

*Jennifer's Murderer*

*by William G. Tedford*

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## *One*

A girl somewhere between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, Jennifer Renee Wessner, sat curled in a recliner running an emery board across her fingernails. Cathy Weibler lay on the couch amidst her halo of shiny blonde curls and glanced hopefully at Jennifer.

The phone rang.

Jennifer gave the older woman and her bright blue eyes a stubborn smile, forcing Cathy to snatch the offending instrument from its cradle with a glare of mock anger. “Evelyn Haxx residence. Cathy Weibler speaking.”

Cathy sat up quickly. “Oh, hi, Evelyn. No, we haven’t gotten any calls.” She listened attentively. “Just me and Jennifer. Nothing much going on.”

Cathy drew erect with rapt attention. “Dimitri

Carvelli..” She reached for a pencil alongside the phone, jotted a number on a scratch pad and repeated it. “You want me to give Dimitri a call. Be sweet as a rotting corpse and tell the rich young dude that you’re scrogging someone else tonight and to call Miss Piggy for another date.”

Cathy winced at the repercussions of her spiteful sarcasm and sighed with exasperation. “I can, too, be civil. I won’t screw around, and I’ll send Jennifer home at a decent hour just as you say. Good-bye, Evelyn.”

Cathy put the phone down a bit heavily. “Prissy bitch.”

Jennifer looked up from her blunted fingernails. “Why doesn’t she call that Carvelli dude herself?”

“Caller ID,” Cathy said. “Business from business phones only. Stalking protection. Rule number four hundred and eighty-seven million.”

It made sense, and Jennifer committed another of Francis’ many rules of the trade to memory, although the four hundred and eighty seven million part was just a bit of facetiousness. She already knew that Francis screened new customers, assigned them to one of her stable of courtesans, and expected business to be conducted in a very business-like manner.

Courtesan was Francis Peugeot’s choice of words, and she always said it with a smile.

“Dimitri Carvelli isn’t an approved customer?” Jennifer said.

Cathy frowned, momentarily distracted. “Blacklisted. Evelyn says he’s a sicko. Francis will refer him elsewhere.”

Jennifer wrinkled her nose. “Elsewhere?”

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Cathy laughed at her puzzled innocence. “Scags stupid enough to take the risk, or tough enough to handle it. Francis doesn’t do that kind of business.”

Jennifer smiled and returned to her nails. “How nice.”

Cathy lay back down on the couch and hugged a pillow. “Evelyn gets all the high-class business.”

“Elegant Evelyn,” Jennifer said, still smiling.

“You know who Dimitri Carvelli is, don’t you?” Cathy said in a conspiratorial tone of voice.

“I wouldn’t have the slightest idea. It’s probably not something for my virgin ears to hear.”

“His dad’s a big shot in city government, commissioner of streets and highways, I think. He’s old as dirt, and his kid’s a spoiled brat, but they’re both top rates. I bet I could keep the little turd in line.”

Jennifer glanced at woman with a jolt of concern. The old stereotype of the dumb blonde applied with a vengeance to Cathy. Her beauty and abject lack of good judgment were a bad combination that constantly got her into trouble with Francis and the other girls. Jennifer could all but hear the cogs turning in her mischievous brain.

“Evelyn didn’t say how I was supposed to deliver the message,” Cathy rationalized aloud.

Jennifer felt a little chill of apprehension. “You’ll get fired, if you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

“Like Wanda getting fired? We’re both the same age, you know. I’m next in line.”

“Wanda won’t lay off the drugs.”

Cathy sat up and sighed heavily. “Yeah, but she’s getting too old, we’re both tired of working by all the rules anyway, and I’m still next in line.”

She stared off into space with a haunted look, then flashed a self-conscious smile. “Why don’t you hold down the fort for me. I’ve got to go to the drug store for some personal stuff. We don’t want to let the bed bugs bite, now do we?”

Jennifer set her emery board aside and unraveled her long legs. “You’re supposed to stay here and answer the phone.” Evelyn’s answering machine had bit the dust late in the day and the two had agreed to fill in for the evening.

“You won’t snitch on me, will you?” Cathy said, her gaze cold as ice.

“No, but I won’t lie for you.”

Cathy got up and headed for the bedroom to dress. “You won’t have to. It’s going to be a quiet one tonight. I can tell.”

Jennifer leaped to her feet, fearful of being abandoned in a strange part of town by the older women. “You just going to leave me here alone?”

“Francis doesn’t want you part of the business,” Cathy called out from the bedroom, “but you’re old enough to answer the phone!”

Jennifer dropped down in front of Evelyn’s forty-five inch flat-screen plasma TV, suppressing nagging concern and petty frustration. If nothing else, Evelyn had rented a stack of DVDs, and they’d have to go back in the morning.

Cathy emerged from the bedroom dressed to kill in one of Evelyn’s gowns, royal blue and edged in black lace, and a pair of heels. She refitted her own gold choker around her neck and did a quick whirl.

Jennifer shook her head in exasperation. Cathy was an absolute knockout. “But you really shouldn’t,” she cautioned.

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“Just don’t rat on me, okay?”

Jennifer nodded reluctantly. She turned back to the TV and reached for the remote. Behind her, the door to the apartment opened and closed and settled the issue with resolute finality.

Jennifer slipped one of the summer’s blockbusters into the DVD. She was skipping through coming attractions when the phone rang again. Wrought with tension, Jennifer paused the player and picked up the handset. “Evelyn Haxx residence. How may I help you?”

“Jennifer,” Evelyn’s soft voice sounded. “Is that you?”

Jennifer’s grew rigid with tension. Her heart picked up its beat. It was Evelyn calling back for confirmation that Cathy had made the call, and already Cathy was in trouble. They both should have guessed that Evelyn would check back. “Yeah, it’s me, Evelyn.”

“Did Cathy make the call?”

Jennifer’s mind whirled with indecision. “She left the apartment, Evelyn. She said she was going to the drugstore.”

“She left the apartment? She didn’t make the call?” Evelyn grew agitated. “She knows Dimitri’s trouble. He’s drunk, Jennifer. He’s really nasty when he’s drunk. Do you think you can stop her?”

Jennifer rose to her feet and danced up and down nervously. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Go after her!” Evelyn cried in alarm. “Tell her I’m calling Francis this very minute! She knows better than to pull a stunt like this! Now go!”

Seething with apprehension, Jennifer fought the need to go running out into the night in shorts and halter. With a moan of dismay, Evelyn’s crisis took precedent over

skimpy attire in a bad part of town. She hung the phone up and ran for the door. Racing down the hall, a door closed on the ground floor.

“Cathy, wait!”

She monitored the deserted hall for a response, then raced down the three flights of stairs rather than wait for the elevator. Pausing at the main entrance to peer out into the darkness, she thought she saw Cathy’s old Dodge Monaco turning at the corner.

It wasn’t too late. The drug store was only a couple blocks away. Her trusty bicycle awaited in the bushes. Still, she hesitated, thinking that it would be one more nail in her coffin should she let the apartment building door close and lock behind her and then be accosted in the night by undesirable elements of the male persuasion. Again, she had no recourse. She had change in her pocket. She could phone Francis from a booth and arrange for a pickup.

She hurried outside and retrieved her bike from the bushes and shadows alongside the building. Pedaling furiously, she cut through a dark alley, zipped across a deserted thoroughfare, and wove through the traffic in the parking lot of the strip mall. A drunk or two emerged from the shadows, holding out a hand to her with a feeble croak of dismay that temptation should come and go so quickly.

She dropped the bike alongside the drug store and went inside the brightly lit interior. It was late, and the store all but deserted. Cathy stood in line behind two other customers at the express register.

Cathy caught sight of her. A contest of whispers followed.

“Go home, Jennifer!”

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“Evelyn called back! She said she was going to call Francis!”

“You snitched on me!”

“I did not!”

“Did so! Now scoot!”

Unfriendly eyes from behind the service counter were watching. Jennifer went outside and paced alongside the car thinking she should at least follow Cathy and keep an eye on her, except that Cathy wasn't likely to take her along, and pitting a bicycle against a car would only get her left in the old Dodge's smoky exhaust and abandoned in an obstacle course of more drunks lining the streets and alleys.

Cathy came bounding through the automatic doors with her usual air-headed exuberance. Jennifer dived impulsively through an open window of the rusty Monaco and crawled over the front seat. She lay face down on the back floor and put her hands over her head, as if the gesture would render her invisible.

Muttering angrily to herself, Cathy tossed a white paper sack into the front seat, climbed behind the wheel, and slammed the door. She started the car, cranked the radio on a heavy rock station and drove away squealing tires.

Jennifer had committed herself, and lost her bicycle in the process. If she revealed her presence now, Cathy would get nasty. She'd evict her from the car and abandon her on foot ten miles from home. Jennifer had no choice but to remain silent for the violent twenty-minute drive and the raucous music that accompanied it.

Cathy lurched to a stop at an iron gate. She turned off the radio and pushed the button to an intercom. A muffled

voice spoke briefly. Cathy said her name was Evelyn Haxx and the gate opened. She drove up a steep drive lined with trees and went around the back of a dark mansion. She parked, shut off the lights and engine, and was gone in a flash.

As the car door slammed shut, Jennifer pressed her forehead to the musky smelling rug and squeezed her fists in a fit of fearful indecision. She positively hated being left alone in the dark.

She raised her head above the seat and took notice that a back door to the house stood slightly ajar. It creaked open even as she watched, caught like a sail in a summer breeze. That was typical of Cathy, always rushing about like a scatter-brain and not paying attention to what she was doing.

It took fifteen minutes for Jennifer to gather enough courage to venture outside the car and peek inside the house. Beyond, a dim fluorescent light glowed in a kitchen of white enamel and stainless steel. Jennifer crept forward step by step, listening for the reassuring sound of Cathy's voice.

She crept down a hall toward the dining room and finally heard murmuring voices. A basement door stood open. Cathy's voice and the voice of a suave sounding man drifted up from downstairs. Jennifer caught sight of the edge of a pool table and a bottom corner of a rich wall of paneling. As tension sloughed away, she sat on the carpeted top step. Cathy didn't know it, but a guardian angel going to watch over her for the rest of her visit.

Jennifer leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, soothed by the subdued voices and sounds of casual laughter. Dimitri Carvelli didn't sound drunk. He didn't

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sound at all dangerous. She ignored the embarrassed giggles and the animal grunts and moans that followed, but when she could hear the tinkling of glass between bouts of love-making, and when Cathy's laughter grew raucous over the course of the next hour, Jennifer knew they were both getting drunk. That, too, was against Francis' rules.

Something went wrong. They began barking angered retorts at one another and Jennifer leaped to her feet, prepared to flee back to the car. Cathy would come storming up the stairs at any moment. She heard the two scuffling and bumping into things. Cathy wasn't one to let her clients get rough with her.

Cathy cried out in sudden pain, an anguished wail cut off in an instant. The hackles along the back of Jennifer's neck crawled. Dimitri snarled in anger. Glass crashed to the floor. Jennifer was frozen in place when a figure backed staggering into view below, a naked man holding a gleaming dueling foil.

Ice crept up Jennifer's spine. The tip of the thin rapier tipped to the ground.

Blood dripped from the end.

The horrible image held her entranced a moment too long. She stood rooted to the spot, not knowing if she should scream, rush down to help, or turn and escape without being seen.

Dimitri Carvelli settled her moment of indecision. Maybe her shuddering breath gave her away. He glanced up at her, his eyes widened in shock, and then he roared with panic and outrage.

He charged up the stairs after her, and it was in that

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place and at that moment that Jennifer's long nightmare began.

## *Two*

**C**ity Commissioner Bernard Carvelli awakened in the dead of the night to the scream of a dying woman. He bolted upright in bed, taken back to the last time he had heard that very same wail of agony and despair. He had only been a boy then, a caretaker to a mansion near Milan occupied by the Germans. So, so many years ago. Men in black uniforms and death's-head emblems had routed him in the middle of the night to dispose of a pale body thrown upon a cart and covered with canvas. No one would tell him what to do with it. No one had cared. He had dumped it down a steep ravine at the edge of town, keeping his face averted as it slid into the darkness and tumbled down the slope.

Again, he would have to deal with it, and with men no

better than those who had ruled his life as a boy. Anguish stabbed at his heart with palpable discomfort. He put a hand to his chest, rose in the darkness, and fumbled for the table lamp on the nightstand. Pudgy fingers popped open a pill box of tiny nitro tablets beneath its warm glow. Most sprayed across the rug at his feet. A precious few stuck to his sweaty palm. One went beneath his tongue as he snatched his robe from the back of a nearby chair.

“Dimitri!” he roared, knowing the source of his woe. “Goddamn you, Dimitri!”

The robe fell to either side of his fifty inch gut pounding along the upstairs hall. He yanked the rich crimson velvet closed and whipped a knot in the sash storming down the spiraling staircase. His whole body trembled with fear. What had Dimitri done now? The boy knew better than to bring women to the house.

Bernard paused on the balcony overlooking a spacious living room. Below, a single table lamp cast ghostly shadows. He resisted the temptation to call the police and risk ruinous publicity. He would first investigate for himself to see what had happened and give himself time to gather his wits about him. There were others to call for help should the need to be discrete arise.

He went down the stairs and flipped a wall switch. Light from a century-old chandelier commandeered from a bombed cathedral near Milan cast a sparkling light into the living room.

Nothing here.

He rushed down a shadowed hall toward the rear basement entrance. Dimitri would most probably be found in one of the downstairs dens. The sound had been dim, filtered through most of the three stories and thirty rooms

of the mansion. If the scream hadn't struck such a note of terror in his soul, its volume alone would never have awakened him.

Dimitri cried out in anger somewhere ahead. The door at the end of the hall flew open. A girl in shorts, hardly more than a child, rushed from the staircase and almost collided with him before dodging to one side with a shriek of terror and ducking by. Dimitri followed, fitting one leg and then another into a pair of trousers. He nervously tossed from hand to hand a three thousand dollar Spanish dueling foil dating from the thirteenth century, bloodied for the first time in perhaps six hundred years.

"For the love of Mary, Mother of God!"

Startled by Bernard's cry, Dimitri stumbled drunkenly. He lowered his head and glowered at the older man through bloodshot eyes burning with drunken rage. His narrow chest heaved. Sweat on his body gleamed in the bright overhead light. And something darker.

More blood.

Bernard lumbered forward, anger bubbling through his confusion. "How dare you bring your foul sickness into my home! You drunken fool, I warned you!"

Dimitri's eyes widened in surprise. Fear penetrated his alcoholic stupor an instant before Bernard backhanded the much younger and smaller man and sent him careening against the wall. The sword clattered to the tiled floor. Dimitri floundered, muttering obscenities forbidden in the house.

The dark stairs from which the girl and Dimitri had emerged caught and held Bernard's focus of attention. The blood was not Dimitri's, and the fleeing girl had been unharmed. A third presence was in the house. An evil that

hadn't touched Bernard's life in half a century had been wrought in the den below.

Bernard retrieved the foil and started down the stairs, holding the thin blade before him as a shield against the unknown. Inwardly, he railed against his cowardice. Cowardice had ruled his life. The self-hatred it engendered would torment him until the day his faltering heart stopped for good.

"Father, no!" Dimitri cried out from the top of the stairs. "Stay away from this! Let me handle it! Goddamn it, I can't let her get away!"

The escaping girl went out through the kitchen. A pot clattered to the floor, and the back door slammed back against the counter. Bernard felt a tinge of satisfaction at the silence that ensued. The girl had escaped. Dimitri whirled about and launched himself pursuit of her, leaving Bernard alone in the deathly quiet den.

Overtured chairs littered the floor. Bernard eyed emptied liquor bottles at the bar, and empty glasses. The smell of death permeated the room, and Bernard turned aside and vomited in a powerful, subconscious protest of the long forgotten stench of blood and loosened bowels. Slowly, he recovered and continued the search. There was nothing in view from his vantage point. He wanted to see nothing more. He backed away slowly, hoping that nothing at all had happened. His faltering heart could stand only so much excitement.

But he had to know for certain, and every second counted if he hoped to stop Dimitri from compounding the consequence of his madness. Bernard shuffled to the bar and snatched the handset of the extension from its cradle.

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A pudgy finger quivering with tension paused over the buttons.

Countless phone numbers spilled through his mind, the home and office numbers of every major city official, of contractors and mobsters, of friends and family. Numbers were his stock and trade. If he closed his eyes, he could all but see the scrolling computer screens in the new accounting offices spilling forth the life blood of a city. No mystery there. Numbers, clean and neat. No blood in any but a metaphorical sense. Numbers had no odor. They did not feel sticky upon the hand, nor were they ever so irrevocably spilled into the dust.

His fingers tapped out a number. It surprised him, the evidence of sanity at work beneath his panic. The phone buzzed and clicked. A muffled voice sounded at the other end. "Karl Garko. Who are you and what do you want?"

Bernard's voice broke. He squeezed tears from his eyes. Self-deprecation seared him. Always this plea for help in times of crisis, always this dependency upon forces in his life that used him as they might a pawn upon a chessboard.

"Bernard?" said the hesitant voice on the other end of the line. "Carvelli, is it you? My friend, you know better than to call me at this number. This is for emergencies only. Is this an emergency, Carvelli?"

Bernard took a shuddering breath of air. "Dimitri. . ."

Karl Garko muttered a profanity, and then an angered sigh. "Dimitri," he spat. "What has he done now?"

"I don't know. Karl, there's blood. Dimitri brought women home!"

Karl's voice went deep and cold. "I've warned you about that boy, Carvelli. He's sick and he's dangerous.

Dangerous to all of us. Did he hurt someone, Carvelli? Do you want me to send help, or can this wait until morning?"

Bernard eyes darted about the room. Morbid curiosity and the need to satisfy Karl Garko's question sent Bernard's head bobbing from side to side in search of the inevitable body. He caught sight of white flesh showing from between the pool table and an upholstered chair. His breath caught in his throat.

"Bernard?"

A white breast, a rose aureole and its nipple glowed like lifeless wax in the dim light. A naked woman, not breathing. A tiny wound in her solar plexus leaked blood, and another lower on her belly.

Bernard Carvelli whimpered. Karl snapped at him over the phone, bringing him back into focus.

Bernard's voice went flat. "He killed a girl, Mr. Garko."

Karl groaned. "Stay put. I'm sending men over. Don't call the police. We'll take care of this ourselves. Where's Dimitri now?"

"Mr. Garko, there was a second girl. I think she got away. Dimitri went after her."

"Christ! Bernard, stay put! I'll get some men over right away!"

The handset clicked and buzzed. Bernard lowered it, his eyes fixed on the cross-section of torso visible through the furniture. He shuffled forward until the cord pulled the handset from his hand and it banged against the side of the bar.

He studied the body long enough to confirm the obvious for certain, and then he turned away. The scream had belonged to this girl. It had been her death he had

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heard echoing through the empty house. Once again he had witnessed murder. Once again he would be used like a tool to hide sin from the eyes of society. And poor Dimitri. By morning, Dimitri would be sober enough to know that he had sealed his own doom. If only he could be stopped before he hurt anyone else. The girl he pursued had been but a child.

Bernard backed to a stool and sat. He had lost his own flesh and blood, his only begotten son. He did not grieve Dimitri's inevitable death. He grieved for the life that had eluded him all of these lost decades. Garko would clean up the mess he and Dimitri had made and leave no evidence to the sins that had been committed yet again. The only witness was the only one that ultimately counted, the Almighty Himself.

He had known this day would come.

## *Three*

Jennifer Renee Wessner paused at Cathy's car in a frenzy of panic and indecision. With Dimitri crashing his way through the kitchen, she didn't have time to check the ignition for the keys. Instead, she threw herself over the five-foot, chain-link fence bordering the manicured lawns and raced down the tree-covered hill toward the main gate below.

Her sandaled feet pounded the smooth grass. Wind stirred her hair. For an instant, she thought that she might escape after all, until she caught sight of gleaming black muscle bounding across lawns lit in patches of stark moonlight.

She dropped to her knees rather than be dragged to the ground by the Doberman snarling a liquid sound deep in its chest. She covered her head with her arms and

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shrieked with despair. The Doberman rushed up to her with lips curled back from teeth like white daggers.

Claws of black ivory dug into the grass and sent dirt spraying in her face. The dog circled her once, dancing in agitation. Twice. It sniffed at her. She cried out her final terror as its wet nose pressed into her crotch. She went rigid with tension, prepared for the drawn out agony of a horrible death.

The animal whined and dropped to its belly before her. Its stubby tail wagged furiously, and the hot stench of its breath panted against her face. She opened her eyes to a lolling tongue drooling dog goo and a pair of friendly brown eyes on level with her own.

“Oh, thank God!” She held the back of her shaking hand out to the animal and wept profusely for a frantic moment.

Dimitri’s mad cry of anger echoed through the night from somewhere behind her, propelling her to her feet. She put her hand absently on the dog’s head, kneading behind the ear. “Man’s best friend like hell,” she muttered defiantly. “Nice doggy.”

Dimitri didn’t come after her on foot. Instead, he circled the house and vanished into the garage. A car engine whooshed quietly, warning that he was headed down to the gate to block her only escape route.

She doubled back to Cathy’s Dodge. A second Doberman joined the first, a female growling in displeasure at her mate’s human companion, but no more inclined to violence than he when Jennifer backtracked and went back over the fence.

Cathy had left the keys in the ignition. She should have guessed as much and saved herself the ten years off

her lifespan the dogs had taken. She closed and locked the doors behind her and took a shuddering breath of air in the quiet. She resisted the temptation to rush back into the house to help and console Cathy. She twisted the ignition key and eased the car into motion thinking that the police and ambulance paramedics would be far more capable of handling the crisis, including whatever was left of herself and Dimitri when she rammed his car at the base of drive, because one way or another, she was getting the hell away from this place and these monsters.

## *Four*

**D**imitri followed the girl out the back door in time to see her go over the low fence along the drive and across the dark lawn on foot. He cried warning, then silenced himself. The Dobermans would tear the fleeing wraith to shreds of meat, and himself as well, if he got in their way. Instead, he circled around to the garage and drove down to block the gate with his Audi, just in case.

He sat trembling in his car, certain she was trapped within the grounds. The illegal, charged wire at the top of the gate would contain her. He told himself to relax. The dogs would leave him with nothing but the chore of disposing of bloodied remains.

Things had gone wrong. He threw his head back, jammed his eyes closed, and cried out his panic to the night. Clenched fists pounded the steering wheel. He

should never have started drinking. The time and the place had been all wrong. Francis had sent the wrong girl. He had been told Evelyn Haxx was a brunette. The blonde had denied it.

“No, honey, I’m Evelyn Haxx! Honest!”

Lying bitch. He had botched it. He couldn’t believe the extent of his foul luck. And a little girl sitting at the top of the stairs in the middle of the night to boot, waiting for nothing more than to serve as witness for the death of a whore. Who in Satan’s name could she have been?

Dimitri reached for the door handle. The dogs were taking too long. He paused when headlights flickering through the trees above his position set shadows weaving to and fro in the surrounding underbrush. The sudden glare of high beams blinded him. And then he heard it, the roar of the worn engine of the old Dodge gaining momentum down the steep slope by the second.

Dimitri had no time to escape the car. He braced himself the instant a tremendous impact struck from behind, spinning his lighter Audi in a half circle off the driveway. The Dodge rebounded, backed up, and then burned rubber ramming the wrought iron gate. Fractured cast iron cascaded out across the street, ringing like a discordant percussion from hell itself.

A piece of iron banged against Dimitri’s hood. Another cracked the passenger door window. The old sedan slid screaming out into the street, then went chugging off into the darkness with broken headlights.

Dimitri resisted the temptation to pursue her. Both vehicles risked attracting the attention of any police cruisers roaming the area. He reached for his car phone

instead, braced his hand against the leather console to stop the trembling, and punched out a number.

“Marcelli,” a sleepy male voice muttered.

“This is Dimitri Carvelli. I have an emergency. There has been an attempt on my father’s life. She’s a hooker, one of Peugeot’s girls. I need a list of addresses and I need them now.”

The voice grunted. Dimitri heard the sound of bedsprings creak and a woman’s murmur of inquiry. “Dimitri, I need authorization from either Bernard or Karl Garko for you to use our services.”

“My father’s ill, but I’m certain he’s called Garko by now. If you don’t help me and do it in the next goddamn minute or two, we’re all in big trouble. I know you’ve got a file on Peugeot Secretarial Services. My father and his friends do business with them all the time. You cleared them yourself.”

A chair creaked. “Give me a moment to fire up the damned machine.”

Dimitri heard the beep of a computer booting and the rattle of a keyboard. “Peugeot Secretarial Services. Okay, so I got eight local listings.”

“Give them to me.”

“Okay. You got a pencil and paper handy?”

“Just give them to me. Now!”

The voice angrily rattled off eight names and addresses. “And there’s a note here that Miss Peugeot has a kid with her, some kind of underaged mascot she uses to run errands. I don’t have a name or address on that one. The note says Peugeot picked her up in Los Angeles, but we checked and records say she’s native to Dubuque County, Iowa.”

Dimitri set the phone back in place, calculating the depth of his crisis. He'd get himself in trouble accessing his father's private investigators without authorization, but tracking down the girl was a priority. He'd sure as hell never be forgiven for tainting the name of a politician of strategic importance to the mob. They'd kill him for his transgression, send him straight to hell with a bullet behind the ear.

Eight addresses. In his mind's eye, he could see a map of the city. The addresses were widely scattered. Only three were close by, and one was very close. She'd go there. Even if she phoned Peugeot for help, she'd be steered to the closest place of refuge.

He stood a chance. She had damaged the old Dodge ramming his car and the gate. He'd catch her if he played it smart, hopefully cut her off before she had a chance to talk to anyone.

Dimitri put the Audi in gear. He whipped the car onto the street in a squeal of rubber, grimly determined to salvage the mess he had made of things. There was nothing left to do but try. What better goal for the balance of his precariously short lifespan than simple moment to moment survival?

## *Five*

Jennifer drove a quarter mile along the four-lane thoroughfare facing the Carvelli estate, then turned down a side street at random. Her headlights hadn't survived the impact with Dimitri's car or the gate. She'd be stopped by the first cop that spotted her. She was lost and had no idea how to find her way back to familiar territory.

She pulled to the curb when oncoming traffic zipped past, then crept forward block by block toward the glow against the sky that advertised the center of the city. Eying a pay phone alongside a convenience store, she pulled to the curb and searched the glove compartment for change. She fed the phone quarters and pecked out a phone number burned forever into her memory.

“Peugeot Secretarial Services,” murmured a husky voice struggling from the depths of sleep.

“Francis, this is Jennifer!” Her teeth chattered so that she could hardly talk. “Dimitri Carvelli killed Cathy! Fran, he stabbed her with a sword!”

Francis took a long time to answer. “Jennifer? My God!”

“I’ve got Cathy’s car, but he’s chasing me and my headlights are broken!”

“Who’s chasing you? Dimitri?”

“Yes!”

“And you’re driving Cathy’s car?”

“Yes!”

“Address, quick.”

Jennifer recited the closest highway junction. Francis would know what to do. Francis would make everything okay again. But poor Cathy. . .

“Jennifer, stop crying this instant. Go to Wanda’s apartment. Do you understand? Borrow Wanda’s car, but take Wanda with you to the safe house. I’ll phone the police and call the other girls now.”

It hardly seemed necessary to send everyone into hiding, but Jennifer agreed. Wanda lived nearby. All the main thoroughfares were at least familiar to her. The safe house was a place of refuge in times of crisis, an old, out-of-place Victorian structure on the south side. Ed was caretaker. Ed was an ex-cop, private investigator and body guard, one of Francis’ old flames and her only male employee. Ed would take care of her and Wanda until the crisis passed.

She crept through back city streets, pulling to the curb whenever traffic approached from either direction.

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The radiator began to steam. A red light flashed on the dash and then stayed on. She passed Wanda's apartment building and circled around back.

A car crept up behind her a half block away and turned off its headlights. She watched it in her rear view mirror for a time, but it seemed unlikely that it could be Dimitri Carvelli. It was a miracle Cathy's old Monaco had made it this far, and Dimitri's car had sustained more damage than her own.

Once she shut off the rattling engine, she knew it would never start again. The sky was overcast and the night heavy with shadow. She felt vulnerable and defenseless sneaking through the alley between the ominous brownstones. She went up three flights of rickety wooden stairs and down a balcony to the end apartment, feeling like a mouse sneaking through a den of sleeping cats.

She tapped on the glass of the door and waited.

And waited.

"Wanda, please!"

The door to the adjacent apartment creaked open. An old man stuck his head out and looked both ways.

Jennifer clenched her fist and pounded the window furiously. "Wanda, let me in!"

The man stepped onto the balcony cackling to himself.

"Wanda!"

The glass broke beneath her pounding fist. Shards rained down and stung the top of her feet. But she had only to slip her hand through the empty window frame to unlatch the chain and slide the deadbolt back. The door swung open. She slipped inside, relatched it and yanked the shade down.

She turned and leaned against the door and waited with her heart pounding in her chest, listening to the creaking of footsteps outside grow close, and then retreat. Only then could she afford to turn her attention to the silent apartment.

The kitchen stank of unwashed dishes and half-eaten meals piled high on the table and sink counter.

“Wanda?”

She crept through the darkened room to the short hall. Dim, flickering light of a television was coming from the living room. Even before she entered the room, she caught sight of the hypodermic needle, spoon and candle on the coffee table.

Wanda was sitting on the floor, leaning against the couch, a rag doll propped up in front of the television. She looked around sleepily as Jennifer moved into view.

“You know Francis told you that you had to stop doing that,” Jennifer said.

Wanda smiled sleepily.

“I need to borrow your car. We have to go to the safe house.”

Wanda pointed to the car keys on the television. “There’s no sense in bothering Miss Piggy about getting a little high,” Wanda murmured soothingly. “I’m not addicted to the shit like I was the last time.”

“Wanda, you don’t understand!”

Wanda climbed to her feet, moaning in protest. An attractive mix of black and white blood standing a good six feet in height, she wore nothing but a pair of panties and an unbuttoned, oversized flannel shirt draped to either side of her magnificent breasts. Still, she had lost weight in recent weeks. It was the major reason Wanda hadn’t

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been working lately. Francis worked by rules, strict rules and lots of them. Wanda violated most of them, and to top it off, she was getting too old, just as Cathy had said.

“Francis says you gotta come with me,” Jennifer reiterated. But she stopped short of telling her that Cathy had been hurt and maybe even killed. She was shaky and on the edge of hysteria herself. Wanda would be uncontrollable if she knew.

Wanda shook her hand loose angrily. “I ain’t going nowhere just because that bitch tells me.”

Jennifer snatched Wanda’s car keys off the television. “I’m going to the safe house. Francis says to take you with me.” She blinked back tears. “Please!”

Wanda grimaced. “No way. Take the car and go. Just don’t tell Francis I’m high. Promise?”

Jennifer nodded, sniffing back her tears. Ed would give her a hand with Wanda.

Wanda gave a strained smile. “Get the hell out of here and leave me alone. The car’s out front. Put gas in it before you bring it back.”

Jennifer left by the front way and fled down dingy halls and a narrow flight of stairs. She paused before exposing herself to the night. Nothing moved in the patterns of light and shadow cast by the streetlights. But the shadows were deep. Anything could be lurking in them.

She shook off her creeping paranoia. Dimitri would ever catch up to her. It was a big city, and the world was not so evil that it allowed killers to roam free for very long. Once rolling down city streets in Wanda’s little Toyota, she took what comfort she could in the thought that he would be arrested and jailed for the rest of his life for what he

William G. Tedford

had done. As for the rest of her own life, Jennifer feared that her teeth would be chattering uncontrollably forevermore.

## *Six*

**T**he invasion of the Carvelli estate began with the arrival of Karl Garko and his men. They swarmed through the house and over the grounds like human roaches. Bernard Carvelli leaned against a wall in the den, too exhausted to climb the stairs and too fearful of bloodying his feet on the soaked carpet to try. His heart palpitated. Pain from his oxygen-starved heart had numbed an arm and sent his lower jaw to aching fiercely.

Karl Garko ignored him during his initial inspection of the den. He and an associate raised the nude corpse of the woman by one arm and discompassionately discussed the tiny exit wound of the rapier. "Pierced the liver for starters," Garko's friend muttered. "Looks to me like we've got a holed artery. Has the coroner been called in on this yet?"

“The police were called from elsewhere,” Garko said. “The girl’s business manager, shall we say. They’re on their way, but we had a witness and Dimitri went after her, so I think we’ll want to handle this one on our own. Get your men down here. Dispose of the body. Do a thorough job, but don’t put a sicko on it. The situation’s loathsome enough as it is. Cut up the rug and take it with. Don’t leave stains behind.”

The two men looked up at Carvelli. “Is he going to be okay?” Garko’s associate said. “He doesn’t look good.”

“His personal physician is on his way,” Garko muttered unhappily and rose to his feet. “Get a move on it.”

They worked around Bernard until his doctor arrived and gave him an unceremonious injection in the buttock to ease the strain on his heart. Within seconds, tension and pain drained away. Garko and the doctor helped him up the stairs while Garko’s men put the girl’s body in a plastic bag and then began to cut and carefully roll up the carpet.

The police were waiting upstairs. Garko abandoned him to shake the hand of a police captain and murmur apologies. “Give us a few more minutes.”

“You sure you’re not overstepping yourself?” the cop grumbled in nervous displeasure.

“We’d like to handle this as an internal affair. If it gets away from us, we’ll backtrack and give you anything you need to cover yourself. You have our word.”

“Is Dimitri’s kid involved in this?”

“I’ll have a man on the way to deal with him by morning. He’ll be gone before he’s a problem to anyone.”

The uniformed officer nodded his satisfaction and

looked embarrassed when he saw Bernard staring at him. "Evening, Commissioner. Sorry this had to happen."

The situation was out of Bernard's control. Garko had taken over completely. Garko had a way with people. He was a troubleshooter, a jack-of-all-trades for an underworld government of evil. Bernard had lived with their kind his entire life. When he thought of Garko and his friends and the Nazis of his youth, he thought of lamprey eels sucking on the underbelly of humanity. Only on rare occasions could they be deemed symbiotic rather than wholly parasitic. Now was such an occasion. An incident that would have otherwise destroyed his career was being glossed over before his eyes.

When the crowds left the house, Garko stayed behind and poured him a small bourbon. Garko was a small, gaunt man, but he had the narrow eyes of a predator.

"This incident will not sit well with my employers," Garko said. "Or yours."

Bernard took a seat with his drink. "I know what has to be done."

"You will resent Dimitri's death."

Bernard shook his head frantically. "I won't. I won't have my life ruined because of this terrible incident. I've warned my son time and time again that this would happen."

"He's a bad seed, Bernard."

Bernard stared into shadows and collapsed inwardly upon himself. "I know what has to be done."

"There will be only one way you can demonstrate to us your full understanding and cooperation. The finger that pulls the trigger will have to be yours."

Bernard clutched the arms of the chair, feeling his

heart begin to pound and the pain spread despite the sedative his doctor had administered. He could see the young doctor pacing nervously in the hall. His shadow flowed across wall as he paced.

Bernard gave Garko a firm nod. "I understand what you are saying, Mr. Garko," he said, eager to settle the issue and bring the doctor to his side for more medication. Left unchecked, the horror of what Garko was suggesting would stop his weakened heart and kill him, and he feared death above all.

"You needn't look him in the eye when you do it," Garko said. "He will not have to know that you are present. But his blood must be upon your hands and not ours. We will come for you when we are ready."

Garko walked away. He paused halfway across the living room and turned. "Was he drunk?"

"Not so drunk that he did not know what he had done," Bernard said. "Not so drunk that he couldn't chase after that unfortunate child."

"I'm having trouble understanding what has happened here tonight, Bernard. The wound inflicted upon the girl was a clean and deliberate thrust. I suppose it could have been an accident. It doesn't seem likely. Why would Dimitri need to murder the girl? He enjoyed inflicting pain. Dead women don't feel pain."

Bernard turned his head aside in shame. God had punished him for his weakness by allowing the evil of the men he associated with to infect even his seed. He had given birth to a monster. His own soul would be as damned as Dimitri's the day he put a gun to Dimitri's head and pulled the trigger. And still he lacked the courage to stand up for himself. He did not even know

what it was he wanted from life. He had never known for certain.

“Why one of Francis’ Peugeot’s girls?” Garko said. “Francis would never have done willing business with Dimitri. Her standards are a bit higher than that. Do you have any answers for me, Bernard?”

Bernard shook his head hard enough to send his jowls flapping against his neck. “I know nothing of such carnal sins.”

“Bernard, we don’t want unexpected developments rearing their ugly little heads at a later date. The death of the woman in your house this evening remains a mystery to me. As long as the mystery exists, there exists the potential for unexpected problems.”

“I know nothing more,” Bernard said, his eyes on the doctor standing in the doorway with his little black bag of magic. “I know nothing except that Dimitri will die for what he has done. Isn’t that enough?”

Garko brushed past the doctor on the way out.

“Isn’t that enough?” Bernard called out after him.

## *Seven*

**W**hen Jennifer left the apartment and closed the door behind her, Wanda flopped down in front of the television and floated in a warm and serene universe, wishing that she, too, was young and beautiful again. It seemed like only yesterday that she had been seventeen or whatever uncertain age Jennifer was with all the world lying at her doorstep. Year by year, the world had revealed itself to her as a landfill of corrupt human flesh, not fit for anyone's doorstep. Her place within that tainted world had shrunk so much that it barely encompassed the need to find a healthy vein for the needle she had been using for the past week.

She sensed that something terrible had happened to bring Jennifer crashing into her apartment in the middle of the night. She told herself that she would have only

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burdened the younger girl in her flight to safety, but she had feared separating herself from the only dependable source of the drugs she needed to survive.

She'd be safe enough left behind. Who'd bother with her? At thirty-five years of age, men weren't paying her the attention they had in earlier years. Not that she minded. The hassle of Miss Peugeot's high-class lifestyle had taken its toll. It was so much easier to dish it out to slower traffic at fifty bucks a pop from her own apartment. Even the candy man made house calls in the hood.

If she was in any danger herself, it hardly mattered. Pain was tolerable. Pain had been an intimate part of her life for as far back as she could remember, the cold of an unheated flat in the winter, or the impact of a fist against the side of her face, delivered by her father, a drunk john, or a pissed cop. She had tolerance for pain, but none for fear, and fear had crept into every corner of her world, the creeping-type horror like in the movies where a fly with a human head shrieks for help, caught in the web of a large black spider. That would be her fate in life the day she became too old and ugly for anyone at all to bother with at all, johns and cops alike, unloved and unworthy of love, or even of pain. She would become that human fly, misshapen and easy prey for anyone out for a cheap thrill. She had already decided to overdose before that happened.

The tap at the door snapped her back from her foggy ruminations. "Hold your horses!" she called out, climbed back to her feet with a groan, and shuffled her way to the front entrance. Important people knocked at her door from time to time. Men with cash and drugs. Miss Piggy would never approve.

This particular visitor had silver hair and dark eyes. He had a nice smile, and with a faint European accent he said hello to her.

“It’s late,” Wanda said, suspicious of visitors so late at night. “What do you want?”

His smile was infectiously innocent, but he stepped close and forced her to back away from the door. Only when he filled her field of vision did she notice how pale he was, and the beads of sweat running off his forehead. His eyes were bright with maniacal fury. “Who was the kid?” he said, keeping his voice low. “Where’d she go?”

Wanda knew better than to volunteer information to a stranger, regardless of how high she was. “What kid?” she muttered in reply.

“Evelyn Haxx and I had a date tonight. The young one must have followed her. I caught her snooping inside my house.”

“She’s just a kid at that,” Wanda said cautiously. She understood now that he was speaking of Jennifer. “She’s not usually a problem.”

“She was a problem tonight. Where did she go?”

“Talk to Francis about it,” Wanda said in a monotone, dimly hoping he’d take no for an answer and leave.

The man chuckled. “I’d like to catch up with her tonight, if at all possible. We have a misunderstanding to clear up.”

Wanda kept retreating from the advancing man until she backed against the far wall. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, trying to sort out the nature of the crisis through her warm fuzzies. Evelyn wouldn’t have let a client deal with a problem himself, and Wanda had never

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known Jennifer to cause trouble. Therefore, her visitor spelled serious trouble all by his lonesome.

“If you had a date with Evelyn, call Evelyn,” Wanda said, certain that Evelyn would never have dated the likes of this man.

The man’s voice hardened. “I haven’t got much time. You know what I want. Where’s the girl?”

Some of her old discipline came to her rescue. “Francis handles complaints. It ain’t my department.”

She heard the snick of the switchblade the same instant his right hand caught her across the throat and slammed her head against the wall. She felt the blade sting her skin just below her navel. “Again,” he said through an unwavering smile. “Where’d she go?”

Wanda spat out the address through the pressure choking her, through her mortal terror. Afterward, she thought that she should have lied and fed him useless information, except that he’d come back and hurt her out of spite.

“That was a good girl.”

“You bastard,” she managed to spit at him through the pressure against her windpipe.

“The only thing I need from you now is for you to keep your mouth shut, and I know just how to arrange that.”

He drew the point of the blade higher, pausing just below her sternum. She didn’t think that he meant to hurt her, because his expression smoothed over so peacefully.

“If only you understood the pleasure of it all,” he whispered, and the knife plunged so deep that she felt the pressure of his fist against her skin and nothing of the blade itself, at least not for an instant.

The universe exploded in a primal fireball of pain and

light. It was like the time she had dropped her hair dryer into the bathtub, a moment of violent chaos and then blackness descending like a protective cloak. That time, she had fallen out of the tub and saved herself. This time, nothing stopped the darkness.

She felt momentary concern for poor little Jennifer. Within fractions of a second, she had no surviving memory of Jennifer, none even for her own existence. The cloak of darkness evaporated into nothingness.

## *Eight*

The turn-of-the-century Victorian mansion had been overrun by a growing city. Now, it squatted on a meager quarter acre of hillside, surrounded by a rotting stone wall and brownstone tenements. Saplings hid its lower windows from view. A single dim light filtering through the trees was the only evidence Jennifer could see that the house hadn't been abandoned altogether.

She hurried up the steps in front, hoping that Francis had called ahead, and that Ed was waiting for her. The house was part of the old way of doing things, a bridge between the brothel it had once been and a way-station for distressed employees of Miss Peugeot's Secretarial Services. Francis had been talking about selling the property as her business evolved and her taste in girls

leaned toward the independence and competence it took to survive modern hazards ranging from AIDS to the computer-aided watchfulness of the IRS. But for this terror-ridden night, it fulfilled its original purpose. A knock on the door brought Ed to the door with his old .38 revolver clutched in his right hand.

Ed went with the house. He, too, was a quality product beginning to wear with age. Ed was in his fifties, carrying too much weight about the middle and reluctant to wear the glasses he needed, but still more than an even match for most of the bad guys Francis dealt with from time to time. Jennifer gave the man a fierce hug and received a fatherly pat on the back in return. "Francis called," the man said gruffly. "Girl, I hope you're wrong about Cathy."

Jennifer burst into tears and endured a bout of violent shudders. Ed closed the door and guided her into the living room. Antiques had been Francis' obsession at one time, and a second justification for the safe house. The property itself was worth a fraction of its content.

Jennifer sat on the edge of an ornate couch. Ed poured her a drink despite her tender age and shoved it into her hands. "Force it down. Did it happen like Francis said? Is Cathy dead?"

Jennifer forced the searing liquid down as instructed and felt it settle into a pool of warmth in her stomach. "He had a skinny sword. There was blood on it."

"Dimitri Carvelli had the sword?"

She nodded again.

"You girls should know better that to go out on your own," he admonished. "Francis knows what the hell she's

doing. She said you stopped off at Wanda's before you came here. Didn't you bring her along?"

"She wouldn't come. I couldn't tell her about Cathy. She would have freaked."

Ed went to the phone by the door. He dialed and held the receiver to his ear for long minutes. "She was shooting something," Jennifer called out.

"Heroin?"

"I don't know what it was for sure."

Ed slammed the phone back down after several ominously quiet minutes. "How did you get here?"

"I got away with Cathy's car, but the radiator was leaking and it overheated, and the headlights were broken. I borrowed Wanda's car, but she wouldn't come with me. Ed, go get her. Please?"

Ed tucked the gun in his belt. He went to a metal panel against one wall and began flipping switches to the house's security system. "Don't open a window or an outside door without letting me know. Until Francis can get help and have Dimitri stopped, we have to assume he'll try to cover his tracks. Right now, that means you and Wanda. Get your butt upstairs. Take the back bedroom for the night. Stay put. If you're hungry, raid the kitchen on the way up."

She gave Ed another anxious hug.

"Lock your door," Ed said, his anger softening, his hand dwelling on her shoulder. "There's a loaded twenty-two caliber pistol in the nightstand, just like your own. Do you remember how to use it?"

Ed had showed her. At the time, it had seemed like such a crazy thing to have to learn how to do. "I remember."

Jennifer went upstairs. She locked herself in the bedroom, showered and crawled into bed without bothering to search the dresser drawers for a negligee or robe. She curled in the middle of the old goosedown mattress and pulled the heavy quilt comforter over her head. She sobbed quietly to herself, racked with guilt for leaving Wanda behind and unable to exorcise the memory of Cathy's scream.

In time, Ed tapped at the door. "Can I come in?" his muffled voice sounded. "You don't have to get up. I've got a key."

She opened her eyes to the darkness of the room. The door clicked and opened. Dim light from the hall washed across the wall. Ed sat on the edge of the bed and massaged the back of her neck with one hand. "How are you doing, kid?"

He knew how she was doing. He could feel her body tremble.

"The cops got a call for the Carvelli estate," Ed said. "I don't know how they're going to handle it, except that nobody wants to see anyone get hurt unnecessarily. If Cathy's still alive, they'll get her help. They'll go after Dimitri. It's out of our hands."

"And Wanda?"

"Francis sent one of the girls to check on Wanda. You and I get to hold down the fort here in case there's further trouble."

Jennifer couldn't imagine the shape and form further trouble might take. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the sensation of Ed's calloused hands kneading her back. "You've grown up, Jennifer," he said after a time. "You're hardly a kid anymore, and you're a darn sight prettier

than any of the others. Don't you dare tell them that I told you that."

She murmured her thanks and smiled, and with a gentle pat on the behind, Ed tucked in her blankets and left the room. Exhausted by her flight through the night, Jennifer fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

She awoke hours later to the bed shifting beneath her, and to cool air flooding across her body as her comforter was tossed aside. A heavy body straddled her, pinning her to the mattress. Sprawled on her back, naked, her eyes flew open in shock.

A hand slammed against her throat, cutting off both her breath and the scream that had gathered in her lungs. The dark eyes of a stranger burning with desperation hovered inches above her face. She had seen them only once before. How, she wondered, had he ever found her? How had he gotten past Ed?

His smile was the self-satisfied smile of a predator. He brought his right hand into view and a shiny blade snapped open, gleaming in the light from the table lamp she had left burning. Jennifer went as rigid as stone.

"It was Evelyn wasn't it?" Dimitri growled at her. "The blonde you was with? Was it Evelyn?"

"It was Cathy!" she gasped defiantly through his hand clutching her throat. Her hands were free. She clawed for his eyes, but she couldn't quite reach, and he only renewed his grip on her throat, cutting off her breath until she clutched at the bedclothing instead.

His smile went away. The tip of the knife went to her face. "It was Evelyn, you lying little bitch. It had to be Evelyn."

The door behind Dimitri creaked open. Ed stepped

into view, his face drained of color, his chest wet with his own blood. Jennifer's eyes widened in shock as he raised his revolver and slowly squeezed off a shot.

The bullet was a fraction of an inch off its target. Dimitri's right ear vanished in a stinging spray of blood. His shriek of pain mingled with Jennifer's own scream of panic. They rolled in opposite directions.

Ed's aim followed Dimitri. He fired a second and a third time. Dimitri rolled away bellowing rage and threw his knife end for end, silencing the revolver, but gasping for air as he clutched bullet wounds in his arm and side.

Jennifer leaped to her feet and ran to Ed, smearing blood down the side of her body as she eased him to the floor. She reached down to pull out the knife, but Ed shook his head frantically. He opened his mouth to speak, but it, too, was full of blood. Even as she watched, his eyes rolled up into his skull and he sighed.

But he was still breathing and Jennifer promised herself that she'd not panic and get herself killed. Dimitri was staggering to his feet, bleeding and dazed. She fled into the bathroom and gathered her clothes. She went through the connecting door into the adjacent bedroom, and only then remembered that she had bypassed the opportunity to fetch the pistol Ed had given her and shoot Dimitri.

It was too late to backtrack. Besides, Ed had already shot him up pretty badly. She paused and listened to the sounds filter through the walls, but heard nothing except the sound of her own shuddering breathing and the roar of her pulse in her ear. She dressed in the dark as fast as her shaking hands would allow.

Jennifer fled the house. She went out the back way

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through dingy hallways, setting off the alarms as she went. She circled around front to Wanda's car and leaped inside. There was nothing she could do for Ed except to call Francis. She had nowhere to go to make the phone call except to her own apartment. She drove like a maniac, hoping desperately that Ed was okay and that he had put an end to Dimitri's short but horrid reign of terror.

Jennifer parked in the back of her duplex and hurried up the back stairs, turning on lights through her second floor apartment on her way to the phone.

Francis was waiting for her at the other end of the line. In a quavering tone of voice, she told Francis what had happened.

"I'll put in a 911 for Ed," Francis said in a curiously calm tone of voice, "But we have to leave the city until this is settled. It would be safer to leave the state entirely. Do you have your plastic with you?"

Jennifer's plastic consisted of an Illinois driver's license that showed her to be eighteen and a VISA card issued in her name. "What do you want me to do?"

"Jennifer, go home. You know what to do once you get there. Do you think you can handle the responsibility?"

It had always shocked her that Francis should treat her as an equal, better even than most of the older girls in her employ, even though she had said that she never wanted Jennifer to earn a living in the same way. "Yes, I can do that," she said.

Francis hung up gently. Jennifer refused to put the phone down until she went over a mental list of all she had to do. She then set the handset in place and packed necessary clothing. She cleaned the room of anything of personal value and put it all in one suitcase. And she took

her chrome-plated twenty-two caliber, six-shot revolver, the one Ed had given her last Christmas.

Lightning flashed in the sky driving west to the interstate. A brief rain came and went. She left the lightning glowering in the huddled thunder clouds in her rear view mirrors, hoping that Wanda wouldn't be too angry for having taken her car. Three hours later, before the sun had cleared the receding bank of storm clouds in the east, she had crossed the Mississippi River into Iowa and rented a motel room for the day.

She had caught some sleep at the safe house, but she needed a few more hours rest to clear her head. For a time, she lay sobbing in a bed too hard for comfort while a hot and misty day brightened outside. It was over now, she tried to tell herself. Ed had shot Dimitri dead. Even if Dimitri was still alive, she had seen him bleeding. How could he ever hope to track her down so badly hurt? She managed to doze thinking that Francis would straighten everything out as she slept. Cathy and Ed would have been taken to the hospital hours ago. They, too, would be sleeping now, healing. And Dimitri Carvelli would be in jail. Only in the nightmares that haunted her in her sleep did Dimitri wander the darkness, looking for her with his knife clutched in his fist, twisting it, and flicking cold, evil light into her eyes.

## *Nine*

**J**ohn Cantrell lay on a rotting mattress in a room walled by cracked plaster, alert to the sound of the gray dusk around him. Men snored and muttered and stumbled elsewhere in the cheap hotel. Outside the room's single window, a cleansing rain fell steadily, moistening a corner of the ceiling where water had seeped through four floors and would continue to seep through the deteriorating frame of the hotel to the basement.

When he heard the car doors slam in the street below, he knew his half-hearted ploy to hide himself from the face of the city had failed. Someone had gone to the trouble to track him down. That someone would be Karl Garko. His face was too well known on the streets. If Garko was looking for him, he had been found all too easily.

They tapped quietly at the door. John stood in the shadows. "Yeah," he muttered. "What is it you want?"

The voice drifted through the heavy wood door. "Garko wants to see you, Mr. Cantrell."

John unlocked the door. There were two of them, walking, talking apes with oversized physiques and underdeveloped mentalities. They wore dark suits and sunglasses in the dim gray light. "Where and when?" he said.

"Sally's bar on forty-third and Rosemere, Mr. Cantrell. At seven this evening. Mr. Garko said you know the place."

"Yeah, I know the place."

The man looked confused. "You'll be there, right?"

"I'll be there."

The spokesman gave him a respectful nod and nudged his surly partner. They turned away. John closed the door and chained it, wondering what he had done to transgress. Or was it business as usual despite the ultimatum he had given Garko after the last contract? Had he ever really believed that Garko would leave him in peace?

The bar was within walking distance. The only world he had ever known was a square of the downtown area roughly a mile or two along each side. He knew every building and back alley within its perimeter, and most of its unfortunate inhabitants.

The back room at Sally's bar was empty at seven, reserved for Garko's exclusive use. Two diamond-studded women in evening gowns sauntered away as John entered. They were slim, young women who eyed him with fear

evident in their big brown eyes. If they had never met John in person, they at least knew of his reputation.

Garko grinned and gestured him forward. The smile turned to ice during the instant it took to signal the bar's bouncer that all was well. The door closed quietly, leaving them alone.

John slipped into the chair across from the man and shoved an empty shot glass aside.

"You're not looking well, John."

"You've been persistent," John said.

Garko chuckled casually. He studied John openly. "I expected you to leave town. Apparently we're indigenous to this city, you and I, attuned to the environment, so to speak. You had enough money to leave. From what I can see, you haven't spent any of it."

John had nothing to say.

"I have an offer, John, a contract. I can't give it to my own men. I wouldn't dare give it to an outsider. It has to be someone like you. It has to be you, in fact. Specifically."

John shook his head. "No more contracts, Mr. Garko."

Garko gestured helplessness. "Neither of us have a choice in the matter, John. Even I have people I must answer to. Important people. This is not something you or I can back away from. You're too good, too efficient. And too trustworthy. You're the man for this."

John stared at the man, too numbed with despondency to respond. At various times in the past he had hated and feared Karl Garko. Now, he felt nothing but gray apathy.

"I'm not taking advantage of you, John. You've got to get away from this town if you want to live. You have too many enemies here, too many men who fear and hate you.

Maybe you feel you couldn't get away on the few grand you have stashed. I'm offering more. We're not going to barter on this, John. Fifty grand, up front. It's not my money."

"What's the job?"

"It starts with a man named Dimitri Carvelli."

"I know the name."

"Then you know Dimitri is a sick punk. He did an unintelligent thing and he's doing stupid things to cover his tracks. He's liable to mess up important business and important men want him silenced. They want it done quietly and neatly, with nothing left over for the good guys to pick over. Do you want something to drink, John?"

"No, thank you. Is that it? Just another job? Your own men could handle a simple deletion, Mr. Garko."

"My men don't have your smarts, John. Smarts is what makes you so dangerous. They make a man self-serving and unpredictable. You see, there's an unfortunate complication in this matter. Dimitri killed a girl, a hooker, but she had a friend with her, so there's a witness to deal with. In all honesty, John, the witness is as big a problem as Dimitri. She's going to have to go too, you see."

John grew quickly agitated. "I don't kill women, Mr. Garko."

"Dimitri will kill the girl, John. Find him. Wait until he does his thing, then return the favor. That's all I'm asking. You told me you weren't going to work for me again, and I respect your decision, but this is important to us, and you're being paid very well. If you do this for us, you needn't come back. Not ever again."

John's guts were knotted with tension. Taking on Dimitri Carvelli would mean leaving the city. Garko didn't

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seem to understand the problem that posed for him. Or did he?

Dimitri all but read his mind. “You’re a sick man, John. They call it agoraphobia. This neighborhood has become a self-made prison. If you don’t break free now, you’ll be dead within the year.”

It hardly seemed to matter. He had died along with Sasha ages ago. Sasha had been his sister, and brothers weren’t meant to see their sisters raped and murdered and left sprawled in the bloodied filth of an alley for the rats to gnaw at. Men weren’t meant to ravage their own kind as fiercely as he had taken vengeance on the men responsible for her suffering and death.

Garko had taken advantage of the incident. John had been used, blackmailed. He had killed as instructed from time to time, not out of fear of Garko, but because it kept the rent paid and the hits were inevitably the same kind of men who had killed Sasha.

“John, are you going to talk to me?”

John focused his eyes. “We have nothing to say to one another, Mr. Garko.”

The man stared at him with the calculating intensity of a lizard. “Two women have died, John. Dimitri skewered one of them with an old French rapier. He knifed the other in the heart. He thinks he’s covering his tracks, which may be the case, but it’s his sick bloodlust at work. Stop him and you’ll save the lives of other innocent young women, women who would perhaps remind you of your own flesh and blood.”

“I’ll kill you if you say her name,” John said softly.

Karl Garko leaned back in his seat, unaffected by the

threat. "Am I too late? Is there nothing left of your life to salvage? Nothing at all?"

John had wondered that himself. He had managed to stop the killing. Would the depression weighing on his soul lift if he escaped the city? "Where do I find him?" he said, mildly curiosity.

"Moving East. We have a bead on Dimitri. He got shot up a bit, but he's still moving, using a VISA card for gas. He'll find the girl and you'll be there when it happens."

John thought about the offer. Only the deaths he could prevent meant anything to him.

Garko's reptilian eyes darted about his face with calculating interest. Beads of sweat had broken out on his furrowed brow.

"I'll do it."

Garko sighed, sat back in his chair, and chuckled softly to himself. "I thought you were going to give me a nervous breakdown, John."

## *Ten*

The air-conditioner in the motel room window roared and rattled and failed miserably to hold the summer heat at bay. After having chased off a pesky maid twice, Jennifer got up at two in the afternoon and sat cross-legged in bra and panties on the bed, dabbing at rivulets of sweat with a fistful of the already dampened sheets.

She reached for the phone, set it before her, and dialed the number Francis Peugeot had told her to call during emergencies. She got a recording from an answering service.

“Ed didn’t make it. I haven’t heard from Wanda. I have no word on Cathy. Dimitri may not have been seriously injured, but he shouldn’t be able to find you, or any of the rest of us, at least not without help. I can’t imagine who

would help him, or why. It's more likely he'll be severely dealt with for the trouble he's caused."

Francis sighed despondently. *"Find us a nice quiet, out-of-the-way place, if you can. You know the area better than we do. It's still safer to hide until this is over."*

Jennifer put the phone down and let the tears fall. Ed had saved her life. He had sacrificed his own to do it. A part of her refused to believe he could be dead, but another part of her, where he had lived in her memory, became an empty and frightening darkness.

She welcomed the opportunity to get out and explore the area. She had been born and raised somewhere nearby. She had visited for the first time earlier in the year in search of a farmhouse to match the one in the only photograph she had of her childhood. It was a black and white Polaroid showing a child who was supposed to be herself, a house, and people who may or may not have been family members. None of the scenery along the river associated with vague memories of childhood. She hadn't found a match to the house in the picture.

Francis had promised to help her pry more information from the Californian foster-care bureaucracy, but Francis had been running from the law herself when they fled the state together last year. Jennifer wouldn't pressure her to fulfill her promise until things settled down, if they ever would.

She dressed in the outfit that made her look older than her adolescence, a black, snug-fitting, single-piece dress and matching high-heels. Maybe she'd pass for twenty. She had no idea of her actual age, anywhere between fifteen and eighteen. Too much of the past had

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blurred, and someone had destroyed her birth records ten or more years ago.

She put on a flashing gold choker necklace, earrings, and fixed her hair back with a golden barrette. With a touch of pink lipstick and an enthusiastic comb through silken hair that almost reached the small of her back, she thought she looked every bit the role of savvy young businesswoman. She had no memory of ever having thought of herself as a child.

She went out for a newspaper, something to eat, and returned to the slightly cooler motel room to scour the paper for a suitable refuge for Peugeot's Secretarial Services. She sipped on a Pepsi, munched on a blueberry bagel, and ran a finger down the want ads. She concentrated on furnished houses and phoned three prospects that didn't pan out.

She then went through advertisements for furnished apartments and talked to a man who seemed eager to show her any one of six unoccupied apartments in a newly renovated apartment building. She took note of an apology in the man's tone of voice when he informed her that the apartments were a ten mile drive down the river highway, but its isolation was a plus as far as Jennifer was concerned, and the apartments were equipped with appliances and some furniture.

She made an appointment for six that evening. She abandoned the motel room and drove Wanda's red Toyota to a nearby mall where she raided a money machine and tapped her VISA card for three hundred dollars, the most it would give her in one day. At six that afternoon, she idled ten miles outside town at the base of a hill that looked too steep for Wanda's old Toyota to climb. Along

the crest of the hill all but hidden by a line of trees stood an old brown brick building looking for all the world like a stone castle overlooking the nearby Mississippi. This would be her destination, assuming she could reach it.

With clenched teeth and with a sigh of self-commiseration, she slipped the car into gear and tapped the accelerator. The car's suspension bottomed out in an erosion ditch blocking her way. The engine chugged mightily. A glance in her mirror showed a billowing blue-gray cloud of burning oil blocking the lovely river scenery. But the car reached the crest of the hill before both the oil and overheat warning lights blinked on in bright red.

The engine coughed and stalled. Rather than risk a crippled entrance onto the scene, she let the car coast in alongside a beige Cadillac with tinted windows. A thin, weak-chinned man dressed in an immaculate tennis outfit emerged from behind the wheel followed by a fat woman from the passenger's side wearing too much jewelry and make-up.

The man had introduced himself over the phone as Dr. Leroy Reinhart, a local chiropractor. He greeted her with a sultry smile that clouded his wife's pudgy face with displeasure, a woman he introduced simply as Madge. "And you must be Jennifer."

Jennifer retained a severe expression she hoped would help hide her youth and pass her off as a representative of an employer worth taking seriously. She studied the building with its turret facade on four corners. Close-up, the wear and tear of age was more evident. According to Leroy, there were four downstairs apartments and four upstairs, recently redecorated. The building had no

tenants at present. Francis would like the set-up, if she could pull it off.

But it was then that Leroy began rattling off demands for security payments and six-month leases. The apartments would be renting for four hundred apiece per month.

Jennifer had only one counter-offer to make. "Three hundred deposit to hold the entire building until my employer arrives this evening, Mr. Reinhart," Jennifer said in her best poker face. "You and she can negotiate from there."

Leroy's eyes narrowed. "The whole building?"

Jennifer shrugged, feigning disinterest in the details of the negotiation. She removed the cash from her handbag and counted through it with mock boredom. "There will be eight of us. I don't know for how long Francis will be interested in leasing the apartments." Jennifer looked up at the man. "You may want to hear her offer before you dismiss us out of hand."

Leroy eyed the money and grimaced in pain. "I'm not sure what guarantees I can make."

"A nonrefundable deposit," Jennifer said, knowing that Francis would be pleased with her find. They'd never find a better place of refuge than this.

Madge nudged her husband. "It won't hurt to talk to the lady, Leroy."

Sensing a bit of financial desperation in their behavior, Jennifer studied the property again for evidence of shortcomings. The outside of the house glowed an elegant rose tint in a shaft of sunlight peeking from behind thinning clouds. The exterior was neatly trimmed in aluminum doors and windows, gutters and downspouts. A

meticulously mowed side and front lawn gave way to the uncontrolled mass of saplings that held the steep front and side hill in place. From the back drive, the house looked to be surrounded by trees, but she suspected the front, second floor view would overlook the Mississippi.

“Nobody’s living here yet?” Jennifer wanted confirmed.

“Just Gabby, the manager and handyman,” Leroy assured her. “He has one of the basement apartments.

“Gabby did most of the renovation on the property,” Madge added.

Leroy and Madge exchanged pained looks that warned Jennifer of the first potential stumbling block of her acquisition. “Maybe I’d better introduce the two of you and show you around,” Leroy said.

Leroy went in search of the man. Madge rounded the car to keep Jennifer company, or to keep her from escaping. Madge wore a heavy tan dress engineered to hide her weight. Diamonds sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight from fingers of both hands and a matching necklace and earrings.

“Is there going to be some problem with Gabby?” Jennifer said.

“Gracious, no! He’s a bit rough around the edges, is all. But you can see for yourself how well he’s renovated this horrid place.”

Madge offered a strained, apologetic smile. “A poor choice of words, I know. Financially, it’s been a nightmare. You can’t see it from here, but there’s a Catholic convent nearby. This spring, they broke grounds for what was to have been a girl’s school, a prestigious girl’s school, we heard. We acquired and renovated this property assuming we would have tenants by now.”

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Madge shrugged in misery. "They dug and poured some foundation, and then the project was stopped. We don't know exactly what happened except that it's going to be dreadfully difficult to find quality tenants so far from town, and we have a frightful mortgage payment to cover."

Two men exited a side entrance of the house, Leroy and a grisly giant of a man dressed in coveralls and paint-splattered boots. Jennifer pegged him to be in his late fifties. His leering grin revealed a mouth of nice teeth. Bright blue eyes glinted with mischievous intelligence.

"Jennifer, this is Gabby," Leroy said as the pair approached. "Gabby, this is the young lady I've told you about. If we're lucky, we'll have us some good tenants after all."

Gabby grunted reluctant acknowledgement, clearly satisfied living in his empty house. But he eyed Jennifer with enthusiastic approval on another, more primal level.

Leroy threw his arm about the old man's shoulders. "Let's show the young lady what we've got, shall we? You run on ahead and make sure everything's unlocked for inspection."

Gabby turned away to do Leroy's bidding. Leroy waited until he had vanished from view. "Gabby doesn't look like much, but he's a genius, I assure you. He masterminded everything you are about to see."

Jennifer sensed something overdone about the cheerful camaraderie between the two. Still, she was duly impressed. The side entrance opened upon a hallway that transversed the ground floor. There were two front apartments and two rear apartments on each floor, and two floors to the building, not including the basement. The floors were freshly tiled. Original woodwork had been

refinished, and the walls painted. The halls were illuminated by fluorescent panels set in suspended ceilings.

Leroy showed Jennifer each of the downstairs apartments. The apartments were sparsely, but adequately furnished. "Everything one needs, but plenty of room for accessories," Leroy said. Madge was bringing up the rear, huffing and puffing to keep up. "Madge was our interior decorator. Considering the tight budget we had to stick with, I think she did a great job."

The apartments were tastefully painted in matching pastels. The windows had lacy curtains and Venetian blinds in place. The kitchens boasted brand new refrigerators and stoves. The living rooms were carpeted and the front apartments looked out over the front lawns through magnificent bay windows. Living rooms had a simple couch and matching chair as décor and the bedroom a double bed and dresser.

"Nice," Jennifer had to admit. Inexpensive, but well executed.

"Wait until you see the upstairs apartments."

The upstairs apartments were the same, except for the view from the two front apartments. From the second floor perspective, Jennifer could see over the trees. The vista of the gray and white city on the horizon and the river stretching out before them appeared to view, all mist-enshrouded by the haze from the early morning shower Jennifer had slept through. A small town lay on the far bank of the river, looking for all the world like an expensive miniature of shiny white, early nineteenth-century village complete with church spires. There were

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more than a few colorful sailboats in view on the winding, deep blue waters.

From one of the rear apartments, she could see the distant spire of the Catholic Church and the nunnery Madge had mentioned. Adjacent along the hill facing the river, a number of expensive houses could be seen among the trees.

"It is a bit far from town," Jennifer said to take the smug smile from Leroy's face. "Although the price is fair."

Leroy sighed and the smile faded. Madge tugged on her husband's sleeve. "I can make a more attractive package deal on the entire building," he said. "I'll be more than glad to speak with your employer, Miss Wessner."

"Are the phones connected?" Jennifer had a cell phone in her purse, but one reserved for emergencies only.

"Gabby's got one in the basement you can use. All the apartments have their own line, but you'll have to call the phone company to have them hooked up."

"Can I use this apartment for the day? I'll have to leave a message with my employer. She should be in town sometime this evening, as I mentioned."

"We can stop back in the morning," Leroy suggested without missing a beat.

Jennifer rationed a smile. "That would be convenient."

"Will you be okay here alone?" Madge said worriedly.

Leroy frowned his displeasure. "Madge, the young woman will be fine. Gabby will look after her."

Jennifer pegged Leroy with a severe look that warned of her fierce independence. "I'll be fine. Will you accept my deposit now?"

Gabby reappeared in the hall doorway, making it a perfect opportunity to let the men see a flash of sunlight

off the chrome barrel of the revolver in her purse. Leroy turned promptly ashen. Gabby glanced at her in alarm.

Leroy recovered and gracefully accepted the folded stack of bills. "Madge, write the young lady a receipt."

Leroy scratched a number on it when Madge finished. "Our phone number. If it's not too late this evening, give us a call. Otherwise, will noon tomorrow do for a deadline?"

Hopefully. "That should do fine," Jennifer said. She tucked the receipt in her purse and snapped it closed.

Leroy turned to his wife. "Well, we've got places to go and people to see."

Maggy smiled feebly. "I hope everything works out. This room has such a wonderful view."

When the couple left, she could hear Gabby moving things about in the basement. Jennifer verified that the lights and water were turned on and inspected the apartment a bit more carefully. She frowned at the full-length mirror set against the wall backing the bathtub. It seemed an odd feature, but she shrugged it off as a peculiar taste in décor and went in search of the gnarled old man named Gabby and his telephone.

She walking up behind him in the gloom of the basement and managed to startle him. "I'd like to use the phone, please."

Gabby grunted acknowledgement and avoided eye contact on the way through the clutter. His apartment had a ceiling low enough to force him to dip his head on the way through the door. Otherwise, the one large room was compact and neat. An air conditioner hummed high up one wall, tucked in a former basement window.

Gabby handed her a cordless. Jennifer sat on the edge

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of a couch and punched out the number Francis had given her. A recorder clicked in. *"This is Francis, Jennifer. Leave your message and a number and I'll get back to you within the hour. Emily and I are ready to fly out the moment I receive your call. You'll have to pick us up at the Moline International airport."*

Jennifer gave the address of the apartment building and the number on the phone in her hand. "We've got eight furnished apartments, pretty much ready to go, if you can swing a deal. We're ten minutes from the Quad Cities. I'll pick you up when you call."

She hung up and handed the phone back. Gabby grinned nervously. "If there's anything I can help you with, Miss, just let me know."

Jennifer smiled at the man. "I'll be getting an important phone call soon..."

Gabby raised a finger, sidestepped, and reached for a second handset. "Got a spare, both on the same line. Works anywhere in the house or yard. Battery should be okay for the night."

Jennifer laughed. "Great. Just what the doctor ordered."

"I'll let you answer the phone if it rings. If it's for me, just yell out. I'll hear you through the heater ducts."

"Am I going to be calling you Gabby? Would you prefer something more formal?"

He grimaced. "Gunther Wernhauten is the name, Miss. Wanna call me Mr. Wernhauten?"

"I see. Gabby it is, then." She gestured with the phone and brushed past the man. "I'll bring it back as soon as I get my call."

"You'll be needing keys to the apartments," his low

voice rumbled at her. "I'll fetch a set for each and have them ready for you."

She could feel his eyes on her wending her way back through a basement littered with tools and supplies that had gone into the renovation of the building. Jennifer wondered if he had worked entirely alone, and how long it had taken. Getting old, she thought to herself, but physically fit and still captivated by a nice perfume and the sway of a woman's hip. She'd draw a bit of conversation from him later, drop a compliment or two, and he'd be putty in her fingers for the duration of their stay.

She went outside to the car, tucked the telephone in a suitcase, and carried the two suitcases and an overnight bag to the upstairs apartment. She'd have to shop for a few groceries and supplies before she could settle in. Francis would make that call. She sat at the window overlooking the river and made out a shopping list on the back of an envelope should Francis approve.

The phone rang. She fetched it from the suitcase and had it to her ear in an instant. "This is Jennifer."

"Moline International, nine forty-five this evening."

Jennifer repeated the time.

"Jennifer, I have terrible news. And I must warn you. Wanda is dead."

Jennifer put her free hand to her forehead and took a deep breath. "Francis, this line is not secure."

"No matter. I've got to warn you. It's you he's trying to stop before you can talk about what happened. Do you have the means to defend yourself?"

Francis was referring to the gun. "Yes."

"He may have followed you."

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“He’s hurt,” Jennifer said, thinking that she could have shot him herself, just to be sure he was dead, if she could have been so cold-blooded.

“His life is on the line,” Francis said. “He’ll move as fast as he can. He caught Cathy and Wanda off guard. And Ed. Don’t let the same thing happen to you.”

“I won’t.”

“But you do have a safe place to stay?”

“You’ll like it, I promise.”

“Until this evening, then.”

Jennifer’s arm turned to lead. The phone clattered to the floor. Her breath kept catching in her throat, and a sharp stab of panic jangled her nerves.

Jennifer had the chrome-plated pistol clutched in her right hand when Gabby tapped at her door an hour or so later. She kept it hidden behind her back when she handed the cordless back to him.

He had eavesdropped. She could tell by his shaken expression. He handed her a ring of keys and gave her a curt nod. “I’ll be downstairs. You’ll be safe up here, Miss.”

Jennifer listened to him go down the stairs before she closed and locked her door.