you laugh. I don't specialize in laughter, as you know, so I can't help you out there, but you can make it till one, I should think."

At one o'clock, since no one else knew what to say about the summit talks in Paris or whether détente had been achieved through them, Lydia opined, "It's macabre. Isn't it?"

Del shook her head and said, "Awesome dress Helaine was wearing, though. That's a difficult color to wear, baby pink, but I guess if you wear it tight like that you can pull it off."

Lydia rolled her eyes and Paula shot daggers from hers.

By one o'clock the next day, the tight-fitting, pink dress dwarfed all other aspects of the Angelo-Beaumont-Kristenson affair, and showed the two contenders, by a photo-finish, finally running neck in neck together. Paris, already a veritable steam bath, just got hotter.

"Wow, what do you do for an encore?"

"I wilt, Robert. It's gotten brutal here."

"I believe you. It was pretty had two weeks ago. You've got your papers now, though, so why don't you just come home?"

"To where? I have no home. She sold it. Sold everything."

"Now, Helaine, that's being uncommonly severe. We've told you many times that our guest room is yours indefinitely. Once and for all then, come home. We miss you."

Another half hour of this ardent home-is-where-the-heart-is approach would prove just as useless, too.

"Well? Is she coming home?" Kay asked, when he was off the phone.

"She's thinking of going to London to escape the heat," he told her. "She won't have to fly to London, she can go by boat, she says."

"Oh, no, it's not going to be much better in London! What will we tell Lydia? Lydia's left another message again."

"I have absolutely no idea," he admitted. "What does Paula think?"

Paula thinks that Lydia's going to have a breakdown if somebody doesn't, "shit or get off the pot soon," and she's said as much to both Venus and Helaine, asking each of them to consider what kind of a victory that would actually bring them. Even Sharon hadn't been able to accomplish such a terrible feat, try as she had so many times. "I have prepared a guest house here for you. It's climate controlled and awaiting your inspection, Helaine. If you leave tomorrow morning, you can be cool and refreshed by suppertime. Moreover, if you need us to, Dickie and I will gladly come to Paris and accompany you back to the states. I don't know the content or the extent of your talks with Ms. Angelo this week, but I'm certain you'll be able to contemplate it all much better if you were out of that sauna and physically comfortable. I can assure you, you will be more comfortable here, Helaine. We will spare no expense."

Her generous offer was graciously declined, Paula regretted to inform Delilah. "She doesn't want to come home. She's not ready yet. She doesn't know when, or if, she ever will be. The end."

"The mercury's climbing and they're predicting it'll top a hundred degrees in Europe by the end of the week. I'll call her then and see if she's changed her mind," Delilah promised.

By the end of the week it had, indeed, reached a hundred and one degrees in the center of the world called Paris and the news was filling with reports of heat related fatalities. You can boil an egg in the Seine, one tabloid declared.

Delilah had cooked up a scheme of her own in the interim and, although she was braced for a similar response to her top secret proposal, she phoned Helaine with it anyway. Her call was met with the alarming disclosure that Dr. Kristenson had just checked out and was no longer a patient at their facility. "Where is she?" she asked them, in horror. "Did she transfer somewhere else? Is she still in France?"

"Te ne sais pas." (They didn't know.)

"They don't know?" Paula said, both her eyebrows and her ire raised now.

"Yes, they don't," Delilah repeated.

So, even though Delilah suspected those declarations to be rather dubious, "I don't know," is, nevertheless, what she was required to tell Lydia that same evening when she telephoned. I don't know, she heard herself saying to everything Lydia asked about it, including whether or not Venus had returned yet. Venus, too, Delilah and Paula had subsequently discovered, was missing in action, having checked out of her hotel around the same time as Dr. Kristenson had and, like the doctor, leaving no forwarding address or phone number, either. Her cell phone was apparently dead, too. No way to leave her a message.

"Shit," was Paula's best response to that.

Shit, Delilah thought, too.

The runaway brides was a mystery that everyone expected the international press to solve for them and to do so immediately but, nearly two weeks later, there was still no answer to the burning question WHERE IS DR. KRISTENSON? No answer, either, to WHERE DID VENUS GO?

"Well, Lydia, if the police insist it's not a matter for the police, then we can safely deduce that, wherever they are, they're all right and they haven't killed each other," Stan said, in an effort to reassure his rattled client. "What I need to know is, do you want me to go ahead and file these papers for you? It's your call. I'll do whatever you want me to."

"Do it, Stan. File them for me. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong, but I just can't wait any longer."

She just couldn't wait any longer, so she went ahead, as well, and had Marcus and Roy haul her old queen-size mattress down from Helaine's room, and the brass bed while they were at it, the antique dresser, the chifforobe. She would sleep in style now in her guest room on the first floor of the lake house, albeit she was sleeping there alone once more, with no idea how or when that might be corrected.

A queen-size bed and no one to share it with. Her top two choices, having utterly evaporated on some far off continent. No wonder the press was poking fun at her all the time. DROP DEAD, GORGEOUS! the headlines were mercilessly blaring. No joke, Lydia thought. Maybe Dad was right. The ladies were making a fool of her. She should divorce both of them. End this bizarre uncontested contest. Date.

THE SECRET TRILOGY Book Three THE STOLEN KISS

- "Heard anything, Liddy?"
- "Nope."
- "Any word, sweetheart?"
- "Nope."
- "Did your kitty cats call home yet, Queenie?"
- "Nope."
- "Ms. Beaumont! Ms. Beaumont! Have you heard from your wives yet? Can you make a statement?"
- "Nope."
- "Does my esteemed co-president have any good news for me today?"
- "Nope."
- "Cripes, it's going on four weeks now. Enough with the blackout already. You know what I'd do if I were you?"
 - "Paula, I don't and I don't want to. I think I know what I'm doing. Thanks."
 - "I think you hope you know what you're doing. You're welcome."

Chapter 35: Jasmine Angelo

History has shown us that sometimes a victory can be largely symbolic, that it can come with a catch, too, requiring you to make a sacrifice in the short run, in order to preserve something beautiful forever. That kind of victory will look to some like losing, but you don't necessarily have to goose-step down the Champs Elysées and under the Arc de Triomphe to be victorious. You might, as Venus was doing this afternoon with her sister and Mariah, humbly stand atop that arch, on its observation deck, and enjoy a spectacular view of Paris.

"I'm grateful to you for helping me out like this, Jasmine. It would have been impossible to do it myself and Mama would've...well, she wouldn't have wanted me to. That would have been awful. Thank you."

Jasmine, aided and abetted in part by Sebastion, had secreted baby Mariah out of the country weeks ago and, without anybody noticing, smuggled her into France to be with her mother. She had spent most of the summer vacation assisting Venus in ducking the press here. Her role in the ruse now completed, Jasmine was returning to the states today, to face her parents and break the news to them that Mariah and Venus weren't coming back yet. "What are you going to do?" she asked her sister.

"We'll be all right," Venus replied. "They've given up the hunt, I think. No one even knows I never left."

"I meant, are you ever coming back, Venus? Or are you just going to hide here forever?"

No one can hide forever, but Venus wasn't planning on leaving anytime soon. "I'll be back," she said. "When the time is right, I'll come back. Hopefully before this one starts speaking French as her native tongue. Can you imagine that?"

Jasmine chuckled at the idea. "Is that your friend you're staying with or your lover?" she asked. "She looks almost like...well, you know."

"She's my friend, Jasmine. Just a friend."

Jasmine thrust her hands into her pockets and studied her big sister. Venus was still married, her ring finger declared. Everything was so topsy-turvy, so confusing. "Why won't you take Lydia back?" she asked. "After all the trouble you went through. Being scandalized, losing your job. I don't understand you, Venus. I think now that I never did."

Venus had no explanation to offer Jasmine, just half an opaque smile. "Thanks for bringing that other thing, too."

Jasmine had been the ring girl on this trip, as well, retrieving Lydia's old wedding band from Venus's penthouse before locking the place up and leaving for France. She had found it just where Venus had said it would be, stashed in the back of the safe in the bedroom. What a strange thing to keep, Jasmine had thought. Personally, she would have thrown it away. "You're going to be able to stay in that tiny apartment, the three of you together?" she asked "That's no bigger than my dorm room and there's only two of us there and it still feels crowded."

A practical side to Jasmine was slowly, but steadily, emerging. Venus was glad to see it. "Unh-uh, no way. I'll never live in a closet again," she said, with a laugh. "Don't worry about me, Jasmine. I've hired someone to find an apartment near the river. It'll be a nice change for us, I'm hoping. For awhile, anyway. Until things finally blow over."

"Is your friend going to live there with you?" Jasmine asked.

"No, she loves Marais and her beatnik apartment. She'll never leave that neighborhood, I think, and I really wouldn't want her to."

"Eeey," Mariah murmured, through with her power nap.

"And what am I supposed to tell Mama when she asks about your plans, Venus? What am I gonna tell her about all this?"

"I'll talk to Mama and tell her to leave you out of it. Besides, Sebastion says he'll take the blame for everything. We'll just blame Mr. Jones then. He's a great guy, isn't he?"

Jasmine shyly agreed. She had a crush on Sebastion. "Can I ask you something else? You probably won't answer me but, what exactly is the doctor doing? Why did she leave?"

"Dr. Kristenson has some medical concerns, Jasmine. She's gone elsewhere for a second opinion. There are other issues, too, that she's grappling with. That could take some time, of course, but we wish her well, don't we, Mariah?"

"Beaumum...eeey."

"Are you ever going to tell me what you two talked about?" Jasmine pursued. "One would think you could share that with your sister."

Mariah was fidgeting now, hungry, and Jasmine had a plane to catch. "I guess I'd better walk you back to your hotel now," Venus said, "or you'll miss your flight today."

They trekked back solemnly to the hotel again, Mariah chirping the whole way, impervious to the heat. Damn, it felt hotter than the ghetto ever did, Venus mused. Hot or cold, she was a long way from the ghetto, in either case.

"Last leg," Jasmine said, the suitcase finally packed and an overheated cabby honking madly for her downstairs.

"Just make sure to deliver that letter for me," Venus reminded her when they were out on the curb. "And then your mission will be accomplished, kid. I'll owe you one."

"She'll get it, Venus. Scout's honor."

"Scout's honor it is then-adieu."

"Liddy, turn the news on."

"I'm sick of the news, Del, and I've got to go in ten minutes and subject myself to Paula and the vice presidents. I feel like a bug in a bell jar. What is it now?"

"I just wanted to tell you that she's back, Liddy. Call me if you need to talk later. I've got a meeting now, too."

She's back. The woman that launched a thousand pinks. Come home at last, wherever home was going to be. Lydia watched her over and over again on all the media outlets covering the event.

There was Helaine, disembarking from her jet, sometime this morning, the Keagans flanking her sides, the three of them getting in a limousine without commenting, the three of them smiling the same way. Jubilant. Or so it would seem. It was hard to tell what was actually going on behind those dark glasses.

"You're late. Get in here. We've had to start without you."

"She's back, Paula, and she didn't contact me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

She's back. She didn't call. She's back. She didn't call. This afternoon's meeting went by in a blur and Lydia left afterward with her ears humming, all she got out of the strategy session. No strategy of her own, she sat in her office then wondering what she should do next. Nothing, is what her instincts told her. She didn't even call Delilah back.

"Ms. Beaumont?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but there's an Anna Grisholm who wishes to speak to you. Shall I just tell her you're busy?"

"Anna Grisholm? She's here?"

"No, on the phone."

Now what could Anna want? "Put her on for me."

"Line one, Ms. Beaumont."

"Good afternoon, Anna. What can I do for you? How are you?"

"Hello, Lydia. I'm fine, thank you. I need to chat with you today. It's very important. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Not over the phone. I need to meet with you."

"I'm-where?"

"Don't panic, my dear. I was thinking the waterfront. I have to give you something."

"Give me something, Anna? What is it?"

"On the boardwalk. Say half an hour?"

Half an hour later, Lydia was pacing the crowded boardwalk, watching the ships disappear into a haze, and waiting in trepidation for Anna. It was a mixed up day and her heart was a firmament. She wanted to chuck it into the water. Watch it fizz. Helaine had come home at last, but she hadn't called her.

"Lydia."

"Anna."

"You look distressed. I'm terribly sorry to see that."

Distressed wasn't the word for it. "I thought I might have missed you, Anna. That's all."

"She's back, I'm sure you must know. She flew in this morning, Lydia."

"I'm aware of that. I mean, I happened to catch it on the news."

"She didn't notify you, Lydia? You didn't know she was coming back?"

"Well, I guess she's...what did you need to talk to me about, Anna? You said it was important. You have something of mine?"

"Yes," Anna said, her smile filled with pathos today. "Well, it seems that I am forever coming upon your jewels," she attempted to tease.

"My jewels? Again? I—I left my—?"

"No, you didn't. Here, hold out your hand for me."

Lydia held out her hand and Anna placed an object in it, covering it with her own. "Venus sent me this, Lydia. She thought you might be needing it."

It was a ring, Lydia just knew it. She closed her eyes. "Is it my ring, Anna?" she asked. "I don't want my ring back from Venus. Did she take off my ring?"

Anna had turned to go. "No. She'll never give that one back, she said to tell you."

Lydia opened her eyes again. It was a wedding ring in her palm, though. One made of platinum. Just like Helaine's. "Anna!" she called out, but Anna was already gone.

She stumbled back to the office, limping.

"Where the heck did you go to?" Paula demanded.

"I went to the—why?"

"Your mother called looking for you, Lydia. She says it urgent."

A day of bad news. It had to be more bad news. Mom never calls at work. "Did she tell you what it's about?"

Paula wasn't saying. "Just call her, for Pete's sake. She never calls you here."

Lydia headed for her own office to do it.

"Your mother's been calling," the secretary told her, as Lydia flew by her desk.

"I heard. Get her on the phone for me, please. I'll take it in my office."

Once in her office, she dropped her blinds, locked her door and sat in the dark, waiting.

"Your mother's on line two, Ms. Beaumont. Sorry it took me so long."

"That's okay—Marilyn? What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Lydia Ann, you have to come home now. You have to come to the lake house this instant."

Marilyn was overwrought, Lydia could hear. About to cry, she thought. "Why, Mom? What's wrong?"

"Sweetheart...there's someone here asking for you. Come home now."

"Someone's there? Is it an emergency? You sound upset."

"No, but it's urgent. You need to come directly."

"But I'll be leaving here in a few hours anyway. Can't it...can it wait until then?"

"Lydia, sweetheart. She's here. She's come to the lake. She's at the lake house now, honey, with her luggage."

She? "Who's she, Marilyn?"

"Helaine."

Chapter 36: Lana Beaumont-Kristenson

The two most commonly misplaced items under the sun: myself and my keys. When a key is hopelessly lost, however, the situation can be easily remedied. You just have to change the lock and start all over again with a brand-new combination. Unfortunately, it's not as simple as that if it's *you* that you lose, as Dr. Kristenson has painfully and painstakingly discovered.

Finding yourself again, she has learned, is not just about remembering your name, or what you've done, or where you've been. Who you are is who you are, after all, with or without a name or documentation. Who you are is not merely who you were, a fragile memory stored precariously in your head. It's in your heart, too, she recognized, and the heart never forgets.

Helaine sat on the bed in Lydia's guest room, one leg tucked beneath her and the other hanging over the edge of it, tapping with the heel of her shoe a nervous rhythm on the floorboards.

These were theirs, she kept telling herself. The bed and the dresser and the chair and the chifforobe. The things upstairs, too. Theirs. Lydia had saved them all. Even her private things were up there, Helaine had found. Her books. Her dresses. Her shoes. Her jewelry and gowns. All of her things were here with Lydia. All of *their* things were here. Her...everything.

Everything, except Lydia.

Marilyn had phoned Lydia at work from here more than two hours ago, and after that she and Roy had left, leaving Helaine alone in the big house to rest after her journey, to "acclimate." For more than two hours hence, Helaine had been investigating her dazzling new home and the preparations that had been made for her, and it had become a treasure hunt with each new find. Her heart and soul were full of precious things again, things remembered and things forgotten, things that had been wished for and things that were yet to come. For over two hours she had been searching in her mind, too, trying to think of what she would say when Lydia finally got there.

There were so many things she should and could say.

She should start with thank you, she knew. Lydia had placed their names together on the deed to this property and her lawyer had discreetly delivered it to Robert last week, along with a brief message Lydia had wanted him to convey. Helaine was no longer homeless, that message read. Not unless she truly wanted to be.

She truly didn't, but besides words of gratitude now, there were other things she felt the need to say. Not about the gardens or the rooms, which were perfection, or the almost heart-shaped lake out there, which was divine, but about imperfect things that she could not reckon with alone or in silence.

She would have to speak of them. She would begin by telling her what it's like to fall from the sky and to be mistaken for dead. She would tell her then how devastated she was to come back from Hades only to learn that her wife had wed in her absence, was happily remarried to a younger woman, a rival, without a thought or care of her former mate. She would tell her about all the time she had wasted, needlessly languishing on a desert island, in the middle of nowhere, dreaming of someone who had long since forgotten her. She would tell her how she had lived for just that one dream, that one joyous day when she would see her again, lie in her arms and be satisfied. She would tell her that she had dreamt of her like that, chaste, day and night and night and day, and never knew she had been forsaken, never believed for a minute that she could ever be forsaken by her. She would tell her how awful that was to discover that she was wrong about this. She would tell her it was like a death, that knowledge. She would say that there was no pain that she had ever experienced that could compare with it...

157

She had given it a lot of thought. What she would say. She stood at the front door of the lake house with her hand on the doorknob. Through the glass, she could see Helaine's bags in the parlor. Seven of them in a tidy row. Lucky seven. That was the same number she had left with over three years ago. Lydia pushed the door open and walked inside. There were travel tags hanging from Helaine's luggage. France. Switzerland. The USA.

Switzerland. Doctors.

First, she would say thank you for coming home. Then she would tell her how sorry she was about everything. She would tell her, right off the bat, that she never stopped thinking of her, not ever really, but that, after awhile, it had seemed that such thoughts might be deadly. She would tell her how lonely it was waking in the mornings without her, every night so dark and so long. She would say that she was going to make it all up to her somehow now, though, make up for all their lost time, those three stolen years. She would tell her that she had started already by quitting her job this afternoon, breaking her contract with Soloman-Schmitt and taking an early retirement. She would tell her that everything will be fine from here on in and...and the gate to the stairs was open. "Lana?" she called. "Lana, I'm home now. Are you up there?"

"No, I'm in here, darling," a drowsy siren answered. "In the bedroom, Lydia."

She found the guest room awash in sunlight, the bed a riot of blond. "Lana, I...I'm sorry I'm so late. Believe me, I got here as soon as I could."

"Hah—me, too, darling. Me, too."

Chapter 37: The Woman of the House

Romantic, fanciful, lavish, eccentric, eclectic, ornamental and, most assuredly, feminine. These are the words that best describe the Queen Anne style of architecture which reached the height of its popularity in the early part of the twentieth century. These are the words that best describe the lake house.

Gates and locks and bars on the windows have no business being here among ornate spindles and woodworking, stained glass designs and parquet floors. And what good is a turret, anyway, if it has no access, or an upstairs master bedroom that only the guests can use?

But gates, locks, bars, motion detectors, heavy drapes and scads of peace and quiet were what the doctor in Paris had recommended Lydia provide Helaine with, should the two ever reunite and live together again. She would require an ultra safe environment, she had said. It was good advice and, remember, it only cost Lydia two dozen long-stem roses to get.

As obtrusive as they were, the safety devices the doctor prescribed helped to prevent Helaine from unwittingly harming herself while she roamed in her sleep, and the peace and quiet of the elegant Queen Anne was instrumental in recovering from the sleepwalking, the night terrors and the bouts of insomnia that she was still experiencing when she first moved in. Those fixtures were to remain at the lake house for as long as she suffered from these symptoms, for three more years then, until even Marilyn eventually got used to seeing them there.

In three more years, Helaine was virtually symptom-free of her sleeping disorders which were, at their core, caused by post traumatic stress and not her head injury, as she had feared. But the nightmares and insomnia would still crop up from time to time, particularly if she was anxious about something or scheduled for a public appearance.

Public appearances, as a consequence, were kept to a minimum and, true to her word, Helaine never did fly again, so if one wanted to hear one of those rare Dr. Kristenson lectures or attend one of her annual book signings, they had to come to the states to do it, specifically the mainland.

As with her goal to resume her directorship of the Kristenson Foundation, Helaine's hopes to reopen her private practice once she'd recuperated, were, for obvious reasons, never realized either. Venus remained at the helm of the foundation and Helaine, instead, accepted the offer made to her by a newspaper syndicate for a weekly advice column and, although it wasn't as rewarding as her charity work was, or as fulfilling as the one-on-one counseling had been, it helped to fill the gap that was left without them. That gave her plenty of free time, however, to write her autobiography, which is, even today, years after its first release, a current bestseller. In fact, On a Clear Day has become even more popular than her first book was, Keeping Mr. Right.

If she had actually completed her world tour, if her plane hadn't crashed preventing it, then the lake house would have simply been Helaine's birthday present from Lydia and, at the most, a part time place for the two of them to go to whenever they could get away, just as it had been for the Beaumont family decades prior. Fate intervened to make it their permanent residence, however, slowing down their hectic lives considerably and filling them up with a peace they had never expected to own. It was a peace Helaine often described as a "perpetual springtime," like those of the impressionist painters she so adored and hung on the walls.

Although the women of the house endured the grueling winters there as well as the halcyon months of summer, their home on the lake was, indeed, a perpetual springtime for its many guests. Spring was usually when they began descending on Lydia and Helaine. Visitors' memories of the place would not be of icicles and snowdrifts then, but of garden parties and wine-tastings and impromptu skinny dipping in a secluded, spring-fed lake, even one outlandish week-long wedding—that of Delilah and Marcus.

A taste of perpetual springs and of everlasting summers was had by everyone who came to the lake house, but summer, the real summer, belonged to Mariah.

Helaine had never wanted to be a mother but, once posed with the prospect of motherhood, even part time, only for summers, she found she had no real objection to it. She had learned all about Mariah from Venus that day she'd met with her in Paris and she knew it would be a challenging situation for everyone concerned, that it would require patience to strike a compromise and, if patience proved not to be enough, then lawyers, sadly.

Venus had stayed behind in France with the child for over nine months, weaning her and hoping that things would cool down in the states so that they might sneak back there one day unnoticed. As a consequence, Lydia hadn't seen or heard from Mariah for a year and Grandma Beaumont was very displeased about it and with what she had mistaken as apathy on Lydia's part about the estrangement.

Lydia had all the while asserted that the impasse would heal itself in time and, true to form, steadfastly refused to pressure Venus about it, ignoring Marilyn's many impassioned pleas that she call on Stan to legally pursue the matter in court.

Helaine, like Daddy Beaumont, had made a point to stay out of it. She had no opinion, she would say, every time Lydia's mother brought up the subject.

But Lydia was right about Venus and the situation did heal itself. Venus contacted Delilah when she returned again and, through Delilah, good-natured Delilah, the two were able to settle on visitation arrangements.

Then, and only then, did Helaine find it necessary to add her input, and this she did aside, and in a very hushed voice. "When I am gone, I will have no say about you and Venus. That's only fair. But, so long as I am alive, and we are together, you are not going to her place, Lydia. Not to pick up Mariah. Not to drop her off. Not ever. So those visitation terms, in light of everything, are not going to be acceptable to me."

"But, Helaine, I—"

"No buts, Lydia. I would be a fool to allow it. I insist on a different arrangement. This one I will not tolerate."

"Oh, Lana, it'll be all right, I swear to you."

But swearing was for naught, because Helaine had no intention of backing down on this, of being placated by anyone about it and then running a risk and living forever in suspicion, or worse, with regret. "Do you see that man out there, darling?" she asked. "You see him mowing the lawn?"

The gardener was there that day, a good looking fellow about Helaine's age. A Paul Newman. "Yes?"

Helaine stared out the window as she spoke, her eyes glued on him riding the lawnmower, oblivious to his significance in their scheme-of-things. "If you do this, darling, do it over my objections and with my reasonable fears about it, then I will sleep with our handsome gardener out there. I will be certain to do that right away and more than once, Lydia. Not because I want to, you understand, but because I can. Because he would like that. It would be very, very easy."

"Helaine...that's not funny."

"I don't mean it to be funny. I'm not joking."

"Helaine, trust me. I would nev-"

"And then I will see to it, myself, that my sordid affair with our gardener is leaked to the press. I know how you feel about the press, darling. Do you know how I feel about you seeing Venus again?"

Lydia considered the man on the mower in a different light that day. Truth is, she had never given him much thought before. He was just the guy who came and cut the grass for her and weeded sometimes in the gardens, someone Marilyn had gushed over. But that he came highly recommended to her didn't matter anymore. She intended to fire him right away.

"And if you fire him," Helaine warned her, "I will deem that in bad faith and act accordingly."

Accordingly, Lydia did not fire the gardener, though she always, thereafter, treated him somewhat coolly.

"But, Liddy, why the change of plans? I thought we'd worked it all out with Venus?"

From the wraparound porch that day, Lydia had paused in her phone conversation to watch Helaine meander barefoot down to the gazebo in the middle of the lawn, looking sultry and tempting in a strapless summer dress and casting don't-try-me glances in her direction. "Well," Lydia began to explain to Delilah, "I was just thinking about it and that, um, well, you know, in deference to my, uh, that it wouldn't be

comfortable for me to do it that way, Del. You know? I think it would probably not be such a good idea to, maybe, do things that way, after all."

"Hah, ha, ha. That's the sound of me laughing at your expense, Liddy. Don't worry, kiddo. Tell Helaine I'll come up with something different then. Something we can all feel comfortable with."

Lydia waited until the lawnmower man was finished with his chores and his truck was gone before delivering Delilah's message to Our Lady of the Gazebo.

"Thank you, darling, you did the right thing," Helaine replied. "It was very thoughtful of you."

Their discussion trailed off into sweet-nothings after that. Sweet-nothings and, later in the evening, a bubble bath.

Ultimately, everyone decided they would feel more comfortable with a plan whereby Delilah picked up Mariah at Venus' and subsequently dropped her off again. Delilah would become the neutral zone for everybody, their "domestic facilitator" as she preferred to call it.

Whatever her title, she was their perfect compromise. Delilah and Marcus chauffeured Mariah to and from the lake house every year thereafter.

In all those years that would come and pass that way, Lydia never saw and never spoke to Venus. If she wanted to know how she was doing, how she was getting on, she had to ask Mariah.

"How's Mama?" she might have inquired, when Helaine wasn't around.

"She's good," the little girl usually replied, or sometimes she'd even elaborate. "But Mama's mad, Beaumom."

"She's mad, is she? Is she mad at me or is she mad at you?"

"Well...she's mostly mad at the frog I brung home last week."

"Oh." Venus didn't like frogs, Lydia remembered, or anything that was slippery or crawled.

Frogs and fish and caterpillars and fireflies—Mariah was a captivating child, but she really won Helaine's heart with her interest in roses.

"Why are they like this?" she asked her one day. "Why is there so much in them, Lana? They're so thick."

"Those are petals, sweetheart. It's the way that roses grow."

"And why are there all these colors? That looks brown, that one. Brown. And why is that one blue?"

The garden was full of Marilyn's old rose bushes, some of them hybrid varieties that she had experimented with, just for their color. There were blues in there that looked just like they were made of frosting, Mariah said, just like decorations on a birthday cake. There were also some that were a deep red, a blood-red, so dark that they would seem brown to a child. Yucky.

"Is it supposed to be this color," Mariah had asked, "or is there something wrong with it?"

Helaine had put her pruning shears aside then, to discuss with a five-year-old child the color of roses. The natural colors of roses, and the colors that people had sought from manipulating them, and the meanings that were associated with those various colors, and what people sought from roses in general, and what they meant when they sent them.

"Hmm," Mariah said, at the end of the lesson. "If you were a rose, Lana, I think you would be this white one."

"Ah-ha. Thank you. And Beaumom? What color would she be, Mariah?"

"Red," Mariah declared.

"Red. Yes, I agree with you. She's a red one. And your mother? What color rose is your mother?"

That was simple, too, Mariah's face said. "Mama's yellow," she replied, smiling to herself confidently. "That's her favorite color."

Helaine hadn't known that about Venus. She sent the child home with a bouquet of yellow roses that week, making certain there weren't any bugs or caterpillars hiding inside them.

Life, hidden among the roses, was a good life and it turned out to be a good choice for Helaine and Lydia, one they never regretted. Spring, summer, autumn, winter, it was always calm and tranquil on the lake, just what the doctor in Paris had ordered, what the doctors in Switzerland had also prescribed.

Could two people so used to being in the limelight settle for just this: plain old sunshine and moonbeams and their private reflections until death do they part?

Yes, and, save for an excursion now and then to the city, to dine and be spoiled by the maitre-de at Frank's Place, or for the occasional impulse visit to Lavender Lane Hotel for old times' sake, a book signing, a lecture, they never ventured very far from their Queen Anne. Not for eleven uninterrupted years.

But whether one chooses to retreat someplace or not, a lot can still happen in eleven years. A friend marries, a daughter grows, a former mentor and colleague retires, a brother finally makes his peace, a father dies in his sleep, and a spouse suddenly falls ill, complications from an old head injury.

Eleven is a prime number. That's how Lydia regards it now, Helaine passing away in her prime last year. Sixty-one is a prime number, as well. She was sixty-one years old when she died, dying in the cruelest month—November.

When the ground is frozen, burials are impossible and they're customarily postponed until it thaws again; Helaine was finally interred five months after her death, in her favorite month of April. Thus, her empty grave site was filled at last and, this time, it was for real.

Her funeral that spring, marked the first time that Lydia spoke to Venus again, and the first time, since the day she moved out of their penthouse, that she saw her in person. Throughout the service, they'd both stood on either side of their daughter, looking straight ahead and never once at each other. Afterward, as people crowded near to express their condolences, Venus quickly whispered goodbye to Lydia and she and Mariah slipped away.

Helaine's widow watched them from the corner of her eye with a mixture of regret and relief as they were leaving. A quiet gathering at the lake house had been planned after the funeral and there would be no need to be anxious about it then. Venus had made it perfectly clear that she wouldn't be attending.

After Helaine's death, after she was laid to rest, Lydia did not go into a self-imposed exile, as she once would have done. She didn't go into the scotch or dry martinis approach, either. As a matter of fact, life for her at the lake house pretty much resumed as it had, only without Helaine in it. As might be expected, though, there was a tremendous void without her mate and, naturally, in an effort to fill it, Lydia focused her attention on Mariah. Spending more of her time with Mariah gave her some solace.

It took awhile to dawn on everyone that the transportation arrangements which had existed for more than eleven years were no longer necessary and, since Mariah was visiting the lake house more frequently now, also not that convenient.

"I don't see any reason why you can't call each other and figure out a new plan, Liddy. We don't mind bringing Mariah when we can, but we can't do it as often as she'd like us to, so you've got to work out something with Venus. It's time, I'd say."

As the transportation arrangements had become outmoded, so, too, had the concept of never speaking with Venus again. It was no longer practical. Lydia telephoned her with a proposal.

But hyper-vigilant Venus did not go for Lydia's idea of merely sending Mariah to the countryside in a limousine. Venus worried about the girl being alone on the highway with just a chauffeur for protection. She worried about kidnappers and perverts and bandits, she said. "How would we ever live with ourselves if something happened?"

Kidnappers and perverts and bandits are, unfortunately, a reality, so something else had to be devised in order to address those concerns.

So that's how it came to be that Lydia would go to Venus' and pick up their daughter in the lobby.

This routine worked out fairly well. For a couple of weeks anyway.

"Mariah's not here? I don't understand. Where is she, Venus?"

Lydia had been forced to take the elevator to the penthouse.

"She's at her friend's. She'll be here within the hour, she says. I'm sorry for the inconvenience," Venus added. "She does that to me sometimes, too."

Teenagers. It's not an age, it's a condition, Marilyn used to say. Lydia refrained from repeating it, for her own sake. "Well, what should I...do you mind if I just wait up here for her then? Am I keeping you from something?"

"Not at all," Venus said. "Come in and make yourself comfortable."

She did not feel comfortable doing so, but she came in anyway and waited on a stool in the kitchen as Venus poured some coffee for the two of them, their first cup of coffee together in over a decade.

"Still black with raw sugar, right?"

"Yes, thank you," Lydia answered, feeling goofy now and inadvertently appraising Venus, watching her hands and wondering whatever happened to the wedding ring that used to be there on her finger. Her own was in a safe deposit box, but maybe Venus had simply thrown hers away. Lydia could understand why she might have.

"And still light and sweet for me," Venus said, sipping her coffee while standing.

There was a slight hint of gray in Venus' hair and Lydia decided it made her look distinguished, though she wondered why she didn't color it. Otherwise she might have been ageless to her, an age-defying thirty-five or thirty-six in that tailored jacket, tight slacks and heels.

"How's that knee treating you?" Venus asked. "Still giving you problems?"

Her knee wasn't what it used to be. She'd had surgery on it several years ago and, while it didn't hurt her anymore, it was stiff sometimes and looked kind of lumpy. "I had surgery on it, Venus. I don't know if Mariah mentioned that or not. It's pretty good if I keep up with my exercises, but it stiffens up on me if I don't."

Venus nodded, a slight smile forming at the corner of her lips which she was trying to fight off. "You're looking good, Lydia. What do you do for exercise these days?"

Lydia blushed then, a blush she hadn't blushed in years and swiveled her chair around so her back was now to Venus. "I swim mostly," she said. "And I'm walking quite a lot, too. I'm not supposed to run anymore, the doctor says. It'll just aggravate it."

"Ah."

The penthouse, Lydia could see, had undergone some mild changes, too. New lighting fixtures, new furniture, different paint. And Venus had added more curious pieces to her collection, as well. More art from her travels, Lydia speculated. Secretly, she had, in the very beginning, followed some of Venus' travels, read about them in the papers sometimes or heard about them later from Mariah, when she was old enough to describe them. In those early years of their separation, who Venus Angelo was traveling with was always so fascinating to the media, newsworthy, too, who she was visiting whenever she went to France. Lydia had followed it until she couldn't stand to hear about it anymore, or to read the papers, or to watch the television.

"Lydia, can I ask you some—"

"Beaumom!" shouted Mariah from the elevator. "It's my Beaumom!"

Mariah to the rescue. Lydia stood up to greet her. "Well, it's about ti—what on earth are you wearing, Mariah?"

Tattered hip-huggers and combat boots. "Cool, huh? I'm sorry I made you wait so long," Mariah said, and then, "Hi there, Mama," as an apparent afterthought.

"Oh, how like a serpent's tooth," Venus said. "Hustle now and get your bag, Mariah. Beaumom wants to hightail it. And change into something more respectable, will you? The beggars are dressed better than you are."

"Yup," Mariah replied, on her way to her room. But the order was disobeyed.

"I'll bring our ragamuffin back on Sunday," Lydia said, as they were leaving.

"Sunday, Mama. Peace."

"Peace, Mariah."

On Sunday, Lydia brought her daughter back again, but she declined her invitation to go upstairs. "I've got a long ride, but I'll see you next week. Or do you need a break from me?" she asked.

"Nah, I'll see you next week, Beaumom."

"Excellent. And try not to be late, this time."

But she was again, and the case of the late Mariah would continue to confound Lydia for the weeks to come.

So that's how it came to be that Lydia would go up to Venus' penthouse, instead of waiting in the lobby, to pick up her daughter.

"Maybe we should just call this whole thing off," she said to Venus one evening. Over an hour had passed since she'd arrived and there was still no Mariah and no phone call. "It's starting to seem as if she's not all that interested."

Actually Mariah was very interested in going to the countryside with Lydia, but, right at that moment, she was doing just as she'd been told to do—having her supper with Grandma and Grandpa Angelo—and Lydia, in her inimitable way, was being typically obtuse about everything.

"Listen, Lydia. I've made a nice dinner and she's not here to eat it, so why don't you dine with me tonight while you're waiting?"

The table was set already, set for two, and Venus was dressed to kill tonight.

So Lydia had dinner with Venus.

And that's how it came to be that Lydia would go to Venus' penthouse in order to pick up Mariah there, and have dinner instead while she waited.

This worked out pretty well, too. For a couple of weeks.

"She's what?"

"Mariah's sleeping over a friend's tonight. She must have forgotten, Lydia. It happens. She's a teenager, you know?"

But even the most obtuse woman under the sun would, after awhile, get a little suspicious. "Venus?" "Lvdia."

"Are you trying to get me to sleep here tonight?"

Dinner was in the oven. The candles were lit. Crystal. China. Roses. Venus was trying to see if she could get Lydia to sleep there tonight. "Are you seeing someone else?" she asked.

"Someone else?"

"Are you dating anyone, Lydia?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then, yes, I am. I'm trying to see if I can get Mrs. Angelo-Beaumont in my bed again. Show her how much I missed her. Keep her up all night."

Venus didn't need a suit and tie to swagger anymore. She just had to flash that beguiling smile. Lydia walked around her and sat at the table. There was a jewelry box beside the vase of flowers. She opened it gingerly and closed it again with a sigh.

One long lost sapphire earring finally accounted for. And Venus' wedding band.

"But I'm fifty-six years old now, honey. I'm no maiden."

Venus sat beside her and resisted the temptation to steal a kiss. "Fifty-six years old, huh? Boy, you don't look it to me."

"But I am. So what do you say to that?"

What could be said about it? She is fifty-six now, and she is forty-seven. "Well, Lydia. I guess I'd say I've waited long enough then. Don't you think?"

FRANCINE SAINT MARIE BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE SECRET TRILOGY:

The Secret Keeping
Fortune Is a Woman
The Stolen Kiss
;-) a memoir
Girl Trouble
Sex and Censorability

Visit http://www.fifthcolumnpress.wordpress.com for all the news and views on Francine Saint Marie.

