

THE BASEMENT

An unpublished novel by Stephen Leather

New York always brings out the serial killer in me. It's a great city to kill in. The best. You've got something like fifteen million people living cheek by jowl, and most of them couldn't give a damn about anyone else. No one wants to get involved. No one gives a damn. It's terrific. Walk down any street in the Big Bad Apple and the only time you'll make eye contact is if you meet a hooker on the make or a panhandler with his hand out.

Getting a gun is easy, too, legally or otherwise. And you can carry it in a holster under your arm or strapped to the back of your trousers and without probable cause the police can't throw you up against the wall and search you, not like they can in some parts of the world. It's all thanks to the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution. It goes something like: "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures shall not be violated." The only exception is if the cops have what they call "probable cause", which means that have to have a good reason. I love America. So long as I don't stick out, so long as I blend, I can walk around all day with a loaded gun down the back of my pants, assuming that I'm the sort of person who'd want to do that. Which I'm not, of course.

And what other city in the world provides such a variety of victims? Not just the sheer number, but the types: rich, poor, famous, unknown, black, white, every shade of brown. New York has everything, a veritable buffet for the committed serial killer. The trick is not to be too greedy. I mean, if you carry on like Son of Sam and blow away teenagers or you write "I did it and you'll never catch me" letters to the newspapers or the cops, then pretty soon there's going to be a task

force after you with all your victims pinned up on a bulletin board and then it's just a matter of time before you're behind bars. No, the successful serial killer takes his time, chooses his victims with care, and keeps the lowest of low profiles.

The trick is to blend, and to let the numbers take care of themselves. The numbers? Yeah, the numbers. You don't have to bury your victims or dissolve them in acid or cut them up into tiny pieces and drop them all over the city in garbage bags, there's no need. You hide them in the numbers. Fifteen million people, right? Give or take. So, ballpark figure, assume that the average lifespan is eighty years. Yeah, I know, women live longer, men die younger, but eight is pretty much an average and like I said, we're talking ballpark figure. So, fifteen million people living an average of eighty years means that almost two hundred thousand people die each year in New York. Two hundred thousand. That's about four thousand a week. Now, that four thousand includes automobile accidents and a plethora of natural deaths, but there's also a fair sprinkling of murders and suicides. The serious serial killer takes his time, chooses his victim with care, and then does all he can to conceal his crime among the vast numbers of ordinary deaths each year. That's one of the first things you have to realise. Death is a normal part of city life. Four thousand a week. Six hundred a day. The average American doesn't like to think about that, they prefer to imagine that they're immortal and that very few people actually depart this mortal plane. But everyone dies sooner or later. Everyone. Make it look as if your victim slipped and fell in the shower or jumped from her window or decided to swallow bleach, and the chances are that you'll get away with it. Do that for the majority of your victims and then just now and again, when you really can't help yourself, you can cut one up and put it in garbage bags.

Hey, don't get me wrong. This is all hypothetical, right. I'm not a killer, I'm a writer. I'm always looking for plots. For stories. I wouldn't really go on a killing spree. Not really.

A city of strangers, that's New York City. And every day more pour in. One of my favourite spots is opposite Grand Central Terminal, where I can stand and watch them arrive, like ants scrambling out of an anthill, searching for food. Every one a potential victim. When I first got to the city, I used to follow a girl for fun, for the sport. I'd stand and I'd watch and then I'd pick one at random. I'd tell myself that I'd follow the tenth, or the twentieth, or the thirtieth, and then I'd count as the women went by and then I'd follow the lucky winner for as long as I could. Sometimes they'd get into a cab and that'd be the end of it, sometimes I'd lose them on the subway, but occasionally I'd follow them all the way home. God, it gave me such a feeling of power, to stand outside their home and know that they were inside. And you know something? Not one of them ever knew. Not one of them turned to look, not one picked up on me. At times I'd feel like a tiger staking out a herd of zebra. Stupid, docile zebras, too dumb to know that they're in danger until the tiger's claws rip out their throats and their blood flows. It's not hatred I feel. It's contempt. But hey, it's only research, right?

A guy in a stained brown raincoat appears at my left shoulder and in a nasal whine asks me if I've any spare change. He must be about forty years old but his face is weathered and lined like old leather and his eyes are red and watery as if he'd been crying a lot. He wipes his nose with the back of his hand and makes the snuffling sound of a pig at a trough. He asks again. I lean towards him. He smells bad, like rotting cabbage. I smile reassuringly. What I want to say is: "Fuck off, or I'll shoot you in the face," but the guy has a crazy look about him. Intellectually challenged, you might say. Or emotionally different. Whatever, showing any sort of aggression will probably lead to a shouting match and that's the last thing you need when you're trying to blend. I reach into my trouser pocket and bull out a handful bills and I peel off a dollar and give it to him.

"Merry Christmas, fella," I say and his eyebrows shoot up. He grins at the bill and for a moment he looks as if he's going to reply but he just mutters something intelligible and shuffles away. After half a dozen steps he looks over his shoulder and mutters something else. I look at my watch. Eleven-thirty. I've got to get Macy's by noon because that's when she'll be there.

Macy's is at Broadway and 34th Street so I walk the eight blocks at a brisk pace, my breath smoking in the crisp winter air. Winter is my favourite New York season. Everything seems cleaner, and the place doesn't smell as much. The same goes for the people. Each step closer to the store builds the anticipation in my stomach and I almost feel light-headed. I can't believe I'm actually going to see her. I'm finally going to get close enough to talk to her.

When I reach the storefront there are posters everywhere. She's wearing white diamonds around her neck and her shoulders are bare but it's the eyes that dominate, it's the eyes that you look at. They're supposed to be purple but they're not really, they're more of a dark blue, in the photograph anyway. She's got it, all right. Star quality. It wouldn't matter if you'd never seen one of her movies, you'd still know it just by looking at the picture. There's an aura about her, a radiance that says "I'm different, I'm special, kneel before me and worship me." I can't believe I'm going to meet her. The anticipation forms a hard knot in my stomach.

The store is packed. Not full, not busy, but packed, people standing shoulder to shoulder, craning their necks for a better look, for a glimpse of her. The disappointment hits me like a punch in the solar plexus. There isn't a cat in hell's chance of me getting within a hundred yards of her. She's too popular, everyone wants a piece of her, everyone wants the chance to touch the hem of the famous. Fuck them. Fuck them all.

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They always look so weak when they're asleep. So defenceless. You could so easily kill them, slit their throats or drive the knife into their chests and twist and they'd probably never know. You wonder about that sometimes, you wonder what happens when you die in your sleep. Do you carry on dreaming, does the moment of death expand to fill the void so that the dream goes on forever, or does it just fade to black? And if it goes on forever, does it matter whether the dream was a pleasant one or a nightmare. Would one be heaven and the other hell?

She shifts on the bed, her mouth opens and her tongue licks her upper lip, leaving it wet and glistening. A strand of her blonde hair falls across her left cheek and she moves her left arm to brush it away but the chain stops her, limits her movement. She groans softly in her sleep and shakes her head slowly. The hair slides across her face and she licks her lips again. The bed is big, a queen size. You wanted it big because of what you plan to do with her. You need the room.

She tries to turn onto her side but the chains fastened around her ankles keep her on her back. They jingle as she pulls first her left and then her right leg. The chains aren't thick, they don't need to be. It doesn't take much to restrain a woman, you know that from experience. The weaker sex.

Her clothes look expensive. Well tailored. Designer labels, perhaps. That was one of the things that attracted you to her, the way she dressed. That and the hair. The shoulder length blonde hair that whispered that it wanted to be caressed, that it wanted to feel your fingers running through it. You sit down on the bed and reach out your hand to touch the hair. Silky. It feels soft and silky. Her skin is soft to the touch, too. Soft like a young girl's. How

old is she? Twenty seven maybe. Twenty eight, tops. Certainly no older. She had two children, both girls and both with the same honey blonde hair. That was something else that had attracted her to you. The girls.

You run your hand down her left cheek and under her chin. She mutters something in her sleep but you can't make out the words. She has a beautiful voice, a voice that is used to getting what it wants. A firm voice. Firm but soft. You heard her call the girls in while you sat in the van outside her house and waited. You got excited when you heard her voice and wondered how it would sound when she was begging and pleading.

You look at your watch. The drug should be wearing off within a few minutes. You've used it many times so you know how effective it is. You used it on yourself once so you'd know how it felt and how even when you woke up you were too disorientated to move for ten minutes at least. You run your hand down the front of the white silk shirt she's wearing, your index finger catching on each of the hard white buttons. Her breasts move in time with her breathing and you slip your hand inside the shirt. You can feel the lace of her bra and the soft flesh it contains. You move your finger around and it finds the nipple. You feel a sudden desire to pinch the flesh, to rip out the nipple and stifle her screams with your mouth, but you fight the urge and remove your hand. Slowly. You must take things slowly.

She's wearing a blue linen suit, a matching jacket and a skirt which stops just above the knee. She's wearing stockings or tights, you can't tell which. You know you could look, all you have to do is to push the skirt up, but you don't because you know you have all the time in the world. Besides, it's more fun to have them take off their own clothes. It would be the easiest thing in the world to strip her while she's drugged and have her wake up naked, but you know from experience that they only panic and it takes a while to calm them down. The trick is to be firm but polite and explain to them just why they have to do as they're told. They soon understand.

You've taken her shoes off. They were black and had high heels. You like to see women in heels, they stretch the muscles in the back of their legs and it tightens their backsides and makes them sway when they walk. You took the shoes off when you chained her to the bed because the heels were sharp enough to use as weapons and there's always a danger of them lashing out until they fully understand their situation. The shoes are upstairs, along with her handbag.

She coughs and tries to cover her mouth with the back of her right hand but the chain prevents her. Her eyelids flicker and she licks her lips again. She'll be thirsty when she wakes up. They always are. You walk over to the bathroom and fill a paper cup with cold water. There's no seat on the toilet, no mirror on the wall, no shower curtain or towel rail, nothing that can be used as a weapon. You learned that the hard way. You thought that screwing the mirror into the wall was enough but one of them smashed the glass and came at you with a jagged piece, a mirrored dagger that she slashed from side to side as blood dripped from her hand. Messy. That one had been messy and you learned your lesson. Now there's nothing sharp in the room. You put the paper cup on the tiled floor and sit down on the bed again. The bed has a metal frame and a brass headboard, a gentle arch with vertical brass bars. You've welded the headboard to the frame so that it can't be taken apart. Chains lead from her arms to the headboard, short enough to keep her confined to the bed, long enough to give her some movement. There are small padlocks at her wrists and ankles and similar ones fastening the chains to the bed. The chains are as shiny as surgical instruments, and like the padlocks they're brand new.

She coughs and a dribble of saliva runs from the side of her mouth and trickles down her chin. You take a handkerchief from the back pocket of your jeans and use it to dab the frothy mess. She moves her head away and her eyelids flicker again. She'll be awake soon and your stomach goes liquid in anticipation. First you must explain the rules to her. Then you can begin to play.

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I hate my apartment, I really do. It's more of a studio than an apartment if the truth be told, the bed is in an alcove that the landlord calls a bedroom and which I call a cupboard. The main room, okay, the only room, is five paces long and four paces wide, which means that if I keep close to the walls I can do a circuit in eighteen paces. If each pace is a metre then each circuit is eighteen metres. Simple arithmetic, any college kid could work that out. A high school graduate might have to use a calculator, but what the hell, right?

Anyway, I'm on my one hundredth and fifteenth circuit, which means that so far this evening I've walked just over two thousand metres. I think better when I walk, and New York being New York, it's safer to walk inside than out. There isn't much furniture in the apartment. I'm not really one for furniture. There's a built-in wardrobe at the end of the bed, which is all the storage space I need. There's a chair, an overstuffed leather armchair which is sagging and which creaks whenever I drop down into it, and there's a wooden coffee table on which I put the typewriter. That's it. The entire contents of my apartment. A bed. A chair. A table. A typewriter. It's all I need. Writer's write, and you don't need a roomful of Italian designer furniture to get the words down on paper. That's what I am, a writer. I write, therefore I am.

I don't tell people that I'm a writer, not any more. I used to, I used to tell anyone who'd listen that I was a writer and that one day I'd be rich and famous, but they'd always ask the same questions - had I been published, had I written anything they might have read. So then I'd have to explain that I write screenplays, not novels, that I prefer to work in film rather than the printed page. So then they'd ask what films I'd written and I'd start to explain how it's a tough business to break into, that it's all about contacts, about getting your work read by the right people, and then their eyes would glaze over and I could see that they thought I was full of shit. So I don't tell people that I'm a writer, in fact I don't tell them what I do. It's not their business, right?

The pacing helps me think. It puts part of my mind on auto-pilot while the creative bit gets on and does its own thing. I'm halfway through this screenplay about a waitress who falls in love with a Mafia hitman. I've done the first act, the set-up, but I'm having trouble with the second act. I can hear the voices of the characters, I can picture them, but I don't know how to take the story forward. It's not writer's block, I never get blocked, I just need a flash of inspiration, and if I walk long enough, I'll get it.

I'm also working on a thriller called *Checking Out*, a sort of *Die Hard* in a Las Vegas casino. It's set in the biggest hotel in the world, a two thousand room medieval theme monstrosity which is preparing for its busiest night of the year - New Year's Eve. The manager receives a letter cobbled together from newspaper headlines from a killer who has struck at two other hotels on previous New Year's Eves. The killer warns that he plans to kill again, this time at the medieval hotel. The owners of the hotel aren't sure what to do - shutting down the hotel and its casino will cost them millions, and the police say that they cannot guarantee the safety of the guests.

The hotel's head of security is not up to the job, so the management calls in an outside security force. Because it's New Year's Eve, most of the city's security firms are busy - the only one they

can hire is run by a group of oddball Vietnam veterans. The management has no choice but to hire them. Their mission - to identify a serial killer from among thousands of revellers. At eleven thirty, the manager of the hotel is called to the phone. It's the serial killer, telling him that there is a body in one of the suites, along with a message. The manager, and the Vets, rush to the suite where they find the body of the head of security and a stack of high explosive. There is also a message warning that there is a huge bomb hidden in the hotel which will explode at midnight unless ten million dollars from the casino is taken to the roof. There isn't time to evacuate the hotel. The money is taken to the roof, and a helicopter arrives.....can the Vets thwart the killer and save the hotel? Or are the Vets themselves behind the scam? I've only just started it but it has a good feel. The only problem is that there are too many heroes, and the studios seem to be going for single hero movies with one big name, Bruce Willis or the muscle-bound Austrian. It's a problem, but not insoluble.

I've written eighteen screenplays, and no, not one has been made into a movie. It's not that they're not good enough, it's just that they haven't been read by the right people. I've spent hundreds of dollars on postage but so far I haven't reached the ones who can give a movie the green light and cut through all the studio bullshit. It's just a matter of time. The scripts are all registered with the Writer's Guild so that no one else can rip off the ideas, all I have to do is to keep trying.

It's the secretaries that are the problem. They open all the mail, and they get thousands of screenplays a month, most of them written by talentless no-hopers. They don't know that mine are different, that I have the gift, that I can write, but they're just secretaries so they put me on the stack with all the rest. The stack gets higher and higher, a few get read, but most of them are thrown away. It's the fault of the secretaries. It doesn't matter whose name you put on the envelope, it has to go through the secretary. There's only one way to bypass the studio secretaries and that's to get an agent because an agent can deal with the studio executives direct. If an agent sends a screenplay to a studio exec, it gets read. That doesn't mean it's a sure-fire sell, but at least it's going to be read. They might only get through a few pages, because these people have the attention spans of three-year-olds, but at least you've got over the first hurdle.

So, do I have an agent? No, I don't. And why don't I have an agent? Because to get an agent to read your stuff you have to get by - a secretary. I've written to dozens of agents, sent them countless copies of my work, and not one of them have had the decency to send me anything more than the standard letter of rejection. Not that I blame the agents. I don't think they even get to see the letters, let alone the screenplays. It's the secretaries, their primary function in life seems to be to block anyone who shows the least bit of creative talent from making it to the top. It's like there's a conspiracy, a conspiracy of talentless nobodies who resent those with ability and who are determined to do all they can to keep them down. Well, they're not going to keep me down. No way. There's nothing they can do to stop me. Nothing.

I catch a cab over to East 89th Street. It's a pleasant enough day but a bit chilly so I'm wearing a heavy wool suit and brown loafers and a dark brown tie. Plain and simple. Nondescript. It's the camouflage that lets me get in close. A guy in a suit doesn't look like a threat. He looks clean, wholesome and middle class. Hang around outside a building looking like Robert De Niro in Taxi Driver is just asking for trouble, right? So I put on a suit and I put the screenplay in a black leather briefcase and I'm all set. It's a comedy set in Arthurian England. Knights in armour, fire-breathing dragons and a gay Merlin. I've sent it off to half a dozen studios but I couldn't breach the secretarial wall so I'm going to go right to the source. I read in Variety that Mel Brooks is in town and I know he's got an apartment at 50 East 39th so I figured I'll hang about outside until I catch him going in or out.

It's an impressive building, all right, I've been there before. Tommy Tune, the choreographer, has got an apartment in the same block. I don't stand right outside the entrance because that'd be a dead giveaway. I spend my time walking up and down slowly. Pacing. I don't mind waiting. Most people think that time spent waiting is wasted time, but for a writer it can be a Godsend. It gives you that most precious resource - thinking time. I've worked out some of my best plots waiting outside New York apartment blocks.

Mel Brooks has one of the best comedy minds in the business, and I know he'd be just perfect to direct my movie. Chain Male, it's called. And there's a part in it that's tailor-made for him. In fact, I wrote it with him in mind. I know that if he reads it, he'll love it. And with his name attached to the script, it'd be a sure-fire sell. He did Robin Hood: Men In Tights, so he's sure to like the fact that it's about knights.

The doorman appears in front of me, looming over me like a storm cloud about to break. "Can I help you?" he asks. His voice is the sound of grating metal.

"No," I said. "Thank you."

"Are you waiting for someone?" he says.

"No. Is there a problem?"

He sneers and I get a glimpse of nicotine-stained teeth. "Yeah, there's a problem. You're pacing up and down outside my building."

"Your building?"

"Yeah, my building."

"You don't look like a man who owns a hundred million dollar building."

"Huh?"

"This is a public street, I'm within my rights to walk here."

He snarls. "You ain't walking. You're waiting." He looks at the briefcase. "You serving something?"

"What? Like lunch?"

"Like legal papers."

I shake my head. "No. I'm not here to serve legal papers."

"So maybe you'd do us both a favour and move on."

"I don't think so."

He stares at me in silence and I see his hands clench and unclench like he wants to take a swing at me. He won't, I know, because it'd be more than his job's worth. A doorman brawling in the street isn't good for a building's image. No, he isn't going to hit me, but I can see he's annoyed. I smile. The boyish smile, the smile that says I'm a good guy, that I haven't a bad bone in my body. It seems to enrage him even more, which is just what I'd intended.

A Federal Express van drives up and the driver gets out with a parcel. The doorman's head swivels as if it's on castors. He has no choice. He has to go and take the package.

"Off you go," I say to him, my smile widening.

"I'll be back," he says.

You can't help laughing at the line. That's the best he can do? That's so typical, the little people learn all their lines from the movies. They're not capable of original thought. That's why they're little people and I'm a writer. He strides over to the delivery man and practically snatches the parcel out of his hands. He looks over his shoulder at me as he walks inside the building. I can see that he's going to be trouble so I decide to try again later.

I walk across Central Park, deep in thought. One of the screenplays I'm working on is a thriller, and as I walk, head down, I run it through my mind, like playing a video. That's how I write, I play

the images again and again until they feel right and then I put them down on paper. This one is called 1-900. I've only just started it. The opening shot is of an office, and we hear a woman's voice. The voice is deep and sexy, and she is talking dirty to a man on the phone. She is telling him what she wants to do to him as the camera pans slowly to her legs. She has great legs, and we hear the woman describe herself: blond, busty, soft lips etc, as the camera pans up. Then we see that she's not pretty at all, more a Kathy Bates type middle-aged woman, slightly overweight with mousy hair and plain features. Her name is Betty and she is a telephone sex operator, talking dirty on the phone to paying customers. Her sexy voice, and an ability to tell men what they want to hear, has made her one of the most successful operators in New York. The camera pulls back and we see the office is full of women, some young and pretty, others old and plain, all of them talking dirty on the phone. It's an efficient, highly-profitable operation, and Betty is one of the company's biggest earners. She has a stable of regular customers, and handles many new callers. The woman who runs the business knows that once a caller has heard Betty, he tends to be hooked. Callers usually want to meet her, but Betty always refuses, knowing that her looks don't match up to her voice.

A new caller, who gives his name as Frank, begins to talk about hurting her, and she plays along, knowing that that's how some men get their kicks. She isn't worried, she knows that it's only fantasy, but gradually Frank begins to sound more psychotic, until he describes to her how he's like to torture and kill a woman. She hangs up on him, earning a reprimand from her boss who tells her that she's supposed to keep them on the line as long as possible: the longer they stay on, the more they pay. A few days later, Betty reads of a sex killing in the paper, and to her horror she realizes that it's exactly as Frank described. Later that day, Frank calls her and says that he did it for her. Betty calls the police, who refuse to believe her. Frank calls her again, and tells her he plans to kill another girl. The victims he selects are just as Betty describes herself: busty, blond and pretty.

After the second killing, Betty speaks to a young Homicide detective investigating the murders. He's fascinated by her sexy voice and arranges to meet her that evening. Of course, he doesn't recognize the frumpy woman who turns up, he is expecting a sexy young girl. You can picture him approaching a pretty girl he thinks is Betty, and then how his face would fall when he actually meets her. He cuts the meeting short, and asks her to keep in touch if Frank calls again. Frank does call Betty again, and she tells him that she wants him to go to the police. He gets angry and says he'll kill her next. In a bid to calm him down, she has verbal sex with him, but when she's finished he insists that he still wants to kill her. Betty calls the detective, who finds himself turned on again by her voice, even though he knows what she looks like. He finds himself flirting with her on the phone. There are two Bettys: the real life one and the fantasy Betty on the phone. The detective is confused about his feelings, but Betty isn't - she is strongly attracted to him.

Frank waits outside the office where Betty works. One of the girls who works there looks just like Betty describes herself and Frank follows her home and rapes and kills her. The following day he rings up to speak to another girl, but finds that Betty is still alive. He threatens her, and she calls the detective. Realizing that she's now a potential victim, he offers to protect her. He is even more turned on by her voice, but when he meets her again later that night his ardour cools. Betty realizes she isn't going to get anywhere with him, until she turns off the light and they're in darkness. They talk, he is turned on by her voice, and they end up in bed. She, not surprisingly, is very vocal, and the sex is great. In the cold light of the morning, the detective is totally confused: he is turned on by her voice and her personality, but not by her appearance. Meanwhile, he must protect her from the killer who has found out her home address.

It's a cracker of a story, but I'm not sure where to take it, whether the killer gets to Betty, whether Frank is really the killer, who lives or who dies. Being a writer is a bit like being God. I can do what I want with the characters, I have absolute power over them.

I look up from the grass and find myself staring at the Dakota building, One West 72nd Street. It's where John Lennon used to live. It's star heaven, practically. Maury Povich and Connie Chung live there, Rudolph Nureyev had an apartment there before he died of Aids, Roberta Flak sleeps there and I even saw Lauren Bacall going in once. That's one of the reasons that I decided to live in New York and not Los Angeles, the people here are so accessible. The showbiz people, I mean. The movers and shakers. In LA they all hide behind sheer walls and alarm systems and they have armed guards ready to jump on any strangers who get too close. But New York is too crowded for that sort of privacy. Sure, they're safe inside their fortress-like apartment blocks, but they have to come out and they always have to walk across the sidewalk to their cars and that's when you can get to them. Look at what happened to Lennon, right? A guy stands outside the Dakota with a gun in his pocket and before long he's as famous as the man he killed.

New York, huh? It's a lousy place to live, but a great place to kill. The ultimate hunting ground. I mean, close by the Dakota building is 145 Central Park West. Living there, when they're not under armed guard in LA, are Bruce Willis and Demi Moore, Dustin Hoffman, Barry Manilow and Mary Tyler Moore. All in the one place. A stalker's paradise. You want to get close to Steven Spielberg in LA? Forget it. But when he's in the Big Apple, all you've got to do is stand outside 721 Fifth Avenue. He'll come out eventually. Francis Ford Coppola? Just up the road at 781. Robert Altman? 502 Park Avenue.

I stand outside the Dakota building, and as always I find myself instinctively looking for bloodstains. They're aren't any, of course. Blood on the sidewalk is even worse for a building's image than a brawling doorman so it was cleaned up even before Lennon was declared dead. That's one of the few good things about the city. It's so bloody efficient.

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Her name is Sarah, Sarah Hall. According to the driver's licence in her purse she's twenty-eight years old, but she looks younger. Her skin is smooth, unmarked by lines or blemishes and her hair is soft and silky. Her driver's licence is upstairs on the kitchen table along with the rest of the contents of her purse: a gold Visa card, a Hechts charge card, a pale pink lipstick, a small pack of menthol-scented tissues, a pack of chewing gum and forty dollars in bills. There was some change, too: three quarters, two dimes and four pennies. You wonder about the chewing gum. She looks like the sort of woman who wouldn't want her daughters chewing gum so perhaps she does it because she's trying to give up smoking.

You lean forward and sniff her mouth. Her breath is minty fresh and warm, no trace of tobacco. You run your hand down her arm, your fingers scratching quietly against the blue silky material. She's wearing a gold bracelet on her left wrist and the metal is warm to the touch. Next to it on her wrist is the steel chain which binds her hand to the frame of the bed, and at the base of her thumb is the padlock, like a charm on a bracelet. You examine her long, elegant fingers, looking for nicotine stains, but you find none. Perhaps she gave up smoking some time ago but still feels the urge from time to time, a distant longing. You know all about longings. And desire.

Her nails are painted a deep, glossy pink, and they are a perfect shape. They're short enough to be functional - she has two children to take care of - but long enough to scratch if necessary. You imagine her nails raking down your back, hard enough to make you gasp, intensifying your pleasure until it crosses the border and becomes pain. You wonder if she scratches her husband when he makes love to her, whether she bites him with her strong teeth as she grasps him between her soft thighs. John, her husband is called. John Hall. He's in real estate. Hands out business cards with his home telephone number on it to anyone who'll take it. He asks people to call him at home, drop around and shoot the breeze anytime, because he's so eager to make a deal. He has a wife and two daughters to support, after all.

She pulls against the restraining chains and they jangle against the brass bed frame. She groans and her eyelids flicker. Her eyes open but she has trouble focussing and they close again and she shakes her head from side to side slowly, like a child having a nightmare. She licks her lips and they glisten. As her mouth opens a thin thread of spittle is drawn between her lips. It pulls thinner and thinner and then snaps silently, the saliva disappearing back into the darkness of her soft mouth. She murmurs something which could be the name of her husband. She frowns, still with her eyes closed, and you know that her head is probably hurting. They always complain of headaches, and they always ask for a drink of water. Once they've stopped screaming.

Her right arm moves again, pulling harder this time, and then she tries to bring both arms down from above her head. She pulls down hard and as the chains rattle and bite into her wrists she opens her eyes fully and sees you. She screams then, not words, just a yell of surprise and fear like she'd just turned a corner and seen you standing there with a gun in your hand. She screams so hard that you can see right down her mouth to the small fleshy bit at the back, contracting like it's trying to get away from you. She looks older when she screams, deep lines appearing either side of her mouth and wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Her wide open mouth makes the flesh bunch up under her chin and makes her nose look bigger. As she gives voice to her terror you sit quietly on the edge of the bed and wait for her to finish. They never scream for more than two minutes, and usually they grow quiet after just sixty seconds or so. They can't scream and breathe and it doesn't take long for them to realise that they're in no immediate danger. You smile as you watch her, knowing that the room you are in is totally soundproofed. The walls, ceiling and floor are tiled and beneath the tiles are layers of glass fibre and beneath the fibre is a double layer of concrete blocks. Soon after you'd soundproofed the basement you put in a 100 Watt stereo system and played rock music at full volume while you walked around the outside of the house, listening carefully. Nothing, just the territorial chirping of sparrows and the occasional drone of an airliner high overhead. The stereo is back upstairs now, and you know that no matter how hard or how long the woman screams no one is going to hear her. Except you.

* * *

I wake up like a jolt of electricity has been passed through my body and for a few minutes I lie still, staring up at the ceiling, my mind racing. I've got a complete plot in my head, my subconscious has been working overtime and all I have to do is remember it, to run the scenes through my head so that they're imprinted on my subconscious. It's good, it's really good, and when I get up I rush to

the typewriter and bash out a synopsis. When I've finished I pace around the room, reading it aloud. It's better than good. It's great.

I even had the title. The Bestseller. My blood starts to race as I read it through for the second time. This is going to be the one. This is the one that's going to net me a million dollars and a first class ticket to the west coast. It starts with a frustrated writer enrolling on a university creative writing course, determined to write a best-selling book which will make him rich and famous. It's not autobiographical, this guy is a psychopath. No, more of a sociopath. Most of the people on the course are writer wannabees, low on talent but high on enthusiasm, and he is contemptuous of them. The writer is asked by the lecturer to read from his work in progress. His opening sentence is "I'd kill to write a bestseller...." and it rapidly becomes clear that his book is a first person account of a murderer looking for a victim. The lecturer and students realise with horror that he is writing about them. The would-be murderer is planning to kill somebody, dismember the body and bury it in several locations. The book will provide clues to the identity of the victim and the location of the body parts. It will be the ultimate treasure hunt, and the prize will be the writer going to the gas chamber. Or the electric chair. Whatever.

Over the following weeks the writer follows several of the students home, and writes about their possibilities as victims. The lecturer calls in the police, they read the work-in-progress but say there is nothing they can do unless the writer commits an offense. During the next reading of the work-in-progress, the writer considers the possibility of the lecturer as the victim. The writer discovers that the lecturer is having an affair with a young girl on the course. That too goes into the book. The writer becomes increasingly isolated, the rest of the class either fear or ridicule him. The girl who is having an affair with the lecturer vanishes, though her apartment is covered with her blood.

The police question the writer, and go through his manuscript, but they can't believe that anyone would actually write what is in effect a detailed confession before committing a murder. Then they discover his fingerprints at the crime scene and arrest him. The writer is a warped genius, and the cops are unable to get a confession from him. He has an explanation for his prints being at the crime scene - he says that he was having an affair with the girl. The cops don't believe him, but eventually they have to release him and he goes back to the creative writing course. His book is almost finished.

The police, acting on an anonymous tip-off, discover part of the girl's body in the lecturer's apartment, along with the murder weapon. The lecturer is arrested, charged and found guilty, though the rest of the girl's corpse is never discovered.

The writer finishes his book, and it's an instant bestseller. Rumors abound that he has gotten away with murder and that the clues to the whereabouts of the girl's body parts are hidden in the book. Sales boom. The last scene is of him signing copies of his novel - called The Bestseller - in a book shop. A young wannabee writer asks him how to write a Bestseller. "Easy," says the writer, "you just have to kill for it...."

It's perfect. I get dressed and rush down to a print shop on 38th Street and get a dozen copies made, then back in the apartment I put them in envelopes addressed to studio execs, agents and producers in LA. I get a sudden brainwave, the movie would be perfect for Brian DePalma, it's just his sort of thing. I love Body Double, it's one of my all-time favourites. I rip one of the envelopes open and take out the synopsis, then hurriedly type out a personal letter - Dear Mr DePalma, you don't know me but... - and sign it with a flourish. I post the LA letters first, then catch a cab down to Fifth Avenue. His apartment is at number 25, I've dropped stuff off there before, even got a personal reply once. He was really nice, explained that he was too busy to take on another project

and gave me the names of a couple of studios to try. I followed his advice, but of course I hit the secretarial wall straight away. This time it's going to be different. He's going to love The Bestseller, I know he is.

It's only when I get out of the cab that I realise that I'm not really dressed for visiting a prestigious Fifth Avenue address - I was so excited about the story that I just pulled on the first clothes I found, faded blue jeans, an old sweatshirt and a pea coat, and I didn't bother shaving or showering. The doorman looks at me like I'm a wad of chewing gum stuck to the bottom of his shoe. "Whaddya want? he snarls.

I give him the boyish smile and hold up the envelope. "I'm delivering this for Mr DePalma," I say.

"Ya don't look like a fucking mailman," he says.

I nod and widen the smile. "It's personal," I say.

He holds out his hand. The nails are bitten to the quick and ingrained with dirt. Before he can take the envelope I pull it back. There's a crafty look in his eyes and I don't trust him. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather put it in his mailbox," I say.

"You can't. All the mail has to go through me." He makes another attempt to grab the envelope, but he's too slow, too clumsy.

"Surely I can put it in his box?"

"No. Only the mailman has the key."

"Come on, are you telling me that you can't open it?"

He folds his arms across his chest. He looks like a former boxer, a nose thickened by too many punches and a large chin that he juts forward as he speaks. "It's me or nothing," he growls.

"Okay, so what if I take it up to him?" I say, even though I know he's not going to let me inside his precious lobby.

He shakes his head. "No. No way." He holds out his hand.

I'm not sure what to do. I just know that he's not going to pass it on to DePalma. As soon as he disappears inside, the envelope is going to go straight into the trash can. I'm fucked. I know it and he knows it, but I don't have any choice. I give it to him. He weighs it in his huge hand like it was a piece of bad meat. "I'll make sure he gets it," he says with a savage grin.

Yeah, right, I think, but I smile and say thanks. Thanks a lot.

I walk all the way back to my apartment. I'm not angry, I'm cold. Like ice. I'm determined to get my own back on the doorman, but I'll do it calmly, clinically. Revenge is a dish best served cold. It's an old saying, but it's true.

When I get back I sit down at my typewriter and write a letter to Brian DePalma, telling him what happened. I redo it several times, making sure that it's just right, then I put it into an envelope with another copy of the synopsis. I go down to the Post Office and send it by registered mail.

* * *

The questions come thick and fast, but you don't answer any of them. It's true what they say: knowledge is power. And it's important that she realises that any power she once had has been stripped away. She has to do everything you say, without question. Obedience, that's all you require. She must do as she's told.

"Who are you?" she screams. "What do you want?"

You smile at her and press your finger against your lips, telling her to be silent.

Her tone becomes more strident, more aggressive, as if raising her voice is going to make you bend to her will. She's used to dealing with children, or a husband who can be cowed by a hot temper or the threat of a cold bed. She doesn't understand yet, so you smile. You smile and press the finger to your lips. "Shhhh," you say. There are beads of sweat on her brow and the front of her blouse is damp. You can see her breasts rise and fall as she pants and the sight makes you ache between your legs. It's a longing, a need that you want to satisfy then and there, but you've learned from experience that it's better to wait. The longer the better. You used the first few too quickly, and any fulfillment you felt soon faded. Slow is better.

"You can't keep me here," she shouts. "I have to go home."

The shouting phase doesn't last too long. Shouting works the lungs too hard, too much oxygen goes into the blood and they start to hyperventilate. That's when they stop shouting and start talking. They usually start off by threatening you, then bribing, then pleading. By the time they get to the third stage, they're ready to listen.

Sarah doesn't stop screaming for a long time. For a while she goes hysterical, her cries become yells and she begins to thrash about, pulling against the chains so hard that the bed moves. You don't want her to hurt herself so you take the stun gun out of your pocket and hold it in front of her. She doesn't react and so you think that maybe she doesn't know what a stun gun is, the damage it can do. You could explain to her, you could tell what 65,000 volts does to the body's neuromuscular system, but she clearly isn't going to be receptive so you decide to give her a demonstration. You hold it up and wave it from side to side to get her attention. It doesn't look much, that's for sure, matte black and hardly bigger than a pack of cigarettes, with a couple of steel prongs like the antenna of some predatory beetle. You press the trigger and blue sparks crackle and sizzle between the prongs and she starts to scream all the louder. That's happened before, but you know that you have to carry on, you have to show her that you're serious or she won't believe the threats you make in future. She has to know that whenever you say you'll do something, that you mean it and won't be talked out of it. She tries to roll away but the chains hold her fast as you step forward, holding the stun gun like a torch. Part of you wants to really hurt her, to push the crackling prongs against the soft white skin of her breasts and hear her scream. Her breasts are wet with sweat so the conduction would be almost perfect and you know the pain would be exquisite but you don't want to mark her. You go up to her right leg and hold her ankle with your hand. She tries to jerk the leg out of your grasp but the chain is already taught and all she does is grind the metal into her flesh. The shiny metal glistens with blood and there are red drops on the sheet. You smile at her, press the contacts against the back of her leg and switch it on. Her whole body goes into spasm, her mouth open like she was in orgasm, her back arched like she was experiencing pleasure beyond anything she'd ever known before. When you take the gun away she slumps onto the bed, breathing heavily and dribbling from the side of her mouth.

You stand by the side of the bed and run the back of your hand against her cheek. She feels soft. So very soft.

* * *

I'm working on a scene in the casino in *Checking Out*, trying to build the tension between the casino owner and the hero, an LAPD bomb disposal expert turned blackjack dealer, when the

doorbell rings. There isn't a doorman downstairs, the building is too cheap for that, but there's a security system and visitors aren't supposed to be able to get in unless they're admitted. I put the chain on the door. "Yeah? Who is it?" I shout.

"Police," says a voice.

"Yeah? I've already given."

"Given?"

"Yeah. At the office. Thanks anyway."

I go and sit down in front of the coffee table and continue typing. The doorbell rings again. And again. I get up and go back to the door. "Who is it?"

"Are you Marvin Waller?"

"Who wants to know?"

"NYPD."

"NYPD?" I'm starting to enjoy this. Whoever this cop is, he's obviously none too bright.

"New York Police Department. Can you open the door?"

"Sure I can," I say, and go back to my chair. This time he knocks on the door, hard.

"What is it?" I shout.

"I'm getting fed up with talking through this door," he says.

I get up again. "So go away."

"You said you'd open the door, Mr Waller."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did."

"Oh no I didn't." Yeah, this is fun all right. I can spin this out for hours.

"Mr Waller, can you please open the door?"

"Yes I can." I fold my arms and lean against the wall, grinning to myself. I wonder how long it'll take him to get the grammar right. I hear voices. Muffled whispering.

"Mr Waller. Will you open the door?"

"Sure - now that you've asked properly." I unlock the door and open it. I'm surprised. The guy's black, and he didn't sound it. He's well over six feet tall, big shoulders and a squarish face. It'd be a severe face if it wasn't for the tortoise-shell spectacles that give him the look of a schoolteacher. Behind him is a woman, dark-haired and pale-skinned with the bluest eyes I've ever seen. I give them the boyish smile. "Yes?" I say.

The guy looks me up and down. He doesn't seem impressed. "You're Mr Waller? Marvin Waller?"

"I am?"

"What?"

"What do you mean, what?"

He frowns. He's confused. The woman steps to the side. She's smiling. Her eyes really are amazingly blue. "Are you or are you not Marvin Waller?" she says. There's a hint of Irish in her voice.

"I am."

"Can we come in?"

"Not without a warrant, no."

The guy opens his wallet and shows me his shield. "We're detectives," he says.

"I'm impressed."

"I'm Detective Sergeant Turner. This is Detective Marcinko."

Marcinko? That ditches the Irish theory, I suppose. "Pleased to meet you, but I've got work to do." I go to close the door but the guy puts his foot in the gap.

"We'd like a word," he says.

"Trespass," I say.

"Trespass?"

"Yeah. It's a word. It means being where you're not invited."

"I know what trespass means."

"Okay, what about mephitic?"

"Mephitic?" he repeats, confused.

"Yeah, do you know what mephitic is?"

The guy looks at the woman. Then he looks back at me. "Are you fucking with me, Waller?"

"Not without a condom, no. Now would you please take your foot away?"

The woman puts a hand on Turner's shoulder and he steps to the side. The woman smiles at me like she wants to take me to bed and lick me all over. "Mr Waller, you'd really be doing us a favour if you'd let us in." I bet the smile has the bad guys swooning at her feet. She really is pretty. Not drop-dead gorgeous, but the sort of girl you'd take home to meet your mother. If you had a mother. Her hair is as black as night and there's a glossy sheen as if she's just washed it. I bet it smells like apples.

"I'd rather not."

"We're the police," says Turner.

"Do you have a warrant?"

"Why would we need a warrant?" he says.

I smile and tell him. "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized." I flash him a knowing smile.

"Amendment Four of the United States Constitution, made in 1787. You need a warrant. And you need probable cause."

"Are you a lawyer?" he asks.

"Why? Do you treat lawyers differently?"

He ignores the question. "We'd still like to come in," he says.

"I am not giving you my consent. If you keep putting pressure on me you run the risk of my consent not being truly voluntary and an infringement of my constitutional rights. It's up to you, but personally I'd just go. Unless you've got probable cause." I smile at the woman. "Do you have probable cause?" I ask.

"Mr Waller, all we want is a few moments of your time," she says.

"Marvin."

"Marvin?"

"Yeah, call me Marvin. Mr Waller always reminds me of my father."

"Okay, Marvin. Can we come in?"

"Only if you say the magic word."

"The magic word?"

"Yeah. The magic word."

She smiles. She gets it. "Please," she says.

"I've had enough of this shit," says Turner. He begins pushing the door with his foot. I take the pressure off and allow the door to open. He steps across the threshold.

"You realise, Sergeant Turner, that anything you see or hear from this moment on is tainted. There could be a corpse lying on the bed with my knife in its chest and there'd be not one thing you could do about it. I could have a kilo of cocaine in there and I couldn't be charged."

"Fuck off," he says and walks into the middle of the room. He looks into the alcove where the bed is as if to reassure himself that there isn't really a body there.

The woman closes the door. "Mr Waller, did you visit an apartment block on Fifth Avenue yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And you delivered an envelope to a resident?"

"I gave it to the doorman, yes."

"Later you wrote to the resident?"

"Mr DePalma, yes."

"And in that letter you made several disparaging comments about the doorman?"

"I pointed out what an inefficient little shit he is, yes."

She looks at a small notebook. "Last week, on Wednesday, you were waiting outside 200 Central Park South."

"I was?"

"According to the patrolman who stopped you, yes."

"If I was waiting, he wouldn't have had to stop me. Waiting implies I wasn't moving. So he wouldn't have to stop me, right?"

She smiles patiently, like a mother with a disobedient child. "But you were outside the building?"

"That's right."

"Would you mind telling us what you were doing there?"

"I was waiting to give a script to Dino de Laurentis. It's a horror film I'm working on."

"So you're a writer?" she asks.

I nod.

"Had anything published?" asks Turner.

"I'm a screen writer, not a novelist."

"So have you had anything filmed?" he asks.

I ignore him and look at Marcinko. "I was waiting in a public place. I wasn't committing an offence. The patrolman asked me for identification and I showed him my driving licence. He asked me why I was there and I told him. That's it. End of story."

"You've been reported waiting outside other buildings in the city."

"So?"

"So we'd like you to stop bothering people."

"I'm a writer. I have to get my work to the right people."

"That's what the mail is for, Waller," says Turner. "These people don't want you hanging around outside their homes like a bad smell."

"Have you had complaints?"

"Yes," he says. "Several doormen have complained."

"The doormen don't own the buildings. I haven't committed any crime."

"Look Marvin, this city has a problem with celebrity stalkers, you know that. People in the entertainment industry are getting nervous, and they don't want strangers standing outside their buildings. It doesn't matter that your intentions are good. You're a stranger. You make them nervous. We're asking you to take their feelings into consideration, that's all."

I shrug like I don't care. I haven't broken any laws. They're in my apartment illegally. I'm cool. "Have the people I've been waiting to see complained? Or are we just talking about a few bolshy doormen or secretaries?"

Marcinko looks at Turner. Something passes between them. Like telepathy.

"What's going on?" I ask. I hate it when people try to pull one over on me, like they think they're smarter than I am or something.

Marcinko is the one to answer. "You know what this city is like, Marvin. People get uneasy when strangers are around. We'd prefer it if in future you put your scripts in the mail." She pauses. Then smiles. "Okay?"

I pause. I smile. "Okay."

I show them to the door and they leave without saying anything else. I'm sure I haven't seen the last of them.

* * *

You dried the spittle from her chin while she was unconscious, on a handkerchief that's now back in your jacket pocket. Her breathing becomes less like a snore and gradually her eyes begin to flicker. You wait patiently for her to awaken. There's no rush. You have all the time in the world.

She has trouble focussing her eyes and it's obvious that at first she thinks she's dreaming, then she tries to move her arms and she feels the chains bite and it all rushes back. You hold the stun gun out and you can see the fear in her eyes. She shakes her head but before you can speak you tell her that you'll only use it if she disobeys you. Obedience, you tell her, is all you require. And your first instruction is that she is not to speak, only to listen. You ask her if she understands and she begins to say yes, but you raise the stun gun and she nods instead. Good, you tell her, that's good. She smiles like an uneasy child and you put the stun gun into your pocket. Out of sight but not out of mind.

You speak quietly, almost whispering so that she has to strain to catch each word. You tell her about the room in which she's being held, that it's underground, totally soundproofed and impossible for her to escape from. You explain about the door, how it's made of steel and operated by a numbered combination that has to be keyed in to a small metal panel. You show her the panel and you tell her that if any attempt is made to force it open it will lock shut. You explain that there's no key, and that there are thousands of combinations. After three wrong attempts, it will lock shut. You walk up to her and look her straight in the eyes. Her beautiful, blue eyes. You spell it out for her. If she does manage to incapacitate you, there is no way she can escape from the room. If she ever hopes to get out, it will only be because you allow it. And you will only allow it if you have her total and complete obedience. You're lying, of course, but you know that they'll grasp any straw you offer them in an attempt to stay alive. She nods meekly, but you're not fooled. Conversion doesn't take place that quietly, no matter how much the stun gun hurts. Pretty little Sarah might be smiling and nodding and moistening her full lips and giving off all the signals that she's yours to do with as you want, but you're too good a judge of human nature to let her pull the wool over your eyes. She thinks she's smarter than you, that she can lull you into a false sense of security and then catch you unawares. She's not the first, and she won't be the last. You ask her if she wants a drink of water and she nods. You pick the paper cup off the tiled floor and hold it to her lips and keep it there as she drinks. When she's finished you take it away. She

licks her lips and thanks you. You slap her face, hard, and tell her that she isn't to speak. Tears well up in her big, blue eyes.

You smile reassuringly as a red glow spreads across her left cheek. You can clearly see the marks your fingers left, red streaks across her soft white skin. You reach up to touch her cheek and she flinches like a whipped dog. You smile reassuringly and brush her hair behind her ear.

"Please don't hurt me," she says, her voice wavering. The heartfelt plea gives you a thrill deep inside. You tell her that everything is going to be okay so long as she does as she's told. It's a lie and the way she nods eagerly, grabbing at the words like a drowning man fumbling for a lifebelt, excite you beyond words. The training has begun.

* * *

I reread the Chain Male comedy and laugh out loud as I prowl around the apartment. It's good, even if I do say so myself. I decide to have another go at getting it to Mel Brooks. It's a cold day but I decide to walk anyway. On the way up to East 89th Street I have an idea. A cracker, a sort of black comedy. I'll call it The Jinx, something like that. It's about a guy, an ordinary guy called Ralph Delaney. Ralph is jinxed - wherever he is, whatever he's doing, bad things happen to people. At his high school sports day a pole vaulter is impaled on his pole, a swimmer drowns. At college, a professor is electrocuted while demonstrating a scientific experiment, buses crash after Ralph gets off, buildings burn down after he leaves them.

Ralph is blissfully unaware that he is the unwitting cause of the disasters, though he himself always emerges unscathed. He gets a video recorder as a graduation present and carries it everywhere. Before long he's capturing the most amazing rescues and disasters on video tape, and sells them to TV reality shows and news broadcasts. He is soon offered a staff job as a cameraman on a local TV station, and his career flourishes - no matter on what job he's sent, something bizarre happens and he captures it on film. His jinx means he never fails to get a big story and is close to landing a job with one of the networks. Then he meets a girl and falls in love. The jinx vanishes and his career stalls. He loses the girl and the jinx returns. Ralph realizes he must choose between love and his career. It's a great first act, all I need is the rest of the story.

I can't stop grinning as I walk and I get a few doubtful looks from passers-by. New York isn't a city where people smile in the streets, unless they've overdosed on their medication. Bearing in mind what happened last time, I wait some distance away from the main entrance. After a while, I start pacing up and down, trying to work out the second act of The Jinx. I'm so engrossed in the plot that I don't notice the two figures behind me until one of them speaks.

"Mr Waller?"

At first the voice doesn't register and I carry on walking with my head down.

"Mr Waller?"

I turn around. It's Marcinko and Turner. Turner is glaring at me but Marcinko has a butter-wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth smile plastered across her face. "I told you, Mr Waller is my father."

"What are you doing here, Marvin?"

Turner walks behind me and stands there as if he thinks I'm going to run away. "Just waiting," I say.

"Who for?"

"Am I committing an offence?"

"I'm simply asking you a question, Marvin."

"Fuck this, let's just take him down to the station," says Turner. I don't even bother to look at him, I just continue smiling at the angelic face of Officer Marcinko. She has a beautiful mouth.

"Am I catching a train?" I ask.

"Funny man," says Turner. "Funny, funny man."

"What's that?" asks Marcinko, nodding at the envelope.

"An envelope."

"Do you mind if I take a look at it."

"Yes. I do mind."

Turner puts a heavy hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "We want to look at the envelope."

Still I don't look at him. "I am withholding my consent. Unless you have reasonable articulable suspicion that I have committed an offence, you cannot officially stop and search me. Are we clear on that?"

"We've had a complaint from the building owners," says Marcinko.

"Not good enough," I say. "You'll need more than that for a Terry stop."

"You know about Terry stops, do you?" growls Turner. "Quite the little lawyer, aren't we?"

"You're certainly not, Detective Sergeant Turner, or you wouldn't be wearing out your shoes on the city's sidewalks. And you wouldn't have such a cheap watch on your wrist."

A Terry stop refers to the Supreme Court case which established that the police are allowed to question a suspect providing they have what's called reasonable articulable suspicion. Just a feeling that something is amiss won't do, they have to be able to explain what made them think something illegal was going on. And even then they only have the right to frisk for weapons, they can't go through pockets or do a strip search. For that they need a warrant, or an arrest. And neither are possible without probable cause. Standing on a street corner with an envelope isn't probable cause. No way. I know it and they know it so I just stand and smile and tell them no, they can't look at the envelope. So long as I don't try to run away or make any threatening gestures, they can't do anything to me.

"Who are you waiting for?" Marcinko asks.

"Officer Marcinko, you know who I am, I've explained that I'm waiting for someone, unless you feel that you have probable cause to make an arrest, I'd rather you left me alone."

Turner tightens his grip on my shoulder.

"And I regard that as physical detention against my will, and an infringement of my rights under the Fourth Amendment."

"Fuck you," says Turner, but he moves his hand. Marcinko frowns at him, then smiles at me. She's so transparent, this one. So used to getting her way on the back of her looks.

"Marvin. Please show me the envelope."

The magic word. She said the magic word. For that she deserves to be rewarded. I show it to her. She reads the name and address and then hands it back.

"We did ask you not to hang around outside buildings, Marvin. Why didn't you mail it?"

"I don't trust the doorman."

"The doorman can't stop the mail."

"You think not?"

"Mr Brooks isn't the only person who lives in this block, Marvin. There are a lot of single women."

"You think I'm a stalker, is that it?"

"Or worse," growls Turner. "Why don't you fuck off to LA, Waller. There's lots of directors and producers in La-La Land. You could really make a nuisance of yourself out there."

"Are you trying to run me out of town, sheriff?"

"No one's trying to run you out of town, Marvin," says Marcinko.

"But you'd be a lot happier out there, that's for sure," says Turner. "Sun, sand, starlets. Why don't you go buy yourself a one-way ticket?"

"Yeah, you'd contribute would you, Sergeant Turner? On a cop's salary? I don't think so." There's a flash of anger in his eyes. I got to him. I smile.

"You know that several young women have been murdered in this city over the past few months?" asks Marcinko.

"I watch TV."

"So you do know that there's a serial killer on the loose?"

"On the loose? You make it sound like a wild dog."

"That's what he is, Marvin. A wild dog. And we have to catch him. So I think you can understand why we don't want strangers standing outside people's homes. Right?"

I smile sweetly at her. "Officer Marcinko, if I was a serial killer, I'd hardly be standing out here in plain sight, would I?"

"How would you know how a serial killer behaves, Waller?" asks Turner, his voice loaded with contempt.

"I'm a writer," I say.

"Yeah, a writer who's yet to sell a screenplay. A wannabee writer."

For the first time I turn and look at him. I don't say anything, I just look at him. Into his soul. "I'd like to go now, please," I say. They step apart, and I walk away.

* * *

You tap the code number into the keypad, check through the peephole that she's still on the bed, and you open the door. There's no way she could possibly slip out of the padlocked chains, but it's better to be safe than sorry. She turns her head towards you, her eyes wet from crying. You close the door behind you and it clunks shut with a dull, solid thud that echoes around the room.

You ask her how she is and she says she wants to go home. You hold up the stun gun and explain to her that you never want to hear her ask to be released again. You press the button and it crackles and sparks and she nods quickly and says that she understands and that she's sorry. You smile and put the stun gun away. "Good," you tell her, "that's good." You walk over to the bed and sit down. She swallows nervously. "How are you, Sarah?" you ask, your voice soft.

"I'm fine," she says. She smiles nervously, a quick flash of perfect, white teeth.

"Good, that's good," you say. "Would you like me to unchain you?"

The look of anticipation on her face is so transparent that it makes you smile. She thinks that once she's unchained she's only one step away from freedom. You shake your head, almost sadly. You explain how it's going to work, that you'll remove the chain from her wrists and her ankles and that you'll replace them with one chain around her waist which will keep her fastened to the wall. It will allow her to sleep on the bed and to reach the bathroom, but she won't be able to get to the door. She nods, still assuming that it'll be easier to escape

once the chains are off. You stroke her face again and she smiles. You can tell it's not genuine, she's trying to fool you, but that's okay. It's a start.

"I'll be good," she says, but you know she doesn't mean it.

"I know you will," you say. "But I haven't finished explaining what I want. Be silent until I've finished." She nods, eager to please. "The first thing you must remember is that you only speak if I ask you a question. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she replies hesitantly, as if it's a trap and you're going to punish her for replying.

"Good," you say, "that's really good. Now, I'm going to take the chains off today so that you can get to the bathroom and wash. Tomorrow, when I come in, you will get off the bed, you'll stop whatever it is you're doing and you'll stand before me, your head bowed, your eyes on the floor. I want your complete obedience, nothing less. Whatever I ask you to do, you will do without question." Her eyes open wide as she realises the ramifications of what you're saying and you press a finger to her full lips to silence her because if she speaks you'll have to punish her. "I'll ask you to take your clothes off and you'll do it, won't you?"

She's frightened, you can see it in her eyes. She doesn't know what to say. You reach behind you and show her the knife. It's a big one, heavy and sharp, the sort you could use to carve raw meat and it glints under the overhead lights. "If you don't do it willingly, I can do it right now with this. And a lot worse, too, if you make me. It'll be better if you do it yourself. Do you understand?"

She nods, but the reluctance is clear in her eyes. You take the knife and run the tip of the blade down the silky material of her shirt. "I could cut them off now, if you'd prefer." She shakes her head furiously and you know you've won. You smile and lean forward to plant a light kiss on her forehead. You can still smell spearmint on her breath.

* * *

I go to the movies for an afternoon show and see an actress who'll be just perfect for the female lead in *Checking Out*. When I get home I pace around the room for a while, wondering if I should send her a copy of the synopsis to see if she'd be interested. I'm hesitating because I've had a few bad experiences writing to stars. In fact, I don't include my name or address when I write to stars anymore, unless I use a PO Box. It's not because the stars themselves don't appreciate fans writing to them, but for some reason they tend to surround themselves by over-protective idiots.

I don't know if they set out to hire unsuitable people, in fact I'm sure they don't, but I guess that the people they employ start to resent their employers after a while and stop acting in their best interests. I can understand that, I really can. I mean, it must be hard for an ordinary person to work in the shade of a star, someone like Cher or Madonna or Julia Roberts. They'd always know that no matter how hard they worked they could never hope to achieve one half of one per cent of their employer's success. That sort of thing could turn anyone sour, anyone who wasn't mentally stable, that is.

Anyway, people like that, after a while they become over-protective, they do everything they can to keep between the stars and their fans. They form a sort of defensive wall, I guess because it adds to their own sense of importance. I wrote to a really cute blonde in a daytime soap a couple of years back. She's beautiful, really sexy, and totally wasted in the soap. I wrote and told her, and said that she'd be a natural to play the lead in a movie I'd written and that I'd like to talk to her about it. A month went by and she still hadn't replied so I wrote again and sent her a photocopy of

my first letter, but the day after I sent it I got a letter from her, and a signed photograph. Well, it wasn't actually a letter specially for me, it was a standard letter: thanks for my support, glad I liked the show, that sort of thing. No mention of my script. So I wrote again, saying that she must have misunderstood, but a few days later I got another photograph, the same one, believe it or not, and another standard letter. The wording was identical. I got mad then, and wrote a letter saying that I could only assume that my letters weren't reaching her and that someone on her staff must be intercepting them. A secretary probably. The old secretarial wall strikes again. Anyway, I sent the letter by Federal Express direct to the studio where they record the show but I never got a reply.

I realised that the only way I was going to get to her would be to go in person, so I bought a huge bouquet of flowers, a hundred bucks worth, and took it round to the lot. I told the security guard there that I worked for a delivery service and that they had to be delivered to the director. I got to within ten feet of her - and yes, she looks even sexier in real life - but then an overweight woman with bad skin and greasy hair came up to me and asked who I was and what I wanted. I gave her the delivery story but she called the security guard over had them throw me off the set. I was sure that she was the one who'd been intercepting my letters.

The security guard was another of life's underachievers: he gave me a warning and kicked me off the lot. I wrote another letter to the actress, explaining what had happened because I don't think she saw me, and I'm sure she didn't know how badly I'd been treated. I asked her if I could meet her, maybe even take her to lunch.

I got a visitor a week or so later. At two o'clock in the morning. The doorbell rang and I was half asleep when I answered it. I was wearing my bathrobe and nothing else and my eyes were thick with sleep, which is how the guy managed to take me by surprise, I guess. He asked me if I was Marvin Waller and I said I was and then he hit me in the stomach, hard. He pushed me back into the apartment and kicked the door shut, then made me sit on the coffee table. He was Italian and looked as if he hadn't shaved for a couple of days. His suit was made of some expensive, shiny material, and he had spats. Yeah, I remember the spats because I had my head down for the first minute or two while I massaged my stomach and got my breath back. Black shoes with white, spotless spats.

He grabbed my hair and forced me to look up, and he threw some letters at me. The letters I'd written to the actress. I looked at the letters and when I looked up again he had a gun in his hand. A big one. An automatic. He shoved it under my nose and said that I was never again to write to her, that I wasn't to go within five miles of her, the studio, or her house. That if I did, he'd come and see me again and that he wouldn't be as gentle. He asked me if I understood, like I was some sort of retard. I told him I did. He asked me if I agreed to stay away from her and I said yes. I wasn't afraid, I really wasn't, because I could see he still had the safety on. He didn't scare me, I just told him what he wanted to hear so that he'd get the hell out of my apartment. He went, with his shiny suit and sparkling spats and Mafia accent. I didn't write to the actress again, I couldn't see the point, but it was the last time I ever put my address on a letter to a star.

The memory makes my hands shake and I pace around the room, faster and faster. I decide it'd be better not to send the synopsis to the actress I'd seen at the movie theatre. Especially now that Marcinko and Turner are on my case. I've too much to lose.

The doorbell rings and even before I open the door I know it's them.

"Marvin, can we come in?" asks Marcinko. I look at her and smile. "Please," she adds. I take off the chain and open the door for her. I get a whiff of something sweet and fragrant, like a fresh meadow. Turner follows her into the room, bringing with him the smell of sweat and stale cigarette smoke.

"Now what?" I say, directing the question at Marcinko because I prefer to deal with her. Turner is giving off bad vibes, like he wants to smash me against the wall and drive his knee into my groin. I don't like Turner, and it's clear he doesn't think I'm flavour of the month.

"Marvin, we'd like you to come down to the station with us."

"Why, are you scared to be out on your own?"

She laughs despite herself and her hand goes up to cover her mouth. Her teeth are surprisingly white, surprising because cops tend to drink a lot of coffee and smoke too many cigarettes. Yellow teeth go with the job, but Marcinko's belong in a toothpaste advertisement. I wonder what she'd be like to kiss. "No Marvin, I'm not scared to be out on my own. But we'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Can't we do that here?"

"Why, are you scared of going out?" asks Turner. He's staring at the bed.

"Probable cause?" I say.

Marcinko shakes her head. "We'd just like to talk to you."

"About doormen?"

"No. Not about doormen."

"About what then?"

"Forget this shit," Turner says to Marcinko. "Let's just take him in."

"I'll only come with you if you arrest me, and you don't have probable cause to make an arrest. If you make an illegal arrest then it won't matter if you Miranda me or let me call a lawyer, any case you eventually make will fail. Fruit of the poisoned tree."

"I'll give you fruit of the poisoned tree," he snarls, thrusting his face close up to mine. I breathe out and his spectacles fog up. I have to clamp my teeth together to stop myself grinning as he backs away and wipes the lenses with a bright red handkerchief.

"Unfortunately for you, Sergeant Turner, I know my rights."

"We know you know your rights, Marvin," says Marcinko. "You're a very intelligent individual."

I look into Officer Marcinko's deep blue eyes. She's using a dark blue mascara to bring out the colour. She has the most amazing eyes. "Don't bother trying to flatter me," I say.

Her eyes widen like it was the last thing on her mind. "I just think we'd be more comfortable down at the station. I mean, it's not as if you have much in the way of chairs."

She's right, of course, there is only the one chair. I think of asking her to sit on the bed with me, but decide against it. "That suggests it's going to take some time," I say.

She shrugs. "We've a few questions for you."

"And you can't ask them here?"

"We'd prefer to do it downtown."

"On your turf?"

"Sort of. Will you?" She smiles, showing her perfect teeth. "Please."

She's definitely used to getting her own way. And she's clearly told Turner to take a back seat so that she can work her magic on me. "I'll do you a deal?" I say.

She seems amused. "A deal?"

"Yeah. Let me see your credentials and badge."

"That's all?"

I hold out my hand. "Sure."

She takes out a black leather wallet and flips it open. I take it off her and hold out my other hand to Turner. He looks at her and she nods. He gives me his wallet, but he's not happy about it. I sit down and copy down the details on a sheet of paper.

"What are you doing?" Turner asks, frowning.

"For my records," I say.

"Your records? What fucking records?"

I smile benignly. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about that, Sergeant Turner." I hand his wallet back to him, and toss the other one to Marcinko. She catches it one-handed. "Okay," I say. "Let's go."

There's a dirty brown sedan parked outside and I get to sit in the back. I don't have to go with them but I'm having fun with Marcinko. She's cute, for a cop. Lisa is her first name, according to the ID. We drive into the parking lot of the police station and they take me through a back entrance along green-painted corridors to an interview room. Turner waves me to a chair. "Do I get a phone call?" I ask.

"A phone call? What do you want a phone call for?"

"It's my right, isn't it?"

He rubs his nose with the back of his hand. There's a class ring on it, blue with bits of yellow in it. "All we're doing is having a talk here, Waller."

Marcinko closes the door and stands leaning against it, her arms folded across her chest.

"Sure, but I'd like to make a phone call," I say. "Am I under arrest?"

"You know you're not under arrest, Marvin," says Marcinko. "We'd have read you your rights if you were under arrest."

"He knows that," says Turner. "He knows all there is to know about his rights."

"So I'd like to make a phone call, okay."

"Are you calling a lawyer, Marvin?" asks Marcinko.

"Why? Do I need a lawyer?"

"You tell me," she says. She uncrosses her arms and moves away from the door. "But if you do call a lawyer, we'll think that you've got something to hide."

We stand looking at each other for several seconds. I have an almost irresistible impulse to kiss her on the lips. I smile, wondering how she'd react, whether she'd pull her gun or kiss me back. "I'll just be a few minutes," I say. I pat my pockets. "I don't suppose you've got a quarter, have you?"

"Jesus Christ," mutters Turner behind me, but Marcinko takes out a small leather purse and gives me a quarter, like a mother handing out pocket money to a child. Our fingers touch as she gives me the coin and there's a spark, like static electricity.

"Did you feel that?" I ask.

She smiles and opens the door for me. "Go make your call, Marvin."

Five minutes later and I'm back in the room. Turner stands in a corner like a cigar-store wooden Indian, face impassive, and Marcinko is sitting at the table. "Sit down, Marvin," she says. Great. It's going to be the good cop-bad cop routine and it's no surprise whose going to be playing the good cop. Lisa with the smiling eyes.

I sit down and give her the boyish grin, flicking the hair out of my eyes. She wants me, I can tell. She might not realise it yet, but Officer Lisa Marcinko has the hots for me. "So, what's up?" I ask as if I haven't a care in the world.

She takes out a pack of cigarettes and a disposable lighter and offers me one. I shake my hand. "Mind if I do?" she asks, trying to build a relationship between us.

"Go ahead," I say. "Just remember that smoking kills."

She smiles thinly and lights up, blowing the smoke towards the ceiling through slightly pursed lips. "So, Marvin. Tell me a little bit about yourself."

"You sound like you're interviewing me for a job."

"You're twenty-three years old, yes?"

"Yes." She could have got that from my driving licence.

"You went to the New York Film School for two semesters, yes?"

"Yes." That didn't come off my driving licence. They've been making enquiries. I wonder how much digging they've done.

"Why did you drop out?"

"I wasn't learning anything."

"Why do you think that was?"

"You know what they say. If you can't do, teach."

"You're quite smart aren't you?"

"You tell me."

She takes another deep pull on the cigarette. "Yes, I think you're quite smart. Have you ever had your IQ measured?"

"Once or twice."

"And?"

"One eighty. Or thereabouts."

Her eyes widen. "That's genius level."

"And some." She smiles. Maybe she hadn't realised how smart I am.

"You're interested in film, aren't you?"

"Sure. I'm a screenwriter." There's a snort from Turner and I know what he's thinking.

"Do you have a video camera?"

Interesting question that. I think I know what she's getting at. "Sure. Doesn't everyone these days?"

"Where is it?"

"At home. I haven't used it for ages."

She nods and flicks ash onto the floor. There's no ashtray in the interview room. Maybe they think I'll use it as a weapon. "Why do you think it is that you haven't sold a script, Marvin?"

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"You think your screenplays are good, don't you?"

"Sure."

"And plenty of less talented writers get their work accepted, right?"

"Too right."

"So, what's holding you back?"

I lean forward. "Secretaries," I say.

"Secretaries?"

"Yeah. They're emissaries of Satan."

"Really?"

I lean back and grin. "No, of course not. But they act as barriers. That's why I wait outside buildings, to get to the top guy."

She nods. "You've written several letters complaining about secretaries, haven't you?"

"Some. I figure that the guys at the top should know what's going on, that's all. Why are you asking about secretaries?"

"Just routine," she says.

"I don't think so. I don't think it's routine at all. The serial killer you're looking for has killed three secretaries so far, hasn't he? And the woman who's missing, the latest one, she's a secretary too, isn't she?"

"That was on the TV, was it?" asks Marcinko.

"Or in the Times, yeah."

"What do you know about the latest case?"

I raise my eyebrows. "You're asking me?"

"Sure. Maybe you can help us."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you might have a different perspective. A writer's perspective."

My neck starts to itch and I want to scratch it, but I know she'll take any nervous movement as an indication of guilt, so I block the itch out of my mind.

"So, do you know the woman's name?"

"Hall," I say. "Sarah Hall."

"She's not one of the secretaries who works for Satan, is she?"

I laugh. If she's trying to trap me, she's way too obvious. "I shouldn't think so. Do you mean, does she work for a producer or director? Is she one of the women who've been giving me a hard time? I don't know, Officer Marcinko. Or may I call you Lisa?"

"You can call me Lisa if you want."

I turn to look at Turner. "What about you, Ed?"

"You can call me Sergeant Turner, Waller."

"Fine by me, Ed," I say, and flash him a grin. Fuck him. I look back at Marcinko.

"You've seen the videos, haven't you Marvin?"

"The ones he sends to the TV stations. Sure. Everyone has."

"Tell me about the videos."

I sit back in the chair and look into her blue eyes, trying to read what's on her mind. "He makes them do things to themselves, and films them."

She nods. "That's right. And then what does he do?"

I shrug. "I guess he kills them."

"And then what?"

"Then he gets rid of the bodies, I suppose."

She leans forward. "That's not been on the TV, has it, Marvin?"

"What?"

"The bodies. We've never found their bodies."

"Maybe he's too smart for you."

Our eyes lock for what seems an eternity. I can feel her looking right inside me. It's a scary feeling, like she was searching through my pockets and there's nothing I can do to stop her. "Yes, Marvin. Maybe he is."

"You're sweating, Waller," says Turner. He walks to stand behind Marcinko. Good cop, bad cop. "You're sweating like maybe you're hiding something from us."

"It's hot in here," I say.

"It's not that hot," says Turner. "Are you hot, Marcinko?"

"No. Not really."

"See, Waller. It's not hot in here. You're sweating, man. Sweating like a pig. A stinking, sweating, guilty pig."

I smile tightly because I don't feel like smiling. I feel like lashing out, like kicking and hitting until I make him bleed. "Guilty of what, Ed?"

He's just about to answer when the door opens and a uniformed cop sticks his head into the room.

"Hey, Marcinko. You got a guy called Waller in here?"

I raise a hand like I'm in school. "This is him," says Marcinko. "Why?"

The cop grins. "He's got a visitor," he says.

"A fucking lawyer," sighs Turner. "I knew it."

The cop's grin widens and he pushes the door open. There's a pizza delivery boy there carrying a cardboard box. I smile at Marcinko. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I ordered a deep pan with everything on it. Everything except anchovies. I hate anchovies."

Marcinko can't stop herself from smiling at me. She looks really pretty when she smiles. There's a spark in her that even the job can't stifle. "Me too," she says, and I can feel a bond forming between us.

* * *

You check through the peephole and see her lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. You tap out the combination on the keypad and as you push open the door she jumps to her feet, the chain clinking on the floor as she stands up. For a second she forgets to avert her eyes but then she sees the stun gun and quickly looks at the floor. Her hands begin to tremble and she clasps them together in front of her. You keep looking at her as you close the door behind you. She doesn't look up and you smile. She is learning quickly. You walk slowly towards her, taking your time, savouring it. The anticipation is half the pleasure. You stop when you get to within six feet of her and you know that she can see your legs but still she doesn't look up. Her blonde hair has swung forward creating a curtain around her face and it brushes against her shoulders making a soft, swishing sound.

Her skirt reaches to just above her knees and hugs her hips and thighs. She is standing with her legs slightly apart and the material is stretched between them. You look down at her legs and realise that something is wrong. She isn't wearing her shoes. You see them underneath the bed and when you look back at her legs you see that smooth and tanned as they are, she isn't wearing her stockings.

"Where are your stockings?" you ask sharply and she flinches.

"The bathroom," she says, nervously.

You step forward and punch her in the stomach so hard that she doubles over and her head bangs into your chest. Her body is wracked by coughing sobs and you grab her shoulders and push her upright. Tears are streaming down her cheeks. You take deep breaths to calm yourself down. It's important that all commands are given without anger, calmly and rationally. With authority. "I told you to wash yourself, and to dress. That means everything. I didn't tell you to leave off your stockings, or your shoes. I want you to look your best. Do you understand, Sarah?"

"Yes," she says, and reaches up to wipe her nose with the back of her hand.

"Good," you say. "I want you to shower again, and then I want you to dress properly. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she says. She looks up at you, her big blue eyes wet and puffy, then realises that she's broken another rule and quickly lowers her eyes.

"Good," you say. "But before I leave you, I'm going to have to punish you, so that you don't forget again." She jerks and pulls away but you push her back onto the bed and hold the stun gun close to her left arm. "I don't want to do this, but it's for your own good," you say, then you press the button and the electrodes crackle blue and you push them down against her flesh as she struggles and screams.

* * *

I'm pacing around the apartment in my bare feet, drinking a cup of coffee and chewing on a bagel. The doorbell rings. "Go away!" I yell, because I'm in the middle of something and I don't want to be disturbed.

"Marvin, open the door please." It's Marcinko, and I know that she's not alone.

"I'm busy. If you haven't got a warrant, leave me alone." I carry on pacing and I hear a muffled conversation. Turner is with her. I can feel their presence outside the door and I feel the creative juices stop flowing. I fight to keep my imagination on track but it slips away like dispersing fog. I curse under my breath.

When I open the door they're standing there like soldiers on parade. "How do you guys keep getting in?" I ask. "There's a security system that's supposed to keep undesirables out."

"Ha ha," says Turner.

"Can we come in?" asks Marcinko. I look at her with one eyebrow raised. "Please?" she adds.

I step aside to let them inside. "Do you want coffee?" I ask. They both shake their heads. "So to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Marcinko looks at the stack of paper by the typewriter. "You working on something?"

"Sure, I'm always working on something. Writer's write, that's what we do. You know, like detectives detect."

Marcinko nods at the paper. "So what is it?"

"It's a thriller. A sort of Die Hard in a Las Vegas casino. Bruce Willis would be great for the lead, might even have a role for Demi."

"Demi?"

"Demi Moore. His wife. The girl in Ghost, the one who cried."

"Ah yes. 145 Central Park West. One of your haunts."

"But that wasn't what I was doing when you got here." For some reason I want to tell her what I'm working on. I want her to get close to me.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I had this great idea, a real feel-good movie. I'm going to call it Return To Sender, like the Elvis song, you know?"

"Sure I know. I'm a big fan of the king."

"Yeah? Okay, so it's about five middle-aged rednecks who play poker every Thursday night in a small mid-Western town. They're similar: overweight, badly dressed, loud, obnoxious - and single. No woman could bear to marry any of them. Then one of the men turns up on poker night with an advertisement for mail order brides from the Philippines and they all agree it's a terrific idea - beautiful young Asian brides who will do anything for an American.

"They send away for videos of the girls on offer, and two weeks later they're off to Manila for face-to-face meetings. When the five return to their town with young brides, the townsfolk are furious. They reckon that the new arrivals are nothing better than hookers. The local minister

delivers a sermon condemning them, the girls are ignored on the street and shopkeepers refuse to serve them. In fact, the girls are, with one exception, good Catholic girls who really do want to be loyal, hard-working wives. The new arrivals are pursued by the young studs of the town, but they're all rebuffed, with the exception of one girl, Rosa, who actually is a former bargirl and who decides to start sleeping with guys for cash behind her husband's back." Marcinko puts her head on one side as she listens. She seems enthralled, but Turner is kneeling down beside the bed and looking under it. I know what he's looking for. The video camera. I ignore him and continue with the story.

"The girls are fans of all things American, especially Elvis songs. Picture them walking down the town's main street in short skirts and skimpy tops to the tune of Return To Sender, the townsfolk glaring at them and gossiping."

Marcinko nods. She gets it.

"Okay, so the girls seem ignorant of the effect they have on the town, they smile and giggle even when faced with hostility and bad manners. The rednecks' regular Thursday night poker games continue, and Thursday also becomes the girls night for getting together. They talk about the problems they're having with their husbands, while the men play poker and boast about the sex they're getting. Gradually the girls win around the townsfolk. They're keen churchgoers - sitting in the front row, a major distraction for the minister and the old organist - and spend their spare time cleaning the church, tidying up the graveyard and supplying fresh flowers. The girls also begin to gradually change their men - they smarten up their appearance, improve their diet and manners, and help them with their businesses. The girls are smart cookies, and before they realize it, the rednecks are on their way to being transformed - for the better. Their businesses thrive. The girls even get together and put an end to Rosa's freelance activities."

Turner gives up the search for the video camera and walks back into the main room. He stands looking down at the sheets of paper on the coffee table. He's obviously isn't interested in the story. But Marcinko is. I seem to have her undivided attention.

"The church is short of money and the girls plan a town dance to raise funds," I continue, pacing as I talk because that's the way I think. "The girls decide to teach their men to jive, and meet much resistance. In their own way, each of the girls persuades her man to learn the steps: one by withholding beer, one by withholding food, another by refusing to let her man smoke, another by hiding his bowling ball, and Rosa gets her man to learn by withholding sex. On the night of the town dance, the minister thanks the girls, the townsfolk applaud and the girls take to the dancefloor with their men."

I stop pacing and hold my hands out to her, like an actor expecting applause. "So, what do you think? Is that a feel-good movie, or what?"

"It's great," she says.

"It stinks," growls Turner.

"You really think so?" asks Marcinko.

"Yeah, you should write it."

"Yeah, maybe I will. Once I get Checking Out done."

"Checking Out?"

"The casino story. But you really think it's a winner? You're not just saying that?"

She smiles, and it seems genuine. "You should write it, Marvin."

We stand looking at each other. For a moment I forget that she's a cop. "Yeah. Maybe I will."

Turner snorts softly like a racehorse ready to run. I wonder what they want. Actually, I know what they want. Me. Or my head on a plate. "So. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Just a few questions, Marvin. For the record."

"Yeah? We're making a record are we?"

She smiles but doesn't rise to the bait. She's a cool one is Officer Marcinko. "This is quite a small place, isn't it?" she asks, looking around the apartment.

"It's big enough for me," I reply.

"But you'd prefer more space, surely?"

I shrug like I don't care either way. "It's just a place to write."

She pounces, like a cat on a bird. "So you have another place, somewhere more comfortable?"

I narrow my eyes. "What makes you think that?"

"It's a bit small, that's all I meant. Why don't you move into somewhere bigger?"

"Writers write best when they're struggling," I say. "That's a fact."

"But you're not struggling, are you?" I feel her questions tightening around me like a steel snare.

"I haven't sold a script yet, if that's what you're getting at."

She smiles sweetly. "I think you know what I'm getting at, Marvin."

"Yeah," Turner snarls. "He knows exactly what we're fucking getting at."

"You're playing a role, aren't you, Marvin? This is all a game to you, isn't it?"

"I don't follow you."

She waves a hand around the apartment. "This. All this. This isn't real, is it? This is an image, it's your idea of what a struggling writer should live like, isn't it?"

"What do you want?" I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Your father was Sam Waller, wasn't he?" Her voice is almost a whisper, as if she's telling me a secret.

"Why do you ask?" I say. "If you know, you know."

"Okay. I'm telling you. Sam Waller was your father. And when he died, he left you more than half a million dollars."

"Maybe he's spent it already," says Turner. I ignore him.

"So, a man with half a million dollars doesn't have to live in a rabbit hutch, does he, Marvin?"

"Not unless he wants to," I say.

She nods slowly. "That's what we thought. In fact, we thought that maybe you had another home somewhere. Somewhere bigger."

"Somewhere where I might be able to keep a woman prisoner?"

"You see, Marvin. I knew you'd understand."

"No."

"No? No you don't understand?"

"I mean no, this is my only home."

"Yes, but you see our problem, Marvin. You'd have to say that, wouldn't you? If you did have another home, and if you were holding Sarah Hall there, you wouldn't tell us, would you?"

"I suppose not. Can I get you guys anything to drink?"

"No thank you."

I turn to look at Turner. "What about you, Ed?"

"We know you're the one, Waller," he says.

"The one? What, the special person in your life, Ed? Is that what you mean? I hardly think so. We've only just met." He glares at me and I can see that I've got to him. I look back at Marcinko. "Look, this is crazy. You start off by telling me I mustn't bother people at their homes, now you're accusing me of being a serial killer."

"No one's accusing you of anything," she says.

"Yet," says Turner. The yet hangs there like a bad smell.

"If we were accusing you, we'd tell you your rights," she says.

"I know my rights," I say.

"I know you do." She takes a deep breath and her breasts seem to push up against her shirt.

"Marvin, we have a problem."

"We?"

"We've been doing some digging, and what we've found is a little worrying."

"Worrying?" I don't like the way the conversation is going, but I've lost the initiative. The ball is in her court.

"It's starting to look as if you fit the profile of the person we're looking for. You know what a profile is?"

"Yeah. I know."

"So you can see how that concerns us. We have to check. Follow it through. Satisfy ourselves that you're not the killer."

"This is crazy."

"No, it's not crazy. It's police work. It's our job. How much do you know about serial killers?"

I shake my head, confused. "I don't know. Only what I've read. For research."

"Okay." She waits for me to continue, leaving a silence and hoping that I'll fill it.

"They're usually white. Very few are black. They're usually male, and they're usually in their early to mid twenties. That's it, is it? That's your profile? There must be hundreds of thousands of people who fit that description in New York alone."

"Our profile is a bit more detailed than that, Marvin."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. We had some help from the FBI profilers at Quantico. Our profile runs to almost a dozen pages. And the more we look into your background, the more it seems to describe you."

"I don't believe you. You're just trying to scare me."

She smiles like she wants to be my friend, like I can trust her. "Marvin, why would we want to scare you?"

"So tell me how I fit this profile."

"Okay. You're a good looking young man. According to the profile, the perpetrator is handsome. Attractive to women."

I laugh out loud. "Come on, Officer Marcinko. I told you not to flatter me."

"This isn't flattery. I'm telling you the truth."

"So why does your FBI profiler think the killer is good looking?"

"Because there have never been any signs of a struggle when the victims have disappeared. He must be able to get close to the women without frightening them. We believe he drugs them before taking them away, so he must be fairly strong. But if he's strong, he'd be threatening - unless he's a good-looking guy and the women are attracted to him. You're a member of a gym on 45th Street, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I work out sometimes."

"You could probably lift me, couldn't you?"

"Sure. What else?"

"We think the man we're looking for is well above average intelligence. Possibly a genius."

"On what basis?"

"On the basis that we're no closer to catching him now than we were two years ago. Because he's never left any evidence that could identify him. And because we've never found the bodies. Oh, he's clever, all right."

"What else?"

"An interest in movies."

"Because he videos his victims?"

"It's more than that. The technical quality is good, the videos are edited before they're sent to the TV stations, there's a professional feel to them. And you were at the New York Film School, right?"

"You know I was."

Turner puts his hands on his hips like a prizefighter between rounds. "Where's your video camera, Waller? The one you told us about."

I shrug like it's the last thing on my mind. "I lent it to a friend."

"Care to give us his name?"

"Not really." I turn back to Marcinko. "Nothing you've said so far is specific to me, Lisa," I say, using her first name, making it personal.

She looks me right in the eye. "Marvin," she says, "do you know where Sarah Hall is?"

I keep my eyes on hers, fighting the urge to look away, fighting the urge to scratch my nose or shift my feet or give off any of the dozens of signals that would suggest that I was lying, the signals that she's trained to spot. "No," I say. "No, I don't." I smile. "You don't need a search warrant to see that she's not here."

"Which is why we were wondering if you had another home somewhere."

Turner coughs like he smokes too much. "Yeah. Somewhere bigger," he says.

I shake my head. "What you see is what you get."

Marcinko nods as if considering what I've said. "You've been following the case, haven't you, Marvin?"

"Sure? I watch TV."

She carries on nodding, watching me with her pretty blue eyes. The silence crystallises around us like water turning into ice. "So you said," she says eventually. "But you don't have a TV, Marvin."

I stare at her for several seconds. Several long seconds. "It's in for repair."

"Really?" It's clear that she doesn't believe me.

"Really."

"What about the video recorder?"

"What do you mean?"

"You say you have a video camera, but you haven't got a video recorder. Or is that being repaired, too?"

"I lent it to the friend who wanted the camera."

She gives me the friendly smile. "You're not stupid, Marvin. You can see where this is heading."

"Yeah. But you still don't have probable cause. You have a profile, that's all."

"So we were wondering if you'd come down to the station with us, help us to clear this thing up, one way or the other."

"I don't think so."

She holds my look for a while. "Please," she says.

"Not this time, Lisa," I say. "This isn't a joke any more."

Turner stands close behind me. I can smell garlic on his breath. Garlic and stale cigarette smoke. "This was never a joke, Waller," he says. "You killed those women and you're going to kill Sarah Hall if you haven't already. We know you did it, Waller."

"So arrest me, Ed."

He grins. "We will, Waller. Sooner or later, we will."

"Marvin," interrupts Marcinko. "We'd like you to take a lie detector test."

"It won't be admissible."

"No, but it would put our minds at rest."

I think about it for a while. I decide it might be fun. I nod. "But not today," I say.

"Whenever you want."

"Tomorrow afternoon. Three o'clock."

She nods. "Okay. She smiles. "Thanks, Marvin."

* * *

You stand at the door, your eye pressed against the peephole, one hand flat against the painted wood. The door is warm to the touch but it's deceptive because underneath the wooden veneer is a two inch thick slab of cold steel suspended from the concrete walls by reinforced hinges. She's sitting on the edge of the bed, her long legs crossed at her ankles. You get a tight feeling in the pit of your stomach as you see that she's wearing her high heels. She's looking at the padlock which keeps the chain locked around her waist and you know that she's trying to find a way out. She's still clinging to the hope that she'll be able to find a way out. It's a good feeling, watching her and knowing that you have absolute power over her. She reaches up and rubs her nose as if it was itching, a small, child-like gesture. She looks directly at the door, almost as if she sees you, though you know that's not possible. She's wondering whether or not she'll be able to get the door open if she does manage to get free from the chain.

You punch the combination into the panel and the bolts click back. You check the peephole again and see that she's standing up, her hands linked at her waist, her head down. You open the door and step into the room. "Good," you say, "you look much better."

You close the door behind you and stand with your back against it, savouring the anticipation. It's not the sex, you know that, it's something much stronger, much more stimulating. It's the power, the ability to make another human being conform to your wishes, no matter what they are. The power to make them do whatever you want, and to gradually take away everything they hold dear: their freedom, their dignity, and, eventually, their life. You feel a shiver of anticipation which is so intense that you gasp and close your eyes. The tremor passes after a few seconds and you run your hands against the sides of your trousers. Your palms are sweating, but, perversely, your mouth is dry. You walk to the bathroom and pick up a paper cup from the shelf under the metal mirror which is bolted to the wall. You fill the cup with cold water and drink half of it slowly, and then carry it back into the main room. You stand at the end of the bed, looking at her, side on. She has a good figure, no indication that she's a mother of young children. A word comes to mind suddenly: ripe. The woman is ripe for picking, like a fruit that is ready to drop from the tree. You lick your lips. "Take off your blouse, Sarah," you say quietly. She starts to tremble and at first you think she's going to resist but then her hands flutter up to the top button of her shirt. One by one she undoes the buttons and then her hands fall to her side as if reluctant to do her bidding.

"Take the shirt off," you say. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, then shrugs the shirt off her shoulders and removes her arms from the sleeves. She half turns and puts the shirt on the bed, careful not to catch your eye. Her hands return to their original position, linked at her waist. You move to stand in front of her. Her breasts are rising and falling as she breathes, and you can see beads of sweat gathering in her cleavage. Her bra is white and lacy with a small metal clasp at the front. It seems a fraction too small. Perhaps she buys them that way deliberately, knowing that it has the effect of pushing her breasts together, making them look larger and firmer. Her skin is milky white and unmarked, no scars or discolorations, as if she'd spent a lot of money on expensive oils and soaps and kept out of the sun. You savour the moment, and fight back the urge to rush things. You rushed the first few, but you've learned from your mistakes. For the power to be truly appreciated, it has to be extended. Prolonged.

"Sarah," you say, "I want you to take off your bra."

She swallows nervously. You know what she's thinking. She thinks she's smart, she thinks that if she can only talk to you that she'll be able to persuade you to let her go. She's used to dealing with her children, using the force of her intellect to keep them in order, and she's used to getting her own way with a husband who probably worships her. All her life she's been able to get what she wants by smiling cutely and using the right words and she thinks that you'll be just as much of a pushover, if only she could find the right thing to say. But she remembers the stun gun, she knows that as soon as she starts to speak you'll hurt her again, and she doesn't want the pain. Her hands begin to shake. She wants to risk it, she wants to try and talk you out of it because she can see where things are heading. Taking off her shirt is one thing, it's something she might do in a changing room or in front of her family. The bra is something else. It represents a barrier she doesn't want to cross.

"The bra, Sarah. I won't ask again."

Her lips part and you think that she's actually going to speak, but then they close tight. Her hands move slowly up and reach for the clasp but she resists actually opening it. She needs a nudge. "Sarah, you want to see your children again, don't you?"

You hear the metallic click of the clasp parting and the bra opens like a flower sensing the sun. You watch as the lace pulls away from the white flesh of her breasts, almost as if the material had been stuck to the skin. The breasts move outwards and downwards as they are freed from their confinement, but as she slips off the bra you can see that they still do their best to defy gravity, standing proud and full, the nipples small and erect. She throws the bra on the bed and crosses her arms across her chest, trying to hide her nakedness. You chuckle. "Drop your hands," you say. She does as she's told. She begins to cry, small, animal snuffling noises, and tears run down her cheeks. Crying is a defensive response, you know. Either consciously or subconsciously she hopes that by appearing weak and defenceless you'll leave her alone, like a submissive dog lying flat on its back, its tail between its legs and its throat exposed. I'm weak, she's saying, I can't hurt you so leave me alone. She doesn't realise that it's her defenselessness that you find so attractive, so stimulating. You relish her tears. You leave her standing, her head bowed as tear drops plop onto the tiled floor, as you go back into the bathroom, crumple the paper cup and toss it into a waste paper bin.

Her tears are still falling when you go back, but she has kept her hands at her side, like a soldier on parade. You stand in front of her and gently take her breasts in your hands, sighing at their softness. You caress her nipples with your thumbs, wanting to pinch and hurt

but fighting the urge, knowing that pain will come later. First must come control. Total obedience.

"Please," she whimpers. "Please let me go."

You take a sudden, sharp breath and she flinches. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Sarah," you say. "But if you speak to me again I'll chain you to the bed again and beat you to within an inch of your life. Now, kneel down."

She swallows and more tears come, but she does as she's told. You look down on the top of her head, her hair blonde right down to the roots. Soft, shiny hair. You reach down and touch it, running the strands through your fingers. You'd like to pull and twist and hear her scream, and you find your breath coming faster so you fight against it. The top of her head is level with your waist and you know without looking that her eyes are closed. You run your hand down her left cheek and under her chin, lifting her head so that her hair falls back over her shoulders. The tears make her look less attractive but they increase her vulnerability and to you that's just as much of a turn-on. Maybe even more so.

"Pull down my zipper," you tell her, and her face crumples like a little girl who's just been told that her puppy has died. Her hands stay down by her side so you repeat the instruction, tightening your grip on her chin as you speak to give her a taste of what will happen unless she obeys. Her fumbling hands are unsure where to go and they bang against your trousers and then she finds the metal tab and pulls it down with the sound of material tearing. "Good, that's good," you say soothingly, and then you explain what it is you want her to do to you, how she is to use her mouth and her tongue and that she is to keep her eyes open at all times.

* * *

Turner and Marcinko aren't going to go away, of that I'm sure. The lie detector test worries me, but not overmuch. It's only a machine, and machines are fallible. And the results won't be admissible in court. It isn't a problem. But Turner and Marcinko, now they are a problem. I'm going to have to protect myself.

The only information on their IDs was their name, rank and the precinct where they're based, but it's a start. I sit down in the armchair and slide a new sheet of paper into the typewriter. I write four letters, all of them to the Commissioner of Motor Vehicles for the State of New York at Empire State Plaza in Albany. They hold all the driving licence and vehicle registrations records for the state, and for a few dollars they'll run checks on any resident. They prefer to know the name and date of birth of the person you're checking up on, but if all you've got is a name they'll do an alphabetical search so long as you enclose a big enough cheque. I phone first to find out the cost of each search.

I write one letter to the Drivers Licence Department asking for an alpha search for the driving record of Ed Turner, enclosing a cheque for the normal amount plus an additional check in case there are more than one Ed Turner resident in the state. I write a similar letter asking for the driving record of Lisa Marcinko.

The other two letters are addressed to the Motor Vehicles Registration Department at the same address, this time asking for details of any motor vehicles they own and including more cheques.

I seal the envelopes and sit looking at them for a while. They don't know who they're messing with, Turner and Marcinko. But they're going to find out soon enough.

* * *

She scampers off the bed as soon as you open the door and by the time you close it behind you she's standing, head bowed, her hands linked at waist level. The position of obedience, like a subservient shop assistant welcoming a wealthy customer.

You place the white carrier bag on the bed. "There are some new clothes, I want you to wear them later," you tell her. "All of them, the underwear, the stockings, the hair ribbon, everything." She nods but doesn't speak. Her hair is still damp as if she isn't long out of the shower. On the floor by the bed is a paper plate with the remains of the breakfast you brought in two hours earlier. You walk into the bathroom and check that everything is as it should be. You know there's nothing in there that can be used as a weapon, but it's better to be sure. Everything is as it should be.

When you go back into the room she's rubbing her hands together. "Can I speak?" she says.

You stand in front of her as if considering her request. After a while you reach out and caress her cheek. "You did well yesterday," you tell her. "As a reward, you can. But only this once."

She sniffs and shudders as if a cold draught has blown across her back. "Why are you doing this?" she asks.

You smile benignly. "Because I want to," you say. "Because I can."

"Please let me go," she says.

"Eventually I will," you lie.

"You will?" she says, hesitantly, as if frightened that you'll change your mind.

"Of course," you lie.

She swallows heavily. "Can I call my family?"

You laugh out loud, the sound echoing around the room like a pistol shot. "No, Sarah, I can't trust you to do that."

"They'll be worried about me," she says. "They'll be looking for me."

The implied threat is laughable. She still hasn't given up hope. She still thinks she can manipulate you with her soft mouth, that she can find the right words to push you into doing her will. You want to laugh in her face and see the pain, but you don't. "I tell you what I'll do," you say, speaking softly. "I'll call them and tell them you're all right. That you'll be back with them soon."

She looks up quickly, the hope in her eyes burning like a beacon. You keep your face severe, fighting against the urge to grin. "You will?" she asks. "You'll call them?"

"Of course," you lie. "But first, you must do something for me. Okay?" She nods eagerly, then a cloud passes over her face as she realises what you mean. As tears fill her eyes she begins to unbutton her shirt with trembling fingers.

* * *

The guy who they've brought in to operate the polygraph is Oriental, Korean, or maybe Japanese. He gives me a small nod as I enter the room behind Turner and Marcinko. I recognise the model.

It's an Ambassador Halliburton from the Lafayette Instrument Company. It's a good polygraph, but it's only a machine and it doesn't worry me.

"We really appreciate you coming in, Marvin," says Marcinko, laying it on with a trowel.

"Hey, I just want to get you guys off my back," I say. "If this is what it takes, let's do it."

Maybe I'm being too casual because she looks at me strangely, like I'm wearing my shirt back to front. "Have you been through a polygraph test before?" she asks.

I wink. "Maybe you should wait until I'm plugged in before you ask me any questions." I sit down at the table while the Oriental fusses with his equipment. "How's the investigation going?" I ask.

Turner pushes his spectacles up his nose with his forefinger. "It's going just fine, Waller." He looks over at the Oriental. "You ready, Doc?"

The Oriental nods and begins attaching sensors to me: a sphygmomanometer to measure blood pressure and heart rate, electrodes to my thumb and second finger for the galvanic skin response monitor, and a strap across my chest to measure my breathing. It's the GSR that tends to be the hardest to fool because it effectively tracks the involuntary nervous system. It measures the conductivity of the skin, the more I sweat, the more lower my skin resistance, and, in theory at least, the more I lie the more I'll sweat. Sweating isn't something I can control, mentally anyway. But before I left the apartment I sprayed both my hands with Arid Extra-Dry anti-perspirant, the non-scented variety, so no matter how stressed out I get, my hands aren't going to sweat and there'll be no deviation from the base line. It's not an infallible way of beating the machine, but it's better than nothing.

As he works, the Oriental tells me how long he's been using the equipment, how accurate it is, how it's impossible to fool, that he's done work for the FBI and the State Department and several Fortune 500 companies. I nod wide-eyed. It's part of the process, making me believe that the machine is infallible so that if I do lie, it'll be all the more stressful. See, that's one of the myths of the polygraph. It can't tell the difference between truth and a falsehood, all it does is to measure physiological signs. What it actually measures is guilt. If I give off the same physiological signs when I'm lying as when I'm telling the truth, the machine can't tell the difference. Without guilt, the machine is useless.

I smile at Marcinko, waiting for the questions. She isn't wearing as much mascara today, and she's toned down her lipstick. She still looks pretty, though. Far too pretty to be a cop.

"You know, Marvin, if there's anything you want to tell us, now's the time to get it off your chest," she says.

I shake my head, slowly. "I've done nothing wrong, Lisa."

She nods at the equipment. "Just remember that this makes it all more official, that's all. If you want us to help you, you've got to help us. And now's the time to do it."

She's so transparent. The polygraph is just a machine, but it carries a mystique, a mystique that means a lot of people are afraid of it. The cops play on that, they start asking questions even before the machine is switched on, trying to get a confession based on the fear alone. It works, too. If someone is lying, and if they believe that the machine is going to find them out, then it makes sense to tell the truth right away. It's similar to the old cop ploy "we know everything anyway but we need you to clear up a few loose ends." Yeah, well cop tricks don't work on me, and I'm pretty sure that their machine won't work either. Marcinko wanted to know if I'd been through a polygraph test before. Yeah. And some. In face, I used to own one, used to play with it a lot. For research. I was working on a screenplay about a serial killer who preys on actresses, and I wanted to know

how someone could beat a polygraph. They only cost a few thousand dollars so I bought one and spent hours on it. Polygraphs don't scare me, and that's half the battle.

The Oriental finishes fiddling with his wires and he nods at Turner, letting him know that we're ready to start. Marcinko has a notebook in front of her, and she's holding a fountain pen. By the look of it she's got her questions written down, so that she can keep up a steady rhythm. It's important that I'm not given too much time to think. "Okay, Marvin, I think we're ready now."

The first questions are to establish the base lines, general questions to which they know the answers. What's my name? How old am I? Where do I live? What colour are my eyes? Where did I go to school? The base lines are crucial for the accuracy of the machine. The operator has to set the polygraph based on the reaction to the test questions, so if you screw them up, you screw up everything that follows. I let my face relax but tense my feet, curling my toes tight. I've put a small tack in each of my shoes, between my toes, and when I crunch them up they bite into the flesh, hurting. I answer the questions authoritatively, calmly, but the pain in my feet means that the Oriental accepts the stress as normal and sets the base lines accordingly. These people, they're so stupid.

"Okay, Mr Waller, you're doing just fine," says the Oriental from behind me. He stays out of my vision because that's supposed to increase my stress level.

I turn and smile at him. "I'm a bit nervous," I say, playing the small boy, making him feel in control because the more cocky he gets, the more likely he is to be misled. The machine is only as good as its operator, and people are even easier to fool than machines.

"Everyone gets nervous," he says. "Don't worry about it."

"Okay," I say, settling down in the chair and looking at Marcinko as I grind the tacks between my toes.

"Now, I'm going to ask you to describe an event in your past which you feel guilty about," he says. "Can you do that for me?"

"Sure," I say.

"Go ahead."

I pause, like I'm confused. "What sort of thing?" I ask.

"It can be anything. Say, if you stole something."

I look at Marcinko. "Yeah, but what if it's something illegal?"

She smiles. "Have you done something illegal, Marvin?"

"Is this part of the test?"

"No, it's not part of the test," says the Oriental, clearly irritated. "Mr Waller, anything will do. Something from your childhood, maybe."

"Okay," I say. "Okay. There was this time when I was at school, I made this kid give me his bike." It's not true, it's something I made up the night before, but it's important that the machine registers guilt so I grind the tacks really hard, and I contract the muscles in my backside and my diaphragm, actions which I know from experience will send my blood pressure up. "He was smaller than me, I was fifteen and he was about twelve. I pushed him off and took the bike. He hit his head on the ground. He was bleeding, but I rode off and left him there."

"And you feel bad about that?"

I contract my muscles again, then take a deep breath and hold it for a second before answering. Another guilt response, so that the operator thinks he knows what the lines look like when I lie. "Yeah. Even today. He was hurt bad, but all I wanted was the bike."

Marcinko looks at the operator and obviously gets the signal that she's to go ahead. She looks down at her questions. I wait expectantly, relaxing my feet, breathing slowly and evenly. She looks up.

"Your name is Marvin Waller?"

More control questions. "Yes."

"You're a writer?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever had anything published?"

"No."

"Or sold a screenplay?"

"No." She's trying to annoy me. A cheap shot. I relax my body, keeping my breathing even. My hands feel bone dry.

"You don't like secretaries, do you?"

"No."

"Why is that?"

"They stand between me and what I want to achieve."

"Have you ever hurt a secretary?"

"No."

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

"No."

"Have you ever raped anyone?"

"No."

She looks at me for a few seconds, then back to her notebook. She turns the page. So far she hasn't asked me anything that I wasn't prepared for. Yesterday I wrote down several hundred possible questions, and the answers I should give, and I spent hours repeating them until I could answer automatically, until my subconscious almost believed that all the answers I gave were true. A lie repeated often enough becomes the truth, at least so far as the polygraph is concerned.

"Your father was Sam Waller? A base line question, checking the levels.

I grind the tacks into my toes, keeping my face composed. "Yes."

"You live in New York."

"Yes."

"Do you know where Sarah Hall is?"

I relax my feet and breath easily. "No."

"Have you kidnapped Sarah Hall?"

"No."

"Have you killed Sarah Hall?"

"No."

Turner grunts something and walks to stand behind Marcinko. She's come to the end of her questions. Marcinko looks up at him, then nods almost imperceptibly.

"We know you did it, Waller," he says.

"No you don't. If you did, we wouldn't be going through this."

"We know you did it and we'll get you."

"No you won't."

"You think you're so fucking clever, don't you?" he says, leaning forward to rest his hands on the table. He looks at me over the top of his spectacles.

"Only in comparison to you, Ed."

"What have you done with her?"

"Who?"

"You know who. Sarah Hall."

I shrug and he glares at me. "The machine doesn't pick up shrugs, Waller."

"We've been through this. I don't know Sarah Hall. I did not kidnap Sarah Hall. I have not killed Sarah Hall. And if you could prove any of it, you'd charge me."

"You'll slip up, Waller. You'll slip up and I'll be there to kick you when you're down." He's trying to get me to lose my temper. He wants me angry, he wants me stressed. I keep a relaxed smile on my face and keep breathing shallowly, no sighing, no holding my breath, nice and easy does it. I must never forget that the Oriental is standing behind me, studying his readouts and waiting to catch me out. I think calm thoughts. Happy thoughts.

"You're mistaken, Ed." My lungs are bursting, I want to take a deep breath, to drag in more oxygen, but I fight the urge. I look at Marcinko, to see if she's happy with the way Turner's haranguing me. She smiles sympathetically and I'm grateful for that.

"Where's your TV, Waller?"

"I told you. A friend has it."

He pounces. "You said it was in for repair."

I shake my head as if trying to clear it. "That's what I meant. My friend has the video recorder. And the camera."

"What's your friend's name?"

"I don't want to involve him."

"Him? Is he your boyfriend?"

"What?"

"Your boyfriend. Are you gay, Waller?"

I look into his eyes. I'm starting to hate the man. "Why, Ed? Do you fancy me?" He stands up and balls his fists. I smile. "Anyway, you're not my type. Too butch." I blow him a kiss.

"Answer the question."

"No, Sergeant Turner. I'm not gay. Are you?"

"I'm married, Waller. There's nothing gay about me."

I look at Marcinko. "Is that in your profile? Is the killer you're looking for supposed to be gay?"

She shakes her head. "No, Marvin." She looks up at Turner. "I think we're finished."

"I'm not," says Turner, glaring at me.

"That's enough, Ed," she says quietly, but he just keeps on staring at me.

"Understand me, Waller. From now on I'm going to be your shadow. Everywhere you go, I go. You're going to make a mistake, and when you do, I'll have you."

I smile and nod. "Thanks for the warning, Ed. I really appreciate it." For several seconds we remain staring at each other. Eventually it's Marcinko who breaks the silence, sighing and standing up. She motions with her hand for the Oriental to switch the polygraph off. They'll discuss the results later, when I've gone, but I already know what the findings will be. Inconclusive.

I get up to go but Turner slaps a hand on my shoulder and pushes me back onto the seat. "We haven't finished with you yet, Waller."

"I said I'd sit through a polygraph test, and I've done that."

"And I've got more questions for you."

The Oriental finishes packing up his equipment and trundles it out of the interview room. Marcinko lights a cigarette and studies me through a plume of smoke. "You've got good control, haven't you, Marvin?" she says.

"In what way?"

"Physical control. Mental control. You're very....controlled."

"I like to think so, yes."

"It's important to you, isn't it? Control?"

"Discipline. Yes. Discipline is important." She nods and flicks ash onto the floor. "Don't you agree?" I ask.

She shrugs and doesn't answer.

"What have you done with the bodies, Waller?" Turner barks, catching me by surprise.

I raise an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you have asked that question while I was hooked up to the machine, Ed?"

"Fuck the machine. What have you done with the bodies?"

I lean forward and stare at him, wide eyed. "I cut them up into little pieces, and I buried them all over the State." I laugh like I'm crazy and for a few moments I can see that he's taking it all in. "Get real, Sergeant Turner," I say. "It's going to take more than a few snappy one-liners to get me to confess."

"What would it take, Marvin?" asks Marcinko.

"Maybe I should kick the shit out of him," snarls Turner.

"I'm shaking," I say.

"You fucking well will be."

I reach over slowly and take hold of Marcinko's cigarette lighter. I'll show her control.

Turner's hand grips my wrist, his nails biting into my flesh. Our eyes lock. "I don't want you smoking," he says.

I twist my arm free, still holding the lighter. "I don't smoke," I say.

I flick the lighter on and hold my left hand above the flames. I stare at Turner.

He smiles like he doesn't care. He looks at Marcinko. She looks worried. He looks back at me. I can feel the heat but I block it out of my mind. I'm ice. "You can set yourself on fire, shit-for-brains," he says. I keep my face impassive. I'm ice.

We stare at each other for a few seconds. I concentrate on not feeling the pain, I concentrate on the tacks in my shoes, anything but the singeing flesh.

"You mother-fucker," he says.

Marcinko gets to her feet, her chair legs scraping along the floor. "Enough," she says.

I keep on staring at Turner. His face is stone. I'm ice. The question is, which will crack first.

"Stop it, Marvin," says Marcinko. "You're not proving anything."

I ignore her and she rounds on Turner. "They're going to think we did it to him," she says. "No one's going to believe he did it to himself."

"Who gives a fuck?"

"Me," she says. "I give a fuck. You're behaving like kids." She puts her hands on the table and leans towards me. "Stop it."

I force a smile. It hurts, but I can stand it. I'm ice. "He's got to ask me," I say through gritted teeth.

Turner sneers at me. "Burn in hell."

I raise an eyebrow. "Whatever." I keep my hand in the flame. I can smell burned flesh, and it's not my imagination.

Marcinko slams her hand down on the table, then stands facing Turner, her hands on her hips. "Okay, okay," says Turner.

"Okay what?" I say. I need to hear him say it. I want Marcinko to know who's in control of the situation.

"Okay you can stop trying to set fire to yourself."

I smile. Ice has won. Rock is broken. I flick the lighter off and toss it onto the table. My hand hurts like hell, but it was worth it. I stand up, grin at Marcinko, and walk out of the room.

* * *

You assemble the tripod and fix the video camera so that it's pointing towards the bed. She's standing there, head bowed, dying to look up to see what it is you're doing but knowing that if she does then she'll be punished. You check the viewfinder to make sure that she's in the centre and that you can see all of the bed behind her. You don't want to repeat the mistake you made the first time when you had two hours of footage of nothing but the end of the bed and the sound of a woman sobbing.

When you're satisfied that it's lined up just right, you stand by the side of the tripod. "Sarah," you say, "you can look up now."

Her head jerks upwards as if she was a marionette in the hands of an inexperienced puppeteer, her eyes wide and fearful. She swallows and deep furrows appear in her brow.

"A home movie," you explain. The furrows deepen. She doesn't understand. You explain, and tears well up in her eyes. You offer her hope. "I spoke to your husband," you say softly. "I told him that you were okay, and that I'll be releasing you soon." Her eagerness to believe the lie is so transparent that it makes you want to laugh in her face, but you keep your features steady. The face of authority.

"Can I speak?" she says quietly. She understands the rules now. She's a quick learner.

"You may," you say, though you already know what she wants to ask.

"Can I talk to him?" she says, her voice trembling.

The one phone call. They always think they're entitled to one phone call, like this was a police cell or something. "Maybe," you say. "If you continue to do as you're told. You are going to do as you're told, aren't you?"

She nods. Too eager. Too willing to please. She thinks she can outmanoeuvre me, that she's smarter than me and that all she has to do is to lull me into a false sense of confidence. She isn't the first to think that, and she won't be the last. But they were all wrong, there isn't one of them that can outsmart me, so I smile and raise my eyebrows and nod approvingly.

She tilts her head at the camera. "Is this to send to my husband, to show him that I'm okay?"

You can tell from her voice that she knows it isn't, but she hopes to convince you that it'll be a good idea so that you won't carry on with what you have in mind. You wait a beat, allowing her to clutch at the straw, allowing her to believe that she's managed to change your mind, then you shake your head. "No, Sarah. This is for me." You reach over and switch the camcorder on. "Take off your clothes. Start with the ribbon." She begins to cry, but she does as she's told.

With shaking hands she reaches up and unties the blue silk ribbon which was holding her hair back from her face. Her blonde hair falls forward, a stray strand swinging across her

left cheek like a scar, held in place by the dampness of her tears. She looks around, not sure what to do with the strip of silk. "The floor," you say. "Drop everything on the floor."

She lets the ribbon slip from her fingers and it trickles like water onto the tiles. Her eyes look to you for guidance. She doesn't want to take the initiative, she wants to be told what to do every step of the way, so that she can tell herself that it was all done under duress. Just obeying orders. You don't mind, at this stage you're more interested in the end result. Later, much later, she'll know what she must do to gain your approval. This is part of the training, part of her education, so you reward her with a smile and tell her to take off her shirt. She starts unbuttoning her top button but you stop her and tell her to the cuffs first. She frowns a little, then unbuttons her right cuff, then the left. "That's good," you say as she goes back to the top button.

She does them slowly, trying to take as much time as possible, postponing the moment when the shirt comes off. She doesn't realise that it's the anticipation that you find so stimulating, that makes the blood pound in your ears and the sweat run down your back. God, if it was just the sex you could have had it all over in an hour, put a gun under her pretty little chin and made her do what you want there and then. By prolonging the inevitable, she makes it so much more enjoyable.

She folds the shirt and puts it on the bed. "No," you say. "The floor." You'll want the bed later and it'll spoil the moment if you have to start moving clothes off the bed. She picks up the shirt and bends down to put it on top of the ribbon. As she moves her breasts swing forward allowing you to look down her cleavage. Her eyes glance up to see if you're looking, then quickly avert as she sees that you are. The moment is exquisite, as if you'd caught her unawares, like the first time you saw her in the driveway of her home, playing with her children. You can feel your bladder tighten and you shiver with an anticipation so powerful that you gasp.

She straightens up. She's stopped crying, and there's an arrogant look in her eyes. You know what's going through her mind. She knows the effect her body has on men, and she hopes it'll have the same effect on you. She's undressed in front of men before, and she knows that when she gets them into bed she's always the victor. She thinks she'll be able to do the same with you, that by doing what you want she'll win her release the same way that she got everything else she wanted in life. She looks deep into your eyes and her hands reach for the bra strap. She wants to see how you react, knowing that your glance will drop to her breasts as she releases them from the lacy confines. Part of you wants to dash her hopes there and then, to tell her that there's only one way she's getting out of the basement. You suppress the urge.

"The skirt first," you say. She has to know who's in control, who's calling the shots. She unfastens the skirt and allows it to fall around her legs and onto the floor. She steps out of it but you motion with your hand for her to move back so that she stays in the centre of the viewfinder. Her heels catch in the dress and she loses her balance for a moment, putting a hand down on the bed to steady herself. "Take it easy," you say. "You're doing just fine." The look of arrogance has gone, you're back in control.

She licks her lips nervously as you look her body up and down. The heels and black stockings make her legs look impossibly long and lean, her stomach is hard and flat and her breasts are firm and shapely.

Again her wide eyes seek guidance. Your mouth feels dry and you swallow. You can hear your own breathing and you quieten it. "Your panties," you say.

Her hands move slowly to her hips and she slips her thumbs under the white material. For a moment she stands stock still as if you might change your mind, but then she leans forward and slips them down to her knees. The cotton hisses against the silk of the stockings. The tuft of dark blonde hair between her legs is a magnet and you allow your eyes to be drawn to it. The flesh there looks so soft and succulent that you want to bite it, to rip and tear it with your teeth, and you have to stop yourself from stepping forward and throwing her onto the bed. She lifts her left leg and slips the cotton over her shoe and then replaces the foot on the ground. When she stands up straight she lets go of the panties and they fall down around her ankle. She wiggles her right leg and lifts her foot so that the panties drop to the floor, then stands straight with her hands together, overlapping at her crotch. "Keep your hands at your sides," you say, and reluctantly she allows her hands to slide apart, like old friends reluctant to let go. She clenches her hands into fists, then unclenches them and places her palms flat against her hips. The skin of her thighs and stomach gleams under the light, its whiteness emphasised by the black of the stockings.

"Stand with your legs slightly apart," you say. It's important to keep giving her commands so that the initiative stays with you. She shuffles on her heels and widens her stance, giving you a clearer view of her crotch. She has surprisingly little hair there, and it's a darker blonde than that on her head. You wonder if she shaves for her man, if he likes the feel of her, naked and smooth. The idea appeals to you, and you make a mental note to buy shaving cream and a disposable razor. Later, when she's nearer to the end of her training, you'll get her to shave for you.

"Now you can undo the bra," you say.

She brushes the stray lock of hair from her face with the back of her right hand, then shakes it back behind her ears. You look to your left to reassure yourself that the camcorder is recording correctly, and when you look back at her she has unfastened the strap of her bra and is shrugging it off her shoulders. Her breasts move downwards as she pulls the lace away from them, then swing free as she drops the bra onto the floor.

She puts her hands back at her sides and straightens her spine, bringing her shoulders back to show her breasts to her best advantage, and you can see the arrogance returning to her eyes. She knows the power her body has, and how to use it. You have to move quickly to demonstrate that her power won't work on you. "Turn around," you say. She obeys. You study the discs of her backbone, the swell of her buttocks and the long, long legs. She looks over her shoulder but you stop her and tell her to keep looking at the wall. She has wide shoulders and a narrow waist, a true hour-glass figure. "Lean forward and put your hands on the bed," you say. As she follows your instructions the movement tightens the muscles in her backside and thighs making her legs look even leaner. "That's good," you say. "That's perfect."

You walk around the tripod and stand just behind her so that her backside is only inches away from you.

"Please," she says. "Please don't hurt me."

You reach out a hand and caress the inside of her thighs with your fingertips. She whimpers, like a frightened child. "Oh Sarah, I'm not going to hurt you," you say, as you run your fingers up to the soft dark blonde hair. Not yet anyway. "Open your legs," you say. She obeys. "Wider."

* * *

I'm having trouble with *Checking Out*. I can't get the pace right, there's this dull spot in the middle where nothing happens. The characters are great, the Bruce Willis blackjack dealer is sharp and funny, his ex-wife has some really strong lines, but it's just not coming together and the more I force it, the harder it gets.

I decide to take a break from it and to think about something else. I start pacing around the apartment, and within an hour or so I've come up with a belter of an idea. I actually think of the title first, *The Big Loser*. It's about Tom and Shirley, a happily-married couple with two children and a nice suburban home. The only black spot in their all-American life is that Shirley is hugely overweight. Tom and the children are forever nagging her to lose weight, but she's happy as she is. Eventually they persuade her to join *Weightwatchers*, and within months she's the country's champion slimmer. Shapely, beautiful and with a new-found confidence, she appears on chat shows and is featured in newspapers and magazines. Her charm and intelligence lead her to a new career, and she has less time to spend with Tom and the children. Before long, they realise that they're losing her. In a bid to win her back, Tom confines her to the basement and force feeds her until she is back to her old weight and her old self and they live happily ever after.

It's a sort of black comedy, a satire on American suburban life, and with the right director I think it could be a winner. It's got a dark feel to it, a menacing edge, like *The Bestseller*. That reminds me, I haven't heard from Brian DePalma, or any of the other execs I sent the *Bestseller* synopsis too. Marcinko and Turner were asking about the letter I sent to DePalma, but I never asked whether he'd sent it to them or if it had been intercepted by the doorman. They didn't mention the manuscript, so maybe he's reading it. I wonder if I should send him my idea for *The Big Loser*, or if it would be better to let him think about the *Bestseller* first. I decide to wait, but I'll send the new idea out to a few select producers in LA.

I sit down at the typewriter but before I can even feed in a sheet of paper, the doorbell rings. I put my head in my hands. "No, not again," I moan because I know it's them, back to give me grief. The doorbell rings again, longer this time, as if the bell was being leaned on. On and on it rings and I know that they're not going away. I trudge over to the door and open it.

"Good afternoon, Marvin," says Marcinko.

"Hiya Lisa, this is a nice surprise." Turner is standing behind her, his mouth clamped shut.

"Can we come in?" she asks.

I think about going through the old "do you have a warrant" routine, but I can't be bothered. I'm tired. I don't answer, I just open the door wide and go back to my chair. So long as I don't give them my consent anything I say isn't admissible in a court.

Turner closes the door and leans against it. I get the feeling that they've decided that Marcinko should do all the talking. That's fine with me because Turner gets on my nerves, big time.

"I see your television is back," she says.

"Yeah."

"So it's fixed?"

"Sure."

She nods thoughtfully and I wonder if she's going to ask for the receipt. "So you'll be following the case again?"

"I watch the news, yeah. I gather she's still missing."

"Sarah Hall?"

"Who else? Do you think she's dead yet?"

"No way of knowing. We haven't found any of the victims, remember?"

"Yeah, I forgot." I flick the hair out of my eyes. "So how do you know that they're dead. All you know is that they're missing, right?"

"We know that they're dead, Marvin. We know that they're dead and that their bodies have been butchered."

I frown. "That's not been on TV."

"We're holding back some of the details."

"But if the bodies haven't been found, how do...." Realisation dawns and I sit back in the chair. "I get it. He videos the murders. And the dismemberment. Wow!"

"Wow?" repeats Turner. "You're impressed, are you?"

"It's a great idea for a movie. In fact..." I realise that I'm about to tell them about The Bestseller, but under the circumstances, that's probably not a bright idea. "Anyway, what is it you want? Is it about the lie detector test?"

"We just wanted a chat, Marvin. That's all."

"What about the polygraph? Have you got the results?"

"Dr Kumagai is still working on them," she says.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, I don't think so."

I can see by the look on her face that they haven't managed to get anything from the polygraph and I force myself to keep a straight face. I bet it's a real disappointment to them and I bet Dr Kumagai got a tongue-lashing from Turner. "So, what's the problem?"

"We've been looking into your background, and it's thrown up a few questions."

"Really?" I'd been expecting it, obviously. I'm now their prime suspect and they're going to keep digging until they charge me or clear me. "What in particular?"

Turner walks over to the television set and kneels down to examine it. Marcinko stands by the kitchen door. She'd obviously prefer to sit but I'm got the only chair. "It's the profile, Marvin. The one we got from the FBI."

"Single, white, good-looking male with an interest in movies? Yeah, I remember."

"Well, the more we look into your background, the more similarities we find."

I sit back in the chair and steeple my fingers under my chin. "I'm all ears," I say.

"One of the things the profile points to is that the killer comes from a dysfunctional family."

"Dysfunctional?"

"In all probability there was no father figure in the household, either because of death or divorce. His mother would have been a weak personality, possibly an alcoholic."

"Oh, come on, there's no way the evidence suggests that."

"The profile is based on interviews with hundreds of convicted serial killers around the world," she says. "The Quantico boys are usually accurate." She pauses. "Tell me about your father, Marvin."

"If you've been digging, you already know everything there is to know."

She smiles tightly. "I only know what's in the files."

I sigh softly. "He was a film producer. He left when I was nine years old."

"Left? You mean he walked out on you and your mother?"

"Yes." Turner straightens up and stands watching me.

"Did you see him after he left?" asks Marcinko.

"Once or twice."

"Did you resent him leaving?"

I shrug. "Maybe. It was a long time ago."

"You admired your father?"

"Admired? No, I don't think so."

"Why not?" says Turner, speaking for the first time. "He was a real writer. Sixteen movies, either as director or writer. Five Academy nominations. One Oscar. Four wives. A hell of a life."

Marcinko reads something in my face. "You didn't get on, did you?"

"My father was...difficult."

"Difficult?"

"Yeah, difficult."

"How did he die?"

I can't believe she doesn't already know, but I answer anyway. "Heart attack. He had a history of heart trouble."

"When was this?"

"When I was fifteen."

"Were you with him when he died?"

"Of course not?"

Her eyes harden and I know that we're about to get down to the nitty-gritty. "But you were with your mother when she died, right?"

"Right."

Turner sniffs. "Bit unfortunate, huh?"

Marcinko glares at him and he pushes his spectacles up his nose with his forefinger.

"She killed herself, didn't she?" says Marcinko. Her voice is soft and gentle, like she doesn't want to upset me.

"That's right."

"It couldn't have been easy for a nine-year old."

"I was ten."

She puts her head on one side. "It said nine in the file."

"Yeah, well you don't want to believe everything you read."

"How did she do it, Marvin? How did she kill herself?"

"Like the Romans. A hot bath. Cold steel."

"And you found the body?"

I shake my head. "No."

"But the file said..."

I interrupt. "I was there."

"You mean you were there when she did it?"

I nod. There's a sadness about her, as if she doesn't want to ask the questions. "I don't want to continue with this line of questioning, Lisa."

"But...."

"I'd rather stop."

"Why, Waller?" asks Turner, raising his voice. "What is it you're trying to hide?"

"I'm not hiding anything."

"Bullshit. The profile fits you, Waller. It fits you like a fucking glove."

I look up at Marcinko. "If you've nothing to hide, Marvin, you've nothing to lose by talking to us," she says.

"Don't try to play with my mind, Lisa."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You're trying to get inside my head. I'm telling you now, don't bother. I've been worked on by some of the highest paid psychiatrists in the country."

"And?"

"And if they didn't get inside me, I'm damn sure you won't be able to."

"We'll see," says Turner.

"What was their opinion?" asks Marcinko. "The psychiatrists?"

I shrug. "Mixed reviews."

"They weren't as smart as you, were they?"

I smile at the feeble attempt at flattery. "No, Lisa."

"No one's as smart as you, are they?" growls Turner. "You're so sharp you're liable to cut your own throat."

Lisa walks over to the coffee table and sits down on the edge, her legs pressed together. It puts her head only inches away from mine. She's so close I can smell her perfume, and the faint odour of cigarette smoke on her breath. "It can't have been easy, Marvin. Losing your mother. Your father remarrying so often. His career. By all accounts he wasn't much of a father."

"Don't," I whisper.

"Don't what?"

"Don't try to get inside my head. It's not a pleasant place, not for a nice lady like you. It's a dark place. A scary place. You wouldn't like it." My voice goes quiet and she has to lean forward to hear me, like a priest taking confession. "Best you stay out, okay?"

She looks at me like she cares. Like she's my friend. "Why did she do it with you around?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd have thought a mother wouldn't want her son within a million miles if she planned to kill herself."

"You didn't know my mother."

"You mean she wanted you to see her kill herself? She wanted you to watch?"

"She was an actress. It was her final performance. Anyone else would have stopped her."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. I was just a kid."

"Ten isn't that young," she says. "You must have known what she was doing."

"Maybe."

Turner rubs his nose with the back of his hand. "Maybe you wanted her to kill herself."

Marcinko's lips press together and her eyes harden. She glares at Turner and he walks away to stand at the entrance to the sleeping alcove. "It wasn't a cry for help, Lisa," I explain. "She knew that she was losing my father. She didn't want to be alone."

"But that doesn't explain why she wanted you there."

"She wanted to hurt him, and there was only one way she could that - by turning me against him. Her last words were 'your father made me do it.' Her final speech. Fade to black."

Marcinko swallows. "I'm sorry."

I shrug. "It was her choice."

She gives me a weak smile and slowly reaches out to put a hand on my knee. This time there's no spark. "You know, Detective Marcinko," I say, "sometimes you remind me of my mother." She pulls back her hand as if she's been burned.

"Very funny, Marvin," she says, standing up.

"Maternal suicide is in the profile, is that it? My mother killed herself, so that makes me the serial killer you're looking for, right?"

"Maybe," she says. She takes a cigarette packet out. "Okay if I smoke?" she says.

"Go ahead. If you want to smell like an ashtray, that's your lookout." She lights up then puts the pack and the disposable lighter on the coffee table, next to the typewriter.

Turner steps forward, his hands swinging free by his sides. "This thing you have about secretaries, where does it come from?" he says.

"I've already told you."

"There's more, and you know there's more."

"I'm not sure what you mean, Ed."

"You know exactly what I mean, Waller. You've got a very good reason for hating secretaries, haven't you?" I say nothing. That seems to annoy him even more. "Are you refusing to answer, Waller?"

"No, I'm not refusing. But it wasn't a real question."

"Your father left your mother for his secretary, didn't he?"

I feel my eyes narrow involuntarily. "I'm not sure that the two events were connected."

"Your father dumped your mother to live with his secretary. And your mother killed herself. That's why you hate secretaries, isn't it?"

"Leave me alone," I say quietly.

"I'm not going to leave you alone until I get some straight answers from you."

"I'm warning you...."

Turner's upper lip curls. "Yeah? What are you going to do, Waller? Are you going to kill me like you killed those women?"

"You'll be sorry, Ed."

"That's it? That's the best you can do? I'm shaking, Waller. I'm so scared I think I just wet myself."

I nod slowly. "Okay, Ed. You want to play games?"

"This isn't a game, Waller. This is for real."

I smile and stare into his eyes. "You asked for it." That's it, that's all I say, because I learnt a long time ago that there's no point in making threats. You either do something, or you don't.

"Go for it, Waller," he says, his eyes as hard as pebbles. "Step over the line and I'm going to beat the living shit out of you."

"You don't scare me, Ed," I say. I go over to the door and hold it open for them.

"Marvin," says Marcinko as she goes out. "Don't do anything stupid." She looks like she wants to say more, but instead she shakes her head and walks away.

* * *

You sit with a cup of coffee in your hand and press the play button on the remote control. You settle back on the sofa and prop your feet up on the coffee table as you watch Sarah play with herself. There's a subservient look in her eyes, a look that says she'll do anything you ask. You went to an SPCA dog's home once and you saw the same look in the eyes of the strays: dogs that had been whipped and starved and beaten, but who still hoped that they'd be well-treated if only they were subservient enough. That's how it works in the animal kingdom, the struggle for superiority ends when one of the combatants shows subservience. Wild dogs and wolves fight with tooth and claw, but once one of them gives up, the fight is

over. There's a victor and a loser and both live to fight another day. With humans, it's different. Humans don't feel safe unless the loser is dead.

You chose a beagle from the dog's home, or at least a beagle crossed with something else. You chose it because of the way it looked at you, its eyes downcast and fearful, a slight wag of the tail, and a hunching of the shoulders that suggested it would flinch from any sudden movement. The dog had no name and you didn't bother giving it one. You didn't plan to have it for long. You learned a lot about dismemberment from that dog.

On the large screen TV, Sarah is leaning over the bed, her legs apart, her right hand between her thighs, stroking and caressing herself, shifting her weight from leg to leg as you told her to. You can see the sheen of sweat glistening on her skin, like a racehorse after a training run. As you watch you undo your trousers and slip your hand inside. It feels good when you touch yourself, but nowhere near as good as when Sarah touches you. You stare at the TV screen. She moves, she climbs up onto the bed and lies on her back, stroking her breasts and moaning, then her hands move slowly up and down her body. Her eyes are closed, her face tense as if she was in pain. That she'd have to change, you wanted her to look as if she was enjoying it, as if what she was doing to herself was better than anything else, better than any man could ever do. It was good, though, no doubt about that. Sarah is learning fast.

You decide to go downstairs, to have a little fun with her, but when you put your eye to the peephole you're filled with a rage. You tap in the door code and throw back the door. She takes a step backwards, knowing what's about to happen. She starts to plead but you hit her across the face, hard, slapping with your hand open so that you don't break the flesh. The crack echoes around the basement, then you slap her again. She tries to block the blow with her raised hands so you knee her in the stomach. The breath explodes from her throat and she doubles over, gasping and wheezing. You grab her hair and yank her head back so that her face is upwards. Tears run down her cheeks. With your other hand you grab her throat, digging your nails into her tracheae. You put your face close to hers, so close that you can feel her warm breath on your cheek. "Don't ever try that again, Sarah. Do you understand?"

She nods fearfully. You let go of her hair and she slumps forward onto her hands and knees, retching like a sick cat. You stand over her, shaking your head. "You were doing so well, Sarah. You were making such progress." You kick her in the side, careful not to break her ribs.

The gasps turn to sobs. She sits back on her haunches, covering her face with hands. "I told you not to go near the door, didn't I?" She nods. "And what did you do?" You'd watched her through the peephole as she'd tried to reach the keypad, a futile attempt because there's an override switch on the outside of the door which deactivates the internal keypad when you're not in the room with her. But that isn't the point. The point is that she disobeyed you, and you won't stand for that. She has to obey without question. She has to be compliant. Any sign of disobedience must be stamped on, hard.

"Sarah, take your hands away from your face." She does as she's told. She's wearing a red silk robe and you can see that she's naked underneath it. Under other circumstances you'd be tempted to play with her, but first she has to learn the error of her ways. "Put your hands behind your back."

"Please don't..." she begins to say, but you hold up a warning finger. She stops mid-sentence and slowly puts her hands behind her back. She arches her back and the motion

pushes her breasts forward. She licks her lips and you realise that she's trying to use her sexuality to distract you. You smile and stroke the side of her face. It's reddening from the slaps but there wouldn't be a bruise. You were careful not to bruise her.

"You're going to have to be punished, Sarah. I don't want to, but I must. You do understand that, don't you?" She nods, slowly. "You have to learn to obey me."

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"But sorry doesn't make it right."

"I won't do it again."

You smile. "Oh, I know that." You take the stun gun out of your pocket. Instinctively she turns her head away but you grab her hair again, forcing her to look at the crackling electrodes. Her chest heaves and her eyes are wide and staring.

"Please don't hurt me..." You cut her short by backhanding her across the face and she falls to the ground, the robe riding up around her waist. You touch the stun gun against the soft white flesh of her lower leg and press the switch. She screams and her body goes into spasm. "There, there," you say soothingly as she writhes in pain. "It'll soon be over."

* * *

There's a chill wind blowing through New York and on CBS's early morning news they there's a seventy per cent chance of snow before the end of the week. I'm wearing a thick wool overcoat, belted at the waist, and I've got my hands deep in the pockets. I'm in the park because I needed a breath of fresh air. I've been in the apartment for three days, pacing around. I've a lot on my mind. I want to get my own back on Turner, I've still not got any further with Checking Out, and I've decided that The Big Loser isn't worth pursuing. The characters just aren't sympathetic enough, and there's nothing I can do to make it work.

I think the problem is that I'm better at thrillers than comedy. While I was pacing around the flat trying to come up with a big bang ending for Checking Out I had a sudden brainwave. I saw a documentary about hypnotic regression last year and it impressed me so much that I scribbled down some notes. I found the notes when I was going through the briefcase under my bed and I read through them as I walked around the room. The idea hit me like a cold shower.

A class of psychology students are learning about hypnosis. A lecturer is demonstrating past life regression on an old man, taking him back to a former life as a Roman soldier. Most of the students are fascinated, but a girl is sure that the whole business of past life regression under hypnosis is a con. She argues with her boyfriend, who is also a psychology student, and they end up making a wager. The next time the lecturer demonstrates the technique, the girl volunteers. To everyone's surprise she is a perfect subject, and quickly slips into a trance. She takes on the persona of a middle-aged woman, married with children. What starts as a look at her life takes a sinister turn - the woman is murdered and the girl comes out of the trance badly shaken but not remembering anything. She and her boyfriend decide to find out all they can about the woman, but attempts to identify her are fruitless. They persuade the lecturer to hypnotize her again, and when he agrees they discover why they weren't able to trace the woman - far from being a past life of the girl, the woman was killed only fifteen years previously. The student has recalled something from her past, not a previous life, and the memories get stronger and stronger, though she cannot recall the face of the killer.

We gradually realise that the murder happened when the girl was very young, that she saw her father kill her mother but then blotted it out of her mind. When her father discovers what is happening, he realizes he must kill his daughter to keep his secret safe. The title came to me as I pulled on my coat to go out. Past Imperfect.

I walk to Strawberry Fields. It's just about my favourite place in Central Park, though sometimes there are some weird people about. The sort who think that John Lennon isn't really dead, and that he's serving burgers with Elvis in Cleveland. Crazy types. Today I'm alone so I stand there for a few minutes looking up at the Dakota building, wondering if Yoko is in there, prowling around from room to room, missing her man.

I recognise Marcinko from more than a hundred yards away, even in the bulky coat and the scarf wrapped around her neck. She's on her own, carrying a manila envelope in a gloved hand and heading in my direction. There's no sign of Turner and I wonder what she's doing out on her own and if it's a coincidence that we're both in Central Park at the same time. I watch her walk towards me. The way she smiles and gives me a little wave almost suggests that we'd arranged the meeting, two friends getting together for a walk, maybe going for a meal or a movie. "Hi, Lisa," I say as she gets close.

"Marvin, how are you today?" she says.

"Fine."

She stands by me and looks up at the building. "Is she in?" she asks.

"Is that a trick question?"

She laughs and for a moment I forget that she's a cop. "No, Marvin, it's just conversation. Do you want to walk?"

"Sure," I say, and we turn our backs to the Dakota and walk into the park. Two blonde girls in skin-tight spandex whiz by on rollerblades, too cool to be cold.

"Can you remember what you were doing when he was killed?" she asks.

"Pacing," I say.

"Where?"

"Pacing. I was in LA. I was pacing around the apartment, the television was on in the corner with the sound off. I had MTV on and they flashed up his picture."

"What did you do, when you heard?"

"Played all his albums."

"Yeah. Me too. The world changed, didn't it?"

I shrug. "Sort of."

"I mean, the world became a more dangerous place."

"For stars?"

"For everyone, Marvin."

I nod. An old woman walks by with two very large Dobermans in tow. One of them sniffs at my leg. "Is this a social call, Lisa?" I ask.

"I was heading towards your apartment when I saw you," she says.

I look at her sideways. I can't think of any route from her precinct to my apartment that would take her across the park. Besides, detectives have cars. "On your own?"

"Turner's taking some sick leave."

"Yeah?" I can tell from her voice she's lying. "What's wrong with him?"

"Oh, the flu I think."

Yeah, right. Lisa Marcinko isn't half the liar she thinks she is. "Well, I hope it's not serious. Do you think I should send flowers?"

She laughs quietly. "No, Marvin, I don't think you should."

"Yeah, you're probably right." We walk in silence for a while.

"What's in the envelope, Lisa?" She's been tapping it against her leg for the past fifty yards.

"It's the script you sent to Brian DePalma. The Bestseller."

"Yeah? What do you think?"

"It's interesting."

"Is that why you're here, Lisa? Because of The Bestseller?"

"It's not good, Marvin."

"It's only a synopsis, Lisa. The finished script will be much better, it'll...."

"No," she says, interrupting me in full flow. "You don't get it, Marvin." She holds the envelope up, almost pushes it into my face. "What do you think this looks like?"

"An A4 envelope," I say, giving her the boyish grin, but now she's not laughing.

"Is this some sort of joke?" she asks.

"No, of course not."

"Did you really think anyone would buy this?"

"Sure. It's a thriller."

"It's scary, Marvin. It's a story about a serial killer who craves media attention. A killer who thinks he's so smart that he won't get caught. A killer who dismembers his victims."

"Victim," I say, correcting her. "He only kills one woman."

"Okay, but you can see where I'm going with this."

"I'm not sure that I can, Lisa. You think that if I was the killer you're looking for I'd be stupid enough to give myself away like that. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Where did you get that from?"

She hesitates as if she's thinking that maybe she shouldn't tell me, but then she nods to herself as if deciding that it's okay. "One of the studio execs you sent it to in Hollywood had been following stories of our serial killer and thought they should pass it on to us."

"So it wasn't DePalma?"

"No. No, it wasn't."

That's good, because it still means I'm in with a chance. I'd really be depressed if he'd handed it in to the cops. At least now I know he's still got it. "Lisa, I want to ask you something else."

She stops and turns to look at me. The wind catches her hair and blows it to the side. "I'm the cop, Marvin. I'm supposed to be asking the questions."

"And I'm a writer," I say. "I want to know whether or not you think I'm the killer."

"What?" she says, surprised.

"I want to know if in your heart of hearts you think I'm the serial killer."

Her eyes go wide and her jaw drops. "What do you think this investigation is all about, Marvin? Do you think I'd waste my time like this?"

"I think that Turner is sure I'm guilty. And I think that maybe you're under pressure to get a result on the case."

"So we'll settle for anyone, is that what you think?"

"I know I haven't killed anyone, Lisa. I know I didn't do it. So if you and Turner insist that I did, you're behaving illogically. Neither of you is crazy, so there must be some other motivation."

"That doesn't make sense, and you know it doesn't. Suppose we do arrest the wrong person, and suppose he goes to prison. What happens when the real killer strikes again? When the TV stations get another video?"

"You'd say it was a copy-cat."

She shakes her head and makes a tutting sound, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "And we're back to square one. No, we have to get the right man, Marvin. We can't afford to get it wrong."

I look straight into her deep blue eyes. "Lisa, I'm not the man you're looking for." She looks at me, a slight frown creasing her forehead. "Do you believe me?"

She stands looking at me for several seconds. Eventually she nods. "I believe you, Marvin," she whispers.

I grin because I can see that she means it. I want to step forward and hug her but I figure that wouldn't be a smart move. Besides, Turner might be close by, watching through a long lens to see how I react to finding Lisa on her own. This could be a ploy, some sick plan of Turner's to get me to drop my guard. "Thanks, Lisa," I say. "That makes me feel a bit better." She hands me the envelope and starts walking again. I follow her and catch up. "What am I supposed to do with this?" I ask.

She shrugs. "It's up to you. It's your property."

"It's not evidence?"

"You tell me." She hunches her shoulders against the cold.

"No. It's not evidence. Lisa, what's going on here?"

She doesn't look at me as she answers. "Nothing's going on, Marvin. I just wanted to return your script. And...."

"And?"

"I don't know."

This doesn't sound right. Lisa Marcinko isn't some lovesick schoolgirl, she's a hard-bitten Homicide detective, and while I've been flashing her the boyish smile at every opportunity, I'm not stupid enough to believe that she's fallen for me. There's something else going on, and I'm damn sure it involves Sergeant Ed Turner.

"Do you come here a lot?" she asks.

"It's a good place to think."

"Dangerous at night."

"Places aren't dangerous. People are. You know that."

She smiles thinly. "What about you, Marvin? Are you dangerous?"

I think for a few seconds before answering. "Only when provoked."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm not a predator, I don't want to go out of my way to hurt anybody. I don't feel enough about people for that. They don't affect me, so I don't even think about them. They're not in my universe. But if anyone threatens me, I'll protect myself. I'll strike back."

She nods, but still she doesn't look at me. "Ed's sure you're guilty," she says.

"He's wrong. And you know he's wrong."

"He's heading up the investigation."

"So until he's convinced otherwise, the pressure stays on, is that what you're saying?"

"Or until the real killer is caught."

I sigh in exasperation. "But if Turner is wasting his time chasing me, the killer isn't going to get caught. Why can't you get him off my back?"

"That's not how it works, Marvin." She looks at her watch and I realise that there's something wrong. Something very wrong.

"Well, thanks for this," I say, raising the envelope. "I'll see you around."

The panic is clear in her eyes and she all but grabs my sleeve. "Walk with me for a while, will you Marvin?"

"I don't think so," I say, my voice hardening. I'm annoyed not because she's tried to fool me, but because she thinks that she's so much smarter than I am. She thinks I'm just like the rest of the trash she pulls off the streets. Well, Lisa Marcinko is wrong. Dead wrong. "I've work to do."

"There are some questions I'd like to ask you," she says. Her eyes flick involuntarily in the direction of my apartment building.

"Get a warrant, Detective Marcinko." I turn my back on her and head home. I'm furious, furious that she's so underestimated my intelligence. She shouts my name, just once, but I don't look back.

I'm sweating despite the cold when I get back to my apartment. It's been trashed. Totally trashed. The typewriter has been thrown against the wall and stamped on, the pages of my work in progress have been torn up and dropped into the toilet bowl, the bed has been upended, the sheets torn, all my clothes have been trampled on. Turner has done a thorough job. I hope he's proud of himself. Marcinko, too. Keeping me talking while her partner rips my life apart.

The armchair is on its side so I stand it up and sit down, still in my overcoat. I sit for maybe half an hour, planning what I'm going to, then I go down to check my mailbox. There are two letters there, both from New York's Commissioner of Motor Vehicles and both relating to my queries about Turner. Both letters give me the details of five different Ed Turners and I take them back upstairs to read.

One of the letters contains replies to my request for driving licence information. Each sheet gives me details of the subject's height, weight, hair colour and eye colour and whether or not they wear spectacles. Only two of the Turners wears glasses and one of them has blue eyes, so I'm pretty sure I know which is the Homicide Detective. The date of birth is on each sheet, and so is the subject's address and social security number. So now I know where Turner lives. The other envelope contains details of the cars owned by the five New York Ed Turners, and I pull out the one that applies to the detective. He owns just one car, a five-year-old Chrysler. Actually, he's shown as the part owner. There's another name on the sheet. Sophie. His wife. I smile and study the two sheets. This is going to be such fun.

* * *

Sarah is standing by the bed, her eyes averted, when you close the door behind you. She's wearing the lingerie you bought her, stockings, suspenders, a black lacy bra and a black silk dressing gown. She's put on make up, just as you told her, the lipstick a brighter shade of red than she would normally use and her lashes thick with mascara. The slut from hell.

"Perfect," you say. "Just perfect."

She says nothing. She's breathing heavily and you can smell her fear. You stand in front of her and stroke the side of her face. You slip your thumb between her lips and inside her warm, wet mouth. Without being asked she sucks gently like a feeding baby, her eyes closed. You move your thumb in and out, slowly, sensuously, and you feel her tongue run along its length. You run your other hand down her chest, along her stomach and between her legs. "Open your eyes," you say. "Look at me."

She obeys. You smile at her as she sucks your thumb. Her teeth gently scratch your skin, a contrast to the soft tongue. Hard and soft. You like that. You like the image. The teeth

that bite, the lips that kiss. And Sarah's well trained, now. She won't bite. She's been trained for pleasure. She'll do anything you ask.

"You've been a good girl, Sarah," you say. She keeps on sucking, her eyes never leaving your face. You slowly take your thumb from between her lips. She moved forward, her mouth open, as if trying to recapture it. You shake your head and take the padlock key out of your pocket. She looks at it and frowns.

"Yes, it's the key," you say. All the time she's been in the basement she's been chained, either to the bed, or to the wall. The chain around her waist allows her to get to the bathroom and almost to the door, but it still restricts her movement. "This is to show you how pleased I am with your progress," you say as you unlock the padlock. The chain slips around her waist and rattles on the floor. Her eyes react instinctively, flicking towards the door, the way out. "It's still locked," you say. She flinches as if you're going to hit her, but you smile. "There's nowhere to go, Sarah," you say. "Now don't go spoiling it. Are you going to be good?"

She looks down at the floor. At the chain. "Yes," she says.

"Say it."

"I'll be good."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

You help her off with the silk robe and drop it onto the floor, on top of the chain. "Lie down," you say and you watch her sit on the bed and lie back. You start to unbutton your shirt. "Play with yourself," you say. She puts her hand between her legs and slips it under her panties. You let your shirt fall onto the floor. "Are you wet?"

"Yes."

"Say it."

"I'm wet."

"You want me?"

"Yes."

"Say it."

"I want you."

"Faster. Move your hand faster. Put your fingers inside. Move them in and out." She does as she's told as you take off the rest of your clothes. She's panting.

"How does that feel?"

"It feels good."

"Do you want me to make love to you?"

You see her eyes narrow, just a fraction, but that's all the reluctance she shows. "Yes."

"Say it."

"I want you to make love to me."

"You want me more than you want your own husband?"

Another narrowing of the eyes. A small sigh of resignation. Then she swallows. "Yes."

"Say it."

"I want you more than I want my husband."

You run your hands down your stomach, between your legs. "Do you like my body?"

Her eyes follow your hands. "Yes," she says. "Yes, I do."

You smile. You climb onto the bed and lie on top of her. Without being asked, she opens her legs and wraps them around you. You feel her breasts flatten against your chest. You

kiss her neck and lick her ear and then, for the first time, you kiss her on the mouth. She returns the kiss, not eagerly, not passionately, but she kisses you.

You break away and look down at her face. Her cheeks are red and she's breathing heavily and her mouth is slightly open. There's a tiny smear of lipstick across one of her canines, like a fleck of blood. "Sarah, I'm going to make love to you like no one's ever made love to you before," you say. "Is that what you want?"

She swallows. "Yes." Her voice is little more than a whisper. You kiss her, hard, slipping your tongue between her teeth, invading her mouth as you move against her. She whimpers and tears well up in her eyes. It makes you want her even more. Fear and sex, it's the perfect aphrodisiac. Fear, sex, and, ultimately, death. You shiver in anticipation and you feel yourself building to an orgasm. "Sarah," you whisper into her mouth, "this is going to be so good."

* * *

Ed Turner lives in a brownstone building on the edge of Harlem. Given a few years and the area will be up and coming, right now it's borderline. I guess he can't afford much on a cop's salary. There's a greasy coffee shop down the road from where I can see the main entrance to the building and I get there just after eight o'clock and sit nursing a cup of something hot and brown until I see Turner leave for work. I give it ten minutes and then I go inside the building. There's a panel of labelled buttons set into the wall and I press the one marked Turner. There's a crackle and a click and then I hear a woman's voice ask me what I want.

I say I've got a special delivery for Ed Turner and she says that I'm to go on up. The door locking mechanism buzzes and I'm in. The Turner apartment is on the third floor and she's already got the door open and the chain on. I hand her the manila envelope, addressed to her husband, through the gap. She doesn't remark on the fact that I'm wearing an overcoat and not a mailman's uniform, and I don't mention the fact that she's wearing a silk robe and nothing on underneath it. She thanks me and closes the door.

I go up the stairs on tiptoe, right to the top of the building and I wait there. While I sit on the stairs I run through *The Bestseller*. The more I think about it, the more I like it. It's becoming a sort of *Silence Of The Lambs* but from the serial killer's point of view. Definitely one for Brian DePalma. Or Dino de Laurentis, maybe.

I sit there for maybe an hour before Sophie Turner goes out. I peer down the stairwell and see that she's dressed warmly and is carrying a bag. I'm not sure if she's going shopping or if she works but it doesn't matter because I'm not planning to be in the apartment long. I knock, just in case they've got someone staying with them, but there's no reply. There are two locks on the door, deadbolts that can't be picked and have to be drilled out, but I was expecting that from the address so I brought a crowbar with me. I pull it out from under the coat, stick it into the jamb and push against it with all my might. There's a tearing sound and the frame splinters and I put my shoulder against the door and it gives. Another push and it swings open, a foot-long splinter of varnished wood almost falls but I catch it in a gloved hand and carry it inside with me. I close the door and stand listening. Silence.

It's a two bedroom flat but one of the bedrooms has been converted into a study. There's a word processor and a filing cabinet and lots of newspaper cuttings pinned to a bulletin board. Sophie

Turner's name is on a few of the stories, different papers and magazines to I guess she must be a freelance journalist. There's nothing heavy, most of it seems to be property-related and, to be honest, her stuff isn't very good.

There's a king-size bed in the bedroom with a mirrored built-in closet and I stand for a while looking at my reflection in the mirror and wondering what Sophie and Ed get up to under the quilt. The furniture is clean but shabby as if they've had it for a while, and the carpet is worn in places. There's a small television set in one corner opposite a long leather sofa and one wall is covered with bookshelves so I figure that the Turners are more into reading than watching. I smash the TV with the crowbar and pull all the books off the shelves. I take a large carving knife from the kitchen and rip the sofa to shreds, then I attack the quilt and the bed until there are feathers everywhere. I pull all their clothes out of the closets and I throw them on the floor and then I stand on the bed and urinate over them. The fridge in the kitchen is full of food and I throw it around the living room and pour milk over the books and then I go into her study and trash it.

I take a lipstick from the dressing table in the bedroom and in big capital letters I write "HOW DO YOU LIKE IT, NIGGER?" across the mirrored closet. It's a nice touch, the Nigger bit. Just in case he thinks it might be a couple of homeboys out to feed their habit. That and the fact that nothing has been stolen should point in my direction. I mean, he is a detective and all. I actually feel guilty as I stand and look at the word nigger written in red. It's not that I'm racist, I pretty much treat everyone as inferior, but it'll make Turner mad. Real mad. I toss the crowbar into the middle of the living room and go home.

I pace as I wait. It's calming, the repetitive steps soothe my conscious mind, allowing my subconscious to roam free. Pacing is liberating. I guess that's why caged animals pace in the zoo. It sets them free, in their minds at least.

I start off by running through some of the dialogue for Checking Out but it doesn't feel right and I wonder whether I should just scrap the project and move on to something else. I know I should start work on The Bestseller but there's something stopping me. Maybe it's Marcinko. Maybe I need another ending for it. Something like a beautiful cop with impossibly blue eyes falling for the killer. Maybe even becoming his last victim. I like that idea and I play with it for a while, but Ed Turner keeps intruding into my thoughts. Turner would make a good character in a movie. Tall, well-built black cop, Wesley Snipes maybe, with a beautiful journalist wife, trying to make it together in the big city. I go with it as I pace, and pretty soon I come up with a plot. It needs a short, snappy title and I get that, too. DNA. Everyone knows about DNA analysis, and they know it's used to solve crimes, but there's something, I don't know, rap-like about it, as if the name belongs to a group of black teenagers with hoods on their sweatshirts and gold chains around their necks. Yeah, DNA. Love the title. The plot's good, too. I picture Turner pretty much as he is in real life, but I'd maybe lose the spectacles. I've got the feeling recently that he only wears them for effect, that there's nothing wrong with his sight and that the lenses are plain glass. Maybe he thinks he'll get promoted faster if his bosses think he's the studious type. He's an ambitious man, Sergeant Turner, and I think he sees me as one more rung on his ladder to the top.

Okay, so the plot of DNA goes something like this. A middle-aged black detective, Turner without the glasses, who works the drugs beat has personal problems at home, a delinquent son and a wheelchair-bound wife. Picture Sophie, without the use of her legs. He loves his wife, but she's no longer able to have sex, so he seeks solace with hookers. He's ashamed at having to pay for sex, but there's no other solution. The hookers like the detective - he's basically a good guy - and several become informers for him. The detective makes love to one of the girls, but they're disturbed by her pimp who has been beating her up. The detective fights the pimp, warns him to

leave the girl alone, then leaves. The detective returns to his wife. The following day the hooker is found brutally murdered. The Medical Examiner discovers semen in the girl and runs a DNA analysis on it. The detective knows that unless he can find the killer, he will himself become a suspect. He tracks down the pimp, who knows that the hooker was alive when he left, but the pimp too has been murdered. The detective is being set up by a drugs kingpin he's investigating.....and all the evidence points to the detective's guilt.

It's a great first act, but before I can take it any further there's a hammering on the door. I look out of the window and am surprised to see that it's getting dark outside. I switch the main light on and go to the bedroom alcove, then I open the door. I put the chain on first but I needn't have bothered because as soon as I slip the lock he kicks the door with all his weight and the wood splinters. The screws are ripped out of the security chain and when he kicks the door a second time it flies open.

Turner isn't wearing his glasses and there's a wild, almost manic, look in his eyes. I step back into the middle of the room and he slams the door shut. For the first time I realise he's carrying the crowbar, swinging it from side to side like a club. His upper lip curls back into a cruel sneer and there are flecks of foamy saliva on his lower lip. Turner has lost it and if I'm not careful he's going to go too far. "What's wrong?" I ask, holding my hands out in front of me. "What have I done?"

"You know what you've done," he says and lashes out with the crowbar. The curved end slams into my stomach and I double over in pain.

It's hard to breath but I have to get the words out. "I haven't done anything," I say.

He grabs me by the hair and pulls me forward, then swings me around and hurls me into the wall by the door. The back of my head hits the wall, hard, and I feel my legs go weak. Turner slashes at my legs with the crowbar and he catches me on the left knee. The pain is intense, worse than my throbbing stomach and pounding head, a stab of agony that paralyses my entire leg. Turner lifts the crowbar and brings it down towards my head but I throw myself to the side, stumbling because my injured leg can't support me. I fall forward and try to crawl into the middle of the room but Turner plants his foot in the small of my back and starts to beat my right arm with the crowbar.

I scream and roll to the side but the foot keeps me pressed to the ground. I beg and plead for him to stop and I keep on shouting that I haven't done anything wrong.

"You think you're so fucking smart!" he screams. He stops hitting me with the crowbar and the foot moves off my back. I pull myself forward with my hands but I haven't got more than a few inches before he kicks me in the ribs. I feel a rib crack and I try to roll away from his feet but I end up stranded on my back like a upturned turtle, unable to move.

"Please stop!" I shout, but he kicks me again, harder this time. Pain sears across my chest. Jesus, I had no idea it was going to hurt so much. He stands over me waving the crowbar and for one terrible moment I think that he's going to bring it crashing down on my skull. For the first time I think that I might actually not get out of this alive. I raise my hands to shield my head but he switches his target at the last minute and wallops me across the chest. Tears of pain well up in my eyes and I almost pass out. Turner raises the metal bar again but then throws it away. I hear it crash against the wall and then he drops down on top of me, his knees either side of my waist. He grabs my hands and pulls them down and then slaps me across the face so hard that my teeth rattle. I accidentally bite my tongue and my mouth fills with metallic-tasting blood that I have to swallow so that I don't choke. He hits me in the face again and his right hand reaches behind his back and reappears with a revolver. He cocks the hammer with his thumb and then shoves the barrel it into

my mouth. The metal scrapes against my teeth and I gag but he pushes it further into my mouth. "I'm going to blow your fucking head off, Waller!" he screams.

I try to shake my head but I can't move. I can see his finger tightening on the trigger and I start to shake. This wasn't supposed to happen. It wasn't supposed to go this far.

"You came into my home! You trashed my home!"

I try to swallow but my throat is too dry. The gun sight is pressing against the roof of my mouth and my stomach heaves like I'm going to throw up. He's heavy and most of his weight seems to be on my cracked rib but all I can feel is the metal in my mouth. His trigger finger is still tightening and there's a blood lust in his eyes and I know that I'm only seconds away from dying on the floor, the back of my skull blown away by a cop's bullet.

Suddenly Turner goes quiet and I can see the tension visibly slip away as if he's gradually gaining control of himself, as if he's finally realised the enormity of what he's doing. He's still angry and his face is still filled with hatred and rage but the urge to kill has gone.

"You ever go near my house or my wife again and I'll kill you, Waller," he says, pushing the gun barrel even further down my throat. "I'll break every bone in your fucking body and then I'll make you eat this fucking gun. Are we clear?"

I blink. I can't speak, I'm choking on his Police Special.

"Are we fucking clear?" he shouts.

I nod. It's all I can do.

Turner stares at me, then slowly takes the gun out of my mouth. His eyes never leave mine as he gets to his feet, then something in him snaps again and he kicks me savagely in the side. Once. Twice. A third time. He draws back his foot to kick me again, then stops. He spits down at my face, the phlegm splattering across my lips. "You're not fucking worth it!" he hisses, then turns his back on me and walks out of the room.

I lie on my back for several minutes, trying to catch my breath. I gingerly touch my side. It hurts bad, but I don't think it's broken, just cracked maybe. My knee hurts like hell, but I can still move my leg. I roll over cautiously because I'm still not sure how hurt I am. Under the bed the red light of the video camera gleams like some half hidden predator.

* * *

You put your eye to the peephole and watch. The peephole is almost as exciting as the video, probably because it's live. She's actually there, only feet away from you, living and breathing and not knowing that you're watching her every move. Sure, the videos are a turn-on because they show the power you have over your captives, that you can make them do anything you want, but there's a different power in watching them without them knowing.

She sits on the bed and examines the chain as if by staring at the metal links she'd discover a weak point. You smile as she works her way along the length of chain. As if you'd be stupid enough to give her a chain that could be broken. And if she were to break the chain, what then? Where would she go? She's certainly learned her lesson about going near the door.

You admire her spirit: by the time most of your victims had been captive for as long as Sarah, they usually just lie on the beds staring up at the ceiling, resigned to their fate. Perhaps it's because she's a mother, maybe this is some reflection of her maternal spirit. You change eyes, using your left eye to watch as your hand seems to develop a life of its own and

slide between your legs. It's so exciting watching her there, sitting and scheming, trying to find a way to escape from your clutches. No one has ever escaped. And on one ever will. She's yours to do with as you want. Until death do you part.

You shiver with anticipation. Soon it will be time for the best part.

* * *

I take a long sip at the gin and tonic and watch myself on the screen, limping out of the court building with a high-powered lawyer on each side. The scene doesn't look as hectic on screen as it was in real life. At the time I felt that I was about to be engulfed by the story-hungry media pack and there seemed to be dozens of flash guns going off everywhere I looked. The TV seems to make everything seem smaller. I lean forward and place the glass on the coffee table, grunting because my side still hurts a bit.

On screen I stop and take a deep breath and a cluster of microphones are thrust under my chin. There's a flurry of shouted questions and one of the lawyers raises a hand, appealing for silence so that I can make myself heard.

A lone voice pipes up above the babble. "What are you going to do with the money, Marvin?"

I smile and a few of the reporters laugh. "I'll invest it wisely," I say, with a rueful smile. My arm is in a sling, but, like the limp, that was more for the jury's benefit than for mine. The arm healed quickly, and the knee only hurts if I twist it. I'm almost one hundred per cent fit, but my lawyers reckoned that every in court grimace was worth another \$50,000. They knew what they were talking about. Three million bucks is what I got from the city. Three million dollars. And that doesn't include the \$250,000 I got selling the video to 60 Minutes and the money my agent got selling the rights around the world. The video has become almost as famous as the Rodney King footage. Turner kicking the shit out of me. Turner walloping me with the crowbar. Turner sticking his gun in my mouth.

"How do you feel about Ed Turner, now?" asks a blonde TV reporter, her smile blindingly bright.

I shrug. "There isn't much I can say. But at least he's no longer employed as a police officer."

"Will you be going to his trial?"

I smile. "I think I've seen more than enough of Ed Turner, don't you?"

The reporters laugh. "What are you going to do now, Marvin?" asks one.

"I've got several projects in hand," I say. "My agent has already had enquiries from several Hollywood studios and I'm hopeful that I'll be moving to the East Coast before long."

My agent. I like the sound of that. In fact, once the existence of the video became known they were queuing up to take me on as a client. For once they were chasing me and not the other way around. There are more questions but the lawyers hustle me away. We'd already sold the exclusive rights to the story to one of the supermarket tabloids for big bucks and I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening in a suite in the Plaza Hotel, spilling my guts.

The news broadcast ends and I use the remote control to switch the TV off. I lie back on the sofa and stare at the ceiling. It's all going so well. The huge pay off from the city, the money pouring in from selling the video recording and the story, Hollywood execs knocking on my agent's door, and a secretary who calls me "Mr Waller" whenever my agent wants to get in touch with me. And as an added bonus, Ed Turner in court on charges of attempted murder. According to my lawyers, he'll probably plea bargain the charges down to assault but he'll spend up to three years

behind bars and his career as a police officer is over. He's been selling his story to the tabloids, too, but for much less money than I got.

I sit up again, grunting as the cracked rib lets me know that it's not fully healed. There are two letters on the coffee table next to the gin and tonic. I went around to pick them up from the apartment that morning. Turner and Marcinko were right, of course. I did have somewhere else to live. A house, a big house in upstate New York, stone built, a slate roof, more rooms than I'll ever need, a two-car garage and the nearest neighbours more than a hundred yards away. I've had it for more than five years and Marcinko was right, my father's inheritance paid for it. It's a nice house, a good solid upper middle class home, but it's not the sort of place for a writer to ply his trade. Not one who's just starting out, anyhow. If all goes to plan I'll soon be moving out to Los Angeles. Santa Monica maybe. By the ocean.

The letters are from the Commissioner of Motor Vehicles. They tell me where Lisa Marcinko lives, how old she is, what car she drives, and the fact that she's not married.

I sit up and reread the letters. I was going to leave her alone, I really was. But on the way out of the apartment I almost bumped into her. I gave her the boyish smile but she froze me out, looked at me like I was a piece of garbage. I slipped the envelopes into my jacket pocket and asked her if it was a social call but she was in no mood for flirting. She told me to get out of town. I smiled and said I was going anyway but she wouldn't let it go, she had to keep on pushing. She told me she knew that I'd set Turner up, that I'd goaded him, knowing that the video recording would be all the evidence I'd need. I still tried to be nice, I told her that I knew that she'd kept me talking in the park while Turner went through my flat, that he'd trashed it to scare me, but that they'd picked the wrong one to try to frighten. Even at that stage I'd have been prepared to have let it go, but she kept on pushing. She told me that she thought I was a sociopath, that Turner had been a good cop and that I'd ruined him, and that if I didn't get out of town she'd come gunning for me. I kept on smiling, kept on trying to win her over, but she was like stone. I left her standing on the doorstep, staring at my back. I could feel her hatred burning into me all the way down the street.

I roll the letters up tightly, then take another drink of gin and tonic. I was going to leave her alone, I really was, but now she's made it personal. She's committed the worse possible sin. She's underestimated me. I hate that. I hate that more than anything.

* * *

You put the carrier bag on the kitchen table and take out the contents, one by one. You weigh the hacksaw in your hands and then rub a finger gently across the blade. The first time you cut up a body you used a wood saw but it soon blunted and from then on you used hacksaws so that you could change the blade as often as you needed. You take the pack of six replacement blades and place them on the table. It usually takes six.

You bought two knives, a large butcher's knife for cutting through tendons and a small peeling knife for flaying back the skin. You always buy new knives. Partly because you need them to be really sharp, but more importantly because you always get rid of them once you've used them. No matter how much you clean them, they'd always carry traces, minute fragments of blood and bone that could lead to you spending the rest of your life in a steel cell. Besides, there's something intensely pleasurable about buying the equipment. You smile as you remember the way the clerk in the hardware store had been so eager to please. If only he knew what you planned to do with your purchases.

There's a can of shaving foam and a pack of disposable razors. You're going to get her to shave for you, first. You're going to see her truly naked. The black garbage packs come in a roll of twenty. You won't need all twenty but it was cheaper to buy them in bulk and they came with metal fasteners to close them, more secure than the plastic ties. The aerosol of air freshener was pine-scented. You've tried the floral version in the past but it never really masked the smell. Pine was much stronger. You do most of the cutting in the bathroom but there's always some mess on the floor so you bought some tile cleaner and cloths. The last thing in the bag is a fresh video cassette.

* * *

Marcinko's house is in Brooklyn, a neat single story home on a small lot, surrounded by a chain link fence. Her car isn't parked in front of the house and there isn't a garage. It's just after five o'clock and I guess she'll be back some time after six. I've got plenty of time.

I walk down the path to the front of the house and ring the doorbell. As I wait to see if there's anyone inside, I check the outside of the house for an alarm system. I don't see one. I stand on the doorstep and check the street, keeping a wary eye out for neighbours. There's no need to worry, the only living thing around seems to be a black dog of indeterminate breed. My ring goes unanswered. I'm not surprised because I know she's not married and she's not the sort of woman who'd be living with her mother. I walk down the side of the house. I'm holding a plastic carrier bag containing a roll of adhesive tape, a screwdriver and a ski mask. I'm not carrying a knife, just in case I'm unlucky enough to be caught breaking in.

The rear of the house isn't overlooked so I can take my time as I check the windows. They all have locks but so far as I can see, no alarm. There's a mat in front of the kitchen door and I lift it up, hopefully, but there's no key there. I check around just in case Marcinko's stupid enough to leave a spare key lying around, but I don't find one.

There's just one lock on the back door. It'd be easy enough to force but I don't have to because there's a small window next to the door which is just perfect. I smile as I fix strips of adhesive tape across the glass. Lateral thinking, that's all any burglar needs. I'm wearing leather gloves so I break the glass with my fist. It makes a crunching sound and hardly any of the splinters fall to the ground, most remain stuck to the tape. I carefully pull out the glass and drop it into a garbage can by the back door. I lean inside the window and push aside the blinds. She's left the key in the lock and it's a simple matter to turn it. There's one bolt at the top of the door and I pull that back. Ten seconds later and I'm standing in the kitchen. I relock and rebolt the door and slant the blinds down in front of the broken window. From inside there's no way of knowing that the house has been broken into, and as she'd left the key in the lock it's clear that Marcinko enters and leaves by the front door.

My mouth has gone dry and I can hear the blood rushing through my head. I lick my lips and I pour myself a glass of water from the kitchen tap, drinking it slowly as I look around the room. There's some shopping on the kitchen table as if she couldn't be bothered to put it away, as if she had something else on her mind. I open the kitchen drawers until I find what I'm looking for. Her knives. I select a long chopping knife with a wooden handle, a solid blade with a sharp end. I weigh it in my hand. It's well balanced, perfect.

I take another look at my watch. Plenty of time. I put the glass tumbler back on the draining board and go through to the living room. It's scrupulously neat, like a mock up of a room in a department store window. Nothing is out of place, and there's nothing personal to be seen. No

photographs, no mementoes, none of the normal junk that turns a house into a home. There are two sofas that look as if no one has ever sat on them, a glass and chrome coffee table and an expensive TV and hi-fi unit. There's a built-in bookcase either side of a stone fireplace, but its bare of books. It's not what I expected. Not what I expected at all.

On the other side of the hallway is another room but it's devoid of furniture. I frown. Maybe she's short of money and can't furnish the whole house, but that doesn't feel right because what furniture there is in the rest of the house looks expensive. She's a strange woman, this Lisa Marcinko.

You climb the stairs, tip-toeing even though you know the house is empty. There are three bedrooms upstairs but there's only furniture in one, a single bed, two pine wardrobes and a dressing table. There are a few personal touches: make up on the dressing table, a white vase of dried flowers and a brass clock on a bedside table, but it's still as sterile as the rooms downstairs. The other bedrooms are empty, though they are carpeted. All the rooms in the house have the same characterless beige carpet. I open the wardrobes. Her clothes are hanging as neatly as soldiers on parade. I run a gloved hand along the hangers. There's something not right about the house, but I can't quite put my finger on it. Everything is too neat, too ordered. It reminds me of a show house, put together by an interior designer who wants to make it look as if it's lived in, trying to disguise the fact that it's an empty, un-lived-in shell. Even the clothes look as if they've never been worn. There are no photographs, no teddy bears, no letters. Nothing personal, as if she's covering her traces.

I go back downstairs, feeling uneasy. When I went through Turner's apartment I had a strong sense that I was on his territory. There was clutter, there was his personality everywhere, and there was a feeling of intrusion, that I was somewhere that I shouldn't be, that I was seeing things that he wouldn't want me to see. There was a feeling of power when I broke into Turner's home, but I don't get that from Marcinko's house. I could trash the place and it wouldn't mean anything. And I know without a shadow of a doubt that she wouldn't care. There's nothing of her in this house.

I look around for somewhere to hide. I want to catch her unawares, but I have to be careful in case she isn't alone when she gets home. And I must never forget that she's a cop and that she carries a gun. I'm holding the knife in my right hand and it feels good. Lisa Marcinko is going to rue the day she underestimated me.

There's a walk-in closet below the stairs but it's too small and if I leave the door open she'll see it when she opens the front door. I don't want to hide upstairs because I don't know how long it'll be before she goes to bed, and the stairs squeaked when I put my weight on them. I go back into the kitchen. There's a door by the side of the stove and I open it to find a big larder, lined with wooden shelves which are piled high with canned goods. There's a light switch just inside the door and I flick it on. A fluorescent light kicks into life. The larder is huge, almost the size of the smallest bedroom upstairs. It looks like a survivalist's store, with enough food to last one person for a year at least. I frown as I stand looking at the stockpile, wondering why on earth a police detective would need so much food.

I hear a car pull up outside and my heart starts to pound. I don't want to risk going near the window so I decide to hide in the larder. I kill the light and close the door, leaving it open just a fraction. By pressing my eye to the gap I can see the door leading to the hallway. I swallow, my mouth so dry it almost hurts. I suddenly remember the ski mask and I take it out of the carrier bag and slip it on. I'm going to teach Lisa Marcinko a lesson she'll never forget.

I strain to hear the car door open and close, but all I hear is another vehicle drive by. I wonder if I missed her getting out of the car, but I don't hear footsteps coming down the path. The larder

door swings open and I grab for the handle and pull it back. The hinges creak and the sound seems to fill the kitchen. I keep a tight hold of the door but my hand is shaking and I feel the door vibrate. I let go but it immediately begins to swing open again. I curse silently. There's a noise outside, but I don't know what it is. It's not the car door, it's not footsteps, it's not a key being slotted into a lock. I don't know what it is. A vision fills my mind of squad cars lining up in front of the house, a SWAT team piling out of an unmarked van, neighbours peering from behind net curtains. I close my eyes and listen, but there's nothing. My hands are sweating in the gloves and the ski mask itches. The shaking in my hands intensifies and I swear I can see the door wobble. I pull it until it's almost completely shut.

I close my eyes then blink rapidly. It feels as if someone has rubbed sand in them. It's pitch black in the larder, but when I look down I realise that there's light coming up through the wooden floor. At first I think that maybe it's a trick played on my mind by my light-starved eyes, but after a minute or so I can clearly see four razor-thin strips of light forming a rectangle at the back of the room. I put my ear to the crack in the door, but there's no sound outside.

I pull the door shut and kneel down by the rectangle of light. My groping fingers find a small hole at one of the lighted oblong and I slip two fingers inside. I pull up and a trapdoor opens smoothly, so smoothly that there must be some sort of counterweight mechanism because the wood is thick and heavy. As I pull the trapdoor open, light floods into the larder casting eerie shadows on the walls. I stand and listen but still I can't hear anything.

A flight of metal stairs lead down into the basement. I swallow nervously but I've gone this far and I have to find out what the hell is going on. This isn't the sort of secret I can walk away from. I descend the stairs slowly, the knife held out in front of me, my nerves screaming that I should just get out of the house, my curiosity saying no, I have to go on, I have to find out what Lisa Marcinko is up to.

The stairs lead down to a white-painted corridor about twenty feet long, and at the end of the corridor is a door. I walk slowly towards it. All I can hear is my own breathing and the sound of the blood pumping around my body, faster and faster. There's a small peephole set into the door and on the wall is a numeric keypad, some sort of security entry system. The peephole is low down, almost at the level of my shoulders, and I have to bend down to put my eye to it.

What I see makes my mouth drop. "Oh my God," I whisper. There's a woman, a blonde woman, sitting on a large bed, a chain around her waist. The other end of the chain is fixed to the wall. The room is completely white, like a cell in an insane asylum. The woman is wearing a black silk dressing gown, and under it stockings and suspenders. Her head is bent down and she's rubbing her eyes with her hands, but then she looks up and stares at the door, as if she knows that I'm standing there, watching her.

The feeling that she knows I'm there is so strong that I jerk away from the peephole. I put my hands on the door and shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. When I look back, the woman is standing by the bed, her head bowed. She looks up, almost shyly, then averts her eyes again. The realisation of who it is hits me like a bolt of lightning. Sarah Hall. Then just as quickly I realise what it all means and the horror of it takes my breath away. I'm scared, more scared than I've ever been in my life.

That's when I hear the noise behind me and I whirl around, my eyes wide and my heart racing. I should have realised. I should have thought. I should have known. I've been so stupid. So fucking stupid. She's standing there, smiling. Her eyes have never looked bluer. Or colder. Her left hand is against the wall, as if she was leaning on it for support. And in her right hand is a large handgun. I have made one big fucking mistake.

* * *

You smile at Marvin and shake your head sadly. In a way you're not surprised to find him in your house, but you never thought he'd discover your secret. There's only one thing you can do now, of course. He hasn't left you any alternative. You tighten your finger on the trigger. The noise will startle Sarah, but that can't be helped. It's almost her time, anyway. Getting rid of Marvin's body won't be difficult. Two corpses can be disposed of just as easily as one. Marvin holds the knife down at his side as if he's forgotten he's holding it. He opens his mouth to say something, but you're not prepared to listen to him. You put your left index finger up against your mouth. "Hush," you whisper, then you pull the trigger.

THE END

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