

# TONY STRONG

*'Master of the psycho-thriller'* TONY PARSONS



# THE DECOY

# Prologue

Hotel regulations: on the day of departure, guests are requested to vacate their rooms by noon.

By eleven o'clock the fifth floor of the Lexington Hotel has nearly emptied. This is midtown Manhattan, where even the tourists are on busy schedules of galleries and department stores and sights. Any late sleepers have been woken by the noise of the maids, chattering to each other in Spanish as they come and go from the big laundry cupboard behind the lift, preparing the rooms for another influx of guests that afternoon.

Dotted down the hallway, discarded breakfast trays show which rooms have still to be cleaned.

There's no tray outside room 507.

Every morning, a folded copy of the New York Times is delivered to each room, with the hotel's compliments.

In the case of 507 the compliment has been refused. The paper lies on the mat, untouched.

Consuela Alvarez leaves 507 till last. Eventually, when all the other rooms are done, she can leave it no longer. She taps on the door with her pass key, calls "Maid", and listens for a reply.

No reply comes.

The first thing Consuela notices, as she lets herself in, is the cold. An icy draught is blowing through the drapes. She clucks disapprovingly as she goes to the window and hauls on the cord. Grey light floods the room. She bangs the window closed, ostentatiously.

The person in the bed doesn't stir.

*You have to wake up now, please.*

The bed clothes are pulled right up over the face. Smoothing the body's contours, like something buried under layers of snow.

Consuela has a sudden sense of foreboding.

Last year, there was a suicide on the second floor. A bad business. A boy hanged himself in the bathroom. And the hotel was fully booked: they'd had to clean the room and get it ready for the next occupant at five.

Consuela crosses herself. Nervously she puts her hand on the bed covers, where a shoulder should be, and shakes it.

After a moment, a red flower blossoms on the white linen, where her hand has pressed it.

Consuela knows there's something wrong now, something very bad. She touches the bed clothes again, pressing with just a finger this time. Again, like ink spreading through blotting paper, a red anemone blossoms on the white.

Consuela summons all her courage and yanks the covers back.

For a long moment she doesn't move. Then, instinctively, she lifts her right hand to cross herself again.

But this time the hand that touches her forehead never completes the gesture: comes down, trembling, to stifle a scream instead.

# Part One

*We are all hanged, or should be.*

- Baudelaire: Les Fleurs du Mal

## Chapter one

Her friend hasn't showed.

That's what you'd think if you saw her, waiting on her own in the bar of the Royalton hotel, trying to make her Virgin Mary last all night: just another young professional waiting for her date. Perhaps a little prettier than most. A little more confident. A little more daringly dressed. She hasn't come straight from the office, that's for sure.

The bar is packed, and when a table finally becomes free she goes and sits at it, putting her drink on the table and her bag on the other seat, to keep it unoccupied. At a nearby table a young man in a Versace jacket and too much jewellery catches her eye and smiles at her. She ignores him. He says something to his drinking companion, who looks her way and laughs. She blanks them both

"Excuse me?"

She looks up. There's a man standing in front of her. He's wearing a suit, but one of an expensive casual cut that suggests he's something more than the usual corporate drone, his collar lapped by hair that's just a little too long for Wall Street.

"Yes?" she says.

"This is my table. I just went to the restroom." He points. "I left my drink to keep my place?"

Around them, one or two heads have turned curiously in their direction. But there's going to be no confrontation, no overspill of New York stress. The woman is already standing up.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I hadn't realised -"

The heads turn away again, back to their conversations.

There's a brief shuffle as the man stands aside to let the woman pass and she moves in the same direction he does, a jerky *pas-de-deux*.

"Unless you don't mind sharing," he says, gesturing at the table.

For a moment, she seems to hesitate - but after all, the bar is crowded. She shrugs. "Why not?"

They both sit down. Surreptitiously, out of the corners of their eyes, they examine each other more closely.

She's wearing Donna Karan, a soft black woollen jacket that clings to her slight frame, sets off her dark hair and her pale skin, makes her eyes look more startlingly blue than they really are.

"Are you waiting on someone?" he asks, and his voice has changed subtly: a thickening of interest, of sexual attention. "Maybe he's been held up by the snow. It's chaos out at LaGuardia. That's why I'm staying an extra night."

And she smiles to herself, because it's really pretty neat, the way he tries to find out if the person she's waiting for is a man or a woman, and at the same time let her know he's on his own.

"Looks like I could be here a while, then," she says. "Hey ho."

"Hey ho," he repeats. He isn't quite sure what she means by it. "Let me buy you another one of those," he says. He beckons to the waitress. "What are you drinking?"

"Thanks. A Bloody Mary."

"And where are you from?" he asks. "I'm trying to place that accent."

"From Idaho, originally."

"Really? I never met a girl from Idaho before."

Something about the way he says 'met' makes it sound provocative, almost sexual, and she raises an eyebrow. "But you *meet* a lot of girls, right?"

He smirks. "A few."

Somewhat to his surprise, he finds that they're flirting now, their bodies carrying on conversations of their own as he tells her he's a lawyer, and she says no, surely he's too well-dressed to be a lawyer. In the music industry, he says, and she asks: here on business or pleasure?

Well, he says, hopefully both. He leans back and crosses his legs, smiles an expensive, confident smile. He has time for a little fun, after all.

"Before you fly back tomorrow to your wife and kids."

For an instant the smile flickers uncertainly. "What makes you think I'm married?"

"The best ones always are." She shrugs. "Don't worry. It's not your fault."

The waitress finally brings their drinks - she's been gone five minutes - and the lawyer gives her a hard time. He's showing off, and the waitress apologizes sulkily, blaming the crowds. She turns away with a little tug at her right ear, almost as if she can pull his words out of it and flick them to the floor. Without breaking her conversation or taking her eyes off the lawyer, the girl who says she's from Idaho thinks: *I could use that.*

It's put away somewhere deep, somewhere in the filing system.

The lawyer's name is Alan. He hands her a business card on which his name is written in embossed, silvery letters. She tells him her name is Claire. She apologises for not having a card. She doesn't carry business cards, she murmurs, in her line of work.

He asks her what she does. "As little as possible," she says. She nods at the waitress, being harassed now by another table, and tells him she used to do that, before.

"Before what?"

"Before I realised there were easier ways to make a buck."

Understanding appears in his eyes like a lightbulb.

He doesn't rush it, though. He tells her about some of his clients, back in Atlanta - the famous teenage idol he names who likes underage girls, and the macho heavy-metal star who's gay but doesn't dare admit it. He tells her, with a hint of emphasis, how much money there is to be made, doing what he does, drawing up contracts for those who are temperamentally unlikely to abide by them, necessitating the services of people like him at both ends, both the commission of the contract and its eventual dissolution. And finally he suggests that since her friend is obviously not going to show, they could move on someplace else, to a restaurant or a club, whichever she'd prefer.

"Somewhere - expensive," he adds, with just a hint of emphasis.

Emboldened by her silence, he says quietly, "Or we could just get some Room Service. I'm staying right upstairs."

"Well," she says, "Room Service can be pretty expensive too." Beat. "If *I'm* in the room."

He exhales. "I'm not the only one who's here on business, right?"

"Well, you sure worked that one out pretty fast, Alan."

"I'm a lawyer, after all. It's my job to know when a witness isn't telling the truth."

"Am I a witness?" she murmurs, and he shakes his head, still smiling.

"Hopefully more of a participant."

She watches the waitress pull a pen out of her hair so that a customer can sign. Another one for the filing system.

"That trick with the table was pretty neat," he says admiringly. "Picking me up right under the noses of the bar staff."

She shrugs.

"So," he says, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Just how expensive does Room Service get around here?" His grin has widened. He is a lawyer, after all. The negotiations, for him, are part of the fun.

"How much is it usually?"

He frowns. "You think I make a habit of this?"

She smiles, touches his arm. "Let's just say you seem to know what you're doing."

Mollified, he says: "How does two hundred sound?"

"That's what they charge in Atlanta, is it?"

"For that," he assures her, "you get quite a lot in Atlanta."

"What's the most you ever paid?"

"Five hundred," he admits.

"Double it," she says softly.

He swallows. "Seven hundred?"

"For a lawyer, Alan, your math is frankly terrible." She shakes her head in mock sorrow. "Nice meeting you."

"Okay, okay. We have a deal."

"What's your room number?"

"Fourteen nine."

"We'll go up in separate elevators. You can catch up with me in the corridor."

He nods.

"I'll need half the money in advance."

He blinks.

"I'll be right ahead of you," she points out.

"Sure. It's just... isn't this a little public?"

"Which is why I feel safer doing it here. Just put the money on the table. Like you're paying the waitress."

He lays six bills on the table. As they get up to go she casually picks up five of them and drops them in her bag.

The tiny elevators leading from the lobby to the bedroom floors are packed with guests going up to their rooms. "Fourteen, please," she says, unable to reach. Someone presses it for her. Alan waits for the next one. He looks impatient.

The elevator stops on the third to let some guests out. She gets out with them and, immediately the doors have closed behind her, turns and presses Down. While the second elevator is coming she gets the Minicam out of her bag and hits rewind, play, rewind, until she hears her own voice say, "You can catch me up in the corridor." Then she puts her palm over the lens and presses Record again.

She's in the next elevator now, travelling back down to the foyer. A couple of models, dressed for a night on the town, look at her curiously as she puts the camera back in her bag. She ignores them.

By the time she steps back into the foyer Alan is going up thirteen floors in the slowest elevator in NYC.

Outside it's still snowing. The fire hydrants and the parked cars along the sidewalk are all wearing lopsided white toupees of snow. Claire crosses the street quickly and pulls open the door of a stretch.

She's about forty five, Alan's wife, with the kind of jaded but expensive looks that suggest she was herself part of the music business before she started having children and hosting his corporate dinners. She's sitting very

close to Henry on the back seat, shivering despite the fact that the engine's running. She looks terrified.

"Everything OK?" Henry asks.

"Fine," Claire says. She's dropped the accent now. In her real voice, which is British, she asks the woman, as she always asks, "Sure you really want to hear this? Sure you wouldn't rather go home and make it work?"

And the client says, as they always say, "I want to know."

Claire hands her the machine. "The bottom line is, he's a regular user of prostitutes. Not just when he's away, either. He talked about paying up to five hundred dollars a time back in Atlanta."

The wife's eyes fill with tears. Henry puts his arm around her.

"I'm sorry," Claire says awkwardly. She slides out of the limo. Henry passes her an envelope with his free hand. Four hundred dollars. Not bad for an hour's gig.

As he hands it to her he whispers, "Did he give you any?"

"Uh-uh," she says. "I left him in the lobby. It's all on the disc."

"You know I'd know if you were lying."

"I know you would."

He nods, satisfied, and she punches her hand in the air for a cab.

Claire Rodenburg. Almost twenty five years old, and almost beautiful. Eye colour: blue. Hair colour: flexible. Occupation - well, if you looked in her passport you'd read *actress*, but in truth that was a little flexible as well.

She hadn't realised, when she'd boarded her cut-price flight from Gatwick six months earlier, how difficult it would be to get work - any work - in the States. Used to the relaxed attitude of British employers to casual workers, she had instead discovered a labour market where enthusiastic

students were two a penny - or rather, a dime a dozen; where you couldn't open a bank account without a Social Security number, or rent a room without a reference from your bank.

She'd managed to cobble together a patchwork of part-time jobs, sprinting from her rush-hour cover in a midtown deli to a bar on the Lower East Side where the owner cared more about the way his staff looked than about their paperwork. But he had an inexhaustible supply of pretty girls to choose from, and it didn't make sense to let any of them stay too long. That way, if the IRS or Immigration came checking, he could claim the new girl's forms were in the post. After three months he told Claire, not unkindly, that it was time to move on.

She was blowing everything she earned on seeing shows - not the dumbed-down blockbusters or the endless Euro-musicals that played to packed houses on Broadway, but the smaller, performance-orientated pieces at The Playwrights' Collective and the Union Square Theater, getting to know the names of the best directors, the hottest casting agents.

The auditions advertised in *Variety* were only for chorus parts and extras, of course, but she had to start somewhere.

At her first audition the casting director asked her to stay behind. When everyone else had gone, she'd approached Claire thoughtfully. In her hand was the form every hopeful had to fill in before the session - name, height, previous experience, agent.

"It says here you don't have an agent, honey," the woman had purred.

"Not in this country. I had one back home."

"I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. I think she might be interested in representing you."

And the agent, Marcie Matthews, had indeed been delighted to meet Claire. She'd taken her to lunch at Orso, an Italian restaurant in the middle of the Theater District, and thrown around the names of shows she could get Claire auditions for, directors she must meet, film producers she would be perfect for.

Until she discovered Claire didn't have a work permit.

"Get out of here. No Green Card?"

"Does it really matter?"

"It does if you want to work," the other woman had said bluntly.

"Isn't there anything I could do? Just to earn some money?"

"Sure. Table dancing, stripograms, nude modelling. What they call the glamour industry, though I personally don't imagine it's all that glamorous." Marcie had waved a ringed hand dismissively. "I don't get involved in that stuff, but I can give you the names of some people who do."

"There's really nothing else?"

Marcie sighed. "I shouldn't say this, but I've got a lot of friends in this business. Maybe I can slip you into a few things." She held up her hand to forestall Claire's thanks. "And voiceovers. The advertising people always want British accents. But it's going to be tough. If I was you, and if I really wanted to work in the States, I'd go right back home and wait for a Card."

Claire had shrugged.

"You want to stay in New York? Well, I don't blame you. But don't expect it to welcome you with open arms. The days when we took the huddled masses yearning to be free are long gone."

Claire found herself another bar job, and waited.

And waited.

There was a single voiceover, and an audition for a non-speaking part in a pop video. In the casting session she had to strip down to her underwear and mime riding on horseback. She didn't get the part.

Another month passed.

She'd met some other young aspiring actors by now, and was rooming with one of them, a friendly Texan called Bessie. Claire paid her in cash, which took care of the bank account problem.

Unfortunately, it didn't take care of the fact that she never had any cash in the first place.

Then she got a phone call from Marcie, asking her if she'd have a chat with an old friend of hers called Henry Mallory.

"I'll be honest with you," the other woman had said on the phone. "It's something you might not want to do. But the money is amazing and - well, I know you'd be good at it."

## Chapter two

Detective Frank Durban rides up in the elevator with the Lexington's manager, a pile of equipment in metal flight cases, a Major Crime Scene Search officer, and a couple of tourists with subway maps tucked into their money belts, wet with snow.

It's the fourth load of equipment to go up, and the hotel manager is developing a twitch.

The silence is broken by one of the tourists, who wants to know what's going on. Are they shooting a movie?

And, in fact, it's not such a stupid notion, the logistics of a modern crime scene demanding much the same equipment as a film shoot: lights, cameras - both stills and video - playback monitors, fingerprint people with their little make-up cases tucked under their arms, a small army of technicians with walkie-talkies strapped to their belts.

"That's right," the manager says nervously. "A movie."

Frank Durban lifts his eyes to the elevator's roof.

"Who's in it?" the man's wife asks. "Anyone famous?"

The manager looks at Frank desperately, but Frank's inspecting the ceiling tiles.

"River Phoenix," the manager blurts at last. The man's wife nods, impressed.

"He's dead," Durban says under his breath.

"I mean, it's about River Phoenix," the manager corrects himself.

"They're using a double."

The lift stops at four and the couple get out. "Need any extras?" the man asks, holding the door.

"He's really good," the woman agrees. "Go on, honey, do your Clint Eastwood."

Durban sighs, and looks at his watch ostentatiously.

Rattled, the manager flaps the tourist's fingers away from the elevator door. "Have a good evening. I hope you enjoy your stay," he snaps.

They ride up to the fifth in silence.

## Chapter three

After she leaves the lawyer's wife, Claire tells the cab to take her to a theatre on 53rd and Broadway. Bessie, her roommate, has just opened in a musical, and Claire's promised to drop by the cast party.

It isn't actually a first night - the show's already been running for two years - just a change of cast. Since it's a sell-out, opportunities for self-expression are somewhat limited: even more limited than they usually would be, playing a singing, dancing sheep.

When Claire gets there the actors are standing around backstage, flushed with applause, and the place smells of make-up and scenery paint and spotlights, the peculiar addictive smell of a theatre. She pauses, breathes it all in.

For a brief moment, a pang of longing stabs at her guts. This is the forbidden kingdom.

She pushes the feeling away. Unfair to Bessie, to get jealous on the other girl's big night. She finds her friend and gives her a hug of congratulation.

Bessie returns the hug a little absentmindedly. She's still working, Claire sees, part of a group of young actors shamelessly flattering the director, a fat toad of a man whose jokes, surely, can't be half as funny as their laughter suggests. Claire leaves her to it. Bessie loves her like a sister, but when all's said and done Claire's part of the competition.

She looks at her watch. The lawyer, pacing up and down in his suite at the Royalton, will just be getting a phone call to say his wife's downstairs.

"Hey, Claire," a voice says.

It's Raoul Walsh, a guy she saw a few times when she first came to New York. "How's tricks?" he asks.

Is it her imagination, or does he give the word 'tricks' a subtle emphasis, a hint at its other meaning?

"Not too bad," she says. "My agent's got me some voiceovers. And I'm auditioning for Vanya next week."

"Really? I heard they gave the last part to Carol yesterday. Carol Reuben," he says, looking over her shoulder and nodding at a passing acquaintance.

"Oh," she says. "I hadn't heard that."

"Still - voiceovers. That's great. Really great." He smiles at her, a plastic New York smile.

She thinks: he's a good enough actor to fake that better, if he wanted to.

"And how about your investigator friend," he drawls. "Still working for him?"

"Henry Mallory," she says. "Sometimes."

"Henry Mallory," he says. His lips twitch. "My God. Henry *Mallory*. I loved that guy when I was a kid. When he was in 'Gumshoe'. Is he - you know - okay?" He mimes the gesture of drinking from a glass.

"Henry's fine," she says wearily.

"Oh, well," Raoul says, drifting away from her. "I'll see you around, okay?"

And it's true: Henry isn't even a proper private detective. Once upon a time, he played the part of an investigator in a television mini-series, from which his character was abruptly dropped. People said he'd been too drunk to read the cue cards.

Whatever the reason, he'd decided to change careers but not roles and started a detective agency, a real one. There had been a court case, once, long before her time, when the network had sued to stop him using the name of his character from the show.

Not surprisingly, matrimonial work is pretty much all he gets. That, and missing pets.

All Marcie had told her on the phone was, "Treat it as a go-see. If you get on with him, we'll talk some more. If you don't, it's just another wasted afternoon."

Claire had taken the subway to the Lower East Side, and struggled with the grille of an ancient lift in a dilapidated office block. On the fourth floor, there was a row of doors with company names picked out in brown paint, like something from an Edward Hopper painting. *Sahid Import...* *Nutreen Clothing...* *Downey Insurance.* And, finally, *The Mallory Private Investigation Bureau.*

"I'm looking for Mr. Mallory," she said to the gaunt man behind the desk.

"That's me," he said, swinging his feet stiffly onto the floor. His craggy face was still handsome, but his eyes were rheumy, the whites as yellow as his nicotine-stained fingers. "And you must be the dame."

"The dame?" Where she came from, dames were a part in pantomime.

"The dame who made the bishop kick a hole in a stained glass window."

She must have looked puzzled, because he'd laughed, a short chesty bark. "Don't they teach young actors anything these days? Farewell My

Lovely, starring Bogart and Bacall. All the best detective stories start with a dame."

Suddenly she realised why the little room seemed so familiar. Henry Mallory had dressed his office like something out of a 1950's *film noir*. A heavy steel fan scythed smoke-filled air over a hat stand, a pre-war filing cabinet, a bentwood chair, and a brown deal desk. The only things missing were a bakelite phone and a fifth of bourbon - and, as she soon discovered, the latter only because Henry generally kept his fifths in the trash.

One thing she never discovered, though, was whether the props were for the benefit of the customers or the proprietor.

"Marcie said you were auditioning..." she began.

Henry shook his head. "Uh-uh. Not auditioning. Auditioning means a hundred talented people made to feel like stale meat on a rack. This is more like - executive recruitment. You've been headhunted, Claire."

"To do what?"

"To work for me."

"As a *detective*? Listen, there must have been - "

"As an actress," he interrupted. "Marcie said you can act."

She shrugged.

"But can you really?" he wondered aloud. The shoes swung up onto the desk again as he slouched back in the chair, looking at her with eyes that despite being rheumy were, she now saw, also bright with intelligence.

"Perhaps you can walk on a stage and do the things that all the other actors do, all the little mannerisms and affectations that people call acting. But can you do it for real?" He gestured with his thumb, in the direction of the street.

"Can you do it out there?"

"I've been acting professionally since I was fourteen."

"Aha. A stage school brat."

"We weren't brats."

"Takes one to know one." This time the thumb jerked at his own chest.

"When *I* was fourteen, I was being directed by Orson Welles."

"You were in an *Orson Welles* movie?"

Henry winked, and pushed the second chair at her with one of his feet.

"Take a seat," he suggested, "and I'll tell you about the time I was seduced by Audrey Hepburn."

A week later, Claire sat in a quiet bar just off Central Park and allowed a businessman to tell her that his wife no longer attracted him. Afterwards, in a limo waiting just across the street, Henry handed her an envelope containing five hundred dollars, and she handed the man's wife a Minidisc of their conversation.

Even in hindsight, it seemed like a better deal than riding a horse in her underwear.

Frank Durban stares intently at the video monitor as the camera plays over the body. It tracks down, past the wrists handcuffed to the bedframe, past the grisly mess between the legs, towards the feet.

"There," he says into his headset. "Go in on that."

The camera closes in on a two-inch square of white card at the foot of the bed.

"Take a look."

The Crime Search officer takes the white square in surgically-gloved hands and flips it over. It's a Polaroid, a close-up of what the video camera has just tracked past.

"Any sign of the camera?" Frank asks.

"No. There's a wallet, though," the voice in his earpiece says. Frank, along with a small army of technicians, is in the room next door to the murder scene, temporarily banished to prevent pristine evidence getting trampled before it's put on tape.

"Let's take a look."

The camera focuses in on the nightstand beside the bed. A gloved hand enters the frame, flips open the wallet and pulls out the driver's licence.

Even through the grain of the video monitor, Frank can see from the ID photo that she was beautiful.

"Stella Vogler. *Mrs* Stella Vogler. An apartment on Mercer."

"Mercer?" Frank thinks hard. A SoHo address, and not a cheap one. "But the room was booked in her name, right?"

"That's correct, sir." That's the manager, still hovering around.

Why book a hotel just a mile or so from her own apartment, Frank wonders?

The disembodied voice of the Crime Search officer breaks into his thoughts. "So she comes here to meet her lover, he brings a few toys, some cuffs, a Polaroid to take some dirty snaps. Meanwhile her husband finds out, he follows her and - wham."

"And after he's killed her in a jealous rage, he stops and takes a couple of photos himself," Frank says dryly. "As you do, right?"

Stung, the Crime Search officer goes through the contents of the wallet.

"Six hundred bucks. It wasn't a robbery."

"Well done, Sherlock," Frank mutters under his breath.

"And what's this?" A note of malicious pleasure has crept into the other officer's voice. He holds a business card up to the camera lens. "Looks like you've got some competition, detective."

"What is that thing?"

"*The Mallory Private Investigation Bureau*," he reads. "You want me to give you the phone number?"

"Wait. What's that on the back? Is that handwriting?"

The officer turns the card over.

"Here," he says, holding the card so that it fills the screen of the little monitor.

On the back, someone has written in pencil:

*Claire Rodenburg*

*= the decoy.*

"Yeah," Frank says. "Yeah, give me that number."

A group of them go on to the Harley Bar. Even though it's gone midnight, the place is packed. Springsteen blasts from the jukebox.

When they finally get served, Claire orders a Martini. The barman fills up a shot glass with Jack Daniels and slams it down on the counter.

"I asked for a Martini," she shouts at him over the music and the crowd, pushing it back.

He pushes the glass back at her again. "That's the way we make Martinis round here, lady," he says. He's Australian. He grins at her, daring her to complain.

The men at the bar whoop and cheer.

And he's young and muscular, wearing just a T-shirt despite the cold that pushes in every time someone opens the door from the street, and she's already noticed the way his dishcloth, tucked into his belt, whisks round his muscular little butt like a tail whenever he turns to the row of bottles behind the bar.

She picks the glass up, drains it, and says, "In that case, give me an Ocean Breeze."

He pours another measure of Jack Daniels into a glass, then adds another measure of Jack Daniels, then finishes it off with another measure of Jack Daniels.

She tips it down her throat, and some of the guys at the bar break into a spontaneous round of applause.

Applause. Now there's a sound she hasn't heard in a while.

"Now give me a Long Island Iced Tea," she says. "With plenty of tea."

Claire was never the most beautiful of Henry's women. In her opinion, that would be Alana.

Alana has the hair of an urchin, the voice of a little girl, and the figure of the model she used to be before she hit twenty seven and the magazine bookings began to dry up. Alana is neurotic as a thoroughbred, and her habitually-bare midriff is as taut as a tennis racquet.

Sometimes, though, there are men oblivious to Alana's cover-girl charms, and these men usually go for Lizzie. Or, more specifically, they go for Lizzie's breasts. Lizzie's breasts are big and creamy and undulate like a waterbed when she moves, which isn't very often. Claire especially covets the left one, the one with the scorpion tattoo on its upper slope.

Then there's Lola. Whilst pretty is not exactly a word you would use of Lola, she definitely has her fans. Half Japanese, half Jewish, with the unfathomable eyes of a geisha and the filthy mouth of a pimp, Lola used to be a stripper at a table dancing club. Where her speciality was that for an extra fifty she would lean over the punter's lap and, underneath the curtain of her long black hair, violate the club's no-touching rule for about ten seconds or so.

She didn't even bother to undo their zippers, she told Claire once. She didn't need to.

Claire never liked to ask how Henry found Lola.

But though she might not be the prettiest, or the sexiest, or the sassiest, Claire has one quality that, as far as Henry's concerned, makes her unique.

She gets results.

Henry maintains it's because there's something about her that makes her seem more approachable than his other girls. Claire knows that's bullshit. It's because, alone amongst his decoys, she can *act*.

Paul, who runs the drama class she's joined, likes to say acting is called that because it's all about action. It's not who you pretend to be, but who you become; not what you say, but what you do.

Claire isn't sure. Maybe this Method stuff she's learning is just Hollywood bullshit.

But she's seen actors go on stage with a streaming cold and have it dry up for three hours, only to reappear when the makeup comes off in the greenroom.

And she's seen men who would throw away everything they have - wives, fiancées, families, careers - just for the chance of a few minutes with a figment of their imaginations.

With her.

Claire isn't proud of what she does for a living.

But she's proud as hell of the way that she does it.

## Chapter four

Dr Susan Ling carefully slides a long, steel thermometer out of the dead woman's rectum, holds it up to the light. Involuntarily, Frank averts his eyes.

"Forty-eight hours," the Medical Examiner pronounces. "Give or take a few."

"You sound pretty confident of that," Frank says.

"Sure." Dr Ling reaches to the buttocks and shakes one dispassionately, as one might shake a jelly. "Rigor mortis has been and gone. Maybe forty four if she put up a struggle."

The crime scene has been filmed from every angle now. The handcuffs securing the corpse's wrists to the bedframe have been removed so that the pathologist can make her examination. The room smells of meat.

Stella Vogler's buttocks and shoulder blades are a dark, angry purple, as if all the blood in her body has slowly pooled in the lowest part of her and solidified. Which, Frank knows, is pretty much what happens.

The bite marks and belt weals patterning the thighs, buttocks and lower back are a less familiar sight.

Dr Ling steps back to the body and signals to her assistant, who helps turn the corpse back over. Stella Vogler's head shakes from side to side, groggily. The mess between her legs slithers and twists. Frank clears his throat. "What killed her?"

Like all the other people in the room, apart from the pathologist, he's standing with his hands in his pockets. It gives the scene a deceptively casual air. Only when all the technical people are done will they be allowed to take them out.

"I can't give you a definite answer until we cut her up, but I don't think there's much doubt. See this line around the neck?" Frank had, but he'd known better than to comment before the pathologist. "It's a ligature mark. Possibly a belt or a strong necklace, more likely rope or wire. Here." Dr Ling produces a tiny Maglite from her pen pocket and thumbs open the eyes. The corneas are cloudy now, opaque as cataracts. Frank has been around enough corpses to know they all do that, after a while. He also sees that the eye and its lid are dotted with tiny red specks.

"Petichiae," the doctor says. "Tiny haemorrhages in the blood vessels. She was strangled, for sure. When we open her up we'll find bloody froth in the lungs." She makes it sound like getting under the hood of a car.

"What about the other wounds?"

"Approximately twenty seven superficial haematomas - it's hard to be exact because some are overlaid - consistent with a blow from a belt or a stick. All premortem. Eighteen bite marks, some puncturing the skin, possibly post mortem. Dental identification unlikely but we'll see what we can do."

"The whipping - was this sex play? Or a beating?"

The doctor bends down and starts to comb the corpse's hair with a fine metal comb. "Well, motivation isn't my department. As far as the medical evidence is concerned, it could be either." Stella Vogler's hair is blonde and fine, and the metal teeth of the comb make a rasping sound as the pathologist drags it hard against the skin. "I can tell you she was gagged at some point. There are specks of dried blood in the corners of her mouth."

Frank indicates the pile of guts between her legs. "And this? What happened here?"

The doctor transfers her combings to an evidence envelope, seals it carefully and writes something on the front. "I'm not sure yet. You'll have to

wait til the autopsy." She moves onto the corpse's hands, scraping delicately underneath each nail with a short wooden pick from the evidence box. The fingertips, drained of blood, are white as candles.

"Sure. But if you've got any initial thoughts... did he penetrate her with something? A knife, maybe?"

"I can't tell that yet," she repeats. She opens the last envelope in her box and takes out another comb, which she uses to comb the corpse's downy pubic hair. "I can tell you there's bruising here," she says. "Postmortem, from the look of it." She parts the hair with the comb to show him. "See? After circulation has stopped, you don't get the vivid colours."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that whatever he did to her, he did after she was dead." Dr Ling puts the comb back in the envelope, seals it, and annotates the front. "Right," she says, "I'm done here." She pulls off her gloves and tosses them into a bag. The flaccid, milky balls of latex remind Frank of used rubbers.

"Thanks," he says.

"I'll see you at the autopsy then, detective."

Frank nods. He takes his hands out of his pockets. His fingers are stiff where they've been clenched into fists.

## Chapter five

Frank sits alone in a bar, nursing a beer. Occasionally the barman says something to him, to see if he needs company, or conversation, or just another drink, but each time Frank shakes his head.

Even small talk is too much, tonight.

He simply wants to watch the people come and go. The pretty girls, reflected in the mirror above the bar. The ones are who are still alive.

Something strange happens, at a crime scene. The strange thing is not that you are disgusted or repelled by what you see. The strange thing is that it seems, at the time, perfectly normal. Like the killer himself, you look on the naked and dismembered body of the victim simply as raw material, something on which to practise your professional skills.

But, very occasionally, there's something else as well. Something even more disturbing than dispassion. Something instinctive, and uncontrollable, and savage. Not anger, or revulsion, but a kind of fleeting bloodlust. Like a wild dog which chases another one from its meal, you stand over the kill with your teeth bared and your hackles raised.

Just for a moment, as the doctor held one of Stella Vogler's limp hands in hers, and ran her pick under the white, bloodless nail, Frank had felt that tonight.

Frank puts down his beer and, sighing, gets to his feet.

He knows he shouldn't take the job home with him. But the job comes anyway, uninvited.

When he gets to Brooklyn, the mutilated body of Mrs Stella Vogler will be there already. Sitting in the unkempt kitchen amidst a mountain of dirty

takeout cartons. Propped in front of the flickering TV. Laid out on the pillowless side of the bed.

To tell the truth, he'll be glad of the company.

Two A.M comes and goes, and by now the barman is trying to persuade her to come back to his place. Bessie has long gone home. When the house lights are turned on Claire waits at the bar as the last customers stumble into the snow, some of them still dancing, like an audience exiting from a show. The barman, whose name is Brian, puts a roach bomb in the middle of the floor and sets the security system. He's still only wearing his T-shirt but he says he isn't cold and they walk through the snow to his apartment, a little drunk. Wet flakes drift down through the murky sky as if they're underwater and the snow is plankton, settling on the seabed. Trees have become reefs of grey coral. Their breath bubbles up and is lost like divers', a stream of silver wriggling to a distant surface.

When they reach his apartment it's even more of a dump than he'd said it would be, hardly more than a mattress surrounded by piles of clothes and a tiny shower room. But suddenly she wants nothing more than to get into his bed, still fully clothed, and be warmed up by that big heat-engine of a body as she lets him undress her piece by piece under the covers until she's warm enough to make love.

She does things like this, after a job for Henry. Why, she couldn't have said.

Just as she couldn't have told you whether the sounds she's making now, as she pulls the barman into her, are real, or fake, or a little bit of both.