

The Source

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Part One

Marie ~ London ~ 2006

There is a girl. She's standing, at ease, neat and tidy in forgettable grey. Only the clammy fists inside her pockets would give her away, but no one here is going to shake her hand. Next to her, a man. They're partners in this, negotiating shoulder-to-shoulder with the two men opposite.

The transaction is quick – in fact for them, it looks effortless. One production-line-new ride, velvet blush interior, cream finish. Delivery to be arranged in the coming week. No money changes hands, but there is no doubt an agreement is sealed: heads nodded, eyes met, the implications of any transgressions clear from the two brick-set suits casting shadows in the hallway, from the flies buzzing to death on the strip lights overhead.

They're inside a sprawling factory complex just outside the M25. No identifiable marks link it to anything, anywhere. In truth, they easily could just be buying a car.

Except there is a girl. And the girl is me. We've just bought another girl; young, unblemished, untouched and unknown. She's there too, the third shadow, the only one whose outline is trembling in the corridor. No one's looking at her, not even me. Only the camera hidden in my buttonhole that's recording the whole thing.

'Can we go through it again? Please? Just one last time...'

The window squeaks as I trace circles through the thick condensation. The car's hot with nerves, but there's no way I can open it. Even the trees are listening, rustling with judgement as they watch us sit and prepare to go inside the complex. These buildings look like they rolled off the factory line themselves, but there's nothing as regular inside.

'I've got it, OK?' Dominic sighs as he fidgets. 'It's a simple business deal. We're there to snap up hot property for sale. But the more we talk about it, the less it feels like it. I know this is your first undercover, but I'll be doing it in my sleep soon...'

'I won't though, will I? And you still look like you've never worn those before...'

I flick a bead of water at his battered cargo pants and shirt. He thinks I'm only here because his usual producer's black and this lot are racist. She's drilled me at least. That's why I can get away with being so lippy. That's what I tell myself, anyway.

'If I get it wrong then we're both sunk, aren't we? I know it's all we've been dreaming about but we have to do it for real this time...'

Dominic rolls his eyes, wiping the sweat off his neck before his faded collar stains. Sure, he's worn the same costume in plenty of war zones – if the state's news media isn't in service of its military then no one else would join up either, would they? But Dominic's far more comfortable in a dark suit, slithering around corridors of power – so slick he's almost invisible. It's easy to forget who you're talking to when he could be any number of people. Journalists eat double dealing, hidden agendas and ulterior motives for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

'Come on. For me if not for you. What's our answer if he can't guarantee she's still a virgin?' I draw myself another circle as I say it, glaring at the trees shaking their heads at me in the breeze. We're about to negotiate with people farming out underage girls for money. Of course we have to pretend to be like them. They'd never believe us otherwise.

'I told you, I'll handle it. You're not the one doing the talking, are you? You just concentrate on standing there looking surly ... Not too surly, mind. Throw in some smug too. Remember, you're the madame. There's always a madame ... think of yourself as the landlord, if it helps. The landlord of a swanky new flat that's going to make you a killing...'

I shiver reflexively as he scratches at his groin, fiddling with the tip of a tiny camera nestled almost invisibly in his fly.

'Christ ... a camera in my actual pants. Whose idea was this again? I do hope you put the cost of buying a new one in the budget. No other news crews will touch this fella when we're through. Hereafter it will no doubt be known as the ball-cam...'

'Because they won't search you down there. They wouldn't dare. Nothing would be worse than to be seen as doing something gay, even if it's dressed up as self-preservation. They'd shoot themselves first—'

'I say no deal,' Dominic interrupts suddenly, as if we're still talking about the girl we're going to buy. 'There's no other answer. That's what we agreed. It's business, isn't it? That's the only reason we're here. We agreed the goods would be production-line new...'

'Right,' I say, itching at the wires taped flat across my chest. My camera's anchored in my buttonhole because they won't search me there either. I'm well past my sell-by date. 'And what if she's not white? We're going to insist on getting a look at her, aren't we? They won't be able to lie about that.'

'I know, Marie. I know. No deal. Velvet blush interiors are what we agreed.' He plucks at the van's seat, hand slick against the leather. That's the giveaway, right there. As if anyone normal buys a car with velvet seats. I look away as his hand moves back to his groin.

'I'll never get away without it itching at some point. I suppose that'll play OK, won't it ... given the substance of this so-called deal?'

'Well, don't scratch too hard, will you? The camera's toast if you give yourself a stiffy.'

I feel a bit sick as we both laugh. I guess I'm finally getting the

newsroom's gallows humour right. But the joke's over before we've even finished – his phone vibrates, shooting tremors through the whole seat.

'We're on,' Dominic mumbles, jamming a cap on to his head with one hand, thumbing the phone with the other. 'It's finally happening. And once it starts, it'll have to finish ... Are you sure you're ready? Marie?'

'Yes, I am. It's just business,' I say, trees nodding with me as we step out of the van, leaves pointing with the wind along the path to the complex gates. There's only one way to go from here.

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Close up, they're not what I expected. The heavies in the corridor, fine, you'd worry if they didn't have muscle, but these two? The main man, the one we've been calling Xenon for all this time – with straight faces – he looks so neat he could be showroom-clean. If the doors next to them swung open to reveal a brand-new Jag, I wouldn't be surprised.

I let my vision blur, looking past them to the wall behind, that curious mix of brown and grey where it could settle on either. It's all a matter of perspective, I suppose. Like everything. Just because these men don't fit my mental picture, doesn't mean they're not the real deal.

My eyes snap back into focus as grunts move back and forth, Dominic sticking to the script. Almost there. Just needs a reference to money. I will myself not to shiver as a bead of sweat trickles down my ribcage, threatening the wires taped to my chest.

There's a sudden jolt as the door opens, framing two more men. I don't need to see Dominic's face to know it looks exactly like theirs. Taut and pale with badly disguised panic, lips pursed so all their questions stay in their eyebrows. The air in the room thickens, like there's smoke creeping in under the door.

'What's this?' Dominic's voice grates, just the right side of

harsh. No longer in the corridor, the heavies stand like sentinels either side of our targets. Still the third shadow quivers in the hall.

'We have a last-minute bidder,' Xenon says, grinning. 'There's a lot of demand for rides like this. I'm sure you understand why we have to give everyone a fair go.'

Nobody moves. I don't dare breathe.

'No deal,' Dominic says, sharper edges this time. 'I didn't come here for an auction. It's what we agreed or bust.'

My neck prickles as the latecomers step into the room alongside us. On the face of it, there's now four of us opposite four of them but we all know it's about as equal as knives on butter.

'I'm not sure that's your wisest move,' Xenon replies from between his teeth. 'You won't find anything of this quality on the market elsewhere. I can assure you of that.'

'Well *I'm* yet to approve of its quality,' Dominic snaps, looking towards the corridor for the first time. 'What's to say you're not selling me a dud? Photos never tell the full story, do they? And who does a deal on a photo?'

Pop goes another fly on the light overhead as they eyeball each other. I can't help but flinch as Xenon takes half a slow step to one side, door opening behind him. And now there's nowhere to look other than straight at her, they'll know if we so much as blink.

I let my vision blur again, over the strands of hair bleached lank round her face, the still budding curves that give away her age, the jutting collarbones, the painted nails, the air of desperation and defeat already hanging like a cloak around her body. And the hands, pinning her in place, invisible to everyone but me.

'Careful there,' Dominic drawls. 'If the merchandise gets damaged then no one will buy it—'

'Ten thousand,' a voice interrupts. One of the interlopers; Scottish, curt and sharp. I swallow my sigh of relief as the door to the corridor slams. At least I don't have to look at her anymore. But Dominic, Dominic doesn't skip a beat.

'Eleven—'

'Twelve!'

I freeze as the heavies move in step, improbably lightly, towards the Scot and his lackey.

'You said your maximum was eleven,' Xenon barks at them. 'Lying, were you? There's no love for lies around here.'

I sneak a glance at Dominic, still staring straight ahead. If it wasn't for the muscle twitching in his jaw, he could be made of stone.

'Proof of funds, then. Come on...' Xenon's smile twists as he continues, and it was ugly enough to start with. 'That's if you've really got twelve to barter. And don't you be moving too quickly now...'

My eyes sting with the effort of keeping them straight ahead instead of on the scuffle erupting to my left. One of the heavies lumbers back over to Xenon shaking out a crumpled piece of paper. There's one dense, slow-motion second of squinting before an almost imperceptible nod back towards the muscle.

And then there's a scream.

I don't look, eyes burning into the blank wall. Howls become cries that become pleas as they fade down the corridor into sudden silence, door swinging shut.

I swallow again. The air feels solid, a mass in my throat, a sponge in my lungs. Xenon turns back to us, knuckles white around the ball of paper he's crumpled back into his fist.

'Eleven it is, as it turns out,' he says, another smile spreading immaculate white teeth across his face. For a moment I think he's going to hold out his hand as colour floods back into his fist, but Dominic does it first.

'Instructions will follow,' Xenon says as they shake, Dominic grunting further assent. Then all we've got to do is move one foot in front of the other, round corners and up steps until the gravel of the forecourt crunches under our feet. And only then can we walk with purpose, straight towards the iron gates in the distance, one-two, one-two, pasty spring sunlight catching in our eyes, wind like it's stroking our hair.

That's all we need to feel. Because we did it.