

Streetwalker

By K. E. Ward

Chapter One

It was a frigid night in Cincinnati. The sky was black and clear, and the stars overhead shone brightly and serenely above the massive skyline of the city. Downtown was ablaze with lights and activity, its roads congested with all sorts of traffic, including commuters, taxicab drivers, city dwellers, tourists, and truck drivers. The sounds of honking horns and squealing tires wafted from the epicenter of the city as planes flew overhead, filling the atmosphere with the dull roars of engines. The trees were covered in frost, for the cold had settled earlier than usual this year, and the streets, slick with patches of black ice, were beginning to break apart under the pressure of the changing temperatures. Cincinnati was as beautiful as it could be that night, stark and clear against the backdrop of a dark sky, its tall buildings standing proudly and majestically over a buzzing district.

Maggie "Star" Faulkner hovered at the street corner, batting her eyelashes, and rubbed her arms with her fingers, trying to get back some circulation. It was so

cold that she felt as though she had been doused head to toe in ice water. Clad only in a pair of nylons, spiked heels, a miniskirt, and a blue sweater, she was not wearing near enough to keep herself warm. She had been working this corner for over an hour, and still not even one customer. Her friend, Darlene, was standing across the avenue at the intersection kitty corner to hers.

A tear escaped from her eye. Something in the glue for her false eyelashes was giving her a reaction, so she gingerly plucked them from her eyes, creating a few more tears in the process. *If someone doesn't come soon, she thought, I'm getting out of here. Back to home sweet hotel.*

A Chevy convertible slowly approached. Maggie, feeling a lilt in her heart, blew him a kiss. He stopped for a moment, as though seriously considering whether or not to make a date, but to Maggie's dismay, he took one long look, changed his mind, and raced off, disappearing fast into a cloud of exhaust fumes.

Once he had left, she squinted her eyes and looked across the intersection. Darlene was over there, looking just as bored as she was, nervously adjusting the straps of her bra and biting her fingernails. Maggie marveled at how this had been the slowest night for the both of them in

several months, then wondered where all their clientele had gone to. But before she could think twice, a slick black car pulled up to the sidewalk where Darlene stood, its driver saying a few words out the window. Maggie looked around for a few moments to see if anyone was coming her way, then looked back to see the man in the black sedan motioning for Darlene to come into the car. She could not see his face, only the glint of a golden cufflink through the window and the forearm of a tweed sleeve.

Darlene waved to her as she sank into the car. Maggie waved back, mouthing "Good luck", with her lips. *Well, at least Darlene's going to get some money tonight*, she thought, sighing in fatigue and boredom.

After a few more minutes she decided to give up for the night and began walking in the direction of her hotel. The gusts of wind in between the buildings were especially chill, and Maggie shivered, hugging her arms tightly against her body. She passed a bar, hearing rowdy laughter and the clinking of glasses, and thought to herself, *Why not?* She could definitely go for a hot toddy on a chilly night like this.

Hustle and bustle greeted her as she opened the front door. The bar was jam-packed and lively, and Maggie had to squeeze her way through to get to the counter. "I'll have

a hot toddy," she told the bartender, slinking down onto a stool.

Several moments passed as she looked around the crowded room and wondered if she would spot someone that she knew. The Juke Box was playing "Karma Chameleon" by the Culture Club as several male customers crowded around the television set to watch a game.

The bartender came back with her drink, she thanked him, then nursed the warm beverage in her hands.

About an hour and two hot toddies later, a man entered the bar. He seemed to be looking for someone, his eyes focused and searching. He was of medium build, broad shoulders, and pepper-gray hair. A strong jawline gave way to angular cheeks, a strikingly sharp nose, and a lustrous pair of lips. His warm, brown eyes roved over the room, resting lightly on the empty seat beside Maggie, then looking up into the bartender's face. He approached, swaggering a little bit, then rested his elbow on the table next to her, cradling his cheek in his hand.

"I'll have a vodka martini." His voice, though masculine, was quiet and gentle. Maggie was struck by him right away. Wearing a black dress shirt and slacks, he had a casual cool that denoted higher class. Though she had grown up in a well-to-do family, she ran away from home at

an early age to become a prostitute and would not ever have the occasion to mingle with a sort like this.

The man smiled at her as she glanced his way. "Are you new around here?"

Maggie smiled shyly and said, "No, I've been living here for most of my life. But thank you for asking."

"No, I mean, are you new to the bar? I haven't seen you around."

"Oh," she laughed, horribly embarrassed. "Yeah, I've never been in here before. I thought I'd stop in to get a warm drink. As you can see, I'm not really dressed appropriately for the weather."

He eyed her. "My name is Garrett. Garrett Dannow." He extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you," she said, while shaking his hand. "I'm Margaret Faulkner, but my friends call me Maggie."

He held her hand lightly but firmly, gently enclosing her fingers with both of his hands. He looked at her with a gentleness that startled her, his two sable-brown eyes searching into her face imploringly and definitively. Maggie could see the strong build of his arms and the muscles flexing as he released her hand.

"Are you going to stay around for a while? I could buy you another drink," he offered.

She hadn't planned on staying much longer, but she was intrigued and impressed by the man. Instead, she reached for a napkin by the bar and scanned him with her eyes for a pen. "No, but I'd love it if you give me a call some time," she said forwardly. "Do you have a pen? I can give you my number."

Obligingly he reached into his breast pocket and fished out a sleek-looking black fountain pen. She met eyes with him while taking it, then scribbled down her number and handed it to him. "It was really nice meeting you," she said.

"Likewise," he answered.

Scrambling for her purse, she grabbed for her purse and paid the bartender. She could see outside that it was already beginning to snow, and as each person going in and out opened the door, they brought with them a gust of snowy wind. She charged into the cold outside air, her arms folded underneath her breasts. Her heels clicking against the sidewalk, she began to make her way home.

What a handsome man, she thought. It would have been her last guess to meet a man while working the streets. Hadn't he noticed the way that she was dressed? Images of his seductive smile flashed across her mind, and she was at once suspicious. Should she have tried to ask him if he

wanted a date? She couldn't fully understand why she hadn't spoken with him about the subject, although she knew that she had been attracted to the man.

She didn't really want to go home. Nothing was waiting there for her but a grimy apartment and a cat who got far too much attention as it was. It had been the cheapest place she could find, and what had most attracted her about the place was the fact that the landlord didn't ask many questions. So long as she paid her rent every month on time, the Asian-American in his mid-forties was more than happy. Tim liked her, but mostly stayed out of her business, and for that she was utterly grateful.

She walked for a couple of more blocks, noticed the discomfort in her feet, and slipped off her high heels. It was darker than it had been earlier in the evening, and though the street lamps on the side of the road illuminated her path, there were large stretches of dark shadows further away from the pavement. Never having been one of those people to fear for her safety on a night like tonight, Maggie wasn't nervous, just a little concerned. She looked in all directions around her, seeing an occasional pedestrian or homeless man.

A manhole beside the road was billowing clouds of white steam, capturing the light rays of headlights rushing

past. She carefully skirted around it, feeling the tingle of warm moisture as she scurried past it.

It had been two years and seven months since she had seen her mother. For all she knew, her daughter was lying out in a ditch somewhere dead. Now nineteen, Maggie was beginning to have thoughts about showing her face. She had never intended to live out the cliché of a troubled teen, running away from home and then deciding that the best way to start making money was to prostitute. She had met enough women along the way to tell her to stay away from a pimp, and so she did just that, and did her business alongside some other women who had wanted to do the very same thing.

Right before she had left the house of her childhood, with nothing on her back but a green army bag, things had gotten especially worse. Her mother had recently remarried a big scumbag, as she called him, who was into drinking and scaring the girls into believing he just might molest them. Maggie left before she could ever have known if he would have or not. Steven owned a gun and shot tin cans in the backyard as a frequent hobby, and more often than not he would be drunk while doing it. One time he had swiveled the gun onto Maggie, and gasping, she dropped everything that was in her arms before he finally put the gun away.

Maggie warned her mother many times to stay away from the guy, and to get a divorce, but instead of listening to her daughter, she immediately put up an icy wall, and a clash of wills ensued. Maggie and her mother would scream at each other in the evenings, when Steven was away at the bar or club. Maggie pleaded with her, over and over again, to listen to what Steven had done to them and to leave him. Her little sister, Dawn, only nine, was too young yet to really understand what was going on, but she listened to their fights from the stairwell, jabbing at fresh tears with her fists.

When she had left town, on that memorable black-skied night, the first thing she thought of to do was take a bus into Cincinnati from their rural home just south of Pittsfield. She had slept underneath a park bench that night, and though frightened, she felt happy and at peace in her heart to be away from the fights with her mom. She slept in odd places all throughout that first week. Pretty soon, though, she met a couple of prostitutes and she asked them how they got their start. She felt it was better to have a little money and sell your body than it was to have nothing at all and have to sleep out in the park at night, begging for food during the day.

It was difficult the first few times that she had given her body to men. Not only had she been a virgin, but she had also never had any experience kissing a boy until she started prostituting. The sudden loss of innocence hit her hard, and she was traumatized from the very beginning.

Soon she was earning enough money to rent an apartment, and she found a run-down studio on a fourth floor in a greasy neighborhood. She loved that little apartment, as grungy as it was, and decorated it with some inexpensive bedding and draperies. It might have been a little bit of a dump, but she loved it because it was her first place. Because it was her first place without her mom. She met Darlene, now her closest friend, who had been prostituting for five years. Darlene had told her about how she had had a pimp when she first started out, but the man was an aggressive, abusive man. Eventually he was put in jail on drug charges, and Darlene walked around a free woman.

There wasn't the usual feeling of dirtiness when she first started the job, just shock. Maggie could mentally understand the destructiveness of what she was doing, could physically see the damage to her own body, yet when she thought about it, she wouldn't turn around and go back home for anything. She had already built up a huge wall around

herself, protecting her from everything and anything, and she had become somewhat accustomed to the lifestyle. Besides feeling worlds older than at the start of her journey, there was a cunning sassiness about her that she began to notice as she became more experienced selling her body.

The tall, luminous shape of her building came up in the distance to her right. By that time the snow had slowed and then stopped, leaving only a few dustings here and there on the ground. Maggie put her shoes back on, fearing slimy patches of mud in the shadows where she would walk.

As she approached the gate there was a sudden cold emptiness in the air, as though someone had just whipped right by her, vanishing from plain sight. Maggie could hear moan-like squeals from other gate doors as the wind whipped at her ears, cold biting at the bare flesh of her hands. Her building was seventeen stories high, scary-looking in an area where there were not as many tall buildings.

Maggie thought she heard someone running away when a sickening fear twisted at the base of her gut. Trembling, she turned the corner, only to be faced with a horrific sight:

When she screamed the noise was not very audible to her own ears, as some kind of nervous static was ringing in her ears, ominous of some sort of faint. But she did not fall down, instead she lost full control of her lungs, screaming again and again.

A man walked out from the building's shadow only to begin caressing her arm. "Maggie? What is it?"

Maggie was shocked to see the face of Garrett Dannow, the handsome gentleman that she had met that evening. With a trembling finger she brought it upwards and pointed to the scene of her horror.

Dangling from a loose cord tied to a lower portion of one of the apartments' fire escape, and obviously lifeless, hung the disfigured form of her best and only friend in Cincinnati: Darlene Potter.

Garrett tried to hold her as she shook and screamed. Quickly dialing emergency numbers while holding her, he brought the phone up to his ear and briefly explained what had happened. "Shhh..." he said, after finishing up the call. "They're on their way. Don't worry."

Chapter Two

Police, fire trucks and paramedics sped to the scene in record time, even though Maggie knew it was too late. Tears were slipping down her face as she watched them hoist Darlene down from the fire escape using a ladder from one of their fire trucks. Her head looked like a lifeless mop as they carefully removed it from the makeshift noose made out of a cord.

She cried into Garrett's jacket, wanting to see Darlene as she was taken off, but she quickly looked away, unable to handle the river of emotions gushing through her. The cold wind whipped and howled at her ears, making a mockery of her scanty outfit. She hadn't known from where or how Garrett had appeared, but she was grateful that a man she had instantly trusted was there by her side.

More tears slipped down her face as she said lowly, "She was all I had. No family. No other friends. It was just me and my friend Darlene."

A police officer then approached her and nodded his head in a short hello. "Ma'am," he said. "I'm Officer Langley. I'd like to ask you a few questions if you would give me a bit of your time."

Still stunned, and feeling most of her energy drained from her body, Maggie shook her head loosely in silent agreement to do what the officer said. She tightened the arms folded around her waist and then decided to say something. "Anything you want," she said hoarsely. "Just let's get this over with. I'm sure you'll want a statement."

Langley nodded and there was concern eminent in his focused eyes. "Did you know this woman?" he asked first, obviously noticing the tears on her face and worn, jaded expression.

Garrett touched her arm and said, "If you want I'll wait for you."

Maggie felt relief overwhelm her, and gratefully said, "That's so kind of you. Would you please? I know I've only just met you..."

"It's no problem at all," he said, peering into the face of the officer who looked like he was beginning to get impatient. "Will it be long, sir?"

"No," he said, "But I would also like a statement for you. Were you present when the body was discovered?"

"No," he said. "I heard Maggie scream and I came running. It turned out that it was the same woman that I had met moments earlier at Schackley's down the street."

Honestly I had no intention of following her, but apparently we were headed in the same direction, because when I heard her scream I just went running, and I hadn't far to go."

"I knew her," Maggie burst in, realizing that she hadn't answered Langley's first question. He looked up at her words. "She was a friend of mine. When I saw her dangling from the fire escape I instantly knew it was her. I recognized her clothing." Not sure how much she should explain and what she should reveal about her prostitution, Maggie shifted uncomfortably, looking from Garrett to the officer. Not wanting to reveal it to either man, Maggie considered her options. She realized that her desire to get justice for her friend far outweighed any risk of legal entanglements, but still not wanting Garrett to know, she turned to him and said, "Do you mind if I speak privately with the officer? I won't be long. There are some things that I would like to discuss with him alone."

Garrett nodded understandingly, backing away from the two and ducking away to speak to another police officer. Langley was a quiet, thin man appearing to be in his late forties, with pepper-gray streaks protruding at the temples of his dark, amber-brown hair. His eyes were kind but focused, perhaps even a little bit skeptical. She measured

him quickly as a man that would probably not indict her for prostitution, but on the other hand she couldn't be sure how reasonable a person he was. "If I am going to reveal something pertinent to the case, something that might put me in a little bit of trouble, is there any way that you can guarantee that I won't get into trouble?" she said directly, eyeing his reaction.

"That depends," he said, "on what we're talking about." He looked her up and down and she could imagine that he knew what she was about to tell him.

"I'm a prostitute," Maggie said blankly, holding her hands out to her side as though in faith that she was doing the right thing. "Darlene was as well. About an hour and a half ago I was standing across the street from her and we were both hustling for customers. Around seven-thirty I noticed her get into a sleek black convertible with its top up. I never saw the driver but I assumed she was getting into the car with a would-be customer. When I found her hanging from our building over an hour later, there was no one around. Sir, am I going to be charged with anything?"

"That one of your customers?" he asked, nodding in the direction of Garrett, who was standing close to the curb smoking a cigarette.

Maggie shook her head vehemently no. "What he said. We just met each other in the bar. There was nothing salacious about it."

Then he seemed to consider things over in his mind. Maggie noticed the wedding band on his ring finger and could imagine that he was a little preoccupied with thoughts about his family. "I'm not going to charge you with anything," he said, "but I would certainly like it if you could give a statement down at the station, and I would like to ask the same of your gentleman friend. Tell me," he said, lowering his voice a little, "since you say you just met this man a little while ago, did you begin to suspect him of anything? Were you suspicious at all about his character? That's not a long time for having known someone, and then he mysteriously shows up at the scene of a crime to comfort you. A little bit convenient if you ask me, and quite a distance away from the place where you met. Is there any reason you might suspect he followed you?"

She hadn't thought about that. Certainly she didn't think that he had. Quickly accepting it as a coincidence, she shook her head again. "I don't think so," she said. "I trusted him as soon as I met him. He had offered to buy me a drink, but I was running late and I gave him my telephone number instead. I may not know him very well,

but it didn't strike me as odd that he was the one to come to my aid when I screamed. He could very well have been heading in my direction."

Langley leaned forward. "I understand that this may be very difficult for you. I can only imagine the shock at finding your friend like this. I notice that you are upset, and I promise I'll be brief and quickly return you home. We offer some counseling, if you feel that you need it."

Maggie shook it off, rubbing her arms. "I don't need any counseling," she said.

"Had you noticed that she was feeling upset lately, maybe depressed?" he then asked.

What kind of a question was that? "No, of course not. Darlene has never been depressed one day in her life. She has always been a cheerleader, always with a sly smile on her face. It is beyond what I could ever comprehend."

"Well, we do need to rule out a suicide. One thing that bothers us is that the apartment she went into was vacant; we've questioned the building manager and all evidence points to breaking-and-entering. The door was busted in when we got there. If Ms. Madding was in fact the victim of a violent crime, then it looks like our perpetrator took her by force into the unit, kicking the

door down, then knocking her over the head before hanging her from the rafter."

"Mr. Langley..." she said.

"Please. Call me Sam. I have a patrol car waiting to escort you to the station, if you'd like to come now."

Maggie looked over in Garrett's direction and realized that they were about to get separated. Feeling that it was a lost cause, she agreed with Sam and he gently took her in the direction of his cruiser.

The folks at the police station were happy to supply her with warm cups of coffee and powdered donuts, as many as she liked. With the warmth and new fullness in her belly, she felt refreshed and more than able to comply with their list of questions. She met detectives Harlow and Madison, two balding men each about a foot in height apart. Sam came in to check on her during the interview and asked if she might like something more substantial than powdered donuts to relieve her appetite. She realized a moment later that he was asking her to dinner, and before she could refuse she heard a low rumble in her belly, begging for a meal after she'd gone an evening without any, only a few hot toddies and some bar mints.

She was surprised to see Garrett also at the station. He was talking animatedly with the man behind the front desk. Unfortunately she was unable to say hello, as she was tied up in the interview room, but she remembered that he had her telephone number, if he ever wanted to call her. I'll just leave it up to Fate, then, she thought, and if he wants to he wants to.

They wrapped up their interview and Sam approached the room, his face solemn. When they were alone, he said, "I would put a hold on prostitution for a while, if I were you," he said. "It looks like this is a repeated event. Three other women have been found in the past week, all prostitutes, beaten and hung from a wire. As close as he came to you, I'd be worried for your safety if you were to continue."

Maggie felt the bottom of her stomach go out and then her eyes dulled, dragging her gaze across the floor. "I won't. There's no way I'll be doing that with a serial killer on the loose."

"--Who has a pension for prostitutes," Sam pointed out. "And besides having been the officer duty when you found her, I feel protective of you. I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to you. And I'd also like you to stay away from the streets at night now. We're sending out

an alert to the public that a bad guy may be out there on the loose. If he's seen you and knows that you were a prostitute, then perhaps he'd want to come after you even though you're not doing that anymore."

Maggie shook her head as though she were drugged, beginning to feel reality set in. How could something like this have happened? She had just seen Darlene, smiling and flirting with men. It was beyond comprehension. She simply couldn't accept that she was gone.

It was the middle of the night before they were done, and as she sleepily dragged out of her chair, she went into the main room to search for Sam. He came out a minute later, putting his coat on. He helped her on with hers and said, "Well, shall we go? I know of an all-night diner close by here."

She nodded her agreement, feeling a lack of energy that slowed her muscles and pulled at her eyelids. Sam was a nice man, she thought. When she had first met him, she hadn't been so sure of him—she thought maybe he was going to get her into some trouble. But ever since he had first questioned her, he had been nothing but support and sympathy. Maggie got the feeling that he was the sort of man that would do anything to break a case—but he wasn't going to compromise the feelings of those involved. She

liked that about him. They walked side-by-side to the parking lot, and he unlocked a Jetta four-door from a distance. He opened the passenger's door for her, and she swung her legs over the side of the car and nestled into her seat, fastening the seatbelt around her.

Sam got in quickly, checked his mirrors and started the car. "It won't be a long drive," he said. "I know you're probably famished."

Maggie watched the trees and houses go by silently from her seat. She was itching to change out of her blue sweater and short leather skirt. As confused as she was by the day's events, Maggie began to feel a spark of anger. *How could anyone have done something like this?* she thought. Whoever the criminal was, she felt tricked and betrayed by him. He had no right to come into their lives and take someone so beloved to her... and she wanted to stop him. More than anything she wanted to fight the bastard who had done this to them... and win.

Sam was looking over at her gently, every now and again checking to see if she was okay. "Don't fall asleep on me now," he said, adjusting the car's heat, and she realized that she had been about to nod off. The all-night diner was lit up like a highly decorative Christmas display, oodles of neon lights glittering on and off

advertising the restaurant's name and 24-hour service. The bright lights woke her up in a start, halfway illuminating the night sky in a halo around the building. Her stomach gurgled in anticipation that it was about to be fed.

They got out of the car, and her knees were a little bit wobbly, but she managed to make it to the front of the restaurant just as Sam opened the door for her. A pleasant-looking waitress approached carrying menus. She had a plump, rosy face, rectangular spectacles, an apron, and pepper-gray hair pinned back in a low chignon. Her nametag read "Ella," and she smiled at them brightly as they came in. "Table for two?" she asked cheerily. Ella was no doubt used to the late shift. Maggie imagined that her employer valued her late-night pep.

Sam mumbled his agreement, flicking his eyes concernedly over at Maggie. When they had both found a booth, she knew that he was going to say something to her. "Been a rough night for you?" he asked, and Maggie smiled at the question. She felt comforted that he had been thinking about her.

"It's funny. I still can't seem to get it into my head that Darlene is gone. The way I feel right now, I may be badly in need of sleep, but it's almost as though

nothing has happened. I can imagine going home and everything will be just the way that it was before."

Sam folded open his menu, scanned the first page and then looked up at her. "I have to apologize for all the red tape. On top of what you've already been through tonight, you've had to deal with all of our lengthy procedures. I've been in this line of work for a long time, but I have never been able to forgive how cold the system can sometimes be. Unfortunately, it's necessary, but if there's anything I can do to help you with the aftermath, I'm here for you."

She forced a smile and realized that he was putting forth a lot of effort. She would emote more if she could, but all of her nerve-endings and muscles felt cramped up, cold. If they had met at a different time and under different circumstances, Maggie imagined that she would be highly attracted to this man. She valued the friendliness and the caring that she was already able to observe in him, and then there was also the spark of chemistry that she felt welling within her. "What can you do?" she said emotionlessly. "She may not have been family, but we were close. Almost too close. And just imagine that I did not have any other friends. I don't know what I'm going to do now. And moreover, there's a killer out there that I have

to be wary of. Never in my life have I been through something as shocking and as terrifying."

Sam's deep brown eyes warmed at her. "I understand that you've just been through something horrific. As terrible as I feel about the loss of your friend, though," he said, "I would feel even worse if something were to happen to you. I really want to make sure that you're protected. And enough of that awful lifestyle—maybe it's a little signal that you should be done with it and moving on to other things."

Maggie's eyes dulled, an almost sultry look to her expression of disdain. Her "lifestyle" was not something she really cared to discuss with Sam yet, especially since he was the officer who could have had her arrested when she confessed it to him. She decided to remain mysterious for the time being, and only reassured him, "I will not be doing any of those things any time soon." She played with the napkin on the table. The waitress approached and Sam ordered eggs, ham, and a pot of coffee for the both of them. She ordered French toast with a side of bacon. "Speaking of danger," she began, lifting her chin up a bit, "Just what kind of details do you know so far about the killer? Is there anything that I might need to know?"

He leaned in closer to her. "The perpetrator in question has struck three times. All three of his victims were prostitutes. All three of them were struck over the head and hung by a wire. He strikes after dark, preferably well into the evening. The three women in question were last seen loitering on a main Cincinnati sidewalk, hustling for prostitution clients. Professionals are generally referring to him as "The Sidewalk Stalker," for his tendency to stake out victims before he makes an attack.

"What leads you to believe he follows people before he picks them up?" she asked.

"In a previous case a man was seen circling around several times before picking up the victim. We have some good leads, like the make and model of his car. One witness says she saw a man with an average build and dark hair."

"I would certainly like to see this person caught," she said, just as their late-night breakfasts arrived. A shiver ran through her, and she said calmly, "And to think how close I came to him."

He nodded his head, taking a sip of his coffee. "You're a lucky girl to be walking away from this unharmed. I just hope that the word gets out before anyone else is hurt."

"Do you think whoever this was will be caught?" she asked, hoping that Sam would answer yes. She didn't know how she would take it if the criminal were to walk away, unpunished.

"Our staff is on it at all hours of the day," he said. "Sooner or later, and I'm hoping sooner, we'll catch him." Maggie felt as though she wanted to run and hide from this man. She couldn't understand where the urge came from, or what the underlying cause was, but all she knew suddenly was that she had had just about enough of talking with him for the evening—as though he were watching her carefully, hoping to incriminate her. Now with a full belly, she thought of an excuse to leave Sam's presence.

"It's late," she said. "I'm glad I was able to appease my hunger, but I just think that I might turn in for the night. Thank you for a thoroughly great meal. You've been nothing but kind to me this entire time."

Sam nodded slowly, looking a little bit disappointed in his eyes. "It is late. But you can reach me any time if there's anything that you need. Remember, you're not to blame here. Go home and get some rest."

Maggie wandered out of the restaurant after Sam paid, feeling confused and a little frightened, and started to head home.

Chapter Three

She awoke to the sunlight coming into her bedroom through the slats of her blinds. She had slept for quite a long time, and the sun was already beginning to warm the inside of the apartment. She was sprawled width-wise on the bed, still in her blue sweater and short skirt. She got up slowly, paced over to the mirror, and saw the smudged eye makeup beneath her eyes and smeared red lipstick. Her hair was a mess, full of tangles. She groaned and pulled at it, then decided to have at it with the brush. First things first, she was going to take a shower and rid herself of the horrible evidence of what had taken place last night.

Once in the shower, she could begin to remember meeting Garrett in the crowded bar. Emotions swarmed through her as she thought of him, and realized that their meeting could not have come at a worse time. In the wake of her friend's death, how could she even think about engaging with a man, albeit a highly intriguing one, under such terrible circumstances? Silently she cursed herself for being so forward. What now must he think of her, now that she was entirely certain that he knew about her prostitution? How could she face him?

And she was overwhelmed, also, by feelings of grief and loss. This was the girl who had started out with her, back in those lonely days when she had just run away from home and was living on the streets as a homeless woman. After being drawn in by her first pimp, Landon, Darlene had been an immeasurable form of support and companionship for her.

It had been another cold day. Maggie was counting the money she had just picked up from a highly satisfied customer. The man had been wearing a pinstripe suit and presented her with the money beforehand—more than enough to cover her regular dues. He insisted on her quietness and cleanliness, ordering her to shower before the deed. When she had come out, his suit was flung over the easy chair in the hotel room's sitting area and he was sitting very primly on the bed, looking up expectantly at her. Landon came in and demanded the cash. Maggie looked up smartly and said, "What about my cut?"

Landon growled, "Not this time, Star. You've been taking more than you should. I know you've been slighting me. I asked one of them how much he had paid for you, and it was well over what you ended up telling me. Hand it over."

"It's not true!" Maggie protested. "I've always told you the truth. I've never once taken more than my share. You have to believe me!"

Landon back-handed her with a ringed hand. Maggie saw shooting stars and reeled, overcome with a swarming dizziness. She staggered back.

A newcomer entered. She was of average height, thin and with long, dark shiny hair. Her eyes were rimmed with especially dark make-up, framing a set of deep brown irises. Immediately the girl raised her voice. "That's enough, Landon. I told you from the beginning that if you became violent with us, then I would personally report you to the police."

Landon eased back. "Darlene."

"Now step away from her. This is another one of your girls, right? I'm telling you not to touch her." The girl had her fists squarely on her hips, and was cocking her head towards the long, curly-haired pimp, angling her chin at him.

He backed off. Addressing Maggie, he said, "Just don't think about cheating me again, Star," the last with a growl. And at that he left the apartment and ambled down the stairs.

"Hi, girl," she said. "I'm Darlene. Are you alright?"

Maggie thanked her and said, "He's a peach. I'm glad you came when you did."

The two girls became fast friends from that moment on. Landon was eventually jailed for assaulting another one of his prostitutes, and Darlene and Maggie went on to go about their business on their own.

Turning from the mirror, Maggie let out a gasp. "Landon." She had seen his haggard reflection, but when she turned he seemed to look even more disheveled and menacing. "Are you out of jail?"

"Yeah," he said, in a low, breathy voice.

"How did you get in here?"

"The door was open. I'm sure you don't mind, Star," he said, even though she did.

"Are you back to do more business with me?" she said, her hands shaking a little.

Landon looked as though he had been through a nightmare. There were huge, puffy dark circles beneath his eyes, and his chin looked more refined, as though the incarceration had taught him a few lessons in toughness. He glared at her menacingly, even though Maggie doubted that he would lay a hand on her at this point.

She let her shoulders relax, conceding to him. "If you want to be my pimp again, it's a little too late," she said, remembering Sam's warning last night about the serial killer. "I can't do that anymore. It's become too dangerous. And besides," she said flatly, "Darlene is dead."

Landon's eyes widened. "Our Darlene? Are you sure? Star, what happened to her?" He grabbed her arms and began to shake her. He sounded as though he had never heard of such a thing happening before. Maggie narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing his believability. Maggie wondered if the timing of his release and the start of the prostitute killings matched up.

"When were you released?" she asked slyly.

But he looked honestly shocked. Maggie couldn't imagine Landon being that good of an actor. In his face she saw genuine surprise, and, though small, a little hint of sorrow. Beneath that tough exterior and criminal behavior, she thought, maybe there was some part of him that cared. Nevertheless she was still frightened of him, and his re-appearance could not have come at a worse time. "Yesterday," he said plainly, and then let her go from his grasp. He seemed to be mulling something over, the wheels of uncertainty and disbelief churning on his face. "When

did this happen?" he asked. "How could it have happened? Tell me everything that you know."

She shook her head, drained of energy and patience. "She was killed, Landon. There's nothing that we can do. I was the one that found her hanging from the rafter. There's a serial killer on the loose, and he's targeting streetwalkers. I wish I could have told you differently, but she's gone."

A wild look appeared in his eyes. A second there, she was wondering whether to go back on her previous guess that he wouldn't harm her. He rolled back on his heels, blew a large sigh, and cast his eyes downwards. "I had no idea..." he said. Maggie watched him leave.

Well, she thought, that will tide him over for a while before he comes back to claim me as one of his girls again. She fiddled with the blow-dryer and then dried her hair, what was left of it, anyway. Where there had been tangled clumps of ratty strands, the hair had come out onto the brush, thinning her mane disproportionately. Maggie did not think that Landon would bother her again that day, although she was still reeling from her close-encounter with the man she detested more than any other person. Her hands were still shaking, and her knees felt wobbly. She wanted more than anything to sit down.

On the table beside her bed, she noticed a sharp-looking business card with numbers sprawled across the back. It was the one that Sam had given to her yesterday, with his cell phone number on the back. At their departure yesterday, Sam had told her to give him a call whenever she would like, for any reason at all. Maggie couldn't help but wonder if this officer had a thing for her. Obviously he was nice, and sensitive to her feelings. But there was a certain way that he looked at her, though, almost like... interest.

The huge lips-shaped telephone rang. Maggie picked it up on the second ring. "Hello?" she asked guardedly.

"Hi, Maggie. It's me, Sam." Well, speak of the devil, she thought.

"To what do I owe this honor?" she said blithely.

"Well, I just wanted you to know that the department is looking for any living relatives or family of the deceased. No leads yet. Would you know if Darlene Campbell was her real name?"

"As far as I know," she said, "Darlene had no other names. She's never been married and she never spoke of any other identities. I think it's pretty safe to assume that that was the name that she was born with."

"Well, I'm sure it won't take long before we get some more information about her. How long had you known her?"

"A couple of years. She told me that she had left home just as I had, never looking back. We were both eighteen at the time that we met, although I first ran away from home when I was fifteen. I think that Darlene told me that she was sixteen. Her parents are from Ohio, but I do not know their names."

"Do you know the place of her birth?"

"I can't say that I do. But I think she lived in Cincinnati for a while. I hope that helps."

"Yes, Maggie Star. It helps a lot. I'm sure we're that much closer to finding her family. I've put her name and face through a search-engine for missing persons during the last ten years. I have a few leads. With your information, I believe we'll find her a little faster. And if we do manage to find them, would you like me to notify you?"

"Of course," she said. "I may not have known everything about her, but like I said we were best friends. Meeting her family would give me some much-needed closure, and of course I would want to pay my last respects."

"I also wanted to call you to tell you that I had a good time at the restaurant." So that was it. Maggie had been right that Sam had taken an interest in her.

"Oh, me, too," she said. "It was a delicious meal. I had been so hungry that it was that much more delectable. And thank-you for picking up the tab—I had needed that."

"We've been working steadily on the Sidewalk Stalker. No major breaks in the case yet, but I will keep you posted, and, Maggie, I would still advise you to keep clear of your former life. I can't tell you how much of a risk it would be for you to return to it at this point."

Maggie had thought about his warnings, but for the first time she realized something with a sinking feeling that was going to be a major problem. What about her finances? How would she be able to afford living in her apartment without prostitution? She could apply for a job, but never in her life had she had an honest job, and she didn't feel that she would know how to even begin. Nevertheless, she had a sinking feeling that she just might have to go that route, seeing as how necessary it would be for her to stay off the streets. It had always appealed to her to be able to make a quick buck, and that was one of the things that led her to prostitution in the first place.

"I won't do it, Sam," she swore. But inwardly she was wondering if she was going to be able to do that.

"I trust you, okay? Many women have been able to turn their lives around and I believe that you can, too." She smiled wanly. "Listen, I just wanted to check up on you, see how you were doing, and ask you if you would perhaps like to have dinner with me later this week."

Well, that had come as a surprise. She mulled it over quickly in her mind, and felt trapped. This was the officer who was possibly going to detain her last night, and this was the man that she was trying so much to be amicable with. She knew what a hassle police officers could be, and frankly she didn't want to risk his ire. "Sure," she said airily, hoping that she came across sounding genuine. "You name the time, you name the place, and I'll be there."

When she let the phone drop, she had an overwhelming urge to be outside. She got dressed hastily in a pair of gray jeans and a dark purple turtleneck sweater. She placed argyle socks on her feet and then laced up a pair of boots. She did not wear any jewelry, but had finally conceded to wear a little bit of blush and eye make-up. When she was dressed she donned the black nylon coat with a

fake fur hood lining. She zippered up, grabbed her keys, and left.

It was brisk outside. Her breath fogged up in long clouds as she walked, hands in pockets. The dry air stung at her cheeks, but the sensation left her feeling stimulated and invigorated. She walked along a familiar route, looking up at the tall, looming buildings and to her sides, where homeless men in coats huddled against the sides of stony building where grates radiated much-needed heat. Vendors selling refreshments and flowers called out to her, but she declined brusquely with a wave of her hand and walked forward. There was an intense, thick darkness which pervaded the sky, but at the horizon a small band of grayish light partially illuminated the sky. The moon was clear and crescent-shaped, jutting out starkly in the high sky of darkness.

She did not know where she was going. She just knew that she had to be here, among the crowds of amblers, people that she passed by every day, and lonely strangers with wondrous looks in their eyes. She passed by the bar she had stopped at last night, and peered inside. She could not see Garrett, but looked for a long time at a protruding, masculine hand wearing a gold band around its ring finger. That hand was cradling what looked like a

glass of scotch and ice, and the man slowly lifted it up, sloshing it back and forth in his hand. She looked at his face, but did not recognize it. Scanning the other faces in the still crowded bar, he was nowhere to be seen.

Was she crazy to want to come back here, in the hopes that she would see him again? She half hoped that he would call her, perhaps apologizing that he had taken so long to get back with her, and charmingly asking to get together for some drinks. But she also half hoped that she would never be able to face him again after he had discovered what she truly was—trash. She knew not much of all about his background, which line of work he was in, or if he was attached. Wouldn't it be nice if they could get to know each other more? Maggie wrestled with these thoughts as she strolled along the 160th street sidewalk. Just as she turned a corner, a shadowed figure moved quickly and stealthily ahead of her. She braced herself, and moved back.

A rustling sound emanated from where the shadow-person had disappeared. Maggie's breath quickened, and she remembered Sam's alert. Try to be brave, she asserted herself, and backed away by minuscule steps. She turned on her heel and started to run away, but she collided with a telephone booth to her left. She reeled with the impact of

her head to the glass plating, but picked herself up and scampered away. Her breath was uneven, and she had a slight sensation that someone was following her.

She ran past telephone poles that seemed to zip past her in lightning speed. She flipped back her scarf, which was falling down, and rushed back in the direction she had come. She did not see many people around; it was growing later and the normal crowds that came by these streets during the day had waned to almost nonexistence. She ran to the next telephone booth that appeared before her, intending to call 9-1-1, but as she slowed and then stopped, she could hear no sets of footsteps, not another person breathing, or even stirring. There was only the sound of the wind rushing gently past her on the desolate streets of this part of the city. She thought she heard another rustling; she looked to her left and saw a frail homeless man coughing in the alleyway. She looked left and right, and then all around her for any indication that someone was around her.

There was a closed convenience store across the street with its green neon lights still glowing eerily; it cast a green light on the streets for about a half a block in either direction. She saw a form behind the store window; he was masked and swiping things from the counters. Maggie

decided to place an anonymous call to the police that Spencer's was being robbed, and then resigned to go home. As nervous as she was, she was highly relieved when she made it back to her building in one piece. She stripped off her coat and scarf, and tumbled onto her bed. Inside, the warmth felt invigoratingly good.

Silently, that night, she prayed that she would come through this experience in one piece, and that whoever this person was who was doing this would be caught and given the proper punishments. She cried for the one girl who had accompanied her through this latest leg of her journey through life, sobbing with more and more emotion until she finally fell asleep, plowing into such a deep slumber that she could not even hear the telephone ring in the morning.

Chapter Four

He called back when Maggie was digging into a bowl of corn flakes with slices of banana on top. She picked up the receiver and said, "Hello?"

His voice sounded melodic, resonating through the telephone receiver. "Hello, my darling. This is Garrett Dannow. We met at O'Donnell's the other night. You gave me your telephone number and I thought I'd give you a ring."

Maggie nervously straightened her hair as though he could see her, and laughed self-consciously into the phone. "Garrett! I'm glad you called. I was hoping that you would."

Garrett laughed a deep, hearty laugh. "The circumstances were unfortunate, of course. I did see you at the police station after the incident occurred. Are you holding up alright?" His voice marked genuine concern, and she felt flattered.

"It's a tragedy what happened. It strikes me as much of a coincidence that I was the one who found her, and she had been one of my friends. I am overwhelmed by sadness for her loss, and I do not think that she can ever be replaced. How much did the police tell you?" She asked

this last question with nervous apprehension, and she found herself sitting a little closer on her seat. Had he learned what she was? She feared the worst, and half-closed her eyes as though to brace herself.

"They only told me what they could," he said. "She lived around here and apparently this has happened before. It's an alert to anyone who plans to be outside during the night hours. Frankly, I would stay in as much as you can, and practice never to go out in the evening unless you are accompanied by someone. It's frightening how close we both came to a killer—a killer who is still on the loose."

Maggie thought for a moment. He wasn't letting on that he knew anything about her, but she felt that it was only right that he know. "Garrett, I need to tell you something."

"Can this wait until we can see each other? The least I can do is take you out sometime."

"Sure," she said uncertainly.

"How about tomorrow? I can pick you up at seven if you like. We have a choice of some great restaurants in your area. Afterwards we could browse the shopping district, or go to the park, whatever you would like."

She faintly murmured that she would love to go out with him, and the time was just fine. She hung up feeling lighter, happier, as though she were on air.

That day she decided to take the opportunity to start hunting for a job. She walked down to the corner mart and purchased a paper and a red delicious apple. She took her things with her back upstairs and started to dig into the classified section.

A nearby bank was searching for tellers. She decided to circle that one, including the address, and she proceeded to weed through her closet for something understated to wear. She called the number and was met with a cheerful-sounding female voice. "I'm inquiring about the job opening," she stated, referring back to her newspaper for easy reference. "Your advertisement says that you are in search of someone for a full-time position."

"I can set you up with an interview," the woman said, and Maggie rattled off a few dates that she would be able to make it. Actually, she would be available at any time, but she didn't tell the woman that. "Would you be available as soon as today?" she asked, the sound of shuffling papers in the background.

Maggie didn't have to think twice. "I would. And whom should I ask for when I get there?"

"You will be asking for Mr. Perkins. My name is Ms. Davies and I am his receptionist. I could pencil you in for two o'clock this afternoon. Is that an acceptable time?"

Maggie agreed that it was, but immediately she became nervous. She had no work experience, and her credentials were non-existent. She figured that if she made a good impression, though, then perhaps she would be able to snag the job. In fact it would all hinge upon that, she thought.

She found a light grey sweater and brown pants in her closet. With a necklace and some earrings, then it would be a perfect outfit to wear to her job interview. Some brown loafers, and she would look perfect.

She proceeded to get ready, and as she blow-dried her hair thoughts of Landon re-entered her mind. What if he was going to come back? She thought. There was no telling when he would be at it again, and when he would come she did not know if she could stop him. Would he listen to her now that it was too dangerous to work the streets? Or would he insist on exploiting her anyway, despite the existence of a serial killer?

Up until the time she needed to leave, he did not show up at her doorstep. She grabbed her purse, filled with tissues, extra make-up, her keys, her wallet, a bus schedule, and the newspaper advertisement, and walked breezily through the door. She perused the bus schedule and headed for the bus stop at the corner.

About five minutes after she arrived, the bus came rumbling to a stop. She entered through the front door, paid, and headed toward the middle section of the inside of the bus. She looked warily around her, seeing faces of obliviousness, and folded more guardedly into her seat.

As they drove she looked out at the familiar roads and buildings, seeing a district abuzz with activity. She needed this to go well. She could not, now, do what she had been doing with the circumstances as such. She may never have had a job before, but she was willing to try her best and put forth all of her efforts to see this endeavor through. She hoped that her interviewer would see how hard she was willing to work.

The bus neared the intersection where she was to get off. The two-story bank loomed proudly over the road with four stone pillars shielding its entrance. Dripping green mildew stains fell from the two top windows, but otherwise it was a clean-looking, newly refurbished edifice. Its

concrete walls were standard gray, and the structure presented the bank well, as undoubtedly this was quite a reputable establishment.

Maggie felt the last of her nerves fluttering away as she lowered herself from the bus, reaching inside of her purse for the folded newspaper advertisement. She took a deep breath, smoothed out her hair, and strode forward, purposely placing her head high.

"Mr. Perkins, please," she asked the woman at the front desk, who was very possibly the same person who had helped her on the phone.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I have an interview. I called earlier today." The woman had a pinched face and black, probing rat-like eyes. Her hair was smoothed back into a low pony-tail, and Maggie noticed that she wasn't wearing any make-up and didn't have any adornments. She thought about giving her some beauty advice, but bit her lip that it probably wouldn't make the best first impression.

"Wait right there," she said, "and I'll page him."

She made her way to the sorry-looking waiting area, full of a half-dozen folding chairs and a warped wooden coffee table covered with old, ripped magazines. It was decorated with a shoddy-looking oil painting of a wood shed

at the water's edge, canoes lined up along the bank, and here and there evergreen trees brushed at the top of the sky. She chose the seat closest to the receptionist's desk, picked up an Elle, and tried to occupy herself until it came time for her appointment.

Not finding anything interesting in the magazine, she opened her purse and proceeded to fiddle with her lipstick. As she raised the tube to her trembling lips, a stout man with a serious expression on his face appeared. His face was sprinkled with fine wrinkles, and his eyes, covered by a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, were dark and concentrating. "Miss Faulkner?" he asked.

Maggie quickly stood and gathered her things together, throwing her magazine back down on the table. She smoothed out her pants and rose to shake the man's outstretched hand. "I'll be conducting your interview today," he said. "Why don't you come with me?"

Though nervousness had left her when she first got off of the bus, it came back now in full force. She heard the rustling off fabric as she brushed against a side table, and felt an overwhelming urge to faint as the man was leading her into his corner office. She hoped above all else that he would not notice as she braced herself against the table, waiting for the feeling to pass. Little

hallucinated bees swarmed around her head, as what often happened before she fainted, and she pleaded that she would not fall down, as more imaginary bees buzzed through her quivering stomach.

As the man alighted behind his desk, the feeling thankfully passed, and Maggie fought to gain control of her train-wrecked mind. Sweat came to her palms and a draft of climate-controlled air chilled her forehead and made her shake.

"Have you ever worked in a bank before?" he asked in a flat tone, eying her up and down as though to pass a quick judgment on her. The way he was looking at her, with his head raised up just slightly, gave Maggie the distinct impression that he was looking down his nose at her. She examined her clothes, which she had thought this morning were quite tasteful, and suddenly came to a glaring realization that nothing she could have chosen would have been good enough for a job interview. The pants were too tight, and the neckline on the sweater was too low. Everything in her closet was all wrong. To be sure, she was much too used to dressing for the streets to be able to throw together a tasteful ensemble. And then she realized, as he was scrutinizing her, that she was probably wearing too much make-up, too.

"No," she said, "But I'm a quick learner. In high school I used the computer a lot, and I'm a fast typist. I'm also good with numbers. I always made A's in all of my math classes."

He crinkled his nose in a gesture of dissatisfaction. "What type of work experience do you have? Do you have any at all?"

Maggie began to feel like a fool. How could she even think that anyone would give her a second look after the kind of life she'd led? She was in the wrong place, of that she was sure. "No," she said with an uneasy laugh. "But a girl's got to start somewhere, isn't that right?"

Mr. Perkins gave a haughty snort, but didn't look up from his paperwork. She shivered, feeling as though ready to crawl out of her skin and too-tight clothes. *Try to say something intelligent*, she told herself, placing her hands primly in her lap.

Mr. Perkins looked up pointedly from his desk, then adjusted his glasses. "And what interested you about banking?"

Maggie thought for a moment, her mind blank. She chewed nervously on her lower lip, thinking that the interview wasn't going well. She felt cheap and out of place, to say the least. Was her perfume going sour? The

man was wrinkling his nose in distaste, literally. Before she spoke she drew in a shaky breath, trying her best to give a small smile. "When I was thinking about what job I might like," she said, "it occurred to me that there's nothing I appreciate more than money. If I were to become a teller, I'd be working with money all the time. And that's something I could really get into."

She had half meant it to be a joke, but Mr. Perkins wasn't finding it funny. Instead, he closed his stack of papers, looked down his nose at her again, and said, "References?"

She mentioned the first name that came into her head. "Sam Langley," and knew that she had put herself into a fix. Surely she would have to explain herself to him before the bank could call him.

"Are there any special qualifications that would make you a good candidate for this job?"

At this question, Maggie felt confidence ripple through her. "I know how to handle people," and it was the truth.

Mr. Perkins excused her and she walked blithely back into the waiting area, adjusted her purse strap, and sailed out of the building.

By the time she got out of her interview, the sky had turned deep grey with splashes of burgundy and violet. A rumbling of thunder pealed across the cloudy sky, and as she looked up at it, her breath came out in rolling fog around her face.

She was disappointed, to say the least. She supposed that she did the best she could possibly do considering that she had never been looking for a bona fide job before, but even still she wished that she had been better prepared for the questions. Sitting in that cramped little sterile room, she remembered she had felt every bit the hooker and nothing of the confident businesswoman that she wanted to portray.

She wrapped her arms tightly beneath her breasts as she walked briskly towards the bus stop, but then decided to walk home. It was, after all, still a little bit light out, and the rain was sure not to come until a long while later.

The click of her heels echoed against the sidewalk like she was walking on top of hollow metal trash cans. Amblers roamed the streets singly and in pairs, heading for the restaurants and bars along the main street. Early crowds were beginning to form at the movie theaters and

clubs, and a quiet rustling of excitement brushed the streets with life.

Again, Maggie got the sensation that she was being followed. She didn't know where the inkling came from or what had started it, but with a sinking certainty she felt that whoever had been following her the night before was following her again.

She rushed on, folding the collar of her coat up to shield her neck from the cold wind, and as a bus pulled to the side she ran to catch up with it. The bus driver waited and held the door open for her, and she hurried on, quickly paying her fare. There was no need to chance things, not when she was that certain that someone was after her.

She went home, and relaxed in the safety of her apartment.

Chapter Five

Maggie felt a chill shudder through her, and noticed that her front window was partially open. She got up from her cozy spot on the sofa and reached to close it. But she realized that the chill air alone wasn't making her cold. Tonight she felt drained and alone, left to the confines of her own prison-apartment without the company of anyone else, and certainly not the regular visitor who had frequented her place in the past, Darlene. She was shocked and dismayed at how bitterly she missed her friend, and as she got back on the sofa, she pulled her knees tightly to her body and wrapped her arms around them.

The place felt smaller, stuffier. Emotions surfaced that she hadn't wanted to tend to, emotions bitter with grief and isolation. Darlene had become like a ghost, the image of her face springing up before her eyes like a laughing vapor, reminding her of an innocent life that had been ripped away much too early that had any right to be. She was angry, and with a force that nearly knocked her over, bitter vengeance surged through her, causing her to shake.

She told herself that she needed to sleep, and turned off the light in the living room to make her way towards

the bedroom. She sucked in a sharp breath as she went past the window and saw the shrouded figure below: Landon. He was wearing a hooded gray sweatshirt with his hands in his front pocket. Billowing clouds of white fog billowed from his mouth as he turned and looked up impatiently in her direction. In horror, Maggie turned from the window and hoped that he had not seen her. Was he waiting for someone? And what was he doing at her building? It was a very late hour and seeing Landon was the last thing on her mind, and the last thing that she wanted to do. She should have realized that he would be coming back sometime soon, but nevertheless she began thinking of excuses to turn him away. He looked at his watch and ambled away from the street corner, apparently coming in the way of the building. Maggie ran from the window, threw on her terrycloth robe, and waited for the coming onslaught.

She heard the buzz and knew who was going to be at the other end. "Yes, Landon?" she answered.

"Baby doll, let me in," he said. "You and I need to have a talk and this can't wait any longer." Maggie heaved a sigh, ready to come up with a casual lie or something that would at least stall him another day or two. But the lapse of silence stole away her chance. "If you don't let me in I'll find some other way to get to you. If we don't

meet here then we'll meet some other way; and you know it. I don't have all day so just buzz me in."

"Landon, I'm done with all of that," she said into the intercom. "I tried to tell you the last time you were here that I was never going to be into that again."

"Then just let me up and we can talk about that once I get inside."

Maggie didn't really feel like fighting tonight. So she considered it for a long time, heard the buzzer again, pressed her eyes closed and sighed heavily, and finally pressed the button that would unlock the front door. Feeling defeated, she crossed her arms and waited on the couch for him to get upstairs, feeling every inch of her nerves tighten at the thought of him coming up here.

She listened to the noises outside of her door, the pattering of feet down the hall, the whoosh of wind coming through an open window, and giddy laughter and music wafting over from next door. *I may as well face up to him now*, she thought. There was no use in waiting any longer, she realized. The terror from her past would only haunt her for a long time to come if she chose to ignore it. The lies, the manipulation, the using: all that was associated with her and her past with Landon seemed to swarm in her head, filling her with anxiety and rage. And yet he had

almost been like a family member, tending to their needs and treating them like sisters. One minute he was tender and sensitive to their needs, asking if there was anything he could supply them with, and the next he was rough and brutal, physically forcing them to go out and sell their bodies to mongrels.

The sound of heavy footsteps came from the hallway, plodding in her direction. Maggie could feel a draft heavier than usual as the footsteps approached her door. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The pounds echoed in the hallway and into her apartment, shaking the floor and furniture.

She edged to the back of the door, her hands shaking. She braced herself, then unlatched the lock and opened the door.

"Babydoll, it's me again. Aren't you glad to see me?" He was angled against the side of the door, leaning to his left with his right hand in his leather jacket pocket. Maggie smelled the sweet, pungent scent of marijuana smoke wafting from his clothes, although the man himself looked sober. His hair was slicked back with gel, and he smelled minty, as though he had just brushed his teeth. His clothes, though they were the same ones he usually wore, were pressed and neat on his slightly muscular body. Landon's dark eyes bore into her as he swaggered to a

straightened position, and when he caught her eye, he winked.

Maggie could not be more revolted by the sight of him, though. What she wanted more than anything else was to put her past with him behind her, and move on to other things. But she had a creeping feeling that Landon was in no way going to leave her alone—at least, not for now.

“Well, aren’t you going to let me in?” he asked, his voice husky, his eyes narrowing.

Maggie thought she would stall him for a little while, and decided to make conversation. “Yes, Landon, but I want to know why you’re here first. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you, and I would think that you’d be able to assume that I have moved on with my life. I’m not interested in that trashy lifestyle anymore. I had hoped you could accept that. It’s a path filled with so many dangers and so many ways to get yourself in trouble. I just can’t put myself in that position anymore.”

Landon eyed her again. “And I would think that you would want to discuss our recent loss,” he said. Maggie noticed how he used the word *our*—meaning that the loss was his, as well. She doubted if he felt any grief for Darlene at all, considering how heartless he had always shown himself to be.

Maggie had nothing to say to his last comment. "You didn't come to talk me into working with you again?"

Landon started to appear impatient. "Just let me in, and we can talk. Surely you trust me enough to let me in."

Maggie nearly bit back a laugh at his last words. Nevertheless, she was not about to have him coming back again and again, and maybe someday breaking his way in like he did the last time. Furthermore, she didn't want to rile his anger, for she knew him to have a destructive and somewhat violent temper. Learning from past experiences, she knew never to cross this man the wrong way, because his reaction, no matter how impulsive, was not something she wanted to handle again. To be sure, she was frightened of the man, and not just because he was a full head taller than her and could beat her into a pulp. She had seen too many of his manipulative ways to ever trust him.

"Alright," she said, "but only for a little while. It's late and I want to get an early start tomorrow morning."

Landon pushed his way inside, visually measuring the inside of her apartment. Maggie, shaking a little bit, looked downwards and then up at his back, hoping that she was not making a grave mistake.

With his hands in his pockets, he took a few paces around the little cozy apartment, his shoes tracking some freshly fallen snow onto her orange-and-brown circular area rug. Maggie noticed but didn't say anything, eager to get this night over with. Then he slumped down onto the sofa, hauling one bended leg on top of the seat next to him. He looked up innocently into her eyes as she came forward to sit with him, and Maggie knew that his calm was just on the surface, for there was forever a fire of anger writhing within him, just waiting to be unleashed at the slightest provocation.

"I have to say I was shocked about what happened to Darlene," he said as she was still standing. She picked up the remnant of a newspaper that was perched on the available seat next to Landon, placed it on the coffee table, and sat down. He had a look in his eyes of a man who was crushed. Could it have been an act? Maggie would not think for a second that he would ever be out of shape over one of his former prostitutes. Images, flashes of the life she had led with him came before her eyes. She saw the lust in customers' eyes as they led her away. Landon counting a wad of bills as they made a deal. Him hitting her, leaving her bruised and beaten on top of a filthy, damaged floor. There were flashy clothing and gifts; the

promises of a better life. All this made her shiver, and she didn't want to meet his gaze.

"It came suddenly," Maggie said vacantly, hoping that the general statement would appease him.

Landon picked up a wad of tissues from the coffee table and started picking at it. "Nothing will ever be the same. I never wanted anything to happen to my girls. I still can't believe it's happened."

"You must have cared for her a lot," she said with a hint of sarcasm in her voice. "You have known us for years. I can imagine how it's been a shock to you."

Then, in a move that startled her so much that she flinched, Landon slammed his fist into the table, making it reverberate. "It should never have happened," he said, "and I would like to kill the sick bastard who did this. If I hadn't of just gotten out of the slammer, I would find him and murder him with my own two hands. Did they say how long this has been going on? Is there anything you know about the killer?"

"It's happened twice before, and the police think that the same person is involved. That's one of the reasons I've decided to quit the scene. They say he's a serial killer who's been targeting prostitutes. I just couldn't take that risk, and I had wanted to stop for a

long time. The feeling of guilt overwhelmed me. In a way, this horrible tragedy has brought along with it a blessing— it is bringing me out of a no-good life, one that might have ended much too soon. I know it's horrible to think that way, but if there was anything that came of Darlene's death, is that she is saving me. I can't look back. I just can't."

"How are you gonna get by?" he said then. "Are you gonna to look for a job? Baby doll, I've known you since you were a teenager and you've never had a job. How are you going to be able to afford living here?"

Maggie wiped stray tears from her eyes and sniffed her nose. "I'll find a job somehow if it's the last thing that I do. I cannot live that life anymore, I simply cannot. It's damaged me in more ways than I can tell you, and I'm going to have to be recovering for the rest of my life. I met a nice police officer—"

Landon cut her off. "Wait a minute. So you're telling me that a police officer has talked you into leaving me? Are you crazy? Of course a cop is going to tell you that. Have you allowed him to completely persuade you? Is there anything that I need to be worried about with the two of you? Maggie, don't listen to anything he says. The bottom line for every cop is the law. He

doesn't know about the life you used to live. He doesn't know about how much I saved you from. Since you got away from your bastard father and your witch mother, you could have ended up on the streets, with nothing. But I made sure that you had everything that you needed, and wasn't it exciting along the way? There's no one who could take care of you like I do."

Maggie knew that he would change the conversation back to this. She should have known, the second that she let him in... "I know, Landon," she lied, "but that's beside the point. I don't want to be involved with this filth anymore. I'm damaging my body and my heart, and those are not things I can afford to lose. And Sam is not someone you should be afraid of. He's a very nice man, and he's only out for my best interests. I don't want to wind up dead like Darlene! A killer is out there, and that's one more reason why I should become straight. I can't do that with you. I hope so much that you could understand that. There's no way in a million years that I'm going back to that."

"I can get you money, Star. Before long you're going to be out there on your own, and you'll have nothing. I can protect you from a little killer. With me around, you'll never have to worry about anyone bothering you like

that. Darlene hadn't had me at the time, and look where it got her. I won't let anyone touch you, and you can rest assured that you're gonna be safe."

Landon's promises did not assuage her. "I won't change my mind. The best thing for me to do is to cut ties with you. After tonight, I don't want to see you again. Please don't come around here, Landon. I don't want to be involved with you anymore."

He looked like he had been punched in the face. Looking so dejected, he crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked down at his toes. "I'm sorry to hear you say that, Star," he said. "Because you and I could have had a wonderful relationship. You would never have to worry about the bills, and life would be so much easier. I would think that after all that we shared you would have a little bit of loyalty to me, but I guess I was wrong." He lifted his head and turned to her. "Didn't I give you and the girls a nice life? Look at this beautiful place. Didn't I always make sure that you were alright? Tell me truthfully, didn't I provide for you?"

Maggie was silent for a few moments. "I can't..." she simply said.

"Then I guess there's no reason for me to hang around here any longer," he said. "I may as well leave." He eyed

her for a long moment, and then a look of resignation washed over him. He pulled himself up slowly, straightened his jacket, and turned. "I'm very sorry..." he said. "So sorry."

Maggie watched him leave with his head down. He trod heavily towards the door, yanked it open, then with a crash it closed. His footsteps disappeared down the hall, and then there was no trace of him.

Chapter Six

In the morning, she awoke groggy and not wanting to get out of bed. But as she sat up and rubbed her eyes, she remembered that she had a late night last night—thanks to a surprise visit from her former pimp, Landon. Some birds were chirping and the light from outside streamed in through her partially opened drapes, creating a cheery atmosphere that she neither felt nor welcomed. Dragging herself out of bed, she shuffled to her nightstand and pulled weak fingers through her messy hair.

There were two things on the agenda today. The first was that she had to do more job hunting. She had a little bit of money left in her bank account, enough at least to pay another month's worth of rent, but she also knew that she had better find a job soon. If this situation with the bank didn't work out, she was going to have to look near and far for something that would pay the bills.

The second thing was that she had a date with Garrett that evening. As much as she tried, she could not get over the sort of rugged masculinity and downright sex appeal that only he could possess, as though it flowed from his very pores. She felt a knot of heat form just beneath her bellybutton as she thought of him, wondering how their

evening together would turn out. She was shocked at how quickly she had agreed to go on a date with him, despite the fact that she was used to giving her body away to virtual strangers. She chided herself softly, saying, "Once a prostitute, always a prostitute, huh?" But she could not deny the magnetic attraction that existed between the two of them. Though she had only been in his presence on two occasions in person and once on the phone, whenever she was near him time seemed to move more slowly, as though she were locked in a vacuum where nothing seemed to matter but the feel of her body and the lock of their eyes, drawing nearer and nearer together.

Feeling a heat brought on by the thought of him, Maggie decided that she would occupy her mind with different matters. No, there was no use thinking about him now when he only brought color to her cheeks and warmth in her body. She pulled on her white terrycloth robe and padded over to the living area, where she found the stack of newspapers and job-hunting notes that she had made earlier.

Seven hours later she had called fourteen offices and was met by one dead end after another. She went back to her newspaper, where she had used a highlighter and dog-eared certain pages that were of interest to her.

Throughout this whole process, she became more and more disheartened, her spirits gradually lowering until finally she put up her hands in a gesture of frustration, let out a huge sigh, and folded herself into the pillows and sofa behind her. The back of her eyes were beginning to hurt, and she even started to wonder if she was doing the right thing. *If* there was a killer out there, who was to say that he would come after her? After all, there must have been thousands of prostitutes inside the city limits alone. Statistically, she would beat the odds for sure, and wasn't life itself a constant risk? No, she was too used to the life that had brought her safely out of the smothering and abusive arms of her parents. And if she was really honest with herself, she would admit that she was still intrigued with the excitement and glamor of the whole thing.

She glanced at her kitty clock on the wall, and realized that evening was approaching. Thoughts about Garrett slammed into her as she realized what was going to happen tonight, and the unknown took her breath away. An image flashed before her mind of a man in shadow, his face in profile. How much did she really know about this man?

She assumed that Sam considered Garrett a suspect, but even though it was quite a coincidence that he was there when she discovered her friend's body, her mind and her

heart and her body would not accept as a possibility that he was Darlene's killer. Why, then, did she shiver just then? She was drawn to him, she knew that. Despite what she was and the emotions that were tearing her apart just beneath the surface, she could recognize within herself the overpowering desire and need to know and be known by this man. Despite what she was—a mere prostitute, a shell—she was shocked to find a resolve within, a daring to know someone intimately when she was so used to deference. That's what prostitution was. There was no intimacy there, despite the physical closeness. No, it was an alienation from the world to withdraw into a thick shell, a prisoner of one's own body. She reluctantly picked herself up from her seat and proceeded into her bedroom, tossing her notes back onto the coffee table as she went through the adjoining doorway.

When she realized how much time she had before Garrett would arrive, she then decided to take a bath. Hopefully it would heal the ache in her muscles and steam away all of the tension. As she gently slipped the clothes off of her body and started the hot water running, she made a deep sigh of relief, the events of the preceding days seeming to spin around her in a whirl of relief. She tested the water with her foot, and it was perfect, so she lowered herself

slowly into the steaming water. Her sorrow melted away. Her tiredness, her fear, all the emotions that had been surging through her with unbelievable passion danced in her throat, threatening her with a sob. She knew that somewhere out there was someone that she loved, someone who was a killer, and someone who was watching her. How could she tell which one was which? She then knew, with absolute certainty, who the first of them was. The walls in the apartment were the only things sheltering her from the darkness and danger that lurked outside on the streets of Cincinnati. Tonight there was a man coming to take her, no doubt, to one of the city's trendy restaurants. But she already knew that she loved him, even before she got out of the bath.

After having lost herself in the warm, sudsy water for a time, she reluctantly got out and patted herself dry with a towel. She wiped the steam off of the mirror and lifted a half-smile to herself. Only one question nagged at her. *Is he innocent?*

When she was still making the finishing touches of her outfit, fastening a gold chain around her throat, adding a belt, she felt her skin begin to shiver. The light outside had dimmed, and the early evening air was becoming like a

thick, dark blanket that surrounded her like an impenetrable shield.

Several people were walking briskly along the sidewalks on the ground below. Maggie saw their breaths steam as street lights partially illuminated them, casting long shadows that cried mystery and danger. A traffic light blinked on and off, and she took in a sharp breath when she saw someone that could have been Garrett. Again impulsivity took over her and she wanted to run out there, perhaps even chase down the person she believed was following her the other night. But would she dare? She was never one to want to be frightened by anyone. She saw a glimpse—was it a vision?—of a sharp knife glinting from an unidentifiable person's hand. She gasped, then narrowed her eyes. She did not see it again. And then the knife seemed to plunge into her heart when she realized who that man must have been. Garrett.

It is a strange thing to be stabbed in the heart when there had been no notice, no warning that such a thing should happen. It was just an inkling, and the vision she saw she now realized was that. Why would it hurt her so much to believe that Garrett was indeed the man responsible for Darlene's death, amongst others? Maggie was frightened by the severity of her conviction that this was, indeed,

the truth. Garrett's square face and dark, probing brown eyes flashed before her vision. There was a raw appeal to his harsh features, one that she could not deny.

It was not as though she had known him for all of her life, but the striking impression he made on her the first time she met him was enough to make her feel as though she had known him for even longer than that. Maggie could dare not look out of the window then, but she knew what was coming. Soon he would come up to meet her and the sound of his gravelly voice would whisper across her throat and she would be helpless to stop that which would come next. Wind then rattled the window pane, and Maggie closed her eyes.

Maggie shook her head. She refused to believe it. She could believe that Garrett was following her the night she discovered the hanging body of her friend. But nothing else seemed to add up. She had been in that bar not much more than an hour after she saw Darlene disappearing into a sleek sedan. How would he have managed to strangle her, break into an unoccupied apartment, hang her from the rafters and then settle down for a leisurely drink in the bar? Garrett had seemed quite relaxed that night, nowhere near the mess of anxiety that she would have expected him to be if he were guilty of just committing a heinous crime.

Sam Langley hadn't liked the man the moment he had met him. As much as she liked Sam, though, she couldn't listen to him about this one. She was in too deep already and she knew it. Goose pimples formed on her arms, and she realized that she was cold. Snow began to fall outside and she waited there, in the sitting room, for several more minutes as she awaited the time that she was supposed to meet Garrett.

Maggie opened the door to meet him downstairs when his dark, penetrating eyes met hers. Garrett was standing there, a few snowflakes on his shoulders, peering down at her with a small upward curl on one of his lips. He wore a black-and-white checked silk shirt with two buttons undone, casual slacks, and black loafers. She noticed the two cufflinks which glinted as she realized they were real diamonds. "Weren't we supposed to meet downstairs?" he asked, and now both corners of his mouth curved upwards into a charming, almost playful, smile.

Maggie glanced back at the darkly stained wooden clock and realized her tardiness. "Oh, my!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry, Garrett, but I must have lost track of the time. I knew we were going to meet tonight, but time got carried away with me..." In her haste and fluster, she must have

snagged her pantyhose, because she looked down and discovered a long run on her right calf.

He eyed the long, lean leg that was exposed, his eyes glowing with a muted heat. There was a menacing shadow to Garrett's face, an eerie sense of mystery to the way that he was holding himself, one arm leaning casually against the doorway. Maggie felt it when she shivered, looking away from him bashfully. Her mind flashed back to the vision she had had of him walking in the street, carrying what looked like a weapon. "Let me just grab my coat," she whispered, her voice shaking a bit.

She whisked by him as he took another long, sweeping look at her. "Dear, you look incredible," he commented in a low, luxurious voice. "I have to say that I've been looking forward to this evening all day." He was wearing a smoky, musky scent—a little detail that did not escape her as she bumped into him, and she dipped her head in apology as he smiled demurely at her. As they walked towards the elevators the hallway was cool and dim. Garrett made lots of light conversation, talking about his day at work and about the construction company that their business was dealing with in order to expand their headquarters. As they swung through the front doors, a blast of cold, crisp air rushed at them. Maggie began to feel more at ease once

he led her to his car, which was a black '97 Jaguar. She felt even more at ease once he chivalrously opened the passenger side door for her and waited for her to enter. Garrett jangled his keys and gracefully sauntered over to the driver's side.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked, pulling out a nice-looking cigar. Maggie shook her head, pulling her black, sequined purse closer to her body. Most women, in Maggie's experience, didn't like the smell of cigar smoke. But this one had a rich, leathery scent that she couldn't help but enjoy. He flicked his eyes to her, easing his hands over the steering wheel. She coughed quietly a couple of times when the smoke tickled her throat. She could see the lights flickering as they neared the downtown district. "Where would you like to go?" he asked. "It's lady's choice tonight. Anywhere you want."

Maggie looked up through the window into the blackness of the night and the blinking lights of the city downtown. She could feel the heat of Garrett's body next to hers—could feel the softness of the leather beneath her. "Let's go to the club I know about... on Jackson and Hewitt. I'll show you where it is."

"Sure thing, sweetcakes." He made a humming noise as he turned on the stereo system, inserting a compact disc

with a silver-colored case. When the music came on, he played it softly and the sound was sexy and methodical. It was a sultry blend of chords that could have been a form of jazz, but with no lyrics. He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel as the traffic gave way; soon they were coasting swiftly along a four-lane street.

When they arrived at the club several minutes later, a group of women and men hovered close to the entrance, the women wearing shimmery dresses and glitzy purses, the men in nice slacks and button-down shirts. A couple of the women were smoking. Flashing lights advertised the front of "The Escape House." A man waved at Garrett to head towards the back for parking. Maggie heard laughter float hauntingly through the cold night air.

Once in a parking space, Garrett held the door open for her and kissed her cheek. His breath smelled like strong mints. Maggie felt a warmth course through her body as blood rushed to her cheeks. It was electric, and exhilarating.

"I meant to tell you sooner," she said, as her breath billowed from her mouth in a steamy cloud. Garrett pulled at her sweater, tightening it around her middle. They were alone in the parking lot, and the closest person around was the parking attendant. She could see him in his uniform hat

talking with a group of people who were about to enter the building. "I don't know if I feel right being around all these nice people," she said, her voice drifting off. "I'm not used to hitting the town. And I don't want to disappoint you, seeing as how you were nice enough to agree to taking me out tonight. I might have thought you were something different, and maybe I suspected you of something before, but I'm definitely sure that's not the truth, now..." Was she talking too much?

He touched her bottom lip with his right index finger. "Hush, now. What are you trying to say to me? Something about 'nice people'?"

"I'm not like them," she tried to say. What she wanted was to tell him everything about her other life. She wanted to explain why she had been acting so mysteriously about her identity and where she had come from. She wanted to tell him how she knew Darlene, how it was that he came into the picture, and about how she was trying to turn her life around now that her best friend was gone.

He kissed her then, and it came as a complete surprise to her. The kiss was soft and slow, warm and moist. She felt a heat below her belly that warmed her to the tips of her toes. She heard the rumble of a train rushing nearby as Garrett held the lapels of her jacket and released the kiss

slowly, adding one more, a softer one, to her bottom lip before pulling away. "I had wanted to catch you alone," he breathed. "You taste... sweet." He pulled back strands of hair from her face. "Since the first night I met you, I have been waiting for the opportunity to kiss you." She gave a start when he traced the tip of his right finger along her collarbone. "I want to know more about you."

"—But Garret," she protested.

"Shhh, don't say anything," he said, languidly looking at her mouth.

Undeniably there was chemistry between them. Maggie had put one foot into a chasm that would pull her deeper and deeper, never letting her climb out again. Warning bells were going off left and right in her head, but nevertheless, she could not turn away, could not fight the overpowering urge to kiss him back, to touch him, to breathe in his scent. To her horror, she had dragged him into her world of brokenness and devastation, spiraling inward into an inescapable vacuum. She could not break free, nor could she rescue him from entering into her shattered world.

And then, she shut down. Suddenly cold towards him, she pushed away and lowered her arms. "I wish I could tell you more, Garrett," she simply said. "But there's really

not much to say. What do you want to know? I could tell you where I was born and where I grew up, but that's a little boring, now isn't it? I love living in Cincinnati, I love my cat, and I lost my best friend. What more could there possibly be?" The cold was beginning to bother her and she wrapped her arms around her chest, dancing from one foot to the other on her four-inch black stiletto heels.

"But Maggie, I'm obsessed with you," he said then. "I want to know more." But a group of twenty-something young men and women walked by them at that moment, laughing and chattering amongst themselves. Garrett took her by the arm and led her towards the building. The cold wind bit at her limbs. The sky was so black that she could barely see the both of them walking towards the club, save the blinking lights at the entrance.

And still there was that suspicion, wondering deep in her heart whether he knew anything about what happened to Darlene, or even deeper, whether he was the one who had killed her in the first place.

Chapter Seven

The club was hopping with activity. Several round tables lined the bar, and almost all of them were filled

with patrons. The dance music blared and multi-colored spotlights swept across the floor. Some people were dancing, and others were talking and ordering drinks. On the opposite side of the dance floor were several booths, where people could find more privacy or sit down and order some appetizers. Garrett chose a round table near the bar. There was a sense of excitement to the night, but Maggie felt troubled by what they had just talked about and about what she was not revealing to him. She thought about the murder and her feelings for Sam. Yes, she had realized that she had them.

He had been nice to her from the beginning. She found solace in him, whereas with Garrett, only excitement and heat. She also wondered about what she was going to do now that she didn't have any friends. She supposed that Sam could be considered a friend; and she could tell by the light in his eyes that there was a little bit of interest on his part, too. She tried to think of the right word for him: *wholesome*. Trustworthy. Dependable. All of the things that she assumed Garrett was not.

Maggie was going to have to work through her problems and move on, bravely entering into the future. She was going to have to be able, somehow, to say good-bye to her friend. She knew that she would never be the same after

what she had witnessed, the silent agony on Darlene's face, forever locked into an expression of horror. She supposed that she would feel the same way, too, if she were about to lose everything. She found herself in deep thought when Garrett spoke.

"I can sense that you are a little tense," he said.

"Does this scene make you feel uncomfortable?"

"No," she said, rubbing her arms.

"Do you want a drink?" He looked inquisitively at her.

She supposed that she shouldn't refuse. She also supposed that she should at least try to have a good time. She thought for a moment, then said, "I'll have a grasshopper."

He got up and went to the bar. Maggie looked uncertainly around her as soon as he left, noticing that the club had gotten a little bit more quiet since they had first gotten there. *Strange*, she thought. *It's eight o'clock, when the business should be at its peak.* Several young people hovered near the speakers, slowly dancing to the music. One of them looked like Darlene, and Maggie turned her head sharply towards the right. Sucking in a deep breath, she searched through the crowds. But when the young woman looked her way, she could see that it was not her.

It was all her imagination. When Garrett returned, he was carrying her drink and a vodka martini. The next song was slower, more hypnotic. "The scene is not as alive as I thought it would be. I have been here a couple of times before, and there was a lot more business." She chewed her index finger. "But I suppose it's not dead. At least we are not the only ones here. I like the music," she said offhand, sweeping her eyes over the crowd again.

"Try to enjoy yourself," Garrett said, taking a sip of his cocktail.

She was, she thought. She could begin to feel the tension slipping away from her. The rhythm of the music was relaxing, and exciting. She looked into Garrett's face and his eyes looked intense. The deep brown of his irises seemed to have warmth in them, but the look in his eyes was teasing and full of promise. She noticed the lines on his face and wondered what kind of life would have caused the crinkles at the corners of his eyes and the lines around his mouth, which gave her the impression of a full, but difficult life. She sipped on her own drink, beginning to relax a little bit more. She noticed a couple coming closer to the bar. The man's arm was enclosed around the woman's small waist. They both swept their eyes on them briefly, and the woman smiled at her seductively.

A waitress approached them. "How are you enjoying your evening?" she said. She was wearing a short, black dress and an apron.

Garrett looked up at her. "The night is just getting started, but I hope that it will turn out well." He looked at her then and smiled, and she felt her arms chill. She looked over to the next table and they were enjoying shots out of colorful tubes. She looked across the room again and various people had gotten up, abandoned their tables to empty and half-empty glasses, crumpled napkins and stacks of bills left there for the waitresses. They were headed to the dance floor.

After about a half-hour there were more people. The music seemed louder. She had ordered another drink, even though the first one had slammed into her at surprising strength. The smile in Garrett's eyes, the multi-colored lights dancing on the floor, the lulling music, and the smell of perfume and cologne mingling in the air with cocktails and appetizers: all of it was magical. But that's when she saw it. A group of people on the dance floor had stopped dancing, and they were talking amongst themselves. A police officer walked in, strutting close to the speakers. He wasn't stopping to talk with anyone, but only scanning his eyes through the club, taking stock of the

faces and what each person was doing. Maggie heard lyrics inside of her head: "Don't tell me anymore lies... I have had enough of your disguise."

A few minutes later she detected the first odor, the odor of smoke. At first she thought it was nothing. Perhaps it was someone, drunk, lighting a cigarette despite the smoking ban. But the odor became more intense. She looked over, close to the speaker, and saw it: small wisps of smoke, rising from behind what looked like a heavy, black curtain. "Garrett, look over there," she said, rising from her chair and pointing. Gasps emerged from the crowd. As the smoke thickened, several people got up to run out. A man shouted, "Fire!" She saw the first licks of flame.

And it happened so quickly. The sprinklers came on, and a woman screamed. Many people hurried to the front doors, ramming their bodies against each other as they struggled to escape. Where was the police officer? Most people were able to leave the club. But by the time Garrett and Maggie reached the front, the doors would not open. "Shit," he said, pulling on the door again and again. "Maggie, go try to find another exit."

The fire was more progressed than she would have thought. It must have started behind the black curtain, and had already grown by the time that she saw the smoke.

Panicked, she looked for a fire exit but could not find one. *Surely there is one here.* There were only a few people left in the club, and many of them were screaming. The fire was still alive, despite the raining water from the sprinklers. Smoke made it difficult to breathe. Maggie let out several hoarse coughs.

Garrett was banging on the door. Maggie saw the lit sign which said "Exit," clear across the dance floor, near the booths. "This way, Garrett!" she yelled. But then she saw that it was barricaded. *Who would have barricaded the door?* Garrett rushed to her side. He saw the reason why she hesitated. He made a move, and with his strong arms he began to push at the obstruction, which was actually a heavy-looking table which had been wedged between the sides to block any person who might be trying to escape.

They managed to get themselves outside, and then asked each other, "What happened to the police officer?"

Chapter Eight

That was the biggest mystery of the night. But soon, there were more of them and also firemen. The police went around from person to person and asked if they had seen anything suspicious. They took down each person's name and

promised to call them if they needed anything further. Garrett then kindly asked one of the officers if they could leave. He nodded sharply, not saying a word.

Maggie was shaken when they reached the car. The cold air was no more merciful than it was when they had first reached the club, and the low temperature did little to calm her shocked limbs. *It was too much excitement for one night*, she thought. *I cannot do this again. First it was Darlene's death, then someone following me on the streets, and now this.* But there was more to it than that. The sliver of doubt about Garrett's innocence would not go away, even after tonight. But if it was true that all three incidents were connected, and that Garrett was the one behind it all, then how could that possibly be? Garrett was sitting right next to her when she noticed the fire that had started. What she couldn't get over was that there was a police officer in the midst of them, before anyone at all had noticed the fire.

She could barely hear when Garrett murmured to her, "Everything's going to be alright, it was only a fire, and no one got hurt. I know you're shaken up. Just relax and I'll do the driving. We'll be home soon." His gravelly voice was strangely soothing at the moment, and she was glad he was saying these very often said, but what some

might think meaningless, words of comfort. She felt as though her eyes were glassy, but the visor was down and she could not see herself in the mirror. Besides, it was dark. She could not shake the shivering, but she knew that this was not the worst she had ever been through. As snow flittered down onto the windshield, the wipers pushed them away. The back way streets were not as well-lit as the main streets, and the car was cast in gray shadows. She could smell the thick, smoky odor of car exhaust from a vehicle they were approaching. Garrett glanced at her as though in sympathy. She felt a second of warmth, and this helped her very much so. He decided to put on the radio, and this helped even more.

When they were inside the apartment, Garrett set her down on the couch. It didn't cross her mind that he would follow her into the apartment without even an invitation, because it felt so natural that he would be here. But the fear was there again, the uncertainty and the hesitation she always seemed to feel with him. Maggie buried her nose into his neck as he sunk her into the soft cushions of her sofa, and again she smelled the smoke of the cigar, but fainter now. It was an intoxicating scent. His cologne was lighter than before, yet still spicy enough to excite her nerves and send shooting pangs of desire throughout her

entire body. Should she reach for him? *He might be dangerous.* Should she tell him to back away? *The night is too romantic.* He brushed the hair from her forehead, but did not say a word. What she thought he meant to say, but what he couldn't, was that he wanted to stay, but that he could not.

Their eyes met and she shivered again from the cold, although she knew that her body temperature was rising. The collar of his checked shirt was crinkled from where she had just buried her nose in it, and the top button was coming loose. She did not know how that had happened.

"Garrett," she found herself saying, even though the name came out in a half-gasp, half-whisper. He moved to kiss her and then did, his lips soft and warm, the breath between them sweet and moist. He pulled away, and she shook, whether in longing or fear, she did not know. It was as though a shock of electricity had sliced through her body, and at that moment she had never known a pull so powerful. But she looked up into his gleaming eyes then and they were friendly. "I'm sorry I'm not saying much," she said with a quavering voice after a moment. "So much has happened in so little time."

He paused. "It's alright," he said. "I know that this is probably very unusual for you."

She crossed her arms across her chest and sighed, but then Garrett watched her. Many thoughts appeared to be going through his mind all at once, but she could not read his expression. He proceeded to reach down to her feet. "What are you doing?" she asked, surprised.

"I am removing your shoes," he said suavely. "Perhaps that will relax you. I see that you're still tense from the events from the night... And I want to make you some tea. The warm cup and the sweet of the drink should relax you. Please, please," he said. "Don't think much of it. There are arsonists all across the city, victimizing people every day. There is no reason for us to believe that there is any connection to what happened to your dear friend."

He had read her mind. And still, the words calmed her, despite the fact that he had finally mentioned Darlene. She had been thinking all day and all night about her death, and yet she felt unready for the utterance of her name out loud. She felt her body temperature drop, or had it risen? The chill was a sharp sensation this time, and she felt it at her back, shooting up her spine. And yet she was warm; the memory of the kiss still lingered in her mind, and the tenderness that came with it was like a whisper of promise that no, he was not going anywhere, and yes, he understood what she was going through. The rustle she heard when she

realized he had moved into the dinette area brought her to turn her head towards the direction of the noise. He was searching through old fast-food wrappers in search of something.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I am looking for something to feed you with," he said. "And I am not finding much. When was the last time you cleaned?"

She was slightly annoyed. "You don't have to do that," she said. "I'll be fine with the tea. I'm not hungry. And I couldn't stand to eat anything right now."

But he insisted. "You need to eat. You haven't had anything all night except for the drinks. Your limbs are shaking. I've found some tea cookies. You will eat them along with your tea."

It was the first order he had given her, and she was too tired to fight with him. "Alright," she said.

He remained in the kitchen for a good while, and Maggie looked out the window into the darkness, only seeing the reflection of light against the condensation on the window and the lights of the street lamps. It was an indifferent world out there, and Darlene had met with the bitterness of it all. Her killer's indifference was what got to her. Obviously she was killed in cold blood, and the

evidence of pure evil was all too apparent to her. If the man or woman had known her and hated her, it would have been different. Then she might have been able to forgive the person. But to have complete disregard for another person's life... maybe not even having known her... was what made her angry. And she felt the anger rise from her chest into her cheeks, which flushed, and she could feel herself shaking as these thoughts coursed through her mind.

Garrett came back with the tea, and carefully handed it to her, along with a plate of the round tea cookies she had kept in one of the drawers. "Please drink and eat," he said, and the tea smelled good as the steam caressed her cheeks with a comforting swirl. Earl Grey, she thought, with a little bit of sweetener.

She sipped the tea and as she drank, she noticed him watching her. Then he moved closer to her, put down the cup and the plate from her hands, and kissed her again.

In the morning, she saw a sleeping figure shrouded in a soft, cotton sheet. She could not help but smile, and she thought to herself, *I feel at peace.*

Chapter Nine

That day, Maggie did not see Garrett at all after he left, probably around ten o'clock in the morning. He had disappeared when she went out to the grocery store to get something more to eat. She looked for him at the bar where they had initially met. He was nowhere to be found. On her way home, she was rounding the corner on a sidewalk, when a figure jumped out before her and slammed into her left shoulder.

She looked up into his face and saw a pale complexion, blood-red mouth, skinny cheeks, and eyes that looked as though they had seen death many times over. He was wearing a long, black overcoat. His smell was that of a damp, moldy cloth. When he opened his mouth, she saw rotting teeth and the tip of a white tongue.

She saw it then—a wire wrapped around his right hand and arm. She saw the pierce in his eyes, and with his eyes he was searching into hers, and looking all over her body (not with attraction, but with sick obsession). She put everything she saw together in her mind—this monster-like creature, the strange dress, and the wire—and thought instantly that he might be the killer, the Sidewalk Stalker.

She began to scream.

"So you're a prostitute, huh?" he said. "You're that Star girl everyone has been talking about. You're the friend of that piece of disgusting trash I killed right before you went and talked to the police."

"How did you find out?" Maggie asked, feeling as though she could both faint and vomit.

"I am intelligent," he said. "I have been following you around, asking questions. See, you're the Star. The Star of the show. I bet they called you that because you were the prettiest one. And now..." he said, tightening his grip around the wire, "You'll be the most disgusting trophy I ever won."

She began to recognize him then. The same slender features, skinny limbs, and sickly white complexion that had sneaked away after savagely raping her mother, years ago. So she was the one he had been obsessed with, all along. She was the one he wanted from the beginning, not Darlene.

"And your mother," he said. "She was a rancid smelling whore. But you see, I can always get them. I can always control them. I can always be their god and master, and they will always do my bidding. You will do my bidding."

"No!" Maggie screamed. She kicked him in the groin. Just then Garrett came around the corner. He punched the

guy in the face while Maggie stood back and watched. The Sidewalk Stalker hit back, slapping at him with both hands and wrists. He tried to wrap the wire around Garrett's neck, but Maggie kicked him in the shin and tore the wire from his hand and arm. Garrett put him in a choke hold.

"Get the police," Garrett said, as though he had very little breath to force out the words.

They came soon, and took the Sidewalk Stalker away.

Chapter Ten

Garrett and Maggie were standing next to each other in the parking lot of the police station. "I'm sorry, Maggie," he said.

"Garrett, I forgive you. Whatever this is about, I forgive you."

"I'm sorry you thought I was the killer, I'm sorry I scared you, I'm sorry I wasn't there when the guy came around, and I'm sorry I couldn't do more to protect you. I'm sorry that your friend had to die. I just wish I could have caught him before he even lay a hand on you. I love you."

"I know," she said. "I love you, too. I should have believed you in the first place, when you told me you were innocent."

"I know," he said, and he appeared to be teared up.

"I didn't mean to blame you for the crimes."

"Please don't blame yourself."

The Sidewalk Stalker was actually the man who had victimized her mother, years ago.

Maggie sighed and said, "Well, it looks like we're now free to go. No more danger here."

"You're right, doll," Garrett said, putting his arm around her shoulder.

Together they walked towards the parking lot and got into either side of the car.

"Look! There's Officer Sam."

Officer Sam waved to them as they drove away. Garrett turned to her and said, "Now nobody will ever take away my Star."

The End.

