

Diamond Cut

A Sandy Corrigan Mystery

By

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For Emilie, who loved to read more than anyone I have ever known.
We love and miss you, Mom.

A diamond with a flaw is worth more than a pebble without imperfections.

Chinese Proverb

Chapter 1

I used to have sex for a living. Now, on a strictly part-time basis, I get paid not to. The guy I was getting paid to not sleep with tonight was a forty-one-year-old married father of two named Jeremy Knox. I had met him once before, two days earlier. Of course, he had no idea he wasn't getting lucky tonight.

I had been told that he often liked to spend his lunch hour at a local Hooters knock-off called Cheerleaders. The place was wedged between a Chipotle Burrito Kitchen and a Panera Bread on the restaurant row area of University Blvd. out by the University of Central Florida. So, two days ago, I put on a little too much makeup and slipped into a dark suit with a skirt two inches shorter and heels an inch longer than I would normally wear in polite company and headed out to the east side of town. Not that the clientele of Cheerleaders exactly qualified as polite company.

I had been given his photo and background file by a fellow private investigator who had been hired by Jeremy Knox's wife. It seemed Mrs. Knox suspected Jeremy of fooling around and, if her suspicions were correct, she wanted evidence to take with her into divorce court. I was the bait and Jeremy was the tuna.

At the risk of being immodest, I'm not bad bait. At thirty-one, I'm still plenty young for ol' Jeremy and can still fill out a tight business suit. I keep in shape and the heels did make my calves look good. My shoulder-length hair is styled simply but tastefully, so that it frames my face without making me look like I'm wearing a helmet. Thankfully, no grey has yet crept into my natural sandy-blonde.

The restaurant was filled with basically two types: college boys from nearby UCF and government contractors from the dozens of training and simulation companies in the adjacent research park. Although I wasn't the only female customer, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I was in a minority of no more than ten or fifteen percent. So, while it wasn't completely weird for someone like me to stroll into Cheerleaders at 12:15 on a Tuesday afternoon, I knew I would at least attract a few looks. Fine. That was exactly what I wanted.

I caught a lucky break. Jeremy sat alone at the bar with a menu in his hand. The file said that he often spent his lunch hour here with some buddies from work. But sometimes alone. Fortunately, today the buddies were absent. Sure, if he had been in a group maybe I could have slipped him my number with a "hey, I noticed you, call me" note, but it's always better to fish for tuna alone, one-on-one. So, I sidled up and took an open seat next to him.

I knew that he noticed me. A girl can tell. I crossed my legs. Damn, my calves *did* look good. If these heels weren't such a pain to walk in, I might wear them more often. A buxom co-ed in a tight black t-shirt and nylon shorts delivered him a burger and fries. She handed over a

menu and went off to pour me a diet cola. I saw Jeremy try not to check out the waitress's perky backside. But he just couldn't help himself. Hell, I could barely help myself. It was an impressive derriere.

“So what's good in here?” I asked, offering Jeremy my best disarming smile.

“Pardon?” he said, quickly blinking his gaze away from the nylon shorts.

I waved the menu. “What's good? Any local specialties?” So, I had just intentionally established that I was from out of town and that I was extroverted enough to strike up a conversation with a complete stranger. Plus, with the literally dozens of nearby dining options, I was willing to come into this classy place alone for lunch.

“Well,” Jeremy said. “It's kind of a wings place. But,”—he leaned over conspiratorially—
“I prefer the burgers.”

“Thanks for the tip.” I gave him a wink and a smile. “Maybe I'll just stick with a salad.” They can say whatever they like about not caring. Most guys still expect women to eat salads. I extended my hand to shake. “Hi. I'm Karen.” Of course, my name is not Karen. Not even close.

He took my hand and a smile of unexpected possibility bloomed slowly across his face.
“Jeremy.”

“And what do you do, *Jeremy*?” I asked and plucked a french fry from his plate. Then I smiled and took a bite.

His smile widened at the boldness of my eating off his plate. “Uh, I'm a program manager for Aeron Sim. We build training and simulation systems. Mostly for the military.”

“Well, that sounds pretty cool.” I then proceeded to share the lie that the other P.I. and I had concocted. I was posing as an account manager for an educational software company who was trying to get the university to buy one of my company's systems. I was only in town through

the weekend. I was based in California—as far away from Florida as possible, offering fewer chances of messy entanglements. I suggested that we move from the bar to a table, to which Jeremy eagerly agreed.

I steered him toward an open seat that offered an unobstructed view from the table where my colleague sat discreetly video recording us with a hidden camera. I noticed that he, too, had ordered a burger.

During the course of the next 70 minutes, I managed to make Jeremy feel like the most interesting guy in Orlando, while simultaneously working my way through a surprisingly large Asian chicken salad. I made sure to touch Jeremy on the arm a few times for the camera, laughing at his somewhat lame attempts to be amusing, getting my flirt on. I knew before it was over that I had my tuna on the hook. We parted with a handshake that I held too meaningfully long and an agreement to meet after work the next day for drinks at my hotel. I could just imagine the story he was going to tell Mrs. Knox about having to work late on a deadline or meet with military clients who were visiting from D.C.

So I now found myself sitting in the bar at the nearby Hilton, nursing a club soda and cranberry, waiting for Prince Charming to show up. My P.I. colleague, a guy named Mike Garrity from a competing but friendly agency, sat across the room, hidden camera pointed at me. This time I was wearing a wire to record our conversation in the likely event that Jeremy elected not to exercise his right to remain silent. I took a sip from my drink and spotted Jeremy entering the lobby.

He located me quickly, perhaps even eagerly, and sat across a low cocktail table. He ordered a gin and tonic from a passing waitress and leaned back in his seat, smirking at me.

“Hello again,” I said.

The smirk widened. “This is a nice place. You’re staying here?”

“That’s right.” I sipped from my club soda and cranberry, pretending it was alcoholic.

“Are you hungry?”

He smiled wolfishly. “Starving.”

I faked an equally wolfish smile but it felt awkward, like I was contorting my face after biting a lemon. “The restaurant here is pretty good. We could grab a bite.”

“Sure...”

His drink arrived and he downed half of it on the walk across the lobby to the restaurant. We found a seat and I saw Garrity shift his position in the bar to get a better shot of our dinner.

For the second time in two days, I broke bread with this creep. I suppose he was attractive enough. His hair was mostly still dark brown with a few grey flecks sprinkled in. His smile was confident but with an almost charming boyish quality. His clothes were decent, department store Ralph Lauren, with nice patterned socks and a pair of Rockport shoes. But despite his respectable looks, the fact that he was a married father sitting here presumably expecting to bed a stranger just made him odious to me.

As the meal wore on, and he drank three more gin and tonics, all pretense regarding why he was here began to vanish. And I, in turn, began to get more and more anxious about the inevitable trip upstairs. You see, I don’t do hotel rooms. I’ve only been on the inside of a hotel room maybe twice in the last six years and never overnight. I won’t lie on a hotel bed. Never again.

The mere idea of entering a hotel room made me fidgety and, as the meal wound down, I felt my heart rate start to increase, pounding my temples. When we agreed to the job, Garrity had told me that he needed a shot of us entering the hotel room. As soon as the door shut, I could pop

back out and make my escape, but video of the two of us entering the room and closing the door was what Mrs. Knox was paying for. So I knew from the beginning how this gig would end. But I thought I could handle it. I'm a professional, right? *A professional...* That was an unfortunate term to occur to me in this context. The more I thought about the elevator ride up and the long walk down the hall to the room Garrity had booked for the night, the more nauseous I felt. I pushed my half-eaten chicken away and realized that Jeremy was saying something. I forced myself to attend to the job.

"You really are hot, you know," he said, not quite slurring, but definitely not entirely sober. "But you know that. Hot women always know they're hot. So no boyfriend back in California? Really?"

I swallowed the golf ball of nerves that was forming in my throat and forced a smile. "Really. Just me and my cat."

He broke out the devilish grin. "Just you and your cat...So... what kind of pussy do you have?"

Oh brother. This kind of witty banter couldn't possibly be how he had courted his wife. I looked away so he didn't catch my eye roll. The thought of the hotel room suddenly squeezed me hard in the stomach. I coughed into my hand, trying not to gag. I felt like I had snakes squirming in my gut. I excused myself to the ladies' room where I spent four minutes in a bathroom stall, attempting to calm my breathing, preventing myself from hyperventilating. If I blew this gig because of my issue with hotel rooms I might not get paid. Billy was always threatening to fire me. Brother or not, he might finally go through with it. This was my job. My career now. With my background, my options were limited. Plus, I actually liked being a private investigator. I told myself to pull it together.

I splashed some water on my face—I was sweating at my hairline. I felt a bead trickle through my hair at my temple. Then I dried off and fixed my makeup. I took a deep breath and pushed back out into the hotel lobby. I marched up to the table and, before I lost my nerve—or puked—asked “Are you ready to come upstairs now?”

Jeremy paused for just a beat before responding. “I’ve been ready since I met you, baby.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

I turned and start walking. As Jeremy hastily threw some cash on the table for the drinks and dinner, I saw Mike Garrity slide out of his seat in the lobby and head up the stairwell. He had booked a room on the second floor so he could get up there and into position while we waited for the elevator. I hadn’t given him any warning and he was now having to hustle. But I had no choice. I was losing my resolve and had to get this over with before it was completely gone.

Jeremy and I stepped into the elevator and found ourselves alone. He immediately pushed himself up against me and kissed my neck and ear. I let him. I could take his touch for one floor. I have endured much worse for much longer. I sent my mind to the blank white room where I always used to send it, back in the day, and flipped the internal switch that made my insides go dead. It was all way too familiar, too easy to go back to that place in my life. I barely noticed the elevator doors opening.

We stepped out into the hallway and made our way down to the room, passing the vending alcove where Mike Garrity was now positioned with his camera. Jeremy pawed at me all the way down the hallway. I stopped at the door to the room, my heart thudding in my chest at the thought of stepping inside. I couldn’t do it. I needed a moment, I told myself. I needed to summon the courage to open the door. I turned around and leaned back against the door. I robotically put my hands on Jeremy’s hips. I lifted my chin, exposing my neck. We needed to

give Mrs. Knox a good show, after all. And Jeremy obliged. He could no longer claim entrapment. He was just a garden variety pig now. He dove in, rubbing his hands up my thighs and over my breasts, kissing my neck from ear to collarbone. He tried to kiss my lips but I turned my head. No kissing on the mouth. Ever.

Despite my anxiety about entering the room, I also felt physically numb. It was almost too easy to make myself feel nothing, to turn my body to stone. Years of practice had made it almost automatic. Like riding a bike, right? I heard Jeremy's eager breathing in my ear as if it were coming from far away, happening to someone else. Perhaps it was happening to someone else—me, six years ago, eight years ago.... But, no, it was happening now, to me, in this hallway. Jeremy unbuttoned the top of my blouse. That suddenly grounded me in the moment and I forced myself to turn around. He pressed himself against me from behind and grabbed my breasts. I inserted the key card in the door and turned the handle. And then we were across the threshold, the door shutting behind us.

I felt like I was moving underwater, in slow motion. I stopped just inside the room. Jeremy moved past me and continued over to the bed. He sat and leaned back on his elbows. I remained frozen where I was. I knew I needed to turn around now and leave—Garrity had the footage he needed for Mrs. Knox. My work was done. But my feet were frozen to the floor. This hotel room, it was so similar to that one six years ago. It, too, had been a Hilton...

"It's okay, baby," Jeremy said. "Don't be shy. I won't bite. Unless you like that."

I had to leave. I had to get out of here. But I couldn't move. *Six years ago...*

Jeremy got up from the bed and came over to me. He took my hand and pulled. But I didn't budge. He pulled a little more insistently.

"Come on, Karen. It's okay."

I managed a hoarse whisper. “No...”

Jeremy cocked his head in a vaguely canine way. “No? What do you mean, *no*? I mean, we both know why we’re here.”

“No...” I reached my other hand for the door handle.

“You’re not gonna get me all the way up here and say no now. Come on. I promise I’ll make it worth your while.” Jeremy pulled my hand even harder.

“No!” I screamed, my vision suddenly colored crimson. A jagged memory of blood everywhere. Blood spraying in a pumping squirt across my naked torso. White sheets a slick shiny red. Warm blood covering my hands, running in rivulets down my forearms.

Jeremy grabbed both of my wrists. “Hey, relax. Shhh. Calm down, you crazy bitch.”

I tried to pull loose, but his grip was too tight. I twisted my arms but he was too strong. He was now pulling me into the room, toward the bed. I could see the bed, covered in blood... *No...Not again*. Instinctively, I brought my knee up, driving it as hard as I could into his groin. I yanked my arms free and thrust the heel of my right palm up under his chin. I felt his teeth clack together and his head snap back. He stumbled backwards, dazed.

I turned and threw myself out the door and directly into the path of Mike Garrity, who was charging down the hall. He grabbed my arms to steady me.

“Sandra—are you OK?” His eyes were concerned, searching mine for trouble.

I managed a quick nod but was unable to say anything.

We skipped the elevator and headed down the stairs. Five minutes later, Garrity was driving me in his pickup to a nearby Starbucks so I could collect myself. He bought me a water and a decaf latte and we sat at a small round table in the corner for several long minutes before he finally broke the silence.

“I’m sorry,” he said. I looked up at him, unsure of how to respond. “I shouldn’t have made you go into the room with him. I could have gone to the client without that. Even without that, the footage was good. The audio was good. It would have been more than enough.”

“It’s OK,” I said quietly. I didn’t tell him about my issues with hotel rooms, but he probably knew. Garrity knew me then. He was there six years ago as the investigating detective, standing on the blood-soaked carpet, before either one of us had ever considered becoming private investigators. He knows who I am and what I was.

“As soon as I meet with the client and get paid, I’ll send Billy a check for the job. All right?”

I nodded. “All right.”

We sat in semi-amiable silence until our coffees were finished. Then Garrity drove me back to the hotel for my car. We made sure that Jeremy Knox was nowhere around before I slipped out of Garrity’s pickup and into my Honda.

“You gonna be OK?” he asked.

“You know me,” I said, which didn’t answer his question. I kept the radio off and the windows open on the drive downtown to my little 1940s craftsman bungalow. The warm nighttime spring air in my face helped. I imagined it blowing the events of the evening away so I didn’t bring them into my home with me. They didn’t belong there.

Tyler was already in bed when I came in but Laura was up watching *Dancing With the Stars* on TV.

“How’d everything go?” she asked.

“Y’know. Fine. Do we have any wine?”

“Fine, huh? Yeah. There’s a half bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge.”

I poured myself a full glass. “How was your evening?”

“No problem. Tyler did his homework and we even read a chapter in that mouse book.”

“*Stuart Little*.”

“Right. That’s what I said.”

Laura was ten years older than me but looked twice that. She appeared perpetually worn out, which, in truth, she probably was. She was in the life a lot longer than I was and that lifestyle will definitely chew you up. It certainly chewed her up. It almost literally killed me. Laura’s unkempt brown hair was going noticeably grey but she was unconcerned and made no attempt to hide it. My deal with Laura was free room and board as long as she stayed clean and sober and took care of Tyler whenever I wasn’t around, the occasional evening glass of Chardonnay notwithstanding. My job often had me working weird hours, so I needed to know that Tyler was safe and fed. For the past three and a half years the arrangement had been working out. Knowing Laura as I did, I was keeping my fingers crossed.

I took my wine and tiptoed to Tyler’s room. I quietly opened the door and slipped inside. He was visible in the dull blue glow of the crescent moon nightlight. He was lying in his bed, eyes closed, lips just barely parted. He seemed so motionless that I momentarily panicked and laid my hand on his chest to reassure myself that he was still breathing. His six-year-old chest gently rose and fell, and I felt the tender rhythmic thumping of his heartbeat beneath his ribcage. I brushed a blonde lock of hair away from his face and lightly kissed his cheek.

I crawled across the room and leaned my back against his dresser, pulling my knees tight up against my chest. Sipping my wine in the darkened room, I spent the next thirty minutes gazing silently at the very best thing I have ever done, a truly good thing to have come from a very bad life.

Chapter 2

The next morning, I walked Tyler the several blocks to the downtown Catholic school where he was in first grade. I loved that time with him. We held hands when we crossed the brick-lined streets, the dappled morning light peeking through the branches of the tall live oaks that hung over the sidewalks. Tyler wore his little white polo shirt with navy shorts and carried a Spider-Man backpack secured over his shoulders. He told me about what happened the day before or what he was looking forward to that day. Music, art, recess, and science were his favorites this week. He loved his teacher and, as far as I could tell, she loved him back. All his days were filled with wide-eyed possibility and I so envied that. I tried to let just a little rub off on me. But my emotional callouses were so thick. Sometimes I felt like I would never regain any sense of wide-eyed possibility. If anyone could ever bring that back to me, it was Tyler.

Spending that time with Tyler had put me behind schedule. When I finally got into the office, Billy was already there. Billy was always already there. He was smoking, as usual. I made a big show of coughing and waving my hands when I came in.

“You’re late,” he said.

“Good morning to you, too,” I replied.

“Just ‘cause you’re my sister doesn’t mean I won’t fire you.” His usual greeting.

“I know, Billy. But if you do that, who else would ever bring you Munchkins?” I plopped a carton of donut holes down on his desk. He offered a noncommittal grunt, which was how he expressed gratitude. He immediately popped two donut holes into his mouth.

“Did you finish that job for Garrity?” he said through his mouthful of Munchkins.

“Yep.”

“You get the goods?” Another donut hole.

“Yep.”

Another noncommittal grunt. Billy was my older brother by more than six years. His wiry black hair was noticeably thinning and he was carrying forty pounds more than he should, but somehow, he made it work. Although he acted gruff, he had always been there for me and took care of me after everything happened six years ago. Truth be told, he had always taken care of me. He was the only one who had ever taken care of me. He was the one who made sure that Ryan and I were fed, that our clothes were washed, that we went to school most days when Mom was gone or unable to get out of bed.

He was also the one who, a few years ago, encouraged me to get my Florida private investigator CC intern license, which allowed me to work for him under his MA license. He needed the help and I needed a job. I liked to think that it’s worked out well for both of us.

Billy wasn't flashy and neither was his agency. We operated out of a nondescript office in a low-rent commercial building in a quasi-dodgy part of town. For his whole life, he always wanted to be a P.I. and, to his credit, the success of Class A Investigators was due entirely to him. The secret of his success was that he wasn't afraid of the grunt work—the worker's comp cases, the insurance and law firm stuff, process serving, even working the computer databases for hours at a time. And I was happy to take whatever assignments he gave me.

But he had never forced me to do the cheater stings. I did those voluntarily. It was one of the few areas where I could bring some added value to the agency. For as long as I was young enough and my looks held, I could occasionally dangle myself in front of unfaithful men to bring in revenue. It was usually easy money. When I first started doing the cheater stings, I wondered about the ethics of entrapment. But it quickly became clear that in the vast majority of the cases there was a very good reason why the spouse or girlfriend was suspicious. Simply put, their husbands or boyfriends were philandering pigs. And, every once in a while, the guy turned out to be a decent human being and stayed faithful. I was always secretly glad when I got rejected. But, of course, I told myself that it was because he loved his wife and not because he found me unattractive.

Usually, the stings went off without any complication. Last night's flashback in the hotel room was an anomaly. The room looked so much like that same room six years ago. I hadn't had an episode like that in a long time. I would need to be more careful next time.

After Billy swallowed what might have been his twelfth donut hole, he tilted his head at me, remembering something. "Hey. You got a call. Before. She wouldn't leave a message with me. She only wanted your voice mail."

“OK. Thanks.” I slid behind my desk and punched in the code to access my system voice mail. In another moment, I heard a woman’s recorded voice. Her accent was southern, almost twangy. She spoke haltingly, nervously, like she was looking over her shoulder.

“Hey, Diamond. It’s me. Collette. Collette Green...Y’know, *Glitter*? Listen, I need to talk to you about somethin’. It’s important. Real important. I’m gonna be at the Florida Mall at lunchtime, around noon. Maybe you can meet me in the food court. I just...I need your help. I don’t know who else to call. Please. OK? I’ll, uh, I’ll see you then. OK. Bye.”

I held the phone receiver frozen against my ear for an extended moment. *Hey, Diamond...* It had been a long, *long* time since anyone had called me that and, after my flashback last night, the timing was eerie. Just the mention of that name made my throat go dry. I listened to the message again before deleting it. I remembered Collette Green. We had shared an apartment for a few months with several other girls back in...Jeez, was it seven years ago or eight? She was younger than me by a few years, maybe more than a few. She was a new girl, fresh off the streets. A runaway who had made her way south from Georgia or South Carolina. I thought it might have been an Atlanta suburb. She had acted tough but I knew she was scared. She had asked me a lot of questions. If she was still in the life, she certainly wouldn’t be new anymore.

Billy had me doing filing and employment background check paperwork all morning but I remained distracted by the message. I didn’t know how she found me here, but I supposed it wasn’t that hard. I wasn’t hiding.

Hey, Diamond...

I told myself to ignore it. I had cut ties with all aspects of my former life. I couldn’t meet Collette at the mall. There was nothing she could say that would be good for me. Whatever she

wanted to tell me would only be bad, would only bring some ghost from the past back into my new life to haunt me. My life was different now. I had Tyler. *I* was different now.

But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered if I *needed* to confront her. To confront what she represented. Last night's episode had proven that, in some way, I was still not over what happened to me. The blood stains were still there, even if I was the only one who could see them. Maybe facing Collette would help me remove those stains, exorcise my hidden demons.

Or maybe I was just rationalizing my own curiosity. Because, as much as I hated to admit it, I was curious.

Either way, I knew that I would be eating lunch at the Florida Mall food court today.

* * *

I spotted her easily. Her hair was darker than I remembered, dyed perhaps a little too black. Unnaturally black. She was picking at some lo mein and looking up occasionally. I remained out of sight for a few minutes, watching her, watching the people who passed by her, wondering if this was some sort of elaborate setup for me. But then I told myself I was being paranoid. A setup by whom? For what reason? I couldn't think of any. But, nevertheless, I got the sensation that something ominous was waiting for me at that small table with the paper napkins and Styrofoam cup of Diet Coke.

Even from this distance across the food court I could see that she was wearing too much makeup. Her eye shadow was too blue and her lips were too red. She was still pretty, though, under all that makeup. She sipped from her drink and went back to her noodles. I decided that

she was probably alone and stepped out from around the corner where I was spying on her. I approached the table.

“Hello, Collette,” I said.

She looked up from her food and offered a shaky smile. “Hey, Diamond.”

“Don’t call me that. That’s not my name.”

She considered me for a brief moment and her face registered concern at making a faux pas. “Sorry. *Sandy*.” Her accent was dripping with sugary southern syrup. In my hypersensitive mind, I translated her likely sincere apology into *It doesn’t matter what I call you. I still know who you are*. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

I sat across from her.

“Aren’t you eating?” she asked.

I had no appetite. All desire for food left my body as soon as I heard her message earlier today. “Maybe later,” I said. “So, how are you?”

“Oh, you know. Same old, same old. Still doin’ that thing we do.”

She had included me in the life I left long ago by using the word “we.” I almost corrected her but decided to let it go. I didn’t want to seem overly defensive.

She was probably only in her mid-twenties, but somehow she looked older. At first I couldn’t put my finger on it. It wasn’t her skin, which was almost flawless. No lines at the corners of her mouth. Her hair, while probably dyed, was cut well and looked good. Her clothes—a simple but nice t-shirt and a pair of jeans—looked almost stylish. But then I saw it. Her eyes. Her eyes were old. They were tired and they had seen too much.

“You look good, honey,” she said. “Really.”

“Thanks.” I took a deep breath. “I almost didn’t come.”

“I wondered whether or not you would. But I’m glad you did.”

“Why?”

“Because I need your help.”

And there it was. This was the part that would end up being bad. I didn’t yet know how, but somehow, some way, there would be trouble for me.

“Go on,” I said.

“There’s this new girl, a little Asian thing, I think from Thailand or the Philippines or Vietnam or somewhere. Her online name is Spice but her real name is Naomi. At least that’s what everyone calls her. Naomi Nguyen, which ain’t easy to pronounce, believe you me. But she taught me how to say it right.” I could see that Collette was nervous. She was talking just a bit too quickly, looking down at her food. She tried sipping again from her drink, which was empty.

“Anyway, she’s been gone for over a week now and I’m worried. We’re all worried.”

“And...?”

“...and...we need somebody to find her.”

“Me.”

“That’s right.”

I snorted derisively. “You want me to find some poor girl so I can bring her back to a life of prostitution? Hell, if she got away, good for her. And even if I did find her, I’d give her some money and help her to keep going. You’re asking for help from the wrong girl, Collette.”

Collette shook her head. “No, you don’t understand. We’re afraid something happened to her. We’re afraid maybe, you know...”

Ah. I got it now. She thought that this Naomi girl might be dead. I sat back in my seat, feeling like a heavy stone was settling in the pit of my stomach.

“Why do you think that?” I asked, my words careful and deliberate. “How do you know she didn’t just run away? It’s not exactly rare. Lots do.” I looked at her meaningfully, reminding her of her own runaway past.

“Because, she never once talked about it. As far I know, she had nowhere to run *to*. She left all her stuff. *Everything*. All her clothes. Her makeup. Jewelry. Her shoes.”

I shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time a girl took off, leaving everything behind. Maybe a social worker found her. Maybe getting away was more important than shoes.”

“Yeah. I know. But...” She took another sip from her empty cup. “See, she has this stuffed animal. A rabbit. I swear, she loves this thing like she’s three years old or something. I think maybe her mother gave it to her when she was little. Anyway, she sleeps with it every night. Holds it when she’s on the couch watching TV. There was this one time when she couldn’t find it and she freaked out. And I mean *freaked*. We finally found it in the dirty laundry but by then she was hysterical, in tears. I mean, she was literally shaking.”

“Okay...” I said, knowing what was coming next. Collette reached down and pulled a dingy stuffed animal from her oversized purse. It was a mottled tan rabbit with floppy arms, legs, and feet. She placed it gingerly on the table, almost as if she might break it. I sighed and lifted it up, squeezing it slightly. “And I suppose you’re going to tell me that she would never leave Mr. Cottontail here behind, right?”

“Yeah. Except his name is Thỏ. That’s what she calls him. I think it means bunny or something.”

I held Thỏ closer and peered into his shiny black button eyes. “I don’t know, Collette...”

“I have money,” she said quickly. “All the girls pitched in. Well, most did. We can pay you.”

“I just...it’s complicated.” I looked across the mall. Of course, at that moment, I happened to see three young Asian tourist girls walking by, shopping bags filled with American goodies. “What about Omar?” I asked. “Is he still around?”

“Yeah... But you know Omar ain’t gonna spend any time or money looking for her. To him, girls come and go. He’s probably already got someone to replace her. And then, there’s what he’ll do to her if he does find her. You remember. He’ll probably make an example out of her. Runnin’ away costs him money and makes him look bad to his partner. We need to find her first, if she can be found.”

I sighed, watching the Asian tourists disappear into a candle store. “I don’t know, Collette...”

“Sandy, please. We need *you*. You’re the only one who can help. You know we can’t go to the police. Plus...” She took yet another nervous sip from the empty cup, then looked down, avoiding my gaze. “You, of all people, *know*... The last time we saw her she was heading out to meet a client. But she never came back.” Collette looked up and directly into my eyes. “That could’ve been *you*, honey. We both know it. And if it had been, you would’ve wanted someone to look for you. To care.”

Collette’s words hit me like a concussive blast. Although I remained still and calm on the outside, inside I was psychically thrown back against a wall. *That could’ve been you*. She was right, of course. I could have easily disappeared that night six years ago and never been heard from again. Would anyone have cared? I honestly didn’t know. Maybe my brothers. Maybe. Perhaps one or two of the other girls. That was it. But no one would have searched for me. I didn’t think that with any sense of self-pity. It was simply a fact. I would have vanished and faded from everyone’s memory. My existence would have been forgotten like the fading ripples

on the surface of a pond. Just another anonymous hooker who vanished. This girl—Naomi—she was alone, probably just a kid, an immigrant, likely brought here illegally for the sole purpose of working the sex trade. Who would know if she simply disappeared? Who would care?

Collette cared enough to offer to pay me to find her. Or least find out what happened to her. To help her, if possible. And if she was in fact already dead, to speak for her and acknowledge her existence by finding out what had happened to her.

Yes, I could've been Naomi. Perhaps, in some ways I still was. I gazed again into the black eyes of her rabbit Thỏ. I saw my distorted, twin fish-eye reflections looking back. The toy seemed to be asking me a question, imploring me for an answer.

“Sandy?” Collette said.

“Yes,” I replied. “I’ll do it. Of course I’ll do it.”

Chapter 3

When I was still in the life, there were between four and six of us living in the apartment at any given time. I never knew for sure how many other apartments Omar had and how many girls, but the rumors were that he had one or two other apartments, each housing the same number of girls as my place. This was where we slept and ate, did laundry, watched reality TV, and pretended like we were sisters. But we all knew we were pretending. This was no sorority. We were just killing time between clients.

Omar managed the girls and a business partner I never met fronted for the customers, marketed us on a password-protected website, and ran the finances. A couple of times a week, Omar would send each of us out to the hotels by the gigantic Orange County Convention Center, or by the attractions, sometimes other places around town, to have paid sex with men from out of town. While we would occasionally get a “date” with a local guy, our clientele was almost

always the tourist and convention trade. I spent five and a half years in that apartment and in those hotel rooms, my soul withering a little bit for every day that passed.

I always lived in the “A” place. As long as you looked good and kept clean, stayed away from the hard drugs, and knew how to carry yourself, you were still marketable as an escort to the higher dollar clients served by Omar’s secret partner. You were given an exotic moniker such as “Diamond,” got to live in the nice apartment, and had your dates arranged. You had relative freedom to come and go, as long as you made sure you were always on call for dates. You got to keep a decent chunk of your earnings and could drive one of two shared cars. You could even have a bank account. Your value as a high-end call girl to Omar’s partner protected you. However, as soon as your looks started to go, either through age or crystal meth or something else, you were no longer of value to Omar’s partner and were moved down to the “B” place. Omar owned the girls at the “B” place outright without any partner and put them all on the streets, 365 days a year. They walked up and down Orange Blossom Trail in mini-skirts and stilettos and had to meet \$300 a day quotas or they got their faces slapped bloody. The lifespan of the girls in the “B” place was only a few years. Some only a few months. You never wanted to get moved to the “B” place.

The girls who started there, never making the cut to live at the “A” place, were almost all runaways, often underage, and desperate to survive. They were all addicted to something. Omar would find them on the streets and prey on their weaknesses and desperation.

Using different tactics, he recruited girls for his partner, and for the “A” place, by cruising the college bars for coeds looking to make easy money and the strip clubs, where he could convince the occasional stripper to take her skills just a little bit further for the promise of a lot more money. Or, he sometimes found girls for the “A” place through referrals, like he found

me. A friend from high school was already part of Omar's stable and convinced me to give it a try. At that point in my life, having just lost a low-end waitress job and way behind on rent, I felt I had nothing more to lose by trying. Little did I know I would lose my soul.

It was an eerie sense of déjà vu when I crossed the threshold into Collette's apartment. The apartment was different but the girls looked the same, watching TV in sweatpants and tank tops. I could smell the pot smoke as soon as I stepped in. The joint was gone, but the sweet, herbal aroma remained. The drugs were also around when I lived in an apartment like this, but I tried to stay away from them. I was no angel, but I avoided the really bad stuff. I knew that led to the "B" place.

There were three girls in the living room, two on the couch and one on a cheap lounge chair, watching E! on TV. I think I may have recognized one of them. But maybe not. I might as well have been right back there six years ago, it was so familiar. However, I was different now. Older. And the girls seemed so much younger. They looked up at me warily as Collette escorted me in.

"Girls," Collette said. "This is Sandy." The girls said nothing. "Sandy Corrigan," Collette clarified. "She's the one I told you about. She's going to find Naomi."

This got their attention. I stepped further into the apartment and said hello.

"I need to ask you some questions, okay?" I said and pulled a rickety wooden chair from the equally rickety dinette table into the living room. I pressed the TV remote and shut off the E! channel. "What are your names?"

Two of the girls deferred to the one in the middle, on the couch. She was a little older than the other two, African American, with short, close-cropped hair. A lot of the Black girls wore wigs on the job. Her short hair lent itself to wigs.

“My name’s Midnight,” she said. “This is Sunshine.” She indicated the blonde to her right. “And that’s Nasty,” she said nodding at the brunette on her left.

I chewed the inside of my lip and nodded. “Okay. But I’m interested in your real names. Your human being names.”

They blinked at me for a second before the brunette said, “Melissa.”

“Jordan,” said the blonde.

The one called Midnight narrowed her eyes at me. “You used to hook for Omar back in the day, didn’t you?” I didn’t reply. But my silence answered her question. “That’s right. I heard about you. Yeah, I heard *all* about *you*. Did you really cut that dude up like they say?” I remained silent. There was no way I was dredging all that up here for this audience. “Yeah...I definitely heard about that. Before I tell you my real name, my *human being* name, first you tell me your client name. Your *online* name.”

Collette held up a hand. “Look, Sandy is here trying to help. You don’t need to give her such—”

“It’s OK,” I said. “Diamond. My name was Diamond. But that’s not who I am anymore.”

“Not who you are anymore?” the one called Midnight said. “Girl, you are who you were and you can’t change that. You think changing a name changes who you are? Just because you quit that name don’t mean that the name quit you. So, what, you think you’re better than us now?”

“No,” I said carefully. She was one of those tough girls, hardened even more by the life she led. How could I explain my new sense of self—the purpose that Tyler’s presence had given me? The self-esteem of a legit job? It was as if before I was some sort of caterpillar and now I

was growing my wings. But I couldn't articulate that here in the "A" place. Instead, I simply said, "I'm just...different now. If you don't want to tell me your name, fine."

She considered me for a long beat. "Tonya," she finally said.

I nodded. "So, Tonya, where do you think Naomi is?"

"Me?" Tonya said. "Damn. The girl ran. She couldn't take the life. She was always..." She hesitated, reaching for the right word. "...miserable. No—worse. *Fragile*. Always crying about something."

I searched the eyes of the other two girls—Melissa and Jordan. "Do you think Naomi ran?" I asked them. There was a long pause, as if they didn't want to publicly contradict Tonya.

"No," Melissa finally said.

I held her gaze. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "Just a feeling. Y'know."

I turned to the blonde. "What about you, Jordan? Do you think she ran?"

Jordan looked sideways at Tonya and then shook her head slightly. Tonya rolled her eyes.

"How well did you know Naomi?" I asked.

"Well, she hardly ever talked to me," Tonya said. "I think she had a problem with Black people."

"No she didn't," Melissa said. "You just scare her."

Tonya twisted her lips. She wasn't buying it.

I turned to Melissa. "Why do you say that?"

"Cause she's shy. We share a room, so I probably talk to her more than anyone else. She doesn't know a lot of English. But she tries. She's quiet and always homesick real bad. I don't

know how old she is, but I doubt if she's even sixteen. All I know is that she hates being here and she hates tricking."

"Which is why she ran," Tonya said. "Hell, she could've made good money. Young, pretty Asian girl. Omar tried. He even gave her some presents after her first few dates. To encourage her. Some earrings. A bracelet. I saw Lindsey wearing them the next day."

"Lindsey?" I asked.

"Another girl," Collette explained. "Satin. She's...*out* right now." I nodded, understanding that "out" meant with a client.

"That's 'cause she didn't want them," Melissa said. "She didn't want anything to do with hooking or Omar."

"Then why was she here in the first place?" Tonya pressed.

"That's a good question," I added.

"I don't know the whole story. But I think she might have been taken. Kidnapped or sold or something back in Vietnam. One time I think she said something about her father selling her. But her English is bad and I have a hard time with her accent. She said she was told that she had to do whatever Omar said—to have sex with whoever she was told to—or else someone would kill her whole family back in Vietnam. I think she said she had four younger brothers, parents, grandparents. She was really worried. She cries herself to sleep a lot."

"So that's why you don't think she ran," I said. "Because if she did, she was afraid that her family back home would be killed."

Melissa nodded. "She was terrified of that."

We were all silent for a few moments. Even Tonya looked down, contemplating the mental and physical torture Naomi must have been going through. This story shocked even me.

When I was still in the life, in a nondescript apartment not too different from this one, the girls were a lot like me. Runaways or drifters. Down on their luck. Girls from broken homes or with drunk or drug-addicted parents. Girls who had been abused—verbally, physically, and sexually. We were all vulnerable and we all found shelter and protection under the care of Omar and his anonymous partner. He preyed on our weaknesses and exploited us, providing the right amount of money at just the right times, sometimes picking certain girls to sleep with himself. He always provided and protected. Except when he was slapping one of us. Like all pimps, he was also controlling and dangerous when he felt disrespected or if he believed that a girl was holding back and not giving the Johns what they wanted. He expected us to perform, to “take care of business,” as he put it, and make money for him and his secret partner who managed the website and arranged the dates.

However, not once in all my years did I ever hear of Omar buying a girl. He found them on the streets himself and became a grotesque sort of father figure/boyfriend/boss. International human trafficking in that way was a new and dangerous low, even for him. And Naomi’s age was younger than I had ever heard for the “A” place. The “B” place was said to have its share of runaway minors but, to my recollection, I and my “roommates” at the time were all over 18. Yet I had no doubts that what Melissa was sharing was true. I just wondered how Omar got connected with the kind of people who operated international underage trafficking rings. He was a local operation. And could this somehow be related to why Naomi disappeared?

“Do you know where she was going the night you last saw her?” I asked.

Shrugs and shakes of heads.

“A client,” Melissa said. “Omar took her out. I think to I-Drive, but I could be wrong. She couldn’t drive so he took her himself.” I-Drive was shorthand for International Drive, the heart of Orlando’s convention Mecca.

“Do you know which hotel?”

“Sorry.”

“Now, Missy,” Collette said. “Tell us what you know. If you care about Naomi, you gotta tell us.”

“I really don’t know.”

“What about Brenda?” Jordan said, cutting her eyes nervously at Tonya.

“Brenda? Be serious, girl,” Tonya said with a dismissive exhale.

“Who’s Brenda?” I asked.

“Brenda Davis. She was Naomi’s roommate before me,” Melissa said. “She got moved down to the ‘B’ place a few weeks ago. She got strung out on meth kinda bad.”

“Bitch was starting to look like a skeleton,” Tonya said. “That won’t do for the ‘A’ place.”

“You think Brenda might know where she is?” I said.

Melissa shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Why do you think that?”

“They used to talk on the phone a lot. She was kinda like a big sister or aunt or something for Naomi when she first got here. Naomi was real broke up when Brenda got moved.”

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees. “You know how I can get in touch with Brenda?”

“I don’t know her number or anything,” Melissa said. “And none of us know where the ‘B’ place is.”

“Ain’t none of us *want* to know where the ‘B’ place is,” Tonya said.

“So you have no idea how to reach her?”

“You could ask Omar,” Jordan offered.

Tonya looked at her like she just sprouted a third eye. “You’re crazy, girl.”

I had to agree with Tonya on this one. There was no way Omar was going to tell me how to contact Brenda or where the “B” place was. The risk of exposure was too great. Plus, I wasn’t exactly his favorite person. After my own unfortunate situation six years ago, I heard there was a lot of heat brought down on him. While I never gave him up or told the cops anything—I valued my limbs and heartbeat too much—I knew that he had to scramble to move his girls before the cops closed in. It was an expensive pain in the ass for him and he blamed me, regardless of the actual facts of the situation.

“Well,” Collette said hesitantly. “What about the Trail?”

Orange Blossom Trail. Also called the Trail or OBT. Or, more specifically, a relatively short stretch of it running north from Oak Ridge Road up towards Colonial Drive. Orlando’s very own red light district, with seedy strip clubs every other block and low-slung motels boasting hourly rates. That’s where Omar sent his girls from the “B” place to walk the streets.

“You think I would find her there?”

“Where else?” Collette said.

Where else indeed. The four of them gave me a description of Brenda. Medium height, perhaps 5’6”. Brown hair gone flat and stringy with the effects of the crystal meth. A once-shapely figure shrinking to a rail thin husk. Dark sunken eyes. That described half the hookers on OBT. Her online name used to be Misty.