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The Death Artist

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Even before it all went bad she had the feeling it was going to be a rotten day. She blamed it on the headache, the one she'd woken up with. But even later, as the headache eased, the feeling, almost a sense of foreboding, remained. Still, she'd made it through the day. Maybe, she thought, the night would be better.

She was wrong.

"How about something to drink, maybe some coffee?" He smiles.

"I should be getting home."

He looks at his watch. "It's only eight-thirty. Come on. I'll buy you a cup of the best cappuccino in town."

Maybe she says yes because the headache is finally gone, or because the day has turned out much better than she expected, or because she doesn't feel like being alone, not right now.

"Let's walk a bit."

The night air is cool, a little damp. She shivers in her thin cotton jacket.

"Cold?" He puts his arm around her shoulders. She's not sure she wants him to, turns the thought over in her mind, sighs audibly.

"What?"

She smiles weakly. "Nothing you'd understand."

Her comment annoys him. *Why wouldn't I understand?* He drops his arm from her shoulders—she wonders, why?—and they continue along another block, lined with restaurants and midsize brownstones, in silence, until she says, "Maybe it's simpler if I just catch a cab home."

He takes her arm, gently stops her. "Come on. It's just coffee."

"I think I should go."

"Okay. But I'll see you home."

"Don't be ridiculous. I can get home by myself."

"No. I insist. We'll take a cab, grab a cappuccino in your neighborhood. How's that?"

She sighs, doesn't have the energy to argue.

In the cab, neither speaks; he looks out the window, she stares at her hands.

The Starbucks on her corner is locked; the kid inside, mopping up, waves them off through the glass.

"Damn. I really wanted some coffee." He looks at her, sad, like a little boy, then offers up his best smile.

"Oh, okay. You win." She smiles, too. "I'll make us some."

At the front door to her building she fumbles with her keys, gets one in the lock, but the door eases open before she even turns the key.

"Everything's falling apart around here. They're doing construction, keep breaking everything. I'd complain to the super, but he's worthless."

On the second floor they have to step around stacks of wood and electrical supplies.

"I think they're making two apartments into one. Hoping for a big rent, I guess. It's been going on for weeks, driving me crazy with the noise."

On the third floor, she unlocks a dead bolt, then a police lock.

He walks past her into the apartment, immediately removes his coat, drops it on a chair, is making himself way too comfortable, she thinks. He sits down on her sofa—a layer of thick foam covered with a bold cotton print with pillows she'd bought on Fourteenth Street, one with a stenciled portrait of Elvis, the other of Marilyn. He runs his finger over Marilyn's garish red mouth, back and forth, back and forth.

She realizes she still has her coat on, removes it, hangs it on a hook behind the front door, turns the dead bolt, then slides the police lock into place. "Habit. You know." She smiles, nervously, turns into the kitchenette, a rectangular alcove attached to the living room, no bigger than a closet. She pulls a chain, and a lightbulb illuminates the half-sized refrigerator, two-burner stove, tiny sink, a shelf with a toaster oven and a drip coffee machine. She removes the top half of the coffeemaker, takes out a soggy brown filter, tosses it into a small plastic trash can.

"Can I help?"

"It's way too small in here. I'm okay."

She can feel him watching her in the tiny kitchen as she gets the coffee going; becomes self-conscious about the way she moves, the swaying of her hair. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

When she comes back into the living room, she chooses the hard-backed chair at her computer table across from the couch. "Coffee'll be ready in a minute." He looks up at her, smiles, says nothing. She plays with a loose thread at the cuff of her blouse, tries to think of a way to fill the silence. "How about some music?" She stands up, takes the few necessary steps to the CD player in the corner on the floor. "My one luxury."

He crosses the room, kneels beside her, plucks a disc from the neat stack. "Play this."

"Billie Holiday," she says, taking the CD from his hand. "She kills me."

Kills me kills me kills me kills me kills me kills me . . . The words echo in his brain.

A clarinet pipes out through two small speakers, followed by Billie's inimitable, soulful whine. The first lines of "God Bless the Child" fill the room with an unspeakable sadness.

He watches her kneeling beside him, humming along, head tilted, hair spilling over the side of her face. He's been watching her all night, thinking about this, planning. But now he's not sure. Start it all again? It's been so long. He's been so good. But when he reaches out and touches her hair, he knows it is already too late.

She jerks her head back, immediately stands up.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," he says, careful to keep his voice calm as he watches her, enjoying the way she moves, like a cat, jumpy, skittish. But when he sees her standing above him, looking down at him as though he were some kind of inferior being, there is no longer anything remotely kittenish about her. A flash of anger spreads through his body, and he's ready.

"I'll get the coffee." She turns away, but he grabs hold of her arm. "Hey," she says. "Cut it out."

He lets go, puts his hands up in a sign of truce, tries the smile on her again.

She folds her arms across her chest. "I think you should go."

But he settles back onto her couch, locks his hands behind his head, a grin on his lips. "Let's not make this into a big deal, okay?"

"Some things are. But I don't want to discuss it right now and . . . I doubt you'd understand."

"No? Why is that? Ohhh . . . wait, I think I'm getting it."

"Just go." She holds her defiant pose.

"I know," he says. "I'm the bad guy, right, and you're the innocent, put-upon woman. Oh, sure. Real innocent." He stands. "Well, let me tell *you* something . . ."

"Hey. Relax," she says, trying to regain control of the situation. "It's cool."

"Cool?" He repeats the word as if it had no meaning for him.

Do it!

"Just a minute!" he shouts.

"What?" she asks, but can see he is not really speaking to her, his eyelids fluttering as though he were going into some kind of trance.

He takes a step forward, hands clenched.

She drops her stance, makes a dash for the door. She's scrambling with the police lock when he lunges. She tries to scream, but he's got his hand pressed—hard—across her mouth.

Then he is all over her, pulling at her arms, shouting, mumbling, his voice harsh, unrecognizable. He stretches her arms above her head. She is surprised at his strength, but manages to wrench a hand free, smacks him in the mouth. A thin line of blood trickles over his lip. He doesn't seem to notice, knocks her to the floor, pins both her arms under his knees, all his weight holding them down, freeing up his arms to tear at her blouse, to grope at her breasts. She tries to kick but can't connect, her legs just thrash in the air.

Then he grabs her chin, leans down, presses his mouth against hers. She tastes his blood. She wrenches her head back, spits in his face, hears herself scream: *"I'll kill you!"*

He hits her hard in the face, then moves off her, stands beside the couch looking down. "How shall we do this?" he asks. "Nice or . . . not so nice?"

She is seeing double, unable to right herself, feeling close to being sick.

Then he is on top of her again, rubbing himself against her, cursing. She bites into the Marilyn pillow, concentrates on Billie Holiday.

But now his movements have become frantic, his cursing louder, and she is aware of the fact that there has been no penetration, and feels a sense of relief.

He rolls off her, says, "You just didn't get me hot," and pulls his pants up. It was a mistake.

Of course it's a mistake. Stick to the plan.

She pushes her skirt down.

"The new woman . . . so tough," he says, fumbling for words, anything to soothe his damaged ego. "So tough she can't satisfy a man."

She tries to think straight, just wants him out. "Yes," she says. "You're right, I—I'm sorry. It wasn't you, I—"

He grabs her face, turns her toward him. "*What?* What did you say?" She tries to push his hand off, but can't. "You patronizing me? *Me!* You fucking little slut!" He lets go of her face and then the slap comes so fast that for a moment she is stunned, then she screams.

"Get out! Get the fuck outta here!" She lunges for the phone. But he's too fast for her. He wrenches it off the end table. The cord jumps in the air as it's torn from the socket. Then he's got her by the hair and around the waist, practically dragging her into the kitchen; the scorching glass of the coffeemaker is scalding her naked back. He slams her against the wall. The coffeemaker falls; boiling coffee splashes against her ankles. She tries to scratch his face, misses, and he punches her hard.

An image of herself as a young girl in a white confirmation dress floods her mind; and then the white turns gray, and then everything is black.

*

He hardly remembers his hand finding the knife in the shallow sink, but the girl is quiet now. She's on the floor, one leg twisted under her, one straight out in front, and there is blood everywhere—splattered on the stove, cabinets, floor. He can't even remember the color of her blouse, it's all stained a deep, gorgeous red. Pinkish saliva bubbles from the corners of her mouth. Her eyes are wide open, staring at him in surprise. He returns her vacant stare.

How long has it been? Has anyone heard them? He listens for sirens, televisions, radios, signs of life from other apartments, but hears nothing. He feels lucky. *Yes, I've always been lucky.*

He rasps, "What a mess," his throat gone dry. He finds a pair of Playtex gloves beside the sink, squeezes his bloodied hands into them, washes the knife thoroughly and drops it into a drawer; then removes his shoes so he won't track bloody footprints, and places them on the shelf beside the toaster oven. He tears a few paper towels off a roll, balls them up, squirts them with liquid detergent, and works his way around the apartment cleaning off everything he can remember touching. He even takes the Billie Holiday disc off the player, puts it back in its sleeve, slips it into the middle of a stack of CDs.

He checks the couch for anything he might have dropped, anything torn off, buttons, even hairs. He sees a few hairs that he thinks are the girl's, but just to be safe he takes the Dustbuster from the wall in the kitchenette and goes over the couch several times, then towels it off, replaces it.

Unconsciously, he touches his lip, feels the soreness, remembers the kiss.

Back in the kitchenette, he takes a sponge from the sink, squirts it with more detergent, washes blood off the dead girl's lips, then shoves the sponge in and out of her mouth.

He lifts her lifeless hand. *Nail polish?* No, blood. *Mine or hers?* But here the sponge refuses to do the job, traces of red cling

stubbornly beneath her nails. He jams the sponge into his pant pocket, right on top of the damp wad of paper toweling—the moisture oozes through the fabric and onto his thigh. Then he removes a small leather-bound manicure set from his inner pocket—one he always carries with him—and sets to work with his fine metal tools. Ten minutes later the girl's nails are not only spotless, but finely shaped. He takes a moment to admire his handiwork. Then, using his cuticle scissors, he carefully snips a lock of the girl's hair and presses it into his shirt pocket, just above his heart.

He moves in closer, touches her cheek. His gloved finger comes away bright scarlet. *That's it!*

Now, starting at the temple, his cherry fingertip creeps down her cheek, slowly, precisely, stopping once for a quick dip into the pool of blood on the girl's chest, then continuing just beside her ear, looping a bit before coming to rest at the sharp edge of the dead girl's jaw.

Perfect.

Now he needs something useful.

In the tiny bedroom, he takes a moment to consider a painting above the bed. Too big. Perhaps the large black crucifix on a heavy silver chain? He slides it from one gloved hand to another like a child's Slinky toy, before dropping it back into the dresser drawer.

But it's the small plastic photo album, which, after a glimpse at its contents, he decides is just the thing.

Back at the door he undoes the police lock and dead bolt, puts on his shoes, then his long raincoat.

In the hall, just outside the apartment, he hesitates. On the first floor, the drone of television dialogue, "Laura, honey, I'm home . . ." and canned laughter. He moves stealthily down the hall and out the front door. It closes behind him with a dull thud.

On the street, with gloved hands thrust deep in his pockets, he concentrates on walking at a casual pace, keeping his head down. Six or seven blocks from the dead girl's apartment he manages to work one of the gloves off his hand while it's still in his pocket; once it's free, he hails a cab.

He tells the driver where he's going, surprised at the calm of his voice.

Did it really happen? Was it some kind of hallucination? He's never quite sure. Maybe it was all a dream. But then he feels the wetness against his thigh, and the plastic glove still on one hand—and they're real enough.

The muscles in his neck and jaw clench; for a moment his entire body shudders.

Is this what he wanted? He can hardly remember.

Too late now. It's done. Finished.

He catches his reflection in the taxicab's streaky window.

No, he thinks, it's just the beginning.

1

Kate McKinnon Rothstein, "Stretch" to the girls at St. Anne's, having hit six feet by age twelve, strode across the pickled-ash floor of her penthouse living room, her mules click-clacking to the beat of Lauryn Hill's hip-hop soul, which echoed through the twelve-room apartment. The music bounced off modern and contemporary paintings, African masks, the occasional medieval artifact, and details that only the best designer in New York City could deliver: antique crystal doorknobs, brass bathroom fixtures sniffed out at Paris flea markets, embroidered pillows from Moroccan street vendors, a couple of near-to-priceless Ming dynasty vases beside pricey Fulper pottery.

In her nearly all-white bedroom, Kate kicked off her shoes, was tempted to stretch out on the king-size bed—an island of marshmallow fluff with its pure-down comforter and a dozen white and off-white lacy pillows—but she had exactly thirty minutes before meeting her old friend Liz Jacobs.

Still, after so many years, the splendor of the room, of her life, could stop her, and a picture—as clear as any painting on her wall—coalesced in her mind: the cramped, narrow bedroom where she had spent her first seventeen years—single bed, thin mattress, chest of drawers covered with faux-wood contact paper, wallpaper older than she was, peeling. Kate caught her

reflection in the full-length mirror on her closet door. Lucky, she thought, damn lucky.

She stripped off her stylish business suit, exchanged it for a pair of charcoal slacks and a cashmere turtleneck, pulled back her thick dark hair—which only recently had begun to sprout a few silver streaks, exchanged for gold ones, thank you very much, Louis Licari, colorist to the rich or beautiful—fastened it with a couple of tortoiseshell combs, and dabbed the back of her ears with her favorite perfume, Bal à Versailles.

A Proustian moment: her mother in a party dress, tall and regal like Kate, despite the JCPenney label, tucking her in, kissing her good night. *Don't let the bedbugs bite, pussycat.* If her mother were alive today, thought Kate, she would buy her gallons of expensive perfume, fill her closets with designer dresses, get her out of that row house in Queens. A flush of embarrassment. Who *cared* about perfume and designer dresses? If only her mother could have stayed around long enough for Kate to have given her *anything*. She sighed.

In the bathroom, she ran a nearly colorless gloss over her lips, studied herself in the mirror, the face of this woman she had become; not really so different from the one she had left behind ten years ago—just take away a few lines, add a uniform, a gun, and an attitude that scared half the men in the 103rd Precinct. But that was a long time ago, another lifetime, one she would prefer to forget.

She'd never meant to be a cop, though it was in her blood—her father, her uncle, her cousins, all cops. Kate chose college, to study art history, but after four years of sitting in dark rooms staring at slides of famous paintings, a legion of papers dissecting works of art, *deconstructing* them, as they say, memorizing dates and terms—flying buttresses, pentimento, fresco, scumbling—after all that, not one single job for the Fordham-trained, full-scholarship art history major. Six months of temp work, typing

and filing anonymous letters, and she thought, why fight it? Cop work had always intrigued her. And the NYPD training proved to be a lot easier than deciphering the symbolism in a Flemish painting.

With her background, Kate never had to walk a beat, and naturally, the art-related cases landed on her desk, but it wasn't until she was assigned runaways and missing kids—an area the men happily handed over to her—that she actually gave the work her heart. A mistake. A decade of kids she could not find or could not save and her heart was ready for a transplant. Thank God for Richard Rothstein and a second chance—graduate school, a Ph.D., time to write that art history thesis, and then her surprise bestseller, *Artists' Lives*.

Nowadays, Kate was saving kids *before* they got lost, and that's the way she liked it. More than one troubled kid had spent the night at the Rothsteins', sometimes nights spreading into weeks, with plenty of hand-holding and bowls of chicken soup, even if it was the maid, and not Kate, who bought the Perdue parts and steamed the parsnips.

Who, least of all Kate, would have imagined that one day this motherless girl from Astoria would host a PBS series based on her book, or throw parties for gubernatorial candidates, CEOs, and movie stars, in her San Remo apartment. Her life, all she had, continued to surprise her, sometimes embarrass her, too; and she worked hard at giving back to assuage some of the guilt that came with good fortune.

Mules exchanged for pumps, a lightweight jacket thrown over her shoulders, and that was it; she was ready.

Heads practically did the *Exorcist* swivel when Kate marched into the bar of the Four Seasons Hotel and spotted, across the room, her friend Liz, half hidden by this month's issue of *Town and Country* magazine, the one that featured Kate's very own

face backed by a cool abstract painting with the caption "Our Lady of the Arts and Humanities."

"Put that rag down. *Please,*" said Kate, in her deep, throaty voice. "If they had taken the time to say one thing about my sad and pathetic youth, I might not have come off sounding like some stuck-up socialite born with a silver spoon up her ass!"

"Ah, the demure cover girl." Liz looked up, blue eyes peering over the air-brushed facsimile at the real thing.

Kate leaned down, pecked her friend on both cheeks, then, with her natural grace, folded herself into a high-backed caned chair. She took in her friend's freckled cheeks, the lack of makeup, no airs about her at all, smiled warmly, then ordered a martini from the tuxedo-clad waiter, who deposited a ginger ale in front of Liz.

"Still not drinking, I see." Kate pulled out a pack of Marlboros.

"Still smoking, I see."

"Still trying to quit is more like it. I wish I had your willpower." Kate lit a cigarette, dropped the pack back into her bag, took in the long mahogany bar, the cathedral ceiling, the elegantly dressed couples talking in whispers, laughing, enjoying their good life. She exhaled a long plume of smoke, watched it break up and disappear. Sometimes her entire life seemed as illusory as that smoke—discussing *Artists' Lives* with Charlie Rose one night, holding a teen's hand at an AIDS clinic the next. "I swear, Liz, I don't know what prepared me for this life."

"Saint Anne's School for—what was it? Wayward Girls?"

"Right." Kate laughed, raised her glass. "Here's to my dearest, oldest chum." They clinked glasses. "So what's brought my workaholic pal out from behind her Quantico desk?"

"A monthlong intensive training course in sophisticated computer skills right here in New York City."

"No." Kate slammed her hands onto the mahogany table.

"Do not tease me, Liz Jacobs. No way Quantico would let you off an entire month to be here, with me, in New York."

"I tease you not. But honey, the FBI did not, sorry to say, send me here to hang out with you, though, naturally, you're the icing on the cake. I'm here to master the computer so I can at least understand how to access the very stuff that is changing my business faster than my butt is sagging. It's all out there if you know how to get at it—profiles, case studies, tracking every sort of criminal." She tapped a finger to her chin. "All of your missing children—if we'd had access to some of the stuff they've got on databases nowadays, you would never have lost that last kid—you remember her name?"

Oh yes, Kate remembered.

Ruby Pringle, aka Judy Pringle. Twelve years old. Last seen alive with three pairs of Calvin Klein jeans—two denim, one black, all size 5—flung over the shoulder of her Forest Hills cheerleading jacket as she headed into the dressing room of the junior department of the Queens Plaza Jeans Store . . . Kate attempted to blink the memory away, but failed. *A naked battered angel, eyes open wide, glazed with a thin film, a kind of inner eyelid, like a half-asleep cat, floating on a cushiony sea of wavy black plastic. Ruby Pringle stares up at Kate. Arms and legs stretched out, white nail polish, chipped, skin the color of newsprint. A telephone cord wrapped so tightly around her neck that it disappears in the flesh. Size 5 jeans bunched at her ankles. The smell of Ruby Pringle's death is undistinguishable, commingled with molding pizza crusts, coffee grinds, vegetable scrapings, soured milk.*

Homicide detective Kate McKinnon knows better than to disturb a crime scene, but cannot help herself. She yanks the jeans up to Ruby Pringle's waist, stumbles from the Dumpster, squints at the hazy midday sun, attempting to burn the image of the dead girl from her retinas.

"You ever miss it?" asked Liz.

"What? Oh." Kate came back to the moment. "Are you kid-

ding? Between the book, the TV series—which, thank God, is over—and my work for the foundation"—Kate expelled a short breath—"I don't have time to pee."

"You know, I watched every minute of your PBS show just waiting for you to forget you were on camera and start cursing. But you were such a lady." Liz grinned. "How'd you ever pull *that* off?"

Kate rolled her eyes. "You didn't see the outtakes."

"I'll bet you get fan mail."

"Oh, sure. Bundles of it. Richard's given up his law practice to stay home and sort it out."

Liz laughed. "How is that sexy husband of yours?"

"Not sexy enough," said Kate with a wry smile. "The man works too hard. There's his usual over-the-top caseload, plus the pro bono work—which, I have to admit, I encourage—his work for the foundation, and now he's even taken on a few pertinent city cases. The nights Richard makes it home before midnight, he's like a dead dog."

"One of those long-legged, pedigreed types."

"Pedigreed? *My* Richard? You know very well, Liz Jacobs, that Richard and I shared the same SPCA upbringing—pure mutts, the two of us." She smiled. "Of course, when Richard *is* sexy, well . . . never mind." She smiled again. "So what about you? How are the kids?"

"They're great. Both of them in college. Amazing, isn't it? Damn good thing their lousy father's investments paid off."

"And that the little geniuses both got scholarships. You should be proud of them."

"I am," said Liz, unable to stifle that look all proud mothers get—the shy smile meant to disguise the burst of pride. "Oh, I shouldn't say that—"

"What? That you're proud?"

"No. That Frank's a lousy father. He was only a lousy husband."

"He gave you two beautiful kids." Kate knocked back her martini, imagined that it could actually leak through the tiny crack that had just opened in her heart. *Damn.* This is not what she needed right now, sitting next to her best friend, whom she loved, absolutely loved, but whom, in an instant, she suddenly wanted to trump with all the perks of that good life she had been putting down for the past quarter hour, because in that most innocent of exchanges—*How are the kids?*—followed by Liz's look of maternal self-satisfaction, Kate felt as though her glittering, perfectly constructed world would surely crumble. *Damn. Damn. Damn.*

Liz caught Kate's faraway look. "You okay?"

"Oh. Sure."

Liz eyed her friend closely. "Really?"

"Truly." Kate painted on a broad smile. "Hey, when did you cut your hair? I like it."

"Just. I got too old for long hair."

"Uh-oh—" Kate fluffed the dark hair shot through with reddish-gold streaks from her shoulders. "What does that make me?"

"On you it works."

"Just tell me when I start to look like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*"

"I'd say you've got about a year." Liz laughed.

"Very funny." Kate narrowed her eyes at her friend, but added a playful grin. "Do you realize I just turned forty-one? *Forty-one.* It's such a shock." Kate pictured herself that very first year on the force. She could still feel the ill-fitting uniform, pants bunched at the waist, blue shirt designed for a man tight across her chest. Liz had kidded her that it was probably the first and last blouse that would ever make Kate look busty. The memory made Kate

smile, then she sighed. "I always imagined I'd be twenty-eight, thirty, max."

"Hey, I'm forty-*five*. You think you're gonna get any sympathy out of me? Forget it." She shook her head. "So what's on the agenda tonight?"

Kate's face lit up. "Richard and I are meeting up with our two favorite kids. Going to a downtown performance—something cool and oh-so-avant-garde, I'm sure." Kate rolled her eyes. "Hey, why don't you join us?"

"No can do. Tonight's devoted to computer manuals. Do I know how to live, or what?" Liz mimed a broad yawn. "But thanks. And, let me guess—you're talking about Willie and Elena."

"Natch." Kate smiled.

"They've become famous since your book."

"Oh, they'd have done it without me." Kate waved a dismissive hand. "Willie's got a group of paintings in the Venice Biennale next month. A *very* big deal in the art world. Then his own show right here, in New York, at the Contemporary Museum."

"Wow."

"Definitely wow. And Elena will be touring Europe this summer," Kate continued, her voice rising with enthusiasm. "Oh, I wish you could have been at her performance the other night. It was really something."

For the moment, the Four Seasons bar was exchanged for the intimate amphitheater of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Elena onstage, a solitary spotlit figure backed by an ever-changing series of pulsating, orgiastic abstractions—the translation of her vocal gymnastics fed through a computer.

"Elena could easily have a career as a mainstream singer," said Kate. "But she's chosen this incredibly difficult, though amazing, route. I mean, she had that crowd of swells and swelled heads riveted." Kate remembered the museum's director, Amy

Schwartz, a fidgety type by nature, rapt, raving over Elena's multi-octave voice. And the senior curator, Schuyler Mills, proclaiming Elena brilliant; here, clearly, was a man of taste and culture. Even that pompous old bore, the Contemporary's recent chairman of the board, Bill Pruitt, managed to stay awake—no mean feat for a man who normally snored his way through the Contemporary's poetry readings and artist talks. As for the young curator, Raphael Perez, the guy could not take his eyes off Elena. But who could blame him? The girl was beautiful.

"I'm sorry I missed it—Elena's performance, that is. You've done a great job with those kids, Kate."

Now it was Kate's turn to try on that little smile that belied a bursting pride. Yes, it was true, she had more than a little to do with the way those kids turned out. Willie and Elena. Her two prized graduates from the very first class she and Richard had adopted through Let There Be A Future, the educational foundation for underprivileged inner-city kids, nearly ten years ago. Okay, so they were not her biological children. Not even adopted children. But could she possibly love any kids more than she loved those two? She didn't see how. Perhaps they were even closer because she had *not* borne them; because there was none of that parental angst that comes with blood, that pits children and parents against one another. No, there had been none of that with Elena or Willie. Oh, sure they'd had their moments, but nothing they could not eventually laugh at, or cry through to the other side. Willie and Elena. *Her kids.* And, yes, they would do. She smiled warmly. "God, I adore those little brats."

"Oh, Kate." Liz folded her hands into a praying position. "Please, please, *please* adopt me. I'll be good—keep my room clean, brush my teeth—I *swear*."

Kate laughed, dug into her bag, came up with her pack of Marlboros; a crumpled nicotine patch was adhered to its side.

"Jeez, no wonder this thing isn't working." Then she lifted a folded photograph from the table. "Where'd this come from?"

"It fell off your nicotine patch. Maybe the thing gave birth."

But Kate had stopped laughing. She held the photo beside the small lamp in the center of the table. The picture was slightly blurry, the colors somewhat faded. "It's from graduation."

"I can see that," said Liz, plucking it from Kate's hand. "Nice."

"Except that I have no idea how it got here."

"You know, it's okay for even tough Kate McKinnon to admit she carries sentimental photos around."

"I would admit it, but the only photo I ever have in my bag is on my driver's license, and I'd get rid of that one if I could."

"Well, I guess someone else put it in there to surprise you."

For a moment, Kate felt something she had not felt in years; something Kate the homicide detective used to feel when she knew she was onto something, or when she knew, though tried to deny, that it was hopeless, that it was over—that the kid she'd been looking for was dead. But she tried to shrug it off. "I guess Richard could have done it," she said. Though she couldn't imagine why. Or her housekeeper, Lucille, possibly. But why not leave it on her desk or the kitchen counter or a dozen other places that would make more sense? Kate dropped the photo back into her handbag—and with it any more thoughts on the subject. "Hey," she said, brightening. "Why not stay with me this month? I mean it. We've got rooms we never even go into. You'd be doing me a favor."

"Quantico's already booked me into a midtown efficiency, near the library."

"Oh, stop trying to impress me."

"It's okay, really." Liz popped a couple of peanuts into her mouth. "Anyway, Kate, I don't exactly fit into your world."

"Oh, brother. After all these years must I remind you that

although I may shop, lunch, and party with the upper classes, I am merely trespassing among them? At heart, kiddo, we're two of a kind."

Liz gazed intently at Kate. "My dear friend. Look at *me,* look at *you*—then look around. I'm the only woman in this room wearing a color, for Christ's sake! And this orange blouse is one hundred percent poly." She got her fingers on the edge of Kate's sleeve. "Cashmere, right? Ralph Lauren or Calvin what's-his-face? And don't lie—I've been through your closet. Me? I can't even remember the last time I ate in a restaurant where you don't pick up your food on a *tray.*"

"Lizzie, if you won't stay with me, you have to promise to spend at least half your time with me, two or three dinners a week—just the two of us." Kate riffled around in her buttery leather bag. "Here. Keys to my humble flat. My extra set. All yours. Come and go as you please. Cadge food from my fridge. Wear my Calvin what's-his-faces."

"You know, I've always wanted a twenty-room penthouse overlooking Central Park as my own little pied-à-terre."

"Twelve rooms. *Please.* Not twenty."

"Twelve lousy rooms." Liz dropped the keys. "Forget it."

"Okay. I'll throw Richard in. Wear my clothes. Sleep with my sexy husband."

Liz's fingers curled around the keys. "Now you're talkin'."