

The Fixer:
The Naked Man

by Jill Amy Rosenblatt

A Katerina Mills Novella

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THE NAKED MAN

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By

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Books in *The Fixer* (Katerina Mills) Series

by Jill Amy Rosenblatt:

The Naked Man

The Killing Kind

The Last Romanov

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CHAPTER 1

“Katrina, I need help.”

Katerina stumbled out of bed, her cell phone slipping from her hand.

“Damn it,” she muttered. Fumbling for the lamp, she snapped it on, blinking several times against the harsh light. She heard the low tone of the man’s voice, now coming from under the bed. Even from a distance he sounded frightened and hysterical.

“Katrina? Katrina?”

Bending over the side of the bed, her long chestnut hair cascading onto the floor, she groped for her phone. She grabbed it, bringing it to her ear.

“This is *Katerina*. Who is this?”

“Katr—, it’s Joe Lessing. I’m a friend of Phil’s. You remember me, right?”

Kat worked to match the voice to a face. After a moment, the film of sleep dropped away. Medium height. Built like a boxer. Strong jaw. Black hair with a widow’s peak.

“Yes, Mr. Lessing. How can I help you?”

She listened to Joe Lessing's labored breathing at the other end of the phone; he sounded like he had just come in from a brisk jog. The clock radio read twelve-thirty. It was a little late for a run around the reservoir.

“I can’t find Phil. Do you know where he is?”

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“He’s not answering his cell phone.”

“Mr. Lessing, I don’t work for Mr. Castle anymore. Maybe his current assistant can help you—”

“Shit! Shit!” Lessing's voice rose. “SHIT!”

“Mr. Lessing—”

“Listen, Katri—Katerina—I need some help. Be a good girl and come over here and I’ll make it worth your while. Okay?”

Katerina answered with silence. She had met Joe Lessing maybe three times when she worked for Philip. He never struck her as a crazed, rapist murderer...until now. Not a good idea, she thought. *Whatever this is, I don't need it.*

“Look, this is on the level. I’m in some shit here and I need a little help. It’s worth a thousand dollars.”

That I do need. Desperately. “Okay...twenty minutes.”

“Make it ten. It’s a matter of life or death.”

“Which is it?”

“I’m not sure.” He gave his address and hung up.

Kat considered his comment and then threw on a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, and laced into a pair of ankle boots. She twisted her mass of hair into a sloppy braid. Stuffing some cash, ID, cellphone, and her trusty pepper spray in her pockets, she rushed out into the brisk New York City night. Against her better judgment, she took the subway. But, if there should be a police investigation, a cabbie, overeager to cooperate, would be a liability. In one of his many moments of ego and hubris, Philip had bragged about his golden rule of “fixing” people’s problems: get in, get out, get gone. Don’t linger. See everything but never be seen.

Keeping alert for drunkards, creepers, and other assorted predators lying in wait, she kept one hand in her pocket, her finger on the button of the palm-sized can of pepper spray.

She found Lessing's building. She glanced up, the bite of the chilly October night air making her give a quick, involuntary shiver. She pushed the call box button.

“Who is it?” Lessing sounded apprehensive.

Who do you think it is? “Katerina.”

The buzzer rang. Kat slipped inside.

She found the apartment door ajar. She inched inside. A colorful Persian rug covered most of the foyer. Examining the bright pattern of red, blue, and black and finding no sign of blood, she relaxed. She took tentative steps inside, scanning the living room. Everything was neat and in order.

“Mr. Lessing?” she said.

“In here,” he called from the end of the hallway.

Kat hesitated. Move ahead or turn back? She crept down the narrow space lined with modern art consisting of colorful paint splatters. The door was open.

Kat peered inside and saw Joe Lessing, a man in his forties, his overdeveloped muscular build now turning fleshy and soft. He was naked, pacing, and breathing hard. His flaccid penis, dangling like an oversized rotini, bobbed and swayed with every step.

Katerina froze. *Oh shit.*

He turned to look at Kat; she saw the panic in his dark eyes.

“Thank God you're here,” he said, turning to the bed. It was a massive four poster with a distressed wooden chest squatting at its foot. A Queen Anne style night stand on each side held a Tiffany lamp. But it was the unconscious, naked blonde woman lying on top of the rumpled covers that grabbed Kat's attention.

“I called someone. She said she would try to get here but I can't wait anymore.” He pointed at the bed. “Can you help me, please.”

Kat didn't know what to say to him. When he had come to Philip's office he was always calm and relaxed...and fully dressed. He liked perching on the edge of her desk and talking about his motorcycle, his house in the Hamptons, and his wife.

His wife.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I don't know,” he said in a shaky voice. “I don't know but I have to do something. *We* have to do something.”

He returned to mindless pacing and the penis began dancing again. Kat moved to the bed. The woman had bottle blond hair, a too perfect nose, but her breasts were real, her waist a size zero. Kat leaned over and touched her cheek. Warm.

“I'm fucked, aren't I?” he asked, wiping sweat off his brow. “Am I fucked?”

“She has a pulse,” Kat said.

“Thank Christ,” Lessing said.

“Have you tried waking her?”

“Of course I did! Nothing works!”

“What happened?”

Joe scratched his head like he was trying to work out a difficult math problem. “We were going at it and it was good—shit, it was great—and then she collapsed. Look, we have to get her the hell out of here.”

“When is your wife due, Mr. Lessing?”

Joe gave a short, guilty laugh. “She’s taking a night flight from LAX. She’ll be here soon.”

“What’s soon?”

Lessing’s eyes met hers. “Less than two hours.”

Shit.

“Your —friend needs medical care.”

“I can’t take her to the hospital. No one can know about this. Her husband would be very upset.”

And your wife. “I understand.”

“Please, you work for Phil—or you worked for him—whatever. You *know* people. You can work this out for me, right? You have to make this—” he said, pointing in the general direction of the bed, “go away.”

Kat mentally tried to construct what Philip, the attorney who considered his oath a suggestion rather than a requirement, would do.

“Just a minute,” she said, and pulled out her cell phone. She listened to the ringing on the other end of the line. Finally, there was a click.

“Yeah,” the voice said. A chorus of coughing and gurgling noises followed.

Kat waited for him to finish. “Doc, it’s Kat,” she said when it was quiet. “I need a favor.”

“I don’t get out of bed for less than a thousand,” the raspy voice said, followed by a deep drawing sound for air.

She held the phone away from her ear. “It’s going to cost a thousand.”

“For both of you?”

“No.”

“Will he take Travelers Checques?”

“No.”

“Will you take Travelers Checques?”

“No.”

“They’re American Express,” Lessing said.

“I don’t care.”

Lessing resumed shuffling. Kat averted her eyes so that the penis was dancing in her peripheral vision. *A miniature Slinky*. She was tired of looking at it.

“Mr. Lessing?”

“Yeah?”

“Put your pants on...please.”

He looked down at himself and then swiped his pants up off the floor.

Kat got back on the phone. “You need to get out of bed.”

“If this needs a cleaner, it’s your problem.”

Kat glanced over at the unconscious woman. “I don’t think so.” She recited the address and hung up. *Good God, I hope not*.

Doc was known only as that—Doc. He was a licensed physician, or at least that’s what Philip always said. He had a black goody bag with the usual items you found in a child’s toy doctor set only they were real: a stethoscope, a thermometer, and bottles of brightly colored pills.

Just under six feet, his frame seemed to struggle under the burden of his bulging stomach. His sagging face, the trophy of a dissipated existence, his silver streaked hair and heavy, jowled cheeks made him look more like a veteran porn producer than a doctor.

Only Doc’s heavy breathing broke the silence of the bedroom. One knee sunk into the mattress as he arched over the naked, unconscious woman, performing an examination.

Kat and Joe hovered on the other side of the bed, watching.

Doc pressed on the woman’s abdomen and ran his fingers in a piano playing motion across the undulating planes of her body, lingering over her breasts.

“Is that necessary?” Kat said.

“A doctor’s hands are sexless,” Doc wheezed.

“Bullshit,” she muttered.

Doc gave a grunt as he pushed his considerable girth off the bed, leaving a deep indent in the mattress. Picking up the woman's purse from the night table, he flicked it open and rooted in the contents.

“So?” Joe said.

“Narcolepsy,” Doc said.

“Bullshit,” Kat and Joe said in unison.

Doc tossed the tiny flame-red clutch on the bed and placed his stethoscope in his bag. He turned to Joe. “A thousand dollars.”

“For that kind of money, aren’t you gonna wake her up?” Joe asked.

“Can’t. She’ll come around on her own.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do with her until then?”

“Wait.”

“For how long?”

Doc gathered his bag. “Not long. A thousand dollars.”

Joe sputtered in objection.

“Mr. Lessing,” Katerina said, “you need to give Doc his money...Mr. Lessing—”

Kat waited for Joe to focus on her. “You need to give Doc his money,” Kat said, her voice strong. “I will find a way to get your friend home. Do we know where her husband is?”

Lessing seemed to have trouble focusing.

“Mr. Lessing—where is her husband?”

“He’s in Jersey. He’s driving back tonight. He could be home already. This was supposed to be a quickie.”

Kat nodded. “The money,” she said. She had no doubt that amount and much more was somewhere in the apartment. When Joe left the bedroom, Kat considered the unconscious woman in the bed. *How the hell am I going to get this woman home?*

She turned to Doc. “You sure about this?”

Doc opened the clutch and pulled out a medical bracelet with an ID tag.

Kat's face flushed. *Shit! I screwed up.*

Doc tossed her the bracelet and she snapped it out of the air with an easy catch. "You're still young, Miss Kitty. You got a lot to learn."

Kat rubbed the bracelet between her fingers.

"She'll be okay. Most of these cycles are short. She'll have a sense of memory loss. Maybe that's good. She'll forget she was in bed with a schmuck."

"Doc—"

"I don't like him."

Lessing came back into the bedroom with a wad of cash. His lips moved as he counted out the bills. He made two separate piles and handed one to Kat and the other to Doc.

"Okay, so," he said. "What now?"

The call box buzzer sounded.

Kat, Joe, and Doc turned toward the door.

Joe Lessing wore blue jeans, a white t-shirt, and a sheepish, cockeyed grin as he opened the apartment door for his wife, Constance, a slender brunette of medium height. She had a hard, unforgiving face and lips that had a generous application of too red lipstick.

"What took you so long?" she snapped.

"Sorry, babe," he said, taking her briefcase. "I fell asleep on the couch."

She grunted at his excuse and brushed past him.

"We need to move out of this place. There's always a bunch of weirdos wandering around."

"Like who?" he asked, vaguely realizing that he usually didn't pay this much attention to her.

Mrs. Lessing let loose a string of complaints as she wandered through the apartment. Joe watched her out of the corner of his eye hoping she wouldn't pick tonight as the night to change her usual habit of tossing her jacket over the chair. She was standing by the closet door.

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Kat had one arm wrapped around the waist of the unconscious woman, her other arm across her chest for support. The woman's dress was half on. Kat was sure she would suffocate in the airless closet, trying not to breathe in the acrid odor of the wife's hideous floral perfume. She listened to Mrs. Lessing's robust bitching while straining against the growing dead weight pulling at her arms.

"...then the elevator doors open and this huge fat guy comes waddling out. He's wearing this sickening aftershave, really disgusting. He stunk up the whole elevator."

The blonde stirred, pulling in a deep breath.

"He looked like a pedophile or a pornographer...and he had this wheeze..."

The blonde raised her head, still drowsy. Kat clamped one hand over the woman's mouth. The blonde's eyes flew open as she tensed into fight mode.

"The wife is home," Kat whispered in her ear.

The blonde froze.

Motionless, they listened to Constance Lessing's voice trail down the hall along with her stiletto heels clicking against the hardwood floor.

"Why the hell do you have the window open? It's forty fucking degrees outside. I wondered why the hell it was so damn cold in here."

Kat and the blonde slid out of the closet, shoes and boots in hand. Treading on the balls of their feet, they raced to the front door and slipped out, hustling down the hallway to the stairwell. Kat cast a last glance back at the apartment door as it closed without a sound.

...

The limo was waiting at the end of the block. A driver, six foot four with skin the color of almonds, leaned against the car. He had an amused look on his face as if someone had just whispered a joke in his ear.

He flipped the back passenger door open and the blonde jumped in.

Katerina handed him a wad of bills which he tucked in his pocket without counting.

"Thanks for the favor, Luther. The lady will tell you where to go."

"No problem, Miss Katerina. Anything for you," he said. With the smirk firmly in place, Luther walked to the driver's side and slid in behind the wheel; he eased the limo away from the curb.

The gentle whirring noise of the electric window rolling down made Kat look back. The blonde's face peeked out. She mouthed the words "thank you" as the limo pulled into traffic.

Kat dropped her boots to the ground, slipped into them, and kneeled to tie the laces. A pair of tawny, slim legs, feet tucked into Louboutin leopard print stilettos stopped in front of her. Kat straightened up and found herself face to face with an impossibly attractive woman a few years older than herself. A shimmering black wraparound dress accentuated her curves; blond, straight, shoulder length hair fluttered in the light breeze.

"I take it you were Plan B," she said.

"Yes," Kat answered.

"It's taken care of," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Kat said.

The woman gave Kat the once over from head to toe. "I'm Lisa. You can tell me all about it over a cup of coffee. If I like what you have to say, I have an opportunity that may interest you."

"What kind of opportunity?"

"One where you make a lot of money, doing what you did tonight."

Kat hesitated, and then nodded.

CHAPTER 2

Someone is in here. Kat froze in the dark entranceway of her apartment. A rush of adrenalin shot through her. Her mind raced. *Get out. Leave. Call the cops.* She saw something on the floor. Ignoring her instincts, she stepped in further, knelt down, and picked it up; a tie. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark and she stood up, placing a hand on a chair; a jacket was draped over the corners. The tension leeches out of her body. She didn't know too many burglars who broke into nondescript, low-rent apartments to strip. The bathroom door opened and a slash of light cut through the darkness.

Philip emerged, naked except for a towel around his waist. Seeing Kat standing with his tie draped over her fingers, he smirked.

"Hi, beautiful," he said, "going to show that on QVC?"

"I hope your apartment is out of hot water," she said, ignoring his remark.

His eyebrows quirked. "No, why?"

"How did you find me, Philip?"

He closed the gap between them. "I'm just back from Boston," he said, caressing her cheek with a feather light touch of his fingers. "And I do have the skills to locate people."

The heat radiating from him made her breath catch in her throat. He was wearing his usual "come hither" smile. Kat knew what that smile meant: a lot of enjoyable moaning and groaning in the night followed by regret and self-loathing in the morning.

"You should've called," she said, walking past him into the bedroom.

The bed had already been turned down. A bottle of wine and two glasses were sitting on the corner of her low dresser.

"We won't be needing those," she said.

"No love for a friend?" he asked, dropping onto the bed.

"No love for an ex-boss."

“But we’re still friends, right?”

“You have lots of friends. You won’t miss one.”

“But you’re my best friend.” He gave her a slow smile. “Aren’t you going to get undressed?”

Kat's lips tightened. She hadn't seen Philip in months. It didn't matter. The college frat boy good looks never changed, the shock of dark hair, the body, lean and fit.

“You don’t mind if I do then, do you?” he asked and the towel was off.

He lay on the bed, exposed without shame and she allowed herself to examine him openly. The ripple of muscle across his stomach, his broad shoulders, were an open invitation for exploration with hands, lips, and tongue.

“I would ask how goes the temp gal Friday gigs,” he said, “but I can see by your new digs, not well.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yes, you are. I bet they all tell you how much they love you.”

“I’m used to hearing that line,” she said. “I don’t believe them either.”

“You didn’t ask how things are for me,” Philip said, glossing over her comment.

“You don’t look unhappy,” she said.

Phil stretched his arms back, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Things are great but I screwed up, you know? I made a big mistake... letting you get away.”

“Not interested,” she said, but the words had no bite.

She caught the soft expression on his face, the eyes narrowing to dark slits. All she had to do was say the word. His face said he knew she would. So did she. Already, her body was preparing, against her mind, her will, and her reason. The adrenalin of the evening’s activities was still pulsing through her veins, every nerve heightened, down to the tingling of her skin. She needed to take the pressure off.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to forgive me,” he said.

“Naked requests for forgiveness are a little tacky, don’t you think?”

Philip rose from the bed and came to her. His eyes held hers as he slowly slid his hands from her shoulders to her waist. He undid the zipper on her jeans, peeling them down, revealing her black bikini panties. Kneeling down, he brushed his lips across her belly. She wanted to run her

fingers through his hair, dig in, and hold on for what was coming next. He glanced up with a sly smile. When he stood he caught her sweatshirt within his fingers and slid it over her head, leaving her black lace demi bra in place.

He spent a long moment taking her in with his eyes. "I wasn't a bad boss, was I?"

"I thought lawyers never ask a question they don't have the answer to."

"Who says I don't have the answer?"

"You slept with someone else."

"Hearsay."

"While you were sleeping with me."

"Conjecture."

"I found her panties."

"Circumstantial evidence."

"In your apartment. In *your bed*."

Reaching around, he pulled the elastic band off the end of her braid. He slid his fingers through her thick chestnut hair, untangling the soft waves.

He let out a sigh. "Okay, I was an asshole."

"Your point being?"

"Look at you," Philip said, his lips brushing her neck. "Barely two years ago you were a wide-eyed innocent, a mere foundling. Look how far you've come. But you're not there yet, kid. Not by a long shot. You need me to finish your education."

His arms tightened around her and his lips closed over hers. She could feel her resolve melting as her body heat rose. She would not let him get away with this.

"You know," she said when she was sure her voice would be steady, "I really appreciate this "seduce the secretary" bit but I'm not moved."

He snapped the clasp of her bra, exposing her full, rounded breasts and began slowly caressing her. Involuntarily, she shifted closer to him; a small sigh escaped her lips. Taking one nipple between his thumb and forefinger, he squeezed. She gave a small gasp and shuddered.

"I'm sure you are," he murmured with a wicked smile. He slid his hand between her legs.

“Forget it,” she said. “I’m ready.”

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The relentless buzz of the alarm woke her. The early morning sun cutting through the cheap, flimsy curtains cast a rectangular pattern on the tangle of blankets. She lay still for a moment, trying to orient herself, listening to Philip’s soft, rhythmic breathing.

She stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom. Flipping the light switch, she turned her face away from the glare of the bulbs. After a moment she moved to the sink. She took a long look in the mirror, running her hands through her hair. Her cheeks had a soft, rosy glow. Making a sound of disgust, she bent over the sink, splashing water on her face. But she could still feel last night’s warm, languid sensations permeating her body.

“Snap out of it,” she muttered.

Reaching into the shower and pulling the top knob, she recited her daily, silent prayer that it wouldn’t come off in her hand. She waited for the gurgle and click that would signal a half-hearted spray of water was ready to begin. She hovered under the warm stream, wishing it could wash everything away.

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Twenty minutes later, Katerina rushed around the cramped bedroom, dampness still clinging to her body.

“Good morning,” Philip said in a lazy voice.

She glanced over to find him propping himself up with both pillows. She continued to rifle through the closet searching for a suitable outfit.

“Wow, now that I get the full view in daylight, you are even more amazing than when I first met you,” he said. “Are you into yoga?”

“We are not having sex this morning,” she said, pulling out a blouse.

He gave a light chuckle.

She came to the night table and grabbed her earrings. He latched on to her arm and pulled her close.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” he said, his voice soft and low.

“What do you want, Philip?”

“What I’ve wanted since the day you left. Come back to work for me.”

She pushed away from him.

Philip swung his legs over the side of the bed and got up; he began pulling on his clothes. “You’re gonna drop dead working these crappy temp jobs, Katerina.” He glanced around. “This place is barely livable. The only thing you’re missing is a colony of roaches you could charge a sublet fee. You’re never gonna make rent typing and filing and your father obviously can’t pick up the slack.”

Kat didn’t answer. *He’s right. Every day, things are getting tighter. Little by little, I’m going under.* Her parents hadn’t sent money in weeks. She couldn’t reach them by phone, no answer to her texts or emails; and her father hadn’t paid the balance on this semester’s tuition. Kat had done the math. To survive, she needed fourteen thousand dollars in two weeks.

“You want to be a lawyer, you need to work for a lawyer,” Philip said.

“I won’t be practicing your kind of law.”

He finished buttoning his shirt. “That’s cold, Kitty Kat.”

He approached her and gave her a light kiss on the lips and then moved his lips close to her ear. “Can we just take a moment to recognize that you were incredible last night?”

The soft lull of his voice made her close her eyes; the nagging voice in her head kept saying she loved him. *I’m supposed to love him.* Her mindset of deluded innocence had been produced by a small town childhood where the message was unspoken but understood: sex means love. *Love. What is that, exactly? What do twenty-three-year-old girls know about love anyway?*

They stood so close she felt sure that he could hear her heart beating. His fingers sifted through her hair; a small sigh escaped his lips. For a split second he seemed like someone else entirely and then...”I wonder if you could hold on to something for me...”

Kat gave him a shove. Same old Philip.

“It’s not dangerous,” he said, tightening his hold on her.

“Then you keep it.”

“We’ve done this before.”

“That doesn’t mean we should do it again. There are lots of things we should never do again. Where’s the new secretary?”

Philip gave her his classic bad boy smile. “You were never the secretary. You’re someone I trust.” Pulling a letter-size envelope from his jacket pocket, he held it out to her. “I’ll pick it up in a week or two.”

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll put it in the drawer.”

She reached for it and he snapped it back.

He picked up her purse and opened it, slipping the envelope inside. “I’ll feel better if it’s with you at all times.”

Katerina opened her mouth to answer but Philip was already walking out of the bedroom, shrugging into his jacket.

She caught him at the front door.

“You’re welcome,” she said.

He turned to her. “I meant everything I said to you, kid, everything. Think about coming back. It’s a big, bad world out there. You’re not ready yet.” He winked at her and was gone.

She stared at her purse. He was right. He knew it. So did she.

Tossing the purse onto the chair, she went back inside to finish dressing.

CHAPTER 3

Three days later, Katerina told the manager at her mindless data entry temp assignment she couldn't work the full day. The woman, in her late fifties with a thick waist and a disgusted expression on her face, shrugged.

"If you have to leave, leave," she said. "Are you planning on coming back tomorrow?"

Kat said yes, just in case.

Hanging on to a pole on the R line subway, Katerina mentally reviewed her encounter with the long and lithe Lisa. In less than ten minutes she had decided to interview for a "consulting opportunity" with MJM Consulting. It was part curiosity and part flattered ego. Consultants were considered by invitation only. But what exactly *was* the position? As Kat slipped into a vacated seat, she remembered that Lisa's answer to her question made her both curious and uneasy.

"You're a fixer," Lisa had said, "but the unofficial title is a 'B girl'."

When Kat eyed her curiously, Lisa explained: "You do the bitch work no one else can do."

Katerina had done her due diligence on the internet regarding her potential new employer. She found an address for MJM but no phone number. The description of the company read "goods and services" or "consulting services." Other than that, the company had no website, no listing of clients or customers, and no Mission Statement. For all intents and purposes, MJM was a non-entity; it might as well have not existed at all.

Kat trotted off the train, jogging up the steps to civilization. She passed The Plaza, making it to the building with five minutes to spare. She spotted the call box off to the right. She pressed the button and waited.

"Yes," came an edgy female voice, cautious, impatient.

"Katerina Mills. I have a noon app—"

The buzzer sounded. Kat tugged at the door and slipped inside. The open, airy marble lobby exuded elegance. Kat rode the elevator up to the fourth floor. When the doors slid open, she stepped out into the hallway, sinking into the thick ecru carpeting. Every office door was a rich

cherry wood, accented with a gold plate etched with a company name. She wandered down the hall until she finally found MJM Consulting. Turning the knob, she stepped inside.

The office waiting room was just that, an anteroom, bare, with dark paneling and a tiled marble floor polished until it resembled glass. There was a short hallway that led to an office. The door was ajar. Kat floundered for a moment, unsure of how to proceed.

“Katerina,” a woman’s voice called out. “Come in.”

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Kat entered the office, what little there was of it: plush, burgundy carpeting and a massive ball and claw mahogany desk squatting in front of the window. An oversized black leather chair sat behind the desk. In the chair, a fortysomething woman in black Chanel with pearl teardrop earrings and raven hair swept off her face stared intently at a laptop. There was nothing else on the desk; no pens, paper, or any of the usual items associated with daily business life. Lisa had told Katerina the woman’s name was Jasmine.

“Sit down,” Jasmine said, gesturing to the one guest chair opposite the desk.

Kat took a seat.

Jasmine turned her attention away from the laptop and focused her laser look on Kat.

“Lisa recommended you. Based on the qualities you’ve already displayed, you’ve earned a trial period.”

“Thank you,” Kat said, folding her hands in her lap to keep from kneading them in anxiety.

“Did Lisa explain what we do here?”

“She said this is an exclusive concierge service.”

Jasmine sat back in her chair. “Mmm. We are an introductory service. There are people who need things. We introduce them to you; you provide those things. Requests may range from the workaday to the unusual. But make no mistake. These requests are not for the run-of-the-mill assistant. They require a specialist.”

Kat nodded her head.

“We do not, under any circumstances, handle requests that involve body to body contact.”

Katerina felt her eyebrows rise. Okay, she thought. That answers that question. This is *not* a high end prostitution ring.

“Here’s how it works. I call you and tell you where to report and how much money you are going to receive. When you arrive at the meeting, the first thing you do is collect the envelope.”

“You collect payment first?”

Jasmine stared in response. Kat realized she had made her first mistake. Her stomach lurched.

“Once an assignment is accepted, it will be completed. No returns. No refunds. Is that understood?”

Kat nodded.

“The second thing you do is count the money in the envelope. Do not do anything else until that is done. If the money amount is not correct, state that. Do not negotiate. If the correct amount of money is not produced, leave the envelope and leave the premises. Is that understood?”

Kat nodded her head, her mind beginning to race.

“This arrangement requires you to have your own database of contacts to do whatever it takes to complete the assignment. If you cannot complete the assignment, there’s no reason for you to be here. Is that understood?”

“Yes. How—how do I get the money to you?”

“The money will be collected. All of it. You’ll receive your share after the assignment is completed. Is that understood?”

Kat nodded. This was not Philip territory. This was way beyond Philip.

“There are rules,” Jasmine continued, in an even, soft monotone. “You must follow the rules. If you don’t, there will be no reason for you to be here.”

“Do not share any details of your assignments with anyone. Ever. Any break in confidentiality and there will be no reason for you to be here.”

No reason to be working at MJM or no reason to be *alive*? Kat thought.

“Do not book any separate appointments on your own,” Jasmine continued.

“You may not accept gratuities.”

“You are permitted to decline one assignment per year for an undisclosed reason.”

“You may waive an assignment on the basis of illness.”

“Do I need to a doctor's note?” Kat asked.

A smile lifted the corners of Jasmine's lips. “We'll know if you're sick.”

Kat's breath caught in her throat. She sat mute.

“You are not an employee and no employment contract exists between you and MJM Consulting. You are an independent operative providing exclusive services. We make introductions between you and the people who need your services. We take a fee for this introduction. MJM assumes no responsibilities for your actions. Any legal issues you encounter as a result of providing services are solely your responsibility. MJM will disavow any warranty or relationship between us.”

Kat did the mental translation: *if I get arrested, I'm on my own.*

“You may not engage with any other company or entity like MJM while you are using our client introduction service. Doing so is a conflict of interest and there will be no reason for you to be here. You may not place yourself in any outside situation or be involved with any outside person or entity that directly or indirectly jeopardizes MJM.”

Kat felt a stab of fear; Philip's envelope burning a hole in her purse.

“You are on probation.”

“How long does probation last?”

“For as long as I say it does,” Jasmine responded. “You are prohibited from asking for help from other consultants and they are barred from helping you. However, you are permitted to have one meeting with Lisa during which she may advise you. You may decline to use our introductory service at any time. However, once you make that decision, it is final and irreversible. Understood?”

Kat became conscious of the fact that she was staring as she tried to wrap her head around everything she heard. She nodded.

“You're going to Sixty, East Eighty-sixth, between Madison and Park. The envelope is twenty thousand. Your cut is twenty percent. The name is Reynolds.”

Kat nodded. *Four thousand dollars. Only ten thousand to go.*

Jasmine returned to staring at the laptop. The meeting was over. Katerina stood up and moved to the door; she had a thought and turned.

“Is the client male or female?”

Jasmine glanced up from her laptop. “It's a man. The client is always a man,” she said.

CHAPTER 4

Katerina exited the taxi at the corner. She rarely ventured uptown. Philip's office was a stripped down affair in the East Village. As she walked she noticed the sidewalks were pristine. She wondered if everyone who came here instinctively knew that the sidewalks were not to be marred by gum and dog shit. Even the birds knew better.

She spied the doorman standing outside the building and headed toward him. The sound of a persistent horn made her stop and turn to see a limousine crawling, keeping pace with her. It eased toward the curb and stopped. The passenger door opened.

Kat glanced at the doorman. He was busy holding the door open for a resident.

She took a step toward the limo and peeked inside.

The man was in his early fifties, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, red tie, and a benign expression. He could have been a teenage girl's favorite uncle.

"Miss Katerina," he said.

She got into the limousine, slamming the door behind her.

"John Reynolds," he said, his voice soft and gentle. "I hope you can forgive me. I'm in a bit of a hurry. You don't mind a meeting on the go, do you?"

"Not at all," she said, her voice sounding small and meek in her ears.

Mr. Reynolds drew an envelope from his pocket and held it out. She reached out to take it and his hand connected with hers and lingered. His eyes held hers; they reminded her of a shark's eyes, cold, careless. Despite his smile, apprehension made her pulse quicken. She pulled her hand back and slid open the lip of the envelope. With a swipe of her thumb across the bills, she knew the money was there.

"How can I help you, Mr. Reynolds," she said.

He disengaged, his hand resting on the seat near her thigh but not touching. She felt compelled to look at him as he spoke, this dapper gentleman with a head full of wavy salt and pepper hair. Despite his easy manner, there was something behind those eyes that made her heart beat fast.

“I’m afraid I’ve done something terrible where my wife is concerned and I need some assistance to fix it.”

Kat nodded. She forced herself to focus, pulling Philip's words of wisdom from her mental file cabinet.

Clients always want to confess.

“I feel awful for having let the situation degenerate this way.”

Listen. Nod. Keep your face blank.

“I’ve been spending all my time in corporate boardrooms and I am out of touch with my partner, my lover, and my best friend. Her birthday is in a matter of weeks and I have no idea what to buy her because I have no idea what she does all day. I don’t know my wife.”

Katerina gave a quick mental exhale of relief. She nodded but keeping a blank expression was proving difficult when she wanted to pat his shoulder and murmur “poor man.” Knock it off, she thought. I didn't just get off the bus. He's either a man in love with his wife who got bitch slapped because he already forgot her birthday, or he cheated on his wife and is trying to smooth it over with an expensive gift.

Either way, not my business. Do the job. Collect your money. End of story.

She met Mr. Reynolds' gaze. She saw none of whatever it was that had frightened her just a few moments earlier.

“I need you to follow my wife. I need to know where she goes and what stores she frequents.” Reynolds took her hands in his own. “Most importantly, Miss Katerina, I need to learn her interests and her passions, so I can get to know her again and arrange the perfect gift.”

Katerina smiled in response.

Jasmine had said even the work-a-day requests required a specialist. But this? Why did a birthday present require a consultant? Why not give this job to the secretary? She had probably been doing the gift buying for years.

Katerina was about to speak when Philip’s most popular mantra played in her head:

DO NOT OFFER ALTERNATIVES. EVER. You put yourself out of work and give someone else the job.

This is a simple job that will net me four thousand dollars. More jobs like this and I'll be out from under.

“I’ll take care of it, Mr. Reynolds.”

He took her hand in his. "Thank you, Miss Katerina, thank you. She has a spa appointment on Thursday. You can start from there." He nodded toward the driver. "Garrett has the particulars and a number where you can reach me."

The limousine slowed and eased over to the curb.

"Where are we, Garrett?" he asked.

"Thirteenth Street, sir."

It was near her apartment.

"I hope this is all right. You won't be too inconvenienced, will you?"

Kat smiled. "This is just fine, Mr. Reynolds. I'll be in touch."

The passenger door opened and Garrett stood, waiting. She exited the limo taking the paper from his gloved hand. She watched him disappear into the driver's seat and maneuver the limo back into traffic.

CHAPTER 5

Katerina decided to stop in at her apartment and change before heading to the campus. Her mind was already racing. How to complete this assignment? She needed to shadow Mrs. Reynolds but she had to have transportation.

Kat entered the gloom of her apartment lost in thought, dropping her keys on the table. She opened her purse, bypassing the cash and instead, extracted Philip's envelope. She slid it between her fingers in examination until she felt the thin strip shapes inside. She frowned. So like Philip, she thought. She put it back in her purse. When she looked up, she saw the man sitting in her wing back chair.

She gave a small gasp and took a step backward. For all she knew, he could have been sitting there for hours, patient, waiting. Her eyes had grown accustomed to the dimness and she could see his face was calm, even meditative. He rose and Kat took another step back. Her mind screamed *run* but her body would not obey.

He stood over six feet tall, ramrod straight, his frame chiseled like rock. He was bald with skin the color of mocha; he wore black.

He came to her. "Here for the pickup, baby."

Kat nodded. Her hands shook as she fumbled in the purse. He laid a hand over hers. It was heavy and warm. She froze.

"Shouldn't I—shouldn't I—call to confirm—that you're okay?"

A smile touched his lips. He took out a cell phone, pressed a button, and held it to her ear.

Kat listened and heard a click. "MJM, how can I help you." Jasmine's voice.

He took the phone back. "We're good," he said and hung up.

Kat took the envelope from her purse and held it out. His movements were slow and deliberate as he took it and tucked it into an inside jacket pocket.

He ran a finger the length of her long hair.

"All right, baby," he said. "All right. Now you know."

Katerina nodded. A personal courier and a walking, talking discouragement from even thinking impure thoughts of skimming.

He went for the door.

“How did you know I would be here?” she asked.

He gave a small chuckle but didn't turn around. “If you've got the money, Angel always knows where you are, baby.”

He opened the door and was gone.

Kat sank into a chair and forced herself to breathe.

The Washington Square Arch loomed overhead, lit up in yellow just as the afternoon sun began to fade. Kat headed to her last class, chiding herself as she always did that she never took a moment to enjoy the experience of being in New York. She had achieved a dream by just getting here.

It was a goal she had willingly pushed back to the far recesses of her mind as she sat by her father's bedside, watching William Mills in a silent struggle, the war waging within him to beat the cancer. After the all clear came, it was another year before his gregarious smile returned along with the faint glow of health as his face and frame filled out once again. She remembered the day her parents called her into the living room. They sat on the couch side by side, Bill and Linda Mills, or Ozzie and Harriet as her brother called them.

“It's time for you to get out of here,” her father had said. “You've got an education to get and we have to get back to the Rotary Club and planting the vegetable garden. Everything back to normal.”

She had hugged her father but now that she thought back on it, his smile had an odd little twist to it. Maybe that's what had struck her about Mr. Reynolds. He had the same smile.

She made her way to class, coffee in one hand and her cell phone to her ear with the other. This was the time of her weekly phone call with her parents. She would stroll to class hearing all about the big doings in small town Vermont. Her mother would do all the talking but her father would be ever-present in the background, calling out comments until finally her mother handed him the phone.

“How's my girl?” he would say and she could hear the smile in his voice. “Do you need money?”

There had been none of that last week or the week before. Today it was the same. The phone continued to ring. Kat's concern had moved past worry and now her stomach did a familiar somersault as panic rose. She needed to call someone to check on them. Who? The police? It wasn't an emergency. At least she hoped not. Her brother was long gone and far away. She

thought of their neighbors, the Taggarts. She clicked off from her parent's number and redialed, her pace increasing with her anxiety as she waited for the connection. She nearly jumped when she heard the click.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Taggart. It's Katerina Mills."

"Katerina, how are you dear? How are things in the big city?"

"Uh, big, very big," she said with a nervous laugh. "I'm sorry to bother you but I've been calling my parents and there's never an answer and no answering machine. Have you seen them?"

"Oh, oh, oh," Mrs. Taggart said. "Well, yes, yes, dear. Yes. Yes. They're fine. I have seen them and they have just been very busy and I'm sure they will call you very soon, probably in the next day or so, I'm sure."

Katerina listened to Mrs. Taggart's locomotive speed response. She blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Mrs. Taggart, is my Dad sick again?"

"Oh, no dear, he's not—sick. He's just—it's just the change of seasons. Everyone's a little off this time of year."

Kat opened her mouth to speak.

"Now dear, I don't mean to rush you but I do have to go. Pies in the oven. Don't you worry about your parents. They are grown-ups after all. They can handle their own lives. You just study hard and be a great, big success. Bye, dear."

Mrs. Taggart rang off, leaving Kat to mull over the strange response she had just received. Who had asked if her parents could handle their own lives? What, exactly, was going on at home?

•••

Kat made it to her Introduction To Ethics class just shy of seven o'clock. She would spend the next ninety minutes discussing ethical behavior, moral compasses, and corporate responsibility with an envelope in her purse that she assumed was of an illegal nature. She had a few minutes to kill before class began and she spent it as she always did: thinking about Philip. She had only worked for him for a couple of weeks when she realized Philip wasn't a trial lawyer or an ambulance chaser. He was a criminal lawyer in every sense of the word. His services included consultation, representation, introductions for the private sale of unadvertised goods, and delivery services utilizing a brown paper bag. On her second day on the job he had

said, “We’re paperless here, beautiful. You’re a smart girl, I can tell. Don’t write down my messages or phone numbers, okay?”

“You want it all on the computer?” she had asked.

“I want you to memorize it. I don’t do e-mails, texts, or instant messages. I don’t want information anywhere but in that pretty little head.”

She would have stayed. After all she and Philip had... she thought they would be... Kat shook off the thought. Stupid girl. The man had clients who looked like large blocks of concrete. They would come into the office, give her a smile, and she would almost wet her pants. What kind of man did she think Philip was? The kind of man who had a blonde hiding in the closet when she showed up with Chinese takeout for dinner; and she had just made another mistake sleeping with him again.

Students filed in and the class filled up. She decided she would get in touch with Philip tomorrow, get rid of the envelope, and stop making bad decisions. At least this job was a step in the right direction. She was good at fixing things; she would do what she was good at and make a lot of money doing it. How hard was it to follow around some spoiled rich wife?

...

The class was a sea of freshman and sophomores. The difference between Kat and everyone else was that they were eighteen and nineteen years old. She was twenty-three with two and a half years more of school to complete. Some students talked of weekend plans and keg parties, while others were already planning for their LSAT’s. She lagged behind, plagued by the nagging feeling that she didn’t know what everyone else knew and she would always be running to catch up.

“YOU’RE ALL LIARS AND HYPOCRITES!”

Professor James, a small, stooped man, with a thatch of unruly, snow-white hair that would have given Einstein a run for his money, was in fine form. Wandering back and forth, at times appearing to talk to himself, wearing an ill fitting jacket, his bow tie slightly askew, he punched his fist into his palm as he spoke.

“I will show you. I WILL PROVE IT TO YOU! There is a runaway train. There are five people strapped to the track. The train will KILL all five. But—there is a switch. With one swipe of your hand, if you flip that switch, you will save the five and the train will take another track. On that track, there is one person strapped down, unable to escape. Do you flip the switch, Mr. Larkin?”

Professor James zeroed in on a male student sprawled in his seat, decked out in his college uniform of jeans, ratty sneakers, plaid shirt, and a sneering attitude of derision.

“Absolutely,” he said with an easy smile.

“Ah,” Professor James said. “But what if I tell you that the facts have changed. There is still a runaway train. There are still five people strapped to the track. But—there is an overpass and on that overpass there is a very large, one would say, OBESE, man. If you push him off, his...*girth*...” the class tittered at the word, “will stop the train. The five will be saved if you kill the one. Do you push him, Miss Mills?”

The class turned to Katerina.

“No.”

Professor James tilted his head down and considered her with narrowed eyes. “And why not?”

“Because it's murder.”

Larkin laughed and mumbled something under his breath that caused students around him to chuckle.

“I see Mr. Larkin does not subscribe to your way of thinking,” Professor James said. “Why not, Mr. Larkin? Would you do it?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“You'd kill a person outright,” Katerina said.

“And you're not killing somebody when you pull that switch?”

“It's not the same,” she said.

Larkin tilted towards her with a smile. “A push, a flick of the finger, a pull of the trigger. It's *all* the same.”

Katerina cast her eyes downward as a flush of heat colored her cheeks.

“Miss Mills, do not be downhearted,” Professor James said, his face the picture of understanding. “It should be the same but it is not and that is what we are here to discuss. Morals are about good and bad but ethics is about reason. If you have already deemed that it is better to have one die instead of the five, then reason dictates that you push the fat man as well. Miss Mills? What is your reason why you do not agree?”

Katerina stumbled over her words. “Because... it's just—”

“Different,” Professor James finished. “Because you have looked into that man's eyes, seen his face, touched him, and killed him with your own hand. But if you merely flip a switch, something impersonal, it's different. You are not the first to face this quandary, Miss Mills. You will not be the last. Thankfully, the odds of anyone in this room having to wrestle with this particular conundrum are miniscule, so we may discuss in theory as much as we like.”

Kat cast her eyes down again onto her notebook. When she glanced up, she found a young man with dark hair, dark eyes, and a fair complexion, staring at her. He was dressed in a blue button down shirt, the tails hanging out over his jeans. He had a Clark Kent quality about him. When their eyes locked, he turned back to the front of the room.

Professor James turned his attention to the class. “Today you will begin to explore your own ethics. You will choose a partner and each will take a side of this case and you will present your findings in a joint paper.”

A low murmur of discontent filtered the room. Professor James paid no attention.

“Would you like to be partners?”

Kat turned at the sound of the male voice. Clark Kent.

“If you don't have one,” he continued.

“Yes.” She caught a look of defensive self-preservation cross his face, a mix of anger and disappointment to blunt the blow of rejection.

“No. I mean yes, I don't have a one,” she said. “Sure, we can be partners.”

He nodded. “Do you want to be for or against?” he asked.

“I'll be against,” Kat said.

“Fine,” he said, but his brow furrowed.

“If you want to be against, that's okay,” she said quickly.

“No, it's okay. You didn't ask me my name,” he said. “I do have one.”

“I hope so,” she said. “You are entitled to one.”

The brow smoothed and he smiled. His boy-next-door face reminded Kat of home at this time of year; a vision of evening concerts, the Harvest Festival, and the last Farmer's Markets before the coming of the winter.

“I'm Mark.”

“Hi, Mark. I’m—”

“Katerina. Yes, I know.”

A slight shiver of anxiety rippled through her. “How do you know?”

“Professor James calls on you every week. And *I* pay attention.”

They stood in an awkward silence for a moment. “I think Starbucks would be a good place to meet,” he said. “We could have a bite to eat and debate the problem.”

“I think a library study room would be a better place,” Katerina said, gathering her books and moving toward the stairs to get to the exit. It was a sweet ploy to get her to eat with him. It had been a while since she had a guy try that hard.

“Food is important. We need to keep up our strength.”

“I’ll bring granola bars.”

Mark nodded his head as he kept time with her on the stairs. “Great. But it’s extremely dangerous to eat without something to drink.”

Katerina stopped short to stare at him.

“Choking hazard,” he said. “You’re not allowed to bring drinks into the library. I mean, people do, all the time, but they shouldn’t and if we get caught, then you’re gonna have to give up your water bottle and then you could choke.”

Katerina pushed down her smile. She had known someone like Mark back home. She still thought of him sometimes, wondering where he was, and if she had made a mistake letting him go.

“You can give me the Heimlich maneuver,” she said, deciding to push a bit further.

“Then, the piece of granola bar will fly out of your mouth and hit the librarian in the eye. Someone will catch it on their phone, it’ll go viral, and you’ll be all over the Internet.”

“Okay,” she said. “Starbucks it is.”

He stood before her, clearly pleased with his rally to win a meeting that involved a meal. “Great, so I’ll call you.”

“Sure.”

“I need your number.”

“Right,” Kat said, rattling off her cell number.

He punched it into his phone. “Okay, great...I’ll call you and we’ll get together... at Starbucks.”

“Sounds good. Goodnight, *Mark*,” she said.

“Right. Goodnight, *Katerina*.”

They went their separate ways; she glanced back over her shoulder to see him striding away with a slight swagger. Katerina turned back. He’s a nice boy, she thought. *Remember when you used to date nice boys, Katerina*

CHAPTER 6

Katerina woke draped over the kitchen table, her face plastered against her *Introduction to Ethics* text book. Her eyes were dry and sticky and her mouth tasted like last night's coffee. She stumbled to the bathroom, splashed water on her face and brushed her teeth. Then, she rolled out her yoga mat and tried to crowd out her thoughts by concentrating only on the motion of her body stretching, leaning, and lifting. After an hour she settled back into Savasana, the corpse pose, a comforting posture of total relaxation. While her body was supposed to mimic that of the dead, her mind would not cooperate. She still had not spoken to her parents.

The ring of the cell phone jolted her from her thoughts. The number came up as private. It was Jasmine. Another assignment.

•••

When the elevator opened, the door to the penthouse was ajar. Kat hesitated, unsure if she should knock or enter. She heard a man's voice speaking in a low and steady cadence. The voice came closer until the door swung open wide. Kat stood like a schoolgirl, her hands folded in front of her.

The man was dressed in crisp, dark slacks, a tailored white shirt, and a red tie. He had a phone at his ear and motioned with two crooked fingers that she should enter. He turned his back to her and moved back into the apartment. She guessed he was in his forties.

"Look, you tell those assholes that the gross margin has to be set at thirty percent, you understand? It's not worth doing with a margin any smaller. Jesus Christ."

The apartment wasn't a living space so much as an exposition for Rococo furniture. Ornate, asymmetrical pieces with floral designs created a miniature version of eighteenth century France crammed into a New York penthouse apartment. Kat was careful not to touch anything. She didn't dare leave a fingerprint.

"Fine, fine," he said, running a hand through his dark hair. "I have to go into a meeting now. Call me in a half hour."

Obviously, this isn't going to take long, she thought. Judging by the surroundings, Kat guessed he wanted her to track down some hard to find item he saw on *Antiques Roadshow*. She was already mentally making her plan of attack. Who did she know in the antiques world?

Clicking off the phone, he turned to her. He regarded her with a bemused look, and then gave a slight shake of his head as he came forward and made a gesture toward a chair.

Katerina sat and waited.

He drew in a long breath. "Jonathan Cookson. I have a situation. It's delicate and it's time sensitive."

He looked her over again, taking in her face and hair. He gave a short laugh, shook his head and glanced around the room. "My wife is attached to antiques. Not the pieces themselves but the act of hunting them down like prey and acquiring them."

Kat gave a nod, pleased she had been right. However, there was a slight problem.

"Mr. Cookson," she said.

He stared in response, his eyes narrowing at her interruption.

"I'm sorry, sir. The fee."

"Oh yes," he said, moving to the desk. He grabbed a Victoria's Secret gift bag and brought it to her. She accepted the bag and pulled out the box inside. He hovered over her as she counted the packs of bills, never glancing up. When she finished, she replaced the lid and put the box back in the gift bag. Eighty thousand dollars. Twenty-five percent would be hers. Twenty thousand dollars for arranging the purchase of an antique. She realized this was like the diamond merchants she had heard about. Thousands of dollars in gems and they carried them in suitcases like they were marbles, like they were nothing.

"I take it I can continue now?" he asked.

Kat nodded and folded her hands.

As he spoke, his annoyance appeared to wane. He sounded almost bored. "As I said, my wife likes to acquire antiques. Sometimes she changes periods, often without warning, and then sells them. She recently sold a Chippendale Secretaire Cabinet. Two drawers that slide open and two drawers that swing open with a hidden compartment behind a false backing."

He stopped speaking. Kat waited. He responded by sitting down, crossing his legs, and mimicking her folded hands.

Kat finally caught on, shifting in her seat in an attempt to cover her obvious lack of understanding. "What's behind the false backing?" she asked, feeling her face color in embarrassment.

"A VHS tape."

“VHS. This is something from a long time ago.”

“Very good, Katerina. The tape showcases a compromising position that must be kept private at all costs.”

She nodded. “It would be highly embarrassing to you.”

“It would be highly inconvenient to me. It would be highly embarrassing to my wife.”

They want to confess.

“My companion in the tape isn’t female. I’m not in the mood to go through another divorce.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, her voice a monotone.

“Indiscretions,” he said and he smiled though Kat was sure he was not amused.

“My wife sold the piece at auction. I did not know this until I returned from a business trip. I wasn’t concerned until I realized the tape wasn’t where I thought it was. It’s in the cabinet.”

Questions began to float through Kat’s mind. Why still have the tape? Why wasn’t it destroyed years ago? Maybe he enjoyed watching it, or he enjoyed having it in the house, or he enjoyed the fact that his wife didn’t know.

And Philip would say... that's not your problem. Do the job.

“You would like me to arrange a buyback.”

Jonathan gave a snort of laughter. “Of course not. Any inquiry to buy it back would require me to speak to my wife and raise suspicion.”

Kat’s discomfort with her slow performance rose with each tick of the Chateau Chambord clock perched above the fireplace.

“I want you to steal it,” he said.

“Steal the piece of furniture.”

He shrugged. “You can if you like but I think it would be easier just to steal the tape, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Kat said. “Yes, I suppose it would.”

CHAPTER 7

There is no way this is going to happen. It had taken a few minutes but Kat's brain had come out of its catatonic stupor. Now an inner monologue sped like a freight train through her head, creating a bullet list of reasons why this had been a mistake from the beginning. What was she thinking? Lisa had told her the straight story: a 'B girl' did the bitch work. But it wasn't work no one else could do. It was work no one else *would* do. Kat chided herself for her foolishness in not connecting the dots: no one paid huge sums of money for a job without risk. What was it Jasmine had said? *Any legal issues you encounter as a result of providing services are solely your responsibility. MJM will disavow any warranty or relationship between us.*

Kat entered the diner and settled on a red stool at the counter, placing the bag on the foot rest to her left. The waitress, a woman in a Pepto Bismol pink outfit, sauntered over.

“What can I get you?”

“Just coffee, thank you.”

The waitress, sensing a tip not worth smiling for, set down a saucer and cup and doled out the coffee without bothering to make eye contact.

Kat mumbled a “thank you” and left the coffee untouched. Plans B, C, and D were already forming in her mind. She slipped her phone out of her purse and held it. *Make the call now.* She would tell Jasmine she was heading back to the penthouse to return the bag. No, that was a bad idea. It would make MJM look bad; they had consultants they couldn't control. No, she would go through with the pickup. *Then* she would call Jasmine later or first thing in the morning and decline to consult. Jasmine would get a replacement and Kat would never work there again. *That's fine with me.*

Angel sat down on her left. “You got something for Angel, baby?” he asked, his voice low.

She gave a small nod as a shiver ran through her. She took hold of a sugar packet, compulsively shaking it, listening to the soft, 'flap-flap' sound it made.

He leaned to his right and picked up the bag. He tossed a few bills on the counter.

He regarded her for a moment, then leaned toward her as he slid off the stool. “Go big or go home, baby,” he whispered. “It's your choice.”

He walked out.

Kat stayed for what seemed like a long time. She would call Jasmine and tell her it was off. Then she would call the employment agency and beg for an assignment. She would do better than that; she would call two or three agencies. She would make sure she was never without an assignment. She was an adult. An adult with ethics. Following someone to make a gift list was one thing. This was something else.

The waitress reappeared. "You want somethin' else?"

Kat shook her head.

Exiting the subway, Kat was greeted by a biting chill in the night air. She hugged her coat tight around her as she turned the corner to her block. She hustled up the few stairs and shoved her key in the building door lock. She let out a sigh as she slipped inside, shutting out the cold. Turning the key in her door, she entered the darkened apartment, her eyes adjusting to the gloom. No sign of a man's clothing.

She dumped her purse on the table and shucked off her pumps. She drew Philip's envelope out of the purse, fingering it in her hands. Reaching out, she flipped the light switch. The envelope was closed with the seal glue, no extra tape, no "confidential" stamp across the seal. She could open it, hold the negatives up to the light, then replace the envelope. At least she would know what danger she was in. But if she didn't look, then ignorance was her best defense, wasn't it?

The choral sound of her cell phone made her jump, reminding her she had to make the call to Jasmine. She dropped the envelope back into her purse and grabbed her phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, kitten, how's my girl?"

"Dad! I've been trying to reach you and Mom for weeks! What's happening? How are you? Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine, Katerina. I'm just fine."

Katerina could see him, that same thin, plastic smile.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fit as a fiddle, precious."

Kat smiled. Fit as a fiddle. Her father was probably one of ten men left in the world who used that expression. That and the word "nifty."

“Daddy, can you put Mom on the phone? There’s something I want to talk to you both about.”

“I need to talk to you too, kitten.”

Kat paced with the phone at her ear. “Daddy, where are you? You sound so close.”

“That’s because I am close. I’m right outside your building. You want to open up and let your old man in?”

Pulling the phone away from her ear, Kat raced for the door and threw it open, making a beeline for the outside door. She hadn’t seen him or her mother when she came in. How had she missed them?

The glass panels of the door made her father appear like a visitor to a house of mirrors, distorting his face and body as well as the person next to him. Katerina threw open the door as he reached the top of the steps. She looked past him at the woman standing next to him.

“Dad...where’s Mom?”

•••

Katerina sat at the table, her mind reeling. Her father, William Mills, the father who had carried her on his shoulders, taught her to ride a bicycle, and taken her to pick out her mother’s birthday and Christmas presents, sat across the table explaining why he left her mother for a bleached blond, thirty-four D bimbo named Lulu. As he talked, Lulu wandered the apartment, her eyes a vast, vacant lot of boredom.

“You see, honey,” her father was saying, “having cancer has taught me a valuable lesson.”

“You can never have too much peroxide?” Katerina blurted, fascinated by the immovable helmet of brassy hair sitting atop Lulu’s head.

“Now kitten, don’t be ugly. I want you and Lulu to be friends.”

Kat stared in response, trying to remember if her father had fallen and hit his head during one of his hospital stays.

Katerina and Lulu exchanged cold, hard glances. *Oh yeah, wicked stepmother, the feeling’s mutual.*

“Daddy,” Kat said, speaking slowly as if he were a traumatic brain injury patient and not a cancer survivor. “Where’s Mom?”

Her father leaned back in the chair, patting his hand against his leg in a rapid, tapping motion, his eyes darting around the room. “She’s packing up her few things. By the way,

Katerina, change brings downsizing. That includes everything you left in your room. It's all gone to Goodwill."

Kat was on her feet. "Wait a minute. You SOLD the house? You gave away my stuff? For what? For this? For her?"

"Kitten—"

"Don't kitten me! What's gotten into you? Did you take everything? What about Mom? Didn't you give her any money?"

"Don't upset your father," Lulu said.

"Cork it, Rent-A-Slut!"

Lulu's face flushed crimson. With her hands out, she rushed toward Katerina.

"Now, now, girls," her father soothed, jumping up and catching her arm, "let's calm down."

Whispering in Lulu's ear, he handed her a few bills. With an icy glance at Kat, Lulu sashayed out of the apartment.

"Does she have enough singles?"

"Don't be fresh, Katerina. Is this how we raised you to be a young lady? New York City has changed you, that's for sure, and I don't think for the better. Maybe I was wrong to encourage you to come here."

"Daddy, what about your job? Twenty years of your life dedicated to the company. When they transferred you, you set up the plant, you hired everyone personally. Richie can't do what you do. He can't run that business."

William Mills laughed but the sound had no joy. "He thinks he can," he said. "Yeah, my number two...he's his own man...well...life is about change," he said, and gave another short, mirthless chuckle.

What the hell does that mean? "Have you talked to Kevin? Does he know about this?"

"He's still off in the wilds of Costa Rica living in a tree house. We get an email every few months when he gets back to base camp. I tell you Katerina, your brother is a shining example. He's been an inspiration to me."

Inspiration? In what way? Why underwear is not a necessity? Bathing—the pros and cons? Katerina struggled to process the fact that her father had lost his mind.

She stared at the stranger before her, finally taking a long breath and taking her father's hands in her own. "Daddy," she said. "I don't know where you met this woman—"

"Lulu."

"Yes, she is."

"She's a nail technician."

"Uh-hunh. Daddy, you and Mom have had thirty wonderful years together. You two went on romantic cruises. You took her to California, to Yellowstone Park. You had date nights. You're in love with Mom."

He squeezed her hands. "Honey... sweetheart," he said, patting her hand. "Your mother is a lovely woman."

Uh-oh.

"Katerina, if cancer has taught me anything, it's that there's more to life than pleasant trips to Yellowstone Park with a lovely woman."

He sat down and Katerina took her place by his side.

"Daddy, when men survive cancer, they buy a motorcycle or a sports car or a boat. They don't dump the woman who nursed them through their life threatening illness."

He patted her hand, the telltale sign that he was preaching to the congregation but they had neither eyes to see nor ears to hear. "I've been given a second chance, kitten. I need more."

Kat jumped to her feet. "Apparently, you need it all. How is Mom going to live? What is she going to do?"

"Listen to me Katerina," he said, pulling her back down. "This is important. You play the hand you've been dealt, bet and bluff to make the best deal possible, and then cash out when it's time to go. Remember that."

"Mom is not a stake in a poker game," she said, a surge of anger shooting through her. "This is your wife, not a hand of Texas Hold 'Em."

He shrugged.

She forced herself to search for something to say that wouldn't end with her telling him exactly how she felt about him at the moment. "Daddy, are you staying in town for a few days?" she asked through clenched teeth.

“No, kitten, Lulu and I are headed—west. Which reminds me...I’m in a transitional phase, Katerina. As I contemplate where this new path will take me, I won’t be able to pay your tuition anymore or help you with rent or expenses.”

Kat’s mouth dropped open.

“I know, kitten, but look at it this way. You’re in the big city. Shouldn’t you be spreading your wings and flying solo?”

William Mills gave his daughter a light chuck under the chin and a wink.

Katerina remembered to close her mouth.

•••

It took three hours of calling before Linda Mills finally picked up the phone.

“Mom! Mom! Are you okay?”

“Yes, dear. I’m fine. Why are you yelling?”

Kat adjusted her tone. “Mom, Daddy was here.”

“Yes, dear,” her mother said. “He said he was going to stop by on his way—out of town. You sound hysterical. Is everything all right?”

Kat stood in her mini kitchenette, tearing open a box of marble pound cake. She hacked off a slice and set to work. “Oh, I don’t know, Mom. Do you think everything is all right?”

She heard a sigh from the other end of the phone.

“Mom, I don’t understand any of this. When did the house get sold? Where were you when all this was happening?”

“Honey, your father is—going through a change. It’s not something you need to concern yourself with.”

“Where is Daddy really going?” she finally managed.

“I’m not sure, dear,” came her mother’s response. “Someplace exotic, like Algeria or Brunei.”

Her father, the nice man with the vegetable garden was going to Algeria? She didn’t see her father wearing his plaid golf pants and white shoes wandering the streets of Brunei. Her mother had left the realm of reality as well. “Mom, aren’t you angry...shocked... hysterical? Why aren’t you hysterical?”

“Well, dear,” she said. “I never wanted to disturb your fantasy about your father, but he’s an ass. He always was. I just didn’t have the heart to tell you.”

Kat pictured Linda Mills, prim and proper mother, with her shoulder length chestnut hair styled in a perfect bob, wearing her buttoned down dress with a cinched waist, saying the word “ass.”

“Sweetheart, what else did he say to you?”

Kat replayed that last moment in her head, her father standing by the door and kissing her forehead. “I’m very proud of you, Katerina. You’re going to do something big. I know it.”

“Nothing,” she said to her mother.

Finishing off the slab of pound cake, Kat opened the fridge door, grabbed the bottle of chocolate sauce, and gave a generous squirt into her mouth. Something Linda Mills would not approve of.

“Mom, how did he manage to take everything?”

“Well, it was all in his name...”

“So what? You’re his wife. You’re entitled to half.”

The question was met with a small, bitter laugh from Linda Mills. “Oh Katerina, my dear girl, what does it matter now? The less you know about all this...unpleasantness, the better for you.”

A feeling of helplessness swept through Katerina. *This doesn't make sense.* “Mom, what are you planning to do?”

“I’m moving in with Ethel and Rachel. They have a house together and since I’m... destitute, they’ve offered to give me a room. They said it’ll be our little commune, filled with sisterly support and affection.”

“Mom...are Ethel and Rachel lesbians?”

“Yes, dear, but they assured me I don’t have to swing that way if I don’t want to. It’s just until I figure out what to do. Dear, I have to go. It’s my turn to prepare dinner. You’ll be okay, won’t you? You’re a smart girl. You always were. Call me Thursday.”

Katerina sat with the phone in her lap for a long while. She scanned her small, shabby living space, settling on the pile of mail on the stand near the door. The top envelope bore the insignia of the university. The tuition bill. She thought she only needed fourteen thousand dollars. She was going to need more than that. A whole lot more.

Or what?

No apartment.

No college.

No law school.

Go big or go home, baby.

Home wasn't there anymore.

She got up and flipped off the light. The miniscule living room slipped into darkness.

She would go to bed early and get up early to study.

Then she had to go to work.

She had to begin surveillance on Felicia Reynolds tomorrow.

She had to plan a theft.

She had to.

She needed this job.

CHAPTER 8

“So, my father has run off with Whore of Babylon Barbie and they’re off to happily ever after while my mother is left with nothing.”

Kat sucked down the rest of her latte. It was her third of the morning. Studying 18th Century European History at five o’clock in the morning didn’t encourage perky wakefulness. The espresso would take care of that.

Her listener, Emma Flynn, nodded, shoving the last oversized wedge of a cinnamon sticky bun into her mouth. She glanced down at her white nursing uniform to see if she was wearing the gooey treat, a usual occurrence at their weekly breakfast-meetings-on-the-go.

The uniform outlined Emma's compact, sturdy, five-foot-five body. Her face, round and plump, held large brown eyes and a no-nonsense ponytail tamed her curly, honey blond hair. Her years in the city had begun to weaken the southern drawl. Kat found the soft lilt comical when Emma let out a string of obscenities at the most unexpected moment.

They had met while rooming with four other girls, a hasty, short-lived arrangement that quickly descended into a pigsty and the occasional pool of puke on the bathroom floor. Together, they fled to a bright, clean, fourth floor walk-up. They went their separate ways when Emma moved in with her boyfriend.

“It happens all the time, hon,” Emma said, licking the frosting from her fingers. “A person comes close to death and reacts by doin’ a three-sixty. He could have another change of heart.”

“He's in the wind and he's not coming back. To top it all off, my mom told me my father’s basically been a schmuck my whole life.”

How did I not notice this?

Katerina was about to mention her mother's lack of finances but kept silent, the familiar internal alarm warning her to pull back before speaking too freely. This time she feared the conversation would sprawl to her own financial situation and she would make a mistake and slip something about the new job. When she worked for Philip, Katerina became an expert at redacting and sanitizing information about the job for Emma. The only exception was the affair. Emma knew all about it.

As if reading her mind, Emma looked at her. “Have you seen Philip?”

“A few days ago. He dropped in.”

“And?”

Kat took a breath. “I let him drop *in*.”

Emma nodded. Katerina guessed it was an occupational habit. So much of what went on in the hospital was out of Emma's control. What else was there to do but nod?

They stopped at the corner across from the hospital emergency room entrance.

“Listen, hon, are you okay for cash?”

Emma's parents were from old money, complete with an aging antebellum plantation housing generations of sins that no one in the family cared to remember. It now functioned as a bed and breakfast to preserve its place in history and prevent it from rupturing into a financial sinkhole.

“I'm fine.”

“So, what about this new job? Did you start?”

“Tomorrow. I think it's going to work out fine,” she lied.

Emma held her gaze. “What exactly is it that you're doin'?”

“It's like a concierge service for people who only need an assistant once in a while. I do—stuff—that they don't have time for.”

Emma nodded. Kat caught the slight lifting of her friend's brows, a signal that Emma's bullshit meter was heading for the red zone. They passed a moment in an awkward silence.

Kat observed people hurry past the hospital, oblivious to the suffering going on inside. *They're not the ones with the problem.* Right, Kat thought. The problem. I'm the one with the problem.

She looked at Emma. “I need to run a bunch of errands for an assignment. I hate to ask but could I borrow your car for a few days?”

Digging around in her purse, Emma pulled out a pack of tissues, a few dollar bills, and a car key on a red, round, Betty Boop key chain.

She dropped the key into Kat's hand. “The car's in the usual spot. Keep your nose clean, sugar. Remember, you're one of those nice girls that don't need to look for trouble. It finds you.”

“You're a nice girl.”

“Yeah, but I don't look like you, hon. Trouble sees me and walks right on by.”

Kat waited for the words of wisdom she knew was coming. In these moments she knew exactly what Emma would look like ten years and two children later. A plump, cherub cheeked face, a mom pixie haircut, a peaches and cream complexion that turned a shade of rose whenever she exerted herself.

“Keep your eyes open and your legs closed, doll. That’s my advice.”

Kat nodded, concentrating on Betty Boop pushing her white dress down to cover her lady garden.

“I want you to come to dinner tomorrow night,” Emma said. “I’ve got news and a surprise.”

“Can’t you just tell me the one now because I hate the other.”

“Nope. Come tomorrow at nine.” Emma pulled her in for a quick hug. “Promise me.”

“I promise,” Katerina said.

CHAPTER 9

The next morning, Kat made her way over to Bay Ridge and found the black Honda Civic in its usual spot, two blocks from Emma's apartment. Getting back into Manhattan was the usual snarl of blaring cab horns, endless traffic lights, and people jaywalking at every opportunity. Traffic signals were never an order in New York City, they were more of a suggestion.

At nine o'clock, Kat found Mrs. Felicia Reynolds, or The Wife as Kat called her, where her husband said she would be, in the Elysium Spa. He said it was the only appointment he knew of because the spa had called to confirm and he had happened to answer the phone.

Katerina circled the block like a gerbil on a horizontal wheel and the car's merry-go-round pattern matched her thoughts. Her father was lazing in Shangri-la with his nail technician/prostitute girlfriend. Her mother, à la Blanche Dubois, was living off the kindness of strangers. *And I'm teetering toward the edge of financial and educational ruin, and preparing to remedy my problems by committing a crime.* Suddenly remembering she also had a paper due on Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" by the end of the week, she cursed silently.

Coming around the block again, she caught sight of The Wife exiting the spa and slipping into the back seat of a Lincoln Town Car.

"Shit!" Kat yelled, slamming on her brakes to avoid being creamed by a taxi. Her excellent driving skills were rewarded with a chorus of angry horns. As the noise blared around her, she realized how ridiculous this was. She didn't know what the hell she was doing and she didn't know a thing about surveillance. I'm not a damned PI, she thought. Why hadn't Reynolds hired one? *Because, genius, if he had, you wouldn't have a job.* The Town Car pulled out into traffic. She had no choice but to follow.

...

By the end of the morning, it became clear that Mrs. Reynolds had a lot of free time on her hands and she spent most of it shopping. Her morning consisted of climbing in and out of the Town Car carrying packages from Saks, Neiman Marcus, and Louis Vuitton. Kat considered telling Mr. Reynolds to get his wife a generous Amex gift card and be done with it.

At the last stop, Kat lucked into a parking spot and slid in, missing a Buick by an inch. She scanned the storefront signs. The Town Car stood idling in front of a small theatre while The

Wife entered the West End Repertory Company. Aha, Kat thought, now we're getting somewhere. Mrs. Reynolds is a patron of the arts.

She kept a sharp eye on the door to the theatre. Her thoughts wandered until one distinct thought popped into her mind. *Turn around. Go back. Don't do this. Don't do any of this.* The clarity of the thought surprised and frightened her. She pushed it away. *No. I can't give up. I won't give up. I need to make this work.*

The Town Car pulled away. Kat shot up in her seat. She had been watching. The Wife hadn't come out of the theatre. The driver had never gotten out of the car. The passenger door had never opened. Just to be sure she sat for another hour even though she knew it was useless. Where was Felicia Reynolds? What had happened to her?

CHAPTER 10

When the alarm buzzed at five a.m., Katerina jolted upright from her seat at the kitchen table, gasping as a sharp pain shot through her neck and back. Reaching out, she slapped her hand down on the cell phone, cursing as her coffee cup tipped over on its side. A trail of brown liquid snaked a path to the edge of the table and dribbled onto the floor, spreading into a puddle.

Kat sighed as she stretched carefully. Collecting herself, she turned her attention back to the open text book that she had abandoned some time around three a.m. Lying on the open pages was a photocopy from a Sotheby's catalog. She needed to find out who had purchased the cabinet. But how? She didn't know anyone at the auction house. She didn't know anyone who dealt in antiques.

“Shit,” she said, slamming the book shut.

She eyed the bursar's letter, still lying on top of the pile of mail. She pushed the chair away from the table and got up. “I need to get a move on,” she murmured aloud. “There isn't much time.”

...

“Emma, I'm sorry about last night,” Kat said, fighting to be heard against the swell of noise from the recesses of the subway. “It was so late when I got done.”

“What happened?”

Katerina bit her lip. Still fuzzy from the late night of studying, she hadn't thought ahead to have her story straight. “I needed to drop off some documents and I got lost. It was hectic.”

“How's my car?”

“The car's fine. I just need—Emma, can I keep it for a few more days? I'm sorry. I'll bring it back with a full tank of gas...promise.”

“Oh sure, hon, as long as you need to. You know I never drive it.”

Kat broke out into a smile. That was the truth. Emma never did drive the car but she would never sell it. Someday she might need it.

“Listen doll, lucky for you Frank had to work late last night or I'd be plum mad at you right now. I'm having a party next Saturday night. You have to promise to be there. Now promise.”

“Okay, okay, I promise.”

“All right, sugar, I’m gonna hold you to it. Remember, my boyfriend’s a cop. I’m gonna send him to get you and the car if you don’t show.”

“I’ll be there,” Kat said, her stomach somersaulting at hearing the words “boyfriend” and “cop” in the same sentence. She hoped she wouldn’t be seeing Emma’s boyfriend for any other reason outside of the party. In the meantime, she was stuck. She needed an expert.

...

Katerina bolted off the subway, taking the stairs two at a time. She passed a row of bars and tattoo parlors that serviced the area’s hipsters and college kids. Steps led down to basements with signs advertising Jägerbombs, Jell-O shots, and music groups that would play and die there, never seeing anything near the big time.

Kat spotted Lisa near the eatery looking like a supermodel as she leaned in to the open window of a limousine. Kat couldn’t see the person in the limo. Lisa said a few words, then nodded her head. She wore a black sheath dress gathered at the waist. It hugged every curve of her body, outlining her perfectly proportioned figure.

The darkened electric window rose and closed. As Katerina approached, Lisa stepped back from the limo and straightened. The limo eased away from the curb and pulled into traffic.

“Are you ready for your complimentary coaching session?” Lisa asked.

“I only have one or two questions,” Kat said.

“That’s fine. There isn’t much I can tell you anyway.”

...

Katerina observed her lunch partner with a mixture of admiration and jealousy. Lisa owned everything she did, every movement lithe and fluid, with a class and grace most women only hope to possess. Her hair fell shiny and straight to her shoulders, her complexion one smooth, luminous tone. She never hurried; every move flowed into another with unrehearsed ease.

“You’re in law school?” Kat asked, flushing slightly. She had been staring.

“Second year.”

“Does that help with the job?”

Lisa smiled but didn’t appear pleased. “Not at all. I hope you’re not planning to break the rules and discuss the particulars of your assignments.”

The server appeared, balancing plates of food. Kat followed Lisa's lead, sitting mute until he left.

Kat, who had been thinking of doing just that, shook her head.

"Good. Don't do that with anyone. It would be a great mistake."

"I don't understand. My contacts know details. Not everything. But I'm sure they can put the pieces together."

"If your contact knows, then he or she was involved. They have no reason to speak up."

"So you're saying there is honor among thieves—not that I'm referring to theft." Kat felt a spike of heat rocket to her face.

Lisa gave the slightest of smiles. "Absolutely not. What I'm saying is that everyone has been paid, in one form or another. Your contact wants you to call again so they can be paid again, in one form or another. Sharing is bad for their business just as much as yours. Most of them aren't even using their real names."

"Is Lisa your real name?"

"Maybe," she said with a slight smile. "Next question."

Katerina tried to process these new facts that she had never even considered. She began to realize that this well ran deeper than she could imagine. "Why did you choose me?"

"Because you thought fast and you were quick on your feet. In this line of work those are valuable commodities." Lisa paused for a moment. "You can still get out if you want to."

Kat gazed at her salad; her appetite had fled. "Is this part of the complimentary coaching session? Giving me another chance to get out?"

Lisa shrugged.

"Or are you doing another evaluation and reporting back to MJM, whoever she is."

"I've never seen MJM, whoever he *or* she is."

"You didn't answer my question."

Lisa met Kat's gaze. "Yes."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Why only male clients?" Kat asked.

Lisa's eyebrows lifted and then furrowed as if surprised by such a foolish query. She raised a finger as she ticked off each point. "Because men have the perfect trio of traits that make them the ideal client: they enjoy behaving badly, they enjoy confessing their bad behavior, and they always want a Mommy substitute to clean up the mess and make it all better."

Shades of Philip, Kat thought. For all his bloated bragging, he wasn't wrong. *The client always wants to confess.*

"I'm a little—concerned about how to find—contacts."

Lisa nodded. "The common mistake a newbie makes is thinking a contact is only good for the one thing you called them for. Use your present contact to find new contacts. Trust me, your connection knows a lot more than he or she is telling you."

"So my cut really isn't my cut. I'll always be paying out to a third party."

Lisa shook her head and leaned in. "Remember, I said paid *in one form or another*. Katerina, this game is all about pride and ego. Your contact gets off by being the one out of five people on this planet who can deliver what's needed at a moment's notice. Test the fences. See what can be begged, borrowed, or bartered. And if all else fails, don't underestimate the chance of someone being willing to help a damsel in distress."

The lunch crowd was thinning. Lisa checked her phone, a sign that she was finished. I'm on my own, Kat thought. But there was one more question she had to ask.

"Don't you ever—you know—worry?"

Lisa didn't bat an eye. "You're being paid large sums of money. You'd be a fool if you didn't."

"You don't look worried."

"Learn to control it or get out. You have other choices. You can get married and get on the mommy track, drive a computer keyboard for some middle management asshole, or go home. You won't be disappointing me. I don't care."

Kat nodded. They rose from the table.

Lisa shrugged her purse onto her shoulder. "I think you want to be a success. I think you want the power that a successful life brings. I think you're drawn to it and I think you're out of options that will get you there and that's why you're still here."

A tinder of fear rumbled in Kat's belly; she had a vision of a moth, fluttering closer and closer to the flame. The genteel life of summer concerts at the farm and the old fashioned

country store with the penny candy belonged to her previous life, even if she had never felt like she belonged there.

“Anything else?” Lisa asked.

“Yes. I have to prove myself to you before I get more than this line of company bullshit, don’t I?”

Lisa’s face relaxed and her smile, for the first time, was genuine. “I knew I was right when I picked you. Stay alert, Rapunzel, and you’ll be okay. Remember, it beats lying on your back for a living.”

Lisa laid down a fifty-dollar bill on top of the check and walked out; she didn’t look back.

When Katerina exited the restaurant, she scanned left and right but Lisa had vanished. A small truck, the name “Exquisite Exports Shipping and Storage” on its side, tooled down the street. Kat watched the truck for a moment and walked in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 11

Katerina called Mr. Reynolds with her report to date.

He made a slight clucking sound that rang with gravity and surprise. “An interest in the arts. I had no idea,” he said. “What's the name of the theater?”

She gave him the details. “I'm trying to wrap this up as quickly as possible for you.”

Kat was met with silence on the other end. Oh shit, she thought. He wants to cancel now.

“Take all the time you need, Katerina,” he said. “I want to get it right.”

With a sigh of relief, Kat decided to see if Mrs. Reynolds was a creature of habit. She parked outside the spa and after two hours, Kat was rewarded for her patience. She should have been pleased but preoccupation with an impending theft that was going nowhere and her part-time occupation as a mule for Philip's less than legal doings prevented her from enjoying her stroke of good fortune.

She allowed herself a tiny smirk of satisfaction as the Town Car pulled up. Mrs. Reynolds emerged, dressed head to toe in beige, and disappeared into the spa. By the time she came out an hour later, Kat had finished formulating a plan.

...

Katerina waited until Mrs. Reynolds entered the theater. Checking the side view mirror to ensure her open door wouldn't be clipped, Kat scrambled out of the driver's side and hurried across the street and inside.

She was greeted with gloom and silence. Posters from past performances lined the walls. Kat scanned the posters looking for any sign that the wealthy, bored, socialite enjoyed a wild fling as an actress, but Mrs. Reynolds' face was nowhere to be seen.

“Can I help you?”

Kat whirled. She found herself face to face with a tall, muscular man with broad shoulders and a head of long, straight black hair brushing his collar. He stood looking down at her, waiting.

“You startled me,” she said with a gasp. She took a deep breath, playing for time. “I'm interested in acting lessons. Do you give acting lessons?”

He broke into a wide smile as he came to Katerina's side.

“Absolutely. Have you studied previously?” he asked, taking her hand.

He had a laser-like focus; Kat found the eye contact disconcerting.

Oh shit. The Wife is in here somewhere but Laurence Olivier isn't going to let me out of his sight.

He continued to study her with expectation.

"I did, but... uh... it was a while ago. I was in a performance of *Oliver* in high school."

"*You were Oliver?*"

"It was a progressive school. The director wanted to reimagine the work."

"Fantastic!" he exclaimed. "Whoever that man was, he was a genius. That's what it's all about, pushing boundaries. And now you're here to push your own boundaries, aren't you?"

Katerina nodded, focusing on the fourteen thousand dollars that was going to keep her from being without the boundaries of apartment walls and doors.

"But I am a bit nervous about this. Could I have a tour?"

"Absolutely," he said.

He chattered as he ushered her through the empty studio rooms, waxing poetic about method and process, Lee Strasberg, Uta Hagen, and Al Pacino.

"Do you have patrons who support the theater?"

"Oh yes, we have several."

"I'd love to meet them, if they're here."

"We'll see who we run into in our travels."

This isn't working, Kat thought. I'm running out of ideas.

As they came out of Studio B, Kat spied a dark haired woman stepping into the elevator, her shoulder length hair and heavy bangs casting deep shadows over her features. She wore a black shirt and slacks and had a black tote slung over her shoulder. As the elevator door closed, Katerina turned away but out of the corner of her eye she caught a sliver of beige.

"Now, when did you want to begin?"

Katerina opened her mouth but didn't respond. Something clicked into place: *beige shoes*.

"Oh," she said, backing up, "this is all so overwhelming for me. I'm sorry but I'll need to call you. I need to process...such a big decision."

Her guide stared at her like he had lost his best friend.

Spinning away, Kat headed for the door. *Sorry Laurence, I have to track a pair of beige shoes.*

She made it out the front door just as The Wife ducked into a cab. There was no time to run for the car. She sprinted to the corner, her arm in the air.

A cab screeched up to the curb. As Kat jumped in, she caught sight of a light, blue Ford behind the cab. The man at the wheel had a crew cut, making his head look like a square box. He had dark eyes. Those eyes were fixed on her. For a split second, they connected and held each other's gaze. Then she ducked inside the cab.

"Lady, where you want to go?" the cabbie asked.

"Follow the taxi up ahead," she said.

"Which taxi?"

Kat faced front. There were four cabs up ahead in the snarl of traffic.

"The one with the *Lion King* ad on top," she said. "Stay close but not too close."

The cabbie mumbled, then said, "You a cop?"

"No."

"Private eye?"

"No."

The cabbie eyed her through the rear view mirror. "What are you?"

"Repossessor of rented goods. The woman in that cab borrowed a Michael Kors bag and never returned it."

"Ahhh," the cabbie said. Gripping the steering wheel, he stepped on the gas.

Only in New York, Kat thought. He's ready to jump into a sting operation for an overpriced handbag.

She had been resisting the urge to turn and check behind her. Now, she turned. The blue Ford, two cars behind, continued to follow. Her pulse began to race.

"Why you look out the back window?"

Kat's hands went cold and clammy; she didn't answer. Damn you Philip, you lousy son of a bitch, she thought.

The cab with The Wife headed to Chinatown.

The cab stopped. Mrs. Reynolds got out.

“Slow down, slow down!” Kat ordered.

The driver eased over to the curb. Kat thrust some crumpled bills at him.

“Can I get a receipt?” she asked, stalling for time to keep an eye on the dark caramel wig as it disappeared inside a building. She glanced behind her. At the end of the block, the blue Ford idled. If she got out of the cab now...

“Never mind,” she said to the cabbie. “Let’s go back.”

“You don’t want the bag?”

“Take me back to Midtown. Penn Station.”

The cabbie handed the bills back to her with a disgusted sigh. He turned, his large round shoulders hunching over the wheel. As the cab pulled away from the curb, the blue Ford tore past them, nearly sideswiping the taxi and rocketed down the street. Brakes squealing, the cab screeched to a stop. Kat flew back, her head striking the window frame. The cabbie launched into a litany of curses.

Kat closed her eyes; she could see stars behind her eyes.

“Lady, you okay?”

She nodded, fingering the rising lump on her temple.

“Crazy people,” the cabbie muttered.

Yes, we are, she thought. Crazy or stupid, and she wasn’t sure which category she fit into.

•••

Kat got out at Penn Station and fled down into the subway, the throbbing in her head keeping time with the rhythm of the trains. She switched lines twice on her way back to the theater. Walking to Emma’s car, she punched in a number on her cell, holding her breath with each ring. Finally, a click.

“Hi beautiful, how’s my bestie?” Philip answered. Kat could imagine his easy smile.

“No bueno, mi amigo,” she managed through her ragged breathing. “Someone came around looking for that something you gave me to hold onto. And since they’re looking for it, that means they’re now looking for me.”

“Hold it,” he said, his voice wary. “Slow down, kid. Who’s looking for it? What did he look like?”

Kat glanced both ways before stepping out to cross the street. “Big, mean, square head, homicidal glint in the eye. Look, I’m working and this is interfering. I can’t have this. Come get it. Now.”

She tucked the phone between her cheek and her shoulder to fish her keys out of her purse.

“What kind of work are you doing?” he asked.

“Never mind.”

“Who are you working for?”

The keys slipped out of her hand, hitting the pavement. “Shit! Philip!” She stopped, forcing herself to slow down and take a breath. “Focus, okay? You have to come and collect your—whatever. I do not wish to have anymore—encounters—with your—business associate.”

Silence on the other end of the line.

“Did you look at it?” he asked.

“Seriously?”

“Right, sorry—listen to me, beautiful,” he began, his voice silky and seductive. He had used the voice that night, whispering in her ear as he moved inside her. A bolt of heat spiked through her and she cursed under her breath. She shook her head to get the vision out of her mind.

“I don’t know what’s happening but I wouldn’t put you in any danger. I’m out of town but I’ll be back soon. Just sit tight. I’ll come and get it and I’ll make it up to you.”

“No, Philip—you need to come—”

“Love you, kid.” Click.

Kat yanked the door open, jumped in, slammed the door shut, and jammed the lock. Bastard, she thought. She glanced down at her watch. Seven o’clock. Shit! Starbucks! Mark was waiting. She revved the engine and took off.

CHAPTER 12

Kat rushed into Starbucks and then stopped on a dime. Leaning against the counter, she forced herself to breathe slowly. She soon became aware of the young women behind the counter observing her with a mix of suspicion and curiosity; she gave them a weak smile.

She ran her fingers through her hair to settle it down, then quickly scanned the tables. Nothing. She craned her neck to check out the second floor. She caught sight of Mark and thought he must have felt her eyes upon him because he looked down at her. She took the stairs two at a time.

“Sorry I’m late,” she huffed, dropping her back pack on the table. “Stuck at work.” Mark’s papers took flight, some fluttering to the floor.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m so sorry,” she said, her hands flying in every direction to catch the papers.

Mark shifted his things to make room for her. “It’s okay,” he said. “No problem. I’m glad you made it.”

•••

“There is no difference between pushing a person or flipping a switch, Katerina.”

“But that man on the bridge has nothing to do with the train or the people on the track. He's not part of the equation. It's murder.”

“You can't look at it that way,” Mark said. “Everyone has choices. There are five people versus one person. Both acts are murder. Your reasoning won't change that. If rationalizations were ever acceptable, the jails would be empty. It is what it is. Don't sugarcoat it.”

Katerina avoided eye contact, stung by his tone, as if she was still a naive girl from a quaint rural town. They sank into a stalemate of silence, Katerina focusing on their empty coffee cups.

“What kind of law do you want to practice?” he asked, cutting through the silence.

Kat shrugged. “Haven't thought much about it.”

“I’m going into environmental law,” he said. “Like the PG and E case. Where I can really make a difference.”

“I’m sure Erin Brockovich will be happy to have you on her side.”

Once again, a stilted silence. A flush of embarrassment rushed to Kat's face, convicting her of her cruel remark.

Mark pulled something out of his bag and held it out to her. It was a granola bar.

She smiled and took it.

“You know, this is a really tough issue, intellectually and emotionally,” he said. “I don't mind writing either side of the opinion. It gives me a chance to see it from your perspective, which *is* totally valid. I'm very open to other viewpoints. I want to see the other side.”

“Sure, okay,” she said, deciding to take the offered olive branch, Mark's version of a left handed mea culpa.

She rose and Mark fumbled to pack up his books and papers. Stalling for time, he cleaned the plates. Then he got up.

“I guess that’s it, then,” he said.

Kat headed for the stairs. Mark hoisted his backpack on his shoulder and followed her down and out the door.

“Maybe, after the project is over we could catch a movie—or something,” he said, his voice tentative.

When Kat glanced over at him, he was staring straight ahead.

“I'd like that,” she said. “And...I’m sure you're going to be a successful lawyer.”

He nodded, allowing himself a quick glance at her. After a second she caught a smile curving the corners of his mouth.

Kat checked her phone. Eleven o'clock. She had a whole night's worth of study ahead *and* a theft to plan. She still didn't have a contact. She still didn't know where to begin. Realizing she was walking by herself, she stopped and turned to see Mark a few steps behind her, staring again, wearing that same confused expression.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” she asked. “I was lost in thought.”

“I got that,” he said with a little shake of his head. “I asked which one was your car. So I could walk you to it—and say goodnight.”

“Right,” she said.

•••

Katerina stopped at a bodega a block away from her apartment and picked up the necessities for an all-nighter: soda, Skittles, and coffee. Plenty of students were already popping Modafinil and Adderall. She wouldn't do it. She had only her mind to depend on and she had to stay alert. She was inserting the building door key into the lock when she heard her name.

"Katerina Mills?"

Kat dropped the deli bag, whipping around in the direction of the voice. A young guy, twentysomething, stepped into the light from the street lamp. He was just shy of six feet with a lanky build and an angular face. He had a crooked smile and uncombed hair.

Kat dug her hand into her purse. The mace. Shit, where was the damn mace!

"Are you Katerina Mills?"

She didn't answer but kept kneading deeper into her purse until her fingers closed around the small can. Whipping it out, she thrust it in his direction. He raised his hands.

"Hey...hey...easy!" he cried, backing away. "*You* called me, remember?"

Kat hesitated but kept her arm poised and her finger on the button of the can.

He held out a paper. She could see scribbling on the sheet. She shrugged, giving a shake of her head. He inched closer, still holding out the paper. She stood her ground.

"William, Will Temple. You called me about a part, in a movie?"

"No. You have the wrong person."

He pulled back the paper to reread it, as if it would somehow reveal some new clue. He glanced at her, then eyed the mace.

"I'm not a crazy serial killer. I'm an actor. I have an audition tomorrow morning. I should be in bed now. But this sounded so good I had to come." He held out the paper again. "Please."

Kat took a tentative step toward him and snatched the paper. It listed her name, address, a production company name, Random Girl Films, and the name of the film, *Love's Fury*. She gave him a wary examination. He was adorable in an artistic, scruffy way, with his battered jacket, T-shirt, and worn jeans that fit him like a second skin. Kat caught a whiff of his scent, a pleasing notion of warmth and pheromones.

"Sorry, Will. Someone is playing you. I don't have a production company. I'm not making a movie."

He took the paper back and read it over again. Kat had a moment's regret at being so matter-of-fact. She hazarded a guess that Will Temple was heavy on looks and charm, but perhaps a little light on brains.

"Oh man," he said. "That sucks."

"Do I sound like the woman you spoke to?"

"Actually, a guy called and gave me your info."

Kat stiffened. *Who the hell is giving out my contact information?*

"I'm sorry you came down here for nothing," she said. "I'm sure there must be at least one other Katerina Mills in the city."

He shrugged, the disappointment clouding his face. "I guess. You have to follow every lead, right?"

They stood together for another moment. *He is a cutie.* Under different circumstances...knock it off, she thought.

"Well, good luck to you," she said, dropping the mace back into her purse.

"Yeah, you too. Take it easy."

He turned to walk away but then stopped.

"Katerina."

She was at the door, key in hand. She glanced over her shoulder at him.

"I'm at the Theater For A New Audience, in Brooklyn. I'm in *Hamlet*."

"Are you playing the Prince of Denmark?"

"No...Rosencrantz. Someday I'll be tragic Hamlet, on the stage in Central Park."

"I believe it," she said.

He laughed. "You should come see me."

"I don't know anyone in the business, Will. I'm not a good contact for you."

"Come anyway," he said with a wide, boyish grin.

She smiled in spite of herself. "Maybe."

Pleased with himself, he took off towards the subway.

Goodnight, player, she thought as she let herself into the apartment. The circumstances of their meeting intruded on her pleasant thoughts and she threw the dead bolt on the apartment door. As much as she wanted to worry over this, her brain was overloaded and the circuits were fried, a swirling eddy of times, places, and events. This was a case of mistaken identity, she decided, a screw up...nothing more. She sank onto the loveseat.

She dozed sitting up, her sleep fitful, a whirl of images and thoughts. A half hour later, her eyes opened. She sat still in the dark, remembering the day she met Lisa, remembering the truck passing by the restaurant. Exquisite Exports Shipping and Storage. Suddenly, she realized she shouldn't be looking for a contact at Sotheby's. She should be looking for the transport company that picked up the cabinet at Sotheby's and brought it to the new owner.

I have a contact for that.

Curious to know what happens next?

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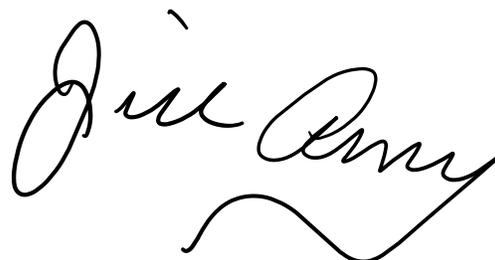
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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jill Amy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, wavy underline.