

**DEATH BY LESBIAN**

**by**

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Pamela Solomon had no use for pastel water colors delicately dabbed onto small, store-bought canvases perched on oak easels. She was on her knees in tattered gold ballet slippers and paint-splotched bib overalls over a red bra with one strap dangling to her elbow. The shock of black hair falling in front of her eyes smelled of turpentine and oils. She was pounding tacks to stretch a canvas across the four by twelve foot frame she'd just sawed and nailed together. Tito Puente blared from the tape deck in her Spring Garden studio, his rhythms and tempo fitting inspiration for her plans on how to kill that sonofabitch Martin.

The hair over her eyes caused her to miss a tiny tack and bang her finger with the hammer. She shook it and blew on it to make it all better, the pain nothing compared to that heaped on her by that fucking creep Martin. She bounced up, still shaking her sore finger, and walked to the boxes of doo-dads scattered on the workbench. She emptied them one by one until she found a medium, black binder clip and used it to tame her out-of-control mane.

The phone rang. She hoped it wasn't her lawyer. She wanted to paint, not deal with divorce crap.

"Yeah, this is Pamela."

"We goin' to Audrey's later?"

Good, it was just Jack. "Sure, but I might be late," she said, still blowing on her bruised fingertip. "If I get on a roll I won't want to quit. When I finish up I'll call you and we'll fix a time."

"Sounds good. I'll wait to hear from you."

That's what she liked about Jack. He wasn't a control freak like Martin, especially once he got laid.

Audrey's Finest Philadelphia Lesbian Bar was down on Sansom and Twelfth. Pamela and Jack liked to hang there since the crowd was flamboyant and friendly. The women would eye Pamela -- a turn-on to Jack -- but because she was with him and the habitués of Audrey's weren't dogs in heat, they kept a polite distance. Sometimes Jack would go to the rest room and stay a while, "to give the sisterhood a crack at you," he said. But she had Jack's number. Most of what he did was about sex. For him.

"Don't be so clever," she'd told him, "I might leave you stranded in there to take care of yourself."

Yet she loved the attention, whether from Jack or the women. "I have to admit," she told him once, "shacking up with a woman might be . . . electric." It sent Jack around the bend. That night his jaw was clamped tight all the way back to her apartment.

"What's the matter," she had asked, "jumping beans in your pocket?" His hunger for her was raw and unalloyed but amused her, unlike sex with Martin who mostly thought he was doing her a favor.

By 7:45 p.m. she was losing the early September light. Time enough to get home and shower, then head to Judy's Cafe for din, and on to Audrey's. She hoped Jack finally had a plan. He had said to leave it to him. He'd help her get rid of Martin.

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They sat in their usual place at Audry's. Jack was used to women checking him out for his chiseled jaw, cleft chin, and boyish insouciance. At Audry's they couldn't care less. Instead they cruised by and shot Pamela quick, affable, sidelong glances with hints of a smile. Jack sat quietly staring into his Drambuie and scotch while the women prowled.

Finally, he pulled his stool close to hers. “You’re quiet tonight. Does the whole deal have you down?”

“I heard from my mother. She complained about Dad. All he does is sit around. He’s making her crazy. I wish I could give him cash to go to Atlantic City.”

Her father, Arnold Lasky, didn’t have much time left with his cancer and all. Pamela was running out of time too—to earn his love and esteem, even if she had to buy it. He was a talented and creative guy, good at everything he tried, except earning a living. She grew up dirt poor, as she put it. And that left her vulnerable to Martin Solomon who draped her with diamonds. She thought her hunger would finally be filled. But as time went on it was like eating cake -- tasty but not satisfying, and too much made her sick. She needed more than Martin could offer, sustenance rather than sweetness. He refused to understand when she tried to explain, trying instead to convince her that diamonds were a girl’s best friend. Just another way of making her out to be wrong.

“Can I slip you a few hundred to give to your pop?” Jack said.

“No way. He’s my responsibility, not yours.”

“Can’t your lawyer have Martin spring for some subsistence money as a credit against any final settlement?”

“I wouldn’t give Martin the satisfaction. Nope, when I hired the Gibbons firm I knew I’d be going to the mat. No quarter asked, none given. I wouldn’t have done it if Martin hadn’t been such a prick about my leaving and refuse to settle up.”

“He must have been really hurt.”

“Hurt my ass! The only thing hurt is his ego. It sickens him to think anybody could leave him.”

“He’s used to success.”

“I don’t see why. Bellissima breaks even at best.”

“You’re kidding, the most fabulous *tres chic* hair stylist and beauty spa outside of Manhattan doesn’t make money?”

“How do you think he attracts top talent? He gives away the store. Plus Rittenhouse Square rent, insurance, advertising, the huge bill for back taxes—it’s not how he makes his money.”

“Well it sure seems like the two of you led the high life.”

“Oh, we did, but not for the reasons you think.” She’d never told any of this for fear of being hit with a slander suit. But what the hell, if Jack was willing to help her kill the bastard, he may as well know why. “He fixes up his blue-haired-ladies and Atlantic City show-biz clients with cocaine and heroin. They tip him for it after he sticks his wick into their hot wax, then sticks the cash into a safe so the IRS and creditors won’t find it.”

“Jesus,” Jack said.

“And everybody knows it. His clients are referral only. They protect him like Moses in the bulrushes.”

“Double-Jesus.”

“It’s why the police won’t give two shits when he disappears.”

“Yeah, about that,” Jack said, “it’s what we hope, but you never know. We may wind up with some homicide detective wanting to make a name and use a local celebrity like Martin to do it.”

They nursed a few more drinks.

“I never signed any pre-nup,” she said. “Martin wanted one but I refused. He married me anyway. I guess he thought I could never leave him. Even when a stylist quits, he broods for weeks.”

“It’s never been clear to me why you left him,” Jack said. “Did he abuse you?”

“Is ignoring me and trying to change me all the time abuse? Maybe I was a patsy. But after I graduated from The Academy I saw the world differently.”

“Sounds like you came into your own.”

“Maybe that’s it. After a childhood of my father demeaning me, then being a middle child in an older brother’s shadow, I guess I was primed for Martin. Maybe that’s what he saw in me, somebody who would put him on a pedestal then dust it for him.”

“It couldn’t have been your fabulous looks and body, could it?”

“Don’t be silly. Dime a dozen, especially in his business.”

“Well, I don’t have his problem,” Jack said. “I love your fabulous looks and body.”

“You’re so shallow Jack. Don’t ever change.” She gave him a wink as he got up to go to the rest room.

By the time he returned, his seat was occupied by Kat, a boyish, attractive, slight-built woman with short cropped brown hair, a blue button-down shirt, gray slacks, and unbuttoned blue blazer with sleeves pushed up the forearm. She’d moved in as soon as he was out of sight.

“Hey Jack,” Pamela said, “this is Kat Johnson.”

Kat smiled at Jack and held out her hand. “I hope I’m not interrupting. You can have your seat back.”

“No , no,” Jack said, “stay. Join us. We’re practically regulars.”

“I know,” Kat said, “I’ve seen you here lots. Did you remember to put the toilet seat down?” Kat said it with a straight face. They paused. Then burst out laughing.

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Pamela had promised Jack he could watch her paint as long as he sat in the corner of the studio and kept his mouth shut. She needed total focus to paint, except for her tape of Stan Getz, JJ Johnson, and Oscar Peterson—*At the Opera House* from ’57, a legacy from her father in lieu of financial security, love, and respect. The only tenderness she ever got from him was when he talked to her about “transcendent things,” like art and jazz. She still struggled with it. She had wanted him to tell her she was beautiful, talented, clever, and that he loved her. But all she got was “transcendent things.”

She stood the huge canvas already coated with gesso on edge, and set an array of jars and tubes of paint and different brushes on a bench next to her.

“How do you know where to start?” Jack said.

“You’re shutting up, remember?” She eyed her brushes. “Watch my tail if you’d like, but let me paint.” She knew Jack would settle for that. He treated everything she said as a come-on. Even a good-morning was the promise of getting lucky.

She dipped a thick brush into red paint and made a huge slash with a sweeping motion in the center of the canvas. She stepped back to look at it. She couldn’t explain to Jack or anyone about the colors she chose, the shapes she drew, or the drippings or marks or letters or splotches or daubs or strokes or anything she did on a canvas. It was a gift, an eye for harmony—of colors and forms, context and tension. All she knew was, she could do it and must do it. And though she didn’t enroll at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts until her mid-thirties, it was a breeze, and classmates were in awe of what she did with oils and huge canvases. They can teach you to

paint, she thought at the time, but they can't teach you to see. Her eye was her own and not to be explained or justified, especially to faculty who urged her to paint their way.

As she worked she quickly forgot Jack was there. She was lost in the rhythms of the slide trombone and tenor sax. They vibrated down her arm into the brush and became reds and blacks, yellows and greens, smudges and drips and the intoxicating smell of paint and turpentine, while her fingers' sensual embrace of the different brushes danced on the canvas, sometimes barely touching it like a midnight kiss to a sleeping lover, sometimes bearing down under the forceful pressure of a starving heart. This was how Pamela painted. Free yet in total control. Blotting out thoughts of her father's failures and emotional penury, and Martin's hatred of her, and his vow that she would never see a penny.

She was vaguely aware that Jack left at midnight. She was still painting.

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Jack knocked on the door the following morning. She managed to roll out of the cot and throw the bolt. He looked rested. She looked like hell but didn't care.

"You're full of paint," he said. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I slept on the cot, or at least lay on the cot. Sometimes when I paint I dream about colors and shapes, and it's hard to separate sleep from awake."

He set the bag with coffee and muffins on the workbench, and all was forgiven. While she munched, he looked over the painting, almost done, dominated by thick reds, some bordered in white, with green and yellow seemingly-random shapes between black slashes. Jagged scribbles here and there from a black felt-tip pen, and the faint suggestion of a woman's body.

Off-center was an eighteen inch diameter charcoal apparition of thick black hair exploding around a face having her features yet vague.

“Do you like it?” she said around a mouthful of muffin.

All he could do was shake his head. “Wow!”

She looked over at the work as she pulled a coffee out of the bag. The painting was good. She would touch it up some, but emotionally it was done.

“I was thinking of taking it to Audrey’s. Kat Johnson said if Audrey liked it they’d hang it for a while.”

“Absolutely,” Jack said. “It’s powerful. I can’t imagine them not liking it.”

“I have a couple little things to fix. Give me one more day with it and it’ll be ready.”

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They carried the canvas up the narrow staircase from Medusa’s Restaurant to Audrey’s. Kat Johnson met them at the top of the stairs. When they set the painting on edge, Kat’s eyes widened as she walked back and forth in front of it.

“Pamela, it’s magnificent!” She turned and waved friends over, “Brand, Tory, come see this, you won’t believe it.” Pamela stood beside the painting while Kat’s friends and others came to look at it.

“Oh, Audrey’s gonna love this,” Brand said. “She’ll be in at nine. Let’s pick out a place to hang it.” After they picked out a spot, Pamela said, “If Audrey lets me hang it, I’ll want to hang it myself.”

“I’ll drill the brick,” Brand said.

“Oh, I didn’t introduce you,” Kat said. “Brand, this is Pamela and Jack.” Six feet tall and built like a fullback, Brand gave a shy salute.

“Brand, short for Brandi?” Jack asked.

“No, short for Brand.” Her short, black hair was all askew. It fit her indifference to appearance. She wore baggy jeans and a plaid shirt with sleeves rolled above the elbows. On her left arm was a tattoo of crossed shovels with six teardrop-shaped spots beneath them.

“I was admiring your ink.” Pamela pointed to it. “Are those tears?”

“No. Sweat.”

“Brand works construction,” Kat said. “Loaders, cranes, shovels, jack hammers, nail guns -- anything a man figures women shouldn’t do, Brand takes it on.”

“At least I did,” Brand said. “Been laid off a year now. Been driving a tow truck. Coulda done long haul trucking but didn’t wanna be away so much. Miss my buds.”

Kat gave Brand a playful chuck under the chin. “Oh, and this is Tory. You might say she’s with me.”

Tory lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers at Pamela and Jack. Her long blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a tight black leather skirt and white silk blouse opened to show a pearl necklace. Black glasses dangled from a gold chain below no-doubt-about-it cleavage.

“I’ve seen you a lot,” Pamela said to Tory. “I’ve seen you in the street. Do you live nearby?”

“Sort of,” she said. “I live on Spruce and work at the clinic on Lombard and Twelfth. I’m a doctor, family practice.”

“Yeah, and lucky for me, a nine to five doctor,” Kat said, and put her arm around Tory’s waist and drew her to her hip.

“Pamela, your work is beautiful,” Tory said. “Let’s have a drink while we’re waiting for Audrey.” They slid into a booth while Brand went to the bar to retrieve their drinks, noisily kibitzing along the way.

“So,” Kat said, “I understand there’s a husband in the wings?”

“Not when my lawyer’s done with him, I hope. You know Bellissima?”

“I used to go there,” Tory said. “So Martin is your husband.”

“Not for long, I hope,” Pamela said. “But he’s being hard-nosed about a settlement. Plus his assets are all well hidden away.”

Brand returned with the drinks and the conversation went on, each of the women sharing bits of their stories. Jack sat quietly through it all – he and Pamela often spoke of how women and men modified conversation in the presence of the opposite sex.

“Let me buy one more round,” he finally said, “then I’m gonna let you ladies chat while I run off and catch L.A. Law.”

“Jack is house-counsel at PRA Insurance,” Pamela said, “the most exciting law he gets to practice is reviewing contracts.”

“Yeah, but that’s me—dull but steady.” He brought back a tray of drinks, kissed Pamela on the cheek, smiled, and waved goodbye.

By the time Audrey arrived at nine-thirty, the women were feeling their drinks and roaring. Audrey came right over to their booth and looked at Pamela.

“You must be the one who made that fabulous painting.” She offered her hand. “I’m Audrey McAllister. I hope you let us hang it for a while.”

“I’d be honored,” Pamela said.

“I’ll bring my tools tomorrow,” Brand said, “we’ll get that beauty hung.”

The women continued drinking and talking well into the evening. They brought something to Pamela that Jack never could. With him, Pamela would talk, and when he didn’t understand he would probe exhaustively until he did, then often found ways not to affirm her story. But with these women, little elaboration was needed, the rules of the game were known, and moral or legal fine points disregarded in favor of helping a friend in a painful circumstance.

“Do you work, Kat?” Pamela said later into the evening. Kat was so easy to be with Pamela had forgotten to ask.

“I’m with the Philadelphia Dragons,” Kat said.

“Dragons? Dragon . . . boat racing?”

“Roller derby. We’re an LGBT league. We skate all over the country.”

“Oh my God,” Pamela said. “I would never have taken you for a roller queen.”

“I’m not. The guys’ team, they’re the queens—the Quaker City Blowhards.”

Pamela laughed. “You’re kidding!”

“Nope. I’m part owner of the league. There’s money in it, and the girls are great to work with. We’re together all the time, even in the off season. Some of us have kids. We picnic together and everything. I got injured—fractured clavicle—last season by a transgender girl with the Brooklyn Bombshells. When she got her plumbing fixed and grew her boobs, she forgot to get a shoulder reduction. She blocked me over the rail, and boom!”

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Pamela, just back from a job interview, heard the phone's persistent ring while still down the hall. She rummaged her purse for keys as she rushed. It might be follow-up from one of her other interviews. She got to the phone mid-ring. "Hello?"

"Pamela? Larry."

Her lawyer. Might be good news. Maybe movement.

"I have something to tell you but I don't want you to worry," Gibbons said.

She stiffened herself. She was already deflated, desperate for money, and afraid her need would undermine her negotiation position. "What is it, Larry?"

"You're going to be served with papers. I advise you to accept service."

"From whom? Over what?"

"From Martin. He's suing you. He's claiming you interfered with his business by persuading his lead stylist to leave."

"That's total bullshit."

"Of course it is. He's also claiming you took thirty thousand dollars from Bellissima and converted it to your own use. He'll say he only recently discovered it. His lawyer says he won't file a criminal complaint as long as you pay it back."

"That's such . . . He *told* me to bring that money home. One of the shop's masseuses walked into the office as I was putting it into a bag. When he got home he put it in his safe. And he must be talking about Carol. One time she told me she had an offer from another salon. I figured it was a ploy to get a better deal from us, so I called her on it."

“You don’t have to convince me, Pamela. And I’m not saying you don’t have defenses. But you’ll have to answer and defend the suit. It’s a separate lawsuit, and I won’t be able to get it consolidated into the divorce action”

“Do I have some kind of insurance to respond?”

“I’m afraid not. I can refer you to a lawyer who can be patient with his billing. Look, Martin is clearly doing this to pressure you.”

“Well what the fuck are you doing for me, Larry? Are you telling me there’s nothing we can do?”

“Just be patient. I know it’s stressful. Some day, after we’ve nailed Martin to the wall, you’ll look back on this and laugh.”

“Yeah, well right now I’m laughing at you!” She slammed the phone down.

She sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. That . . . *bastard!* She had stuck with Martin for fifteen years while he built Bellissima—through setbacks, tax investigations, his gambling, drug addictions. Hell, her art still hung on its walls as part of its panache, to say nothing of all the days she did public relations—chatting up clients, bartering for plugs on radio, other ways to promote the business including charity work and working conventions comprised of women.

And now . . . this was more than her normal anxiety of going broke. How much ramen could a woman eat? How many more times could she call the bank to check balances—four, five, six times a day, as if more money would be there by magic? Forget about cologne, which she loved, or a new sweater. Even hamburger was an indulgence.

But even more painful things lay beneath the surface. Existential things, like inability to feel the glory of being a beautiful woman, a talented artist, and worthy person. Instead, she was

back in her childhood, where her friends owned homes in nice neighborhoods, bought clothes, took vacations, had all the prerogatives of money, while the Lasky household paid rent, got dunned, and twice moved at night to duck creditors—the whole time her father, oblivious, tinkled on the piano and contemplated transcendent things.

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Weeks went by, and Pamela hadn't yet been served suit papers for her husband's phony claims. Was it a bluff to scare her off? At least now she had a modest income from a job selling office furniture four days a week. Martin had succeeded in delaying the divorce proceedings, even mediation, with little light at the end of the tunnel. But then Martin's new girlfriend began calling to scream threats. She sounded like a high school kid, even while screaming that Pamela was a bitch and cunt and thief and whore.

Pamela tried to put on a stoic face when she described these encounters to her friends at Audrey's.

"Do you recognize her voice?" Kat asked. "Is she someone from Bellissima?"

"I don't know. She sounds too young."

"Did she ever tell you her name?" Tory said.

"No. All she says is, 'I'm with Martin now'."

"What do you say to her?" Kat said.

"I tell her fine, she should go suck Martin's dick, if she can find it."

"Did she ever say anything about the lawsuit?"

"No, she can't get out of the gutter long enough to talk business."

“Maybe you can find a way to befriend her,” Tory said, “get her on your side. After all, she is another woman.”

“You don’t know how manipulative Martin is. I’m sure by now he has her convinced I carry typhoid.”

“At least you’re working now,” Kat said, “and you always have us.”

“I’m so grateful for that,” Pamela said, a little choked. “Jack, he’s all right, but I don’t know...”

“You don’t have to say it.” Tory said. “We know. There are a lot of good men out there, but you know how it goes...” She grinned, looked at Kat and Brand and raised her hand as if to cue a chorus. Apparently they’d done this before. On Tory’s signal, Pamela’s three friends burst loudly into song—

*Theeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrre is nothin’ like a dame...*

After the first line, every customer in the place, as well as the bartenders, joined in the anthem:

*Nothin’ in the worrrrrld,*

*There is nothing you can name,*

(shouting) *THAT...IS... ANYTHING... LIKE...A... DAAAAAAAAME!*

Pamela piped in for the last line, then laughed until tears ran. “You’re like sisters to me,” she said.

“All women are sisters,” Kat said, “but we’re a special kind of sister.”

“You mean like nuns?” Pamela said.

“No, like lesbians.”

They drank into the night. Pamela drove home from Audrey’s believing that with friends like them she could withstand anything. It was new to her, this regard: as a woman but not for the promise of sex; as a person and not because she could paint; as a friend with nothing asked in return. And by people who really cared, who understood.

It was near midnight when she parked in front of her building. The lobby of The Philadelphian was empty except for the doorman and a woman in her fifties sitting on a bench with her hands propped on an umbrella between her knees. As Pamela walked toward the elevators, she heard her name called out in a sweet voice. “Pamela Solomon?”

“Yes.” She turned around, and the lady with the umbrella thrust papers into her hand.

“These are for you,” the woman said, and walked away.

The shoe had dropped. Pamela put the suit papers aside for the night, unread. She didn’t want Martin’s pissy lawsuit to poison the sweet nectar of friendship she had just tasted.

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On the way down the elevator the following morning, Pamela made a mental list of supplies she needed from the art supply store at Broad and Pine. From there she would head to the studio to stretch some canvases. She wasn’t inclined to start a new work -- Martin’s lawsuit had her agitated, which couldn’t help the art. It read as if she was Lizzie Borden. Jack tried to soothe her nerves by explaining they were only allegations. Judges saw this tactic all the time.

“Easy for you to say,” she told him on the phone, “but it’s my name under ‘defendant’.”

As she strolled through her lobby, she reflexively scanned for umbrella-lady and scrutinized every stranger expecting...what? Trouble of some kind. She tried to shake it off. Who knew how many disguises umbrella-lady used in her occupation as a woman who delivered grief?

She strolled out of the lobby of The Philadelphian into a beautiful day. The Art Museum’s regal presence on the Parkway beside the languorous, snaking Schuylkill River and gold early September sun were uplifting, allowing the memory of warm and passionate friends at Audrey’s to reassert itself. Thank God for them. They had become her armor. As she approached her Volvo in the front parking area, she stopped in her tracks.

Tiny pieces and shards of red and clear broken glass blanketed the ground next to it.

She walked around the car, astonished. The headlights, windshield, side windows, and tail lights had been shattered. The driver’s side finish had deep gouges.

“Oh my God!” She looked at nearby cars for more vandalism by some asshole or a gang of kids. No other car was damaged. Then she remembered her suit papers upstairs. Martin? No, no way! He was a shit-heel all right, but would practice his harassment through lawyers. What about his new girlfriend, the one with the Betty Boop voice and Three Stooges brain? It fit.

Pamela’s anger eventually trumped disgust. She had insurance and was working, so she could pay the deductible. She went back up to her apartment, called the police, made a report, then called her insurance company and AAA. She called Jack. He’d be right there. He took longer than expected and arrived in a car different from his own, one he’d rented for her to use while her Volvo would be in the body shop.

She gave him a big hug and a smooch. “When you feel like God slams a door, some angel comes through the window,” she told him. But she knew he’d later expect a reward.

“Your theory that it’s Martin’s girlfriend is a good one,” he said, as they drove back to drop him off. “It’s something a kid would do—a sociopathic, immature, jealous, money-grubbing, girlfriend kid.”

Pamela was relieved to hear Jack say it. Usually all he was good for was lengthy analysis and “on the other hand” bullshit. She thanked him again, gave him a kiss, then headed for the art supply store.

She bought paints and a dozen large, rolled canvases, then headed to her studio on Spring Garden. On the way she balled her fist until the knuckles were white. She shook her head no—to creeping feelings of fear, wanting everything to be over. Her competitive juices wouldn’t let her give in to despair and make her weak, the same juices that drove her like a maniac at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and won her both the Hobson-Pittman and Cresson awards. How ironic was that? It was in Italy on the Cresson Scholarship that she decided she could no longer be married to Martin. So she tightened her jaw and resolved not to play into Martin’s hand. Or the girlfriend’s.

She climbed the stairs to her third floor studio. Something was the matter. Painty footprints in the hallway led from her door, which was ajar. She set her canvases down, carefully pushed the door open and peered inside.

“Oh...my...God.”

All her paint jars were smashed on the floor and tubes squeezed out. The fire extinguisher had been used to spray chemical on the walls. Her workbench lay on its side with implements scattered all over the floor, stuck in drying paint. Canvases in various stages of completion were

slashed. Her pine stretchers were snapped in half and strewn about. Even her radio and tape deck lay smashed.

She pulled the door shut, picked up her canvases and ran back to her car. She didn't even know how to reach the building management on a Sunday. She needed to gather herself. Breathe. Think. Process.

When she got back to her apartment it wasn't over. A note in a child's block letters tacked to her door said: WHATEVER IT TAKES FOR U 2 GO BYE-BYE. The damage to her car and studio and now the note were a whole new level of confrontation. Was this like some sicko child—today pulls the wings off flies, tomorrow kills a cat, finally kill a homeless person? She collapsed into a large, stuffed chair and reached for the phone.

“Kat?” Her voice was shaking. She tried to push through it, keep herself together, “I can't begin to tell you what's happening. Can you come over?”

“What? Be right there.”

“If Tory and Brand can come bring them too. I really need help.”

Kat was there in forty-five minutes, Tory and Brand close behind. Pamela paced, wringing her hands.

“Okay,” Brand said, “nothing gets done until we have some tea.” She walked to Pamela's cabinets, “Where is it?”

Pamela rummaged for the tea, then retrieved the pot and held it under the faucet, her hand shaking so badly that Brand took it from her and put it on the stove on a low heat.

“You go sit down,” Brand said. “Tell us the details.”

Pamela sat and recounted events starting with the process-server the night before. She insisted they march out to the parking area to view the broken glass. On the way out she made

them look at the exact place umbrella-lady sat and exact place she stood when she was handed the papers. When they went out to the parking area, she pointed at the various colors of glass as she walked around the space. She was a visual person and thought people needed to see to believe.

Kat took her by the elbow. “Let’s go back upstairs.” The other two women followed, talking under their breath.

The teapot whistled away. Brand filled the cups. The women sat in a circle. Pamela twisted a handkerchief in her hands, trying to smile but failing in favor of the energy it took to forestall an avalanche of fear. Her friends cooed reassurances.

Finally, Kat set down her cup, put her left hand on her left knee, her right hand on the other knee, and leaned into the group. “Okay,” she said, “have you called the police about the studio?”

“Um, no,” Pamela said. “Not yet.”

“Good. Don’t. In fact, we’re going to go over and clean your studio up first thing. We don’t want anyone to know what happened there.”

“But why?”

“Because it gives you a motive. You see, we’re gonna put a stop to this shit. I mean like right now. So let’s talk about a plan.”

Pamela’s shoulders suddenly relaxed, relieving the tension she hadn’t realized was building. Kat’s belief that something could be done, that things weren’t hopeless, that Pamela had allies—served to dam the panic threatening to inundate her.

“What can we do?”

“Pamela,” Tory said, “my last name is Fazio. Does that mean anything to you?”

“No. It’s a nice name. Does it mean something?”

Kat and Brand arched their eyebrows.

“Does the name Ennio Fazio ring any bells?” Tory asked.

“It sounds vaguely familiar. Are you related?”

“He’s my father. He’s in Graterford Prison for a while, completing a ten year stretch for a RICO conviction, his second. My brother is Gianni Fazio. My family sort of runs things around here.”

“Oh my God,” Pamela said. “I thought you were a doctor.”

“I am. I’m a doctor and a Fazio.”

“Don’t worry,” Kat said, “Tory never went into the family business. But they adore her. She’s the youngest, the only daughter. The respectable one.”

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t handle things,” Tory said. “With a father and three brothers in that line of work . . . really, they taught me a lot.”

“You said once that Martin hid money from the tax people and creditors,” Kat said.

“How? Where does he put it?”

“He hoards cash,” Pamela said. “None of it is on the books. He stashes it in a safe.”

“Where is it? The safe.”

“It’s encased in concrete in the floor of the garage.”

“How do you get to it?”

“It has a real heavy door chained with three separate padlocks plus a combination lock. Then it’s covered with an inch-thick slab of concrete to make it flush with the floor. You pull it up with a kind of recessed ring. Then the whole deal is covered over with a piece of carpeting.”

“What about the garage?” Brand asked. “How do you get in it?”

“It’s a heavy duty door, oak I think. It can only be opened manually, and it’s locked from the inside. I never used the garage. Too much hassle, and the door is too heavy.”

“What else is in the garage?”

“Stuff. Lawn care equipment, tools . . . You know, garage stuff.”

“When is he home?”

“Since I left, I don’t know his comings and goings. And I don’t know what he does with the girlfriend. Why are you asking all these questions?”

Kat looked at Brand and Tory. “What do you think, ladies? Think we can handle this?”

“Piece o’ cake,” Brand said.

“Might be easier if he’s there,” Tory said.

“Wait, wait, wait . . .” Pamela said. “How can you get to the safe and padlocks?”

“We’ll elicit Martin’s cooperation with the padlocks,” Tory said. “The safe we can just take with us.”

“Did you hear the ‘embedded in concrete’ part?”

“Not a problem,” Brand said.

“You’ll never get him to open those locks.”

Tory shrugged. “Everybody has a plan until they get hit in the face.”

\* \* \*

Pamela and her three friends made four separate drive-bys of Martin’s house on Fairway Road in Orelan, where luxurious tiled-roof homes each occupied an acre and a half, with wide side yards and exquisitely manicured landscaping. The four-car garage faced the North Hills

Country Club. They reconnoitered morning, early evening, ten p.m. and two a.m. Tory had observations to make about the lighting, traffic, and overall set-up.

“Geez,” Brand said to Pamela, “you lived here?”

“Six years. After we moved from Abington.”

“Is there a swimming pool in back?”

“Two.”

“What do women out here do?”

“They lunch. Go to yoga. Volunteer. Call their friends. Drive kids to soccer.”

“And you did that kind of Stepford wife stuff?”

“Not me. I worked promoting Bellissima, helping at the shop—making everything ship-shape so Martin could get his picture in Philadelphia Magazine then fuck the help after I left.”

They didn’t see Martin’s gold Mercedes parked in the drive during any of the trips. They also didn’t see any other car which could have been the girlfriend’s, or anyone else’s. Kat made an appointment for a trim and shampoo at Bellissima to scout. After, she got a manicure, tried to pump the stylists as to Martin’s comings and goings. No luck.

“You have to be patient in this business,” Tory said to Pamela as they sat parked on Fairway Road to assess traffic.

“What business would that be?” Pamela asked. She was slumped down, trying to keep a low profile.

“The fuck-over-the-bad-guy business.”

“I was afraid for a second that you meant the murder business,” Pamela said.

“That’s a subsidiary enterprise.” Tory said it matter-of-factly. Neither Kat nor Brand registered a reaction to Tory’s transition from funny, feminine family doctor to natural, no-nonsense—as Kat put it—‘fucker upper’.”

“You can take the girl out of Sicily,” Brand said, “but you can’t take Sicily out of the girl.”

“Looks like the place empties by 10:30 in the morning, gets busy again at 5:30, empties again at 7:30 and everybody’s home by 10:00 p.m,” Kat whispered.

“Only clerks and drones are in their offices by 8:00 a.m.,” Pamela said. “These are professionals and business people. They take time for breakfast and to kiss the kids off to school. Maybe a morning schtup before work.”

“I know,” Tory said, “but I wonder why we haven’t seen Martin’s car or any sign of the White Witch?”

“They could be on one of his Atlantic City jaunts,” Pamela said. “You know, three or four days of coke, screwing, and gambling.”

“That could be it,” Kat said.

“But we need to resolve it,” Tory said. “Once we have a clear idea of when to expect him we’ll have our move.”

“You’re a surprise a minute,” Pamela said to Tory.

“Doll, you haven’t seen anything yet,” said Kat.

\* \* \*

Pamela picked up the phone at work. “Office Solutions.”

“How’d you like the redecorating job, bitch.”

It was Martin’s girlfriend, the woman - child now known by Pamela and her friends as the White Witch, from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* who thrust Narnia into endless winter, one without a Christmas.

“How dare you call me here,” Pamela said.

“Look, cunt, if you think you’ve had problems until now you just wait. You just better hope this divorce is over soon.”

“If you call again I’m calling the police,” Pamela said, and slammed the phone down.

Was this the latest? Get her fired from her job? But it meant Martin was back.

After work the following night, Pamela went back to Oreland on her own. Check out the Solomon house once more. It was dusk. She waited. At 8:15, a red Miata pulled into the driveway. Pamela couldn’t see who was driving from where she sat, so she waited. The early October darkness afforded a better view with lights on inside. She raised her bird-watching field glasses to try and see through the sheers. Sure enough, a petite, pony-tailed redhead wearing a cheerleading outfit flitted about with the telephone scrunched on her shoulder and what looked like a bowl of popcorn cradled in her arm. The telephone was antique-looking, colored a dusty rose. Pamela had picked it out when she furnished the place. Except now the White Witch was using it as a cudgel.

Pamela adjusted the focus. The cheerleader wore a little plaid skirt and a well-filled-out, maroon, v-neck sweater with big white letters. AHS. AHS? Of course! Abington High School. If she was sixteen or seventeen now, even eighteen, had Martin been screwing her going back to when they lived in Abington? Cindy Lou cheerleader would have been a child then. She may still technically be a child.

Pamela stowed her field glasses and drove away. If the White Witch was at the house, Martin might be expected soon. What was today? Friday? Hmmmm. Bellissima closed at seven. What else? The high schools played their football games. Pamela should call the girls.

Time for the next move.

\* \* \*

They sat around their third pitcher of Miller Lite at Audrey's. Pamela, Jack, Kat, Brand, and Tory were in a booth brainstorming how to get Martin and the cheerleader. And once they got them, what would they do with them? Tory saw things in the simplest of terms: get Martin, beat the crap out of him, and publish a photo of the White Witch naked in Martin's bedroom. Or maybe just whack them both. But Pamela wasn't ready for bloodshed, especially on the girl, so Kat redirected the discussion from getting Martin and the bitch to just getting the money.

"I dunno," Jack said. "Sounds risky."

"Okay, Jack," Tory said, "then you just be lookout and drive the car and we'll do the heavy lifting."

Pamela could tell Tory and the others were annoyed at Jack. Every time they brought up a plan, Jack found eighty things wrong with it and ninety ways they'd get caught. No wonder Jack had been so slow in coming up with a plan of his own. Apparently he was willing to let her endure the grief rather than admit he didn't have the balls to do much.

"Or how about this, Jack," Kat said with a smirk, "why don't we fake a slip and fall in front of Bellissima and you can *sue* Martin?"

"I'm a commercial transactions lawyer. You'd need a personal injury lawyer."

“On second thought, Jack,” Tory said, “one of us will do lookout and drive. We’ll call you later and let you know how things worked out.”

“Actually, I’d prefer you not do that. The less I know the better. I wish I didn’t even know this much.”

Pamela gave him a blank look, then crossed her legs, the furthest apart Jack would ever see them again. “Well, then, why don’t you run along. We’ll handle the rest.”

“At least let me get the check.”

“That’s okay Jack. We got it,” Kat said.

They watched Jack slide out of the booth and leave.

“It’s good we know this now,” Tory said, “before we depend on him for anything. Now where were we? Oh yeah, boost the money. Tell us about this safe again.”

They talked for hours. Tory wanted every detail. Pamela went over it again and again—the layout of the house, the garage, lighting, contractors they used, who had keys, Martin’s hours, relatives, how he paid bills, how close he was with Bellissima’s clients and staff, neighbors, the golf course, kids in the area—details about which Pamela couldn’t see the relevance. But she trusted Tory. She was, after all, a Fazio, and this was in their wheelhouse.

“I have to pee,” Tory said. “When I come back I’m going to tell you how we’re going to do this.”

She came back all freshened up and perky. Her long blond hair, which she had been tugging as they talked, was pulled back and secured with a white scrunchy. Her pale, pink lipstick was fresh, her blouse tucked and skirt straightened.

“Now I know why I love you,” Kat said to Tory with a proud grin. “You’re a vision.”

“I love you too,” Tory said, “except, put the vision thing on the shelf. Right now I’m in nightmare mode.”

\* \* \*

Sunday, ten p.m. Kat, Tory, and Pamela crept down Fairway Road in a rented Cherokee and stolen plates from the Fazio family’s inventory. Brand was parked next to a pay phone in a closed strip mall on Church Road near Cheltenham Avenue. She sat with the window down in a Falco & Sons flatbed tow truck. In the truck were a black tarp, bungee cords, straps, and an electric powered APT pavement breaker with noise damper, borrowed “for a little personal job” from L. C. Cement Contractors, from which Brand was temporarily laid off but where she still had friends.

There were two streetlights on Fairway Road near the Solomon property. Kat, driving the Cherokee, pulled up quietly near one and did a U-turn, placing it on Tory’s side of the car. Tory lowered her window and reached onto the floor for her Walther Challenger air rifle.

“Nobody coming.” Kat said.

Tory leaned her upper torso out of the car window, placed the stock against her shoulder, and aimed. With a pop, pffffff, and tinkle of broken glass, the light went dark. Kat drove two blocks away and waited. When no traffic came down Fairway Road, she drove to the second streetlight. “Lights out,” she said to Tory.

Tory took aim, fired, and it went dark.

Kat reached into her purse and pulled out a small flask of bottom-shelf whiskey. Each of the three women took a gulp. If they were caught shooting out lights, it would appear to be a spree.

Kat drove down the street and parked fifty yards from the Solomon house. They sat for ten minutes, the street quiet and dark. Martin's Mercedes was parked in the driveway, and no Miata. Tory got out and affixed the stolen tags.

"Got the blindfolds and cuffs?" Kat asked Pamela.

Pamela held them up. "Check."

"Let's do it," Tory said to the women seated inside the car. "Put on your gloves." She looked around, bent over, and pulled something out from under the car behind the rocker panel.

They each put on latex gloves and a long black Cher wig with bangs covering the brow. They were drenched in Prince Matchabelli cologne to deflect attention from their voices and body language. Kat and Pamela wore black jeans, black sweaters, and black leather jackets. Tory wore black jeans, a black turtleneck, and a knee-length cream colored cashmere sweater-coat. Under the sweater-coat was a wide leather belt. Tucked in the belt was a Mossberg SPX twelve gauge with pistol grip. They put on Cher masks and walked quietly to Martin Solomon's front door.

Kat rang the bell. Tory and Pamela stood off to the side flattened against the stucco.

"Coming." A man's voice, Martin's voice.

Martin's face appeared in the door's window from inside. Bolt locks slid. Door latch clicked. The door swung open. Kat faced Martin full-on in her Cher mask.

"What the...?" He took two seconds to process, then yelled, "Heather, it's one of your friends."

Heather the cheerleader came to the door. She wasn't supposed to be there. Where was the Miata?

Petite and not more than seventeen, she burst out laughing. "Lisa, is that you? What are you doing in that outfit?"

Tory whipped the shotgun out of her belt, nudged Kat aside, and put it up to Martin's chin. "Sit! Now!" she commanded.

Heather gasped.

"NOW!"

Martin and Heather backpedaled from the doorway as the three women edged in. Tory signaled to Pamela. "Go through the house."

"What do you want?" Martin said, voice quaking. Heather was strangely calm.

Kat pointed to her. "The White Witch," she said with a laugh, her voice muffled by the mask.

They waited until Pamela returned. Pamela nodded and gave a thumbs up. She couldn't risk having her voice recognized. For now, it was Tory's show. Hers and the Mossberg.

"Blindfolds and cuffs." Tory said.

Pamela handed them to Kat. Kat walked behind Martin and Heather and put the blindfolds on them. "Stand and turn around."

"Why, what are you going to do?" Martin said.

"You'll never get away with this," Heather said, full of attitude.

"Shut up and turn around. Put your hands behind you."

They complied. Kat secured their hands with plastic cuffs.

“Ow, that hurts,” Heather said. “Who are you? What do you think you’re doing? These are too tight.”

Kat pushed them back onto the sofa.

“Show her where,” Tory said.

Pamela signaled Kat to follow while Tory held the gun on the hostages. Kat and Pamela went to the kitchen, down three steps, and into a laundry and mudroom with a door to the garage. Inside the garage, Pamela pulled back the piece of carpeting that covered the concrete panel over the safe. She pointed to the winch chains that opened the heavy-duty garage doors.

As they walked back to the living room, Pamela heard Heather scream, “You fucking bitches, you’ll never get away with this. My father is a district attorney.”

Tory didn’t appear impressed. She still held the gun on her blindfolded charges. She pointed with the shotgun to the antique dusty rose telephone. Kat reached into her pocket and pulled out a slip of paper with the pay phone number where Brand was parked and waiting. She punched out the numbers, waited a few seconds, hung up for a few more, then punched them out again. Two sets of three to four rings – wouldn’t even register on the phone records. Kat hung up the phone and went to the living room window to watch for the lights of the tow truck. Pamela turned on the television, radio and stereo, then went to the kitchen and did the same.

It took two minutes for Brand to cruise by, blink her lights, then go to the corner and turn around. Pamela went to the garage and opened all four doors so Brand could back in and angle the vehicle inside. Pamela looked up and down the street and closed the doors while Brand cut the engine.

Pamela led Kat and Brand to the bedroom. They dragged the king size mattress through the house to the garage where they propped it against the inside of the garage doors. They got

others from second and third bedrooms and did the same. They ran through the house and gathered sofa cushions and pillows for additional damping.

They returned to the living room. Brand went to the hostages and yanked them up by the collar. “Up,” she said, and led them into the garage as the other three friends followed.

“Don’t tell them anything, Marty,” Heather shrieked.

Brand gave her a sharp rap in the head with a knuckle. “Shut the fuck up, or you’ll be getting that nose done over. Again.”

Inside the garage, Tory said, “Okay, pal, where are the keys to the locks?”

“Don’t give them to her, Marty,” Heather said, tilting her head to try to see underneath he blindfold.

“I don’t have them.” Martin said.

Tory walked up to Martin and whacked the side of his face with the barrel of the shotgun. “You sure?”

Martin dropped to his knees, gagged, and spit out blood.

“What did they do to you, Marty? Don’t tell them anything,” Heather screamed.

Tory took the shotgun barrel and poked it hard in Heather’s chest. “If you want your tits blown off, keep it up.”

“I got this anyway,” Brand said as Kat pulled Martin to his feet and leaned him next to Heather against the garage’s workbench. Brand went to the passenger side of the tow truck and retrieved the APT pavement breaker. She looked around and plugged it into an outlet. Pamela turned the volume up on the tvs and radios.

“Stand outside the garage door,” Tory said to Kat. “Blink the flashlight twice if you spot headlights. After we start the hammer, blink if too much noise leaches out. If it does, I may have to shoot the girl over those keys and the combination.

“You fucking bitch, you wouldn’t dare!” Heather yelled.

Tory pressed the shotgun against her chest again. “Then you don’t know me.”

Pamela pushed her mask up over her forehead and shook her head a rigorous no. Tory just shrugged.

Kat took her post outside the garage and gave a tap on the window. Brand removed the thin lid over the safe. She set the hammer’s bit onto the concrete and began breaking it up. The tool made surprisingly little noise, but the chatter of metal against concrete was deafening as pulverized dust smelling of minerals settled like snow onto the black Cher wigs.

“Double check the noise,” Tory said to Pamela. She went outside, the loud tvs & radios drowned out the hammer, but not all of it.

When she came back she signaled Brand into the kitchen. “Some of the hammering noise is getting through.”

“I got something else,” Brand said. She went back to the tow truck and leaned into the passenger side. When the door closed a huge sledgehammer dangled from her left hand. “This way I’ll only need the power tool a little more.” She looked happy, in her element.

“Gimme room,” she said. “twenny poun’ head.”

She raised the hammer over her right shoulder using a wide grip. As she swung downward her right hand slid down the handle to meet the hand at the bottom, to accelerate the force of the swing. It hit the concrete with a dull thud without apparent damage. She worked

steady but not fast. By the tenth swing a web of deep cracks appeared around the space. She set the sledgehammer down and wiped her brow.

“Okay,” she said, “time for the air hammer again.”

“My father will have the entire police force looking for you,” Heather yelled above the racket.

“Heather,” Martin screamed, leaning next to her against the bench, “will you just shut up?”

After twenty more minutes, Brand was on her knees pulling chunks of concrete off the safe. She was drenched from the effort. She seemed to thrive under hard work, and Pamela saw firsthand the inspiration for the drops of sweat under the crossed shovels tattooed on her left arm. Someday soon Pamela would ask if she could paint her as she worked.

The safe lay on its back in a buried metal box with a heavy, locked chain around it.

“The chain is good,” Brand said. “It’ll give me something to hook.”

“I knew you could do it.” Pamela caught herself and put her hand over her mouth as soon as the words tumbled out.

Everybody stopped and looked at one another, still as deer at the crack of a twig.

“You!” Martin said. “It’s you! I should have known!”

“It’s that cunt-bitch isn’t it?” Heather said. “What did I tell you about her? Didn’t I tell you?”

Martin suddenly whipped off his blindfold. Pamela, Kat, Tory, and Brand stood stunned. How did he get his hands free?

Crimson with rage he charged toward Pamela, gripping garden shears above his shoulder.

“Back! Get back!” Tory yelled, and raised the Mossberg.

“Get her, get that bitch,” Heather screamed.

As Martin brought the shears down toward Pamela’s neck, Tory fired. The right side of Martin’s face, neck, and shoulder disappeared in a haze of blood and gore. What was left of him reeled sideways against a wall, the explosion deafening inside the garage.

The shock momentarily paralyzed everyone until Heather began screaming like a howler monkey. “Oh my God! Martin! What have they done? You monsters! What have you done?” She wouldn’t stop screaming until Pamela rushed up and decked her with a right cross to the temple.

Pamela looked down at the unconscious girl and shook her hand, worried she broke a knuckle -- the one that did the magic with dancing brushes.

“Keep your masks on,” she said to her friends. “She’ll wake up. I don’t think I packed that much of a wallop” She looked over at her dead husband, oddly calm about the hideous corpse whose soul she hoped was already baking in hell. “Tory, are you okay?”

Tory bobbed her head yes.

“Good,” Pamela said, “now where were we?”

Brand put her tools back in the tow truck and got in. She started it up and hung out the door to maneuver it. When she had it placed just right, she got out with the engine running. She pulled a lever and a ramp slid slowly outward from the bed of the truck. She stopped it a few feet from the exposed safe, then pulled another lever and a huge metal hook on a thick cable unwound from a large spool. She placed the hook around the safe’s chain and pulled another lever. The hook tugged, making the cable taut and truck’s body heave. But the safe didn’t move. She tried again. Still it didn’t budge.

“It’s the angle,” she said. “The hook isn’t lifting it upward. It wants to pull it sideways, and it’s still encased. I need to bust up more concrete.” She retrieved the air hammer and plugged it in.

“Wait,” Tory said. “Start the hammer and move out of the way. Pamela, turn up the radios and TV again.”

They did as asked. Tory knelt next to the still-unconscious girl, clasped Heather’s hand around the pistol grip and trigger of the shotgun, and fired off a round right above Martin’s corpse, blasting a huge hole in the wall between the garage and Martin’s den. The blast caused Heather to stir.

“C’mon, honey, get up,” Tory said. “You’ll never believe what you’ve just done.”

Heather boosted herself to a sitting position and started to whimper.

“Open your mouth and I’ll coldcock you again,” Pamela said, standing over her with clenched fists.

“I’ll go outside and spot,” Kat said.

Pamela had been trying to put the whole thing together – Martin’s apparent long familiarity with Heather, Heather’s over-the-top violence, the cheerleader uniform worn around the house – and wasn’t liking the answers she was getting. “I want to check the computer in the den,” she said.

The computer was on, still on the site where Martin and maybe Heather, was navigating when Pamela and pals interrupted the soiree. Pamela wanted to vomit. She was right.

KidJizz.com,

Martin had always liked porn while they were together, but not like this, at least as far as she knew. But he must have subscribed to the site. Children, many small, boys and girls, being raped by bald, fat, old men, while women sometimes stood by.

Pamela couldn't take any more. She closed out the site and went into Martin's files. A search of the recently accessed led her to a folder called H.H. Right. Assuming one of the 'H's' was Heather, she opened the file.

It was full of clips of her. She was young, no more than eleven, but flirtatious, a grade school cheerleader running through her routines in her little outfit, except not wearing panties or tights. Who took these clips? Whoever it was, she kept calling him Daddy. "*Go back, go back, go back to the woods, 'cause you haven't, you haven't, you haven't got the goods...* Was that good, Daddy? Did you like it?" Pamela couldn't tell where the clip was taken. She didn't recognize the furnishings, except it was an expensive, well-furnished home.

Pamela opened the next file, more shocking yet. Martin was holding the camera, a downward point of view of a glassy-eyed Heather fellating him. Was she even ten? "Mmmmmmm, Daddy," she purred, as Martin guided the back of her head. Pamela could see it was Bellissima's office. The legs of another man occupied a corner of the frame. Brooks Brothers all the way—polished wing tip shoes and sharp-creased, well-tailored cuffs. Pamela guessed whoever it was had brought Heather to Bellissima. And this stuff was going on while she was married to that creep!

Then Pamela realized. When Martin first rescued her, she had been pretty helpless and outrageously grateful. Childlike. When she began to find her power through art, he lost interest.

That bastard!

She unplugged the computer, carried it into the garage, and put it in the truck. She knew it would come in handy. She looked at Heather, now a grown and beautiful young woman. No wonder she was so screwed up. And that explained who it was in Bellissima's office while little girl Heather was going down on Martin.

She signaled to Brand to cut the hammer. "Go get Kat."

Tory secured Heather's plastic cuffs to the vise on the workbench. Pamela motioned her friends to a corner and told them the story.

Finally, Pamela approached Heather. "I saw your clips, Heather. Who did this to you?"

"Fuck you! When Daddy finds out what you've done, your ass won't be long for this world."

"How long has this been going on? When did it start?"

Heather lowered her gaze.

"Is that why you shot Martin?" Tory asked, staying with the cover story, "because he was abusing you and you got fed up?"

Heather's eyes widened, then slid over to the wall's abstract painting that had been Martin's brains. "You wouldn't dare try to blame me for that."

"It was your father who started it, wasn't it?" Pamela asked. "He pimped you out to Martin, didn't he?"

Heather's eyes looked off to the side, then downward.

"Didn't he!? Your father started all this, didn't he Heather? Say it! Didn't he?"

Heather's eyes began to tear.

Pamela dialed her voice back. "What hold did Martin have on you? Did he threaten to expose your father? Is that what happened?"

Big tears began to roll down Heather's cheeks. Tory lowered the gun. Pamela put her hand on Heather's shoulder. She picked up the shears Martin tried to kill her with and used them to snip Heather's cuffs. Tory, Brand and Kat watched slack jawed as the young woman, tough as tungsten, dissolved into uncontrollable weeping and covered her face. Pamela put her arms around her and held her, holding her up from the crushing onslaught of shame and regret as Heather shook and gasped for each breath between sobs.

Pamela let her cry. After a while she looked straight into Heather's eyes. A faint smile on Pamela's face gradually widened. She smoothed back Heather's hair with her hand. She leaned close to Heather's ear, and said in a soft voice, "You can talk. We won't hurt you. It's safe. Think of us like sisters."

Heather forced a weak grin and tried to wipe tears off her cheeks with the palms of her hands. "You mean like nuns?"

"Not exactly." Pamela turned to her friends. "Let's all go to the kitchen. Heather is going to tell us her story."

\* \* \*

Pamela still knew where everything was. Martin hadn't changed a thing in what used to be her kitchen – he'd probably been living on takeout since she left. She put on a pot of tea. The five women took seats around the table in the delft-tiled alcove under a small domed skylight lit by the full moon. Tory propped the shotgun against a ficus in the window facing the golf course. Tory, Kat, and Brand took off their masks and wigs, It was two hours to sunrise.

Tory turned to Brand. "Business first. You think it'll give?"

“I think so,” Brand said. “I’ll give it a shot.”

Brand went back to the garage. From the kitchen they could hear the motor’s hum as the truck’s ramp lowered and hoist unspooled. After some clunking, thumping and scraping, Brand came into the kitchen. “Got it. All gift-wrapped under the tarp.”

“How are we going to open it?” Pamela asked.

“Don’t worry,” Tory said. “My brother has people.”

“You better leave now,” Kat said to Brand. “Take it where we said.”

Brand stood and gave a salute. “Everything under control here?”

“Go,” Kat said. See you tonight at the usual spot.”

Brand leaned over, kissed Heather on her forehead, and held her face in her rough-hewn hands. “Feel these hands? They’re hard hands. We’re hard women. Not bad hard. Just-right hard. And they’re gonna help you.” She blew a kiss and left.

Pamela got up to answer the teapot whistling for her attention. She poured and sat next to Heather, her chin resting on interlocked fingers. “How old were you when it started?” she said.

Heather began to cry again and said haltingly, “As far back as I can remember . . . I think it must have been right after my mother died.”

Nobody interrupted as she unfolded her pitiful story. Her father was a strict, rigid, and withholding man. She never remembered a time when he didn’t steal into her bedroom and seek the satisfaction he taught her to give. They were the only times she felt important to him. He told her she was far more mature than other children, far too adult for others, even grownups, to ever understand how his life centered around her and how much he needed her.

As Heather told her story, her eyes said she knew it was wrong, yet pleaded for understanding, as if these women should know what it was like to be a girl, a young woman, so vulnerable yet so powerful. How could she not use her power to fill the hunger in her soul? By the time she was ten, he began to pleasure her, then reward her with shopping trips and trips to Bellissima to have her hair done and get a massage, a manicure, and pedicure, just like a grown woman. That was when her father told her he would be so pleased if she showed Martin Solomon how uncommonly mature she was, how good she was at what she did, and that Martin was so important to him. And there were others. But between such episodes her father was remote, often cruel, and would push her away, and she would go to her room and cry and hold her pillow and wonder what she had done wrong.

When she ran out of story and tears, the four women were hushed.

After some moments, Pamela said, "We're gonna put a stop to this."

"Like we did the other one?" Tory nodded toward the garage. She sounded casual, as if killing Heather's daddy was next on a to-do list.

"You can't ever tell anybody what I've told you about my father," Heather said. "I love him."

"No, here's what's going to happen," Pamela said. "You're going to come and live with me."

"I can't leave my father," Heather said.

"You won't have to leave him. You only need to separate from him until we get your head straight."

"You can't make me."

“Actually, we can,” Tory said. “Here’s the score, Heath. One, your fingerprints are all over the shotgun and I’ll make sure they stay there. Two, there is enough stuff on Martin’s computer to put your father away for life. So work with us, babe.”

“We aren’t going to hurt you,” Pamela said. “But you have no other choice, Not for a while.”

“What about poor Martin?” Heather said.

“What I’m going to do, for now, is have a private conversation with your father. I will tell him what we know. I’ll do nothing more unless you say it’s okay. We’ll get your things while he’s at work.”

Nothing could be done anyway until Heather was ready to testify against her father. It would take time. She needed to be able to recognize the damage done to her, then want to save other children. As her guardian, Pamela could bring her to that place.

“How much money are we gonna find in that safe?” Kat asked.

“I don’t know,” Heather said. “But Martin bragged he had enough socked away for a couple hundred years.”

“Okay. Here’s the plan,” Pamela said. “You’re coming home with me tonight. Tomorrow I’ll have a chat with your father before the police have a chance to discover Martin’s body. Soon the police will come around to question me. If a neighbor reports ever seeing your Miata in the past, the story will be that you delivered some papers to Martin but nothing more.”

“But . . . why wouldn’t they blame you?”

“No motive. The house and Bellissima are mortgaged to the hilt, so there’s no assets for me to get. And I’m sure your father will see fit to steer the investigation toward Martin’s drug contacts in Atlantic City. Besides, I have an alibi. A million women saw me at Audrey’s.”

“Yeah, and get ready to run Bellissima,” Kat said.

“Long enough to sell it, maybe. But I want to paint, not listen to blue-haired ladies trying to score drugs.”

“I’m so sorry for what I did to your studio and car,” Heather said.

“Well, we have a brand new canvas right in front of us, don’t we?”

“Before you start we better wipe this place down and get the hell out of here,” Tory said.

“Yeah,” Pamela said, “it’ll be light soon.”

End