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The Guilty

Jason Pinter

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Extract

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1

The limousine pulled up to the curb outside the Kitten Club, and like a cult waiting for its leader, dozens of heads turned at once. Hundreds of eyes widened. Pulses sped up, hearts raced.

A black-clad bouncer stepped to the limo and opened the door. A slender leg stepped onto the curb. Then it stopped, its owner making sure the cameras had time to swallow up every inch of perfect skin. Then another leg slipped out. The crowd moaned, her body glitter giving the girl's normally pale skin a translucent glow. The crowd gasped as her full form emerged. Those who weren't too stunned to move pressed against the velvet ropes, the bouncers going into full push-'em-back mode.

Flashbulbs popped by the dozen. She flashed that million-watt seductive smile, the one that had seduced and captivated people all over the world. They shouted at her. Nothing she hadn't heard before. Yet as she stepped onto the red carpet, rolled out just for her, listening to the throng of fans chanting her name, Athena Paradis couldn't help but feel that the world had given itself to her.

She waved to the dazed crowd, stopped to sign a few autographs and blow air kisses through ruby lips, laughed at the

mismatched chunky schlubs who would be fantasizing about her that night as they lay alone in the dark.

One-thirty in the morning, but the flashes and strobe lights made it seem like broad daylight. It was just late enough for the party to be in full swing, just late enough to make sure she'd be the last memory in a night her fans would never forget.

Despite her seeming nonchalance, Athena spent many nights in breathless anticipation of these delicious moments when all eyes would be on her. Hearing digital cameras beeping, fingers tapping on cell phones as flabbergasted fans sent grainy images to their friends. Young men trying to give her the same lame sultry looks she'd seen and laughed at a million times. Yet she would always smile just enough to make them think they had a chance.

This was Athena's world, her oyster, and it was *delicious.* Everyone else watched from outside the snow globe, hoping that one special night they too might be touched by her magic.

In three days, Athena Paradis would release her very first album, *The Goddess Athena.* Her promotional tour was in full swing, and tonight at the Kitten Club was a prime stop. She was scheduled to guest DJ, spin and sing tracks that had never been heard outside the recording studio (created with the gentle touch of some very talented—and patient—sound producers, vocal coaches and technicians). Athena's autobiography, *HOW YOU CAN BE LIKE ME,* was ghostwritten by a pleasant sixty-year-old Jew named Herman Goldstein. It spent eight weeks on the *New York Gazette* bestseller list. Her signings all required extra security. Herman wasn't allowed to attend.

Three bouncers the size of minivans controlled the crowd. The mayor's office had sent several off-duty cops just in case. Athena's manager and publicist had called Mayor Perez's

office nonstop requesting massive police protection for their twenty-two-year-old gold mine, but the second-termer refused. Not that he didn't want to help. The mayor was well known for his reliance on sizzle over steak, providing a good show to distract people from their everyday woes. He'd written three self-help books and was constantly photographed alongside celebrities, including Athena Paradis. But the police union was busy negotiating a new contract, and they were squeezing him hard. Adding additional unnecessary force tonight would only cost overtime the city couldn't afford.

Every nightclub Athena graced with her presence would fatten her bank account by fifty thousand dollars. The hotter—or more desperate—the club, the more they paid. Most promoters, like the Kitten Club's Shawn Kensbrook, tripped over themselves to pay Athena ungodly sums of money for a simple appearance. She would show up, pose for the camera, down a few kamikaze shots, dance on the bar, and within a week the patronage tripled. Best advertising in the world, and a hell of a lot more entertaining than an ad in a movie theater or those worthless postcards.

Tonight, though, wasn't about appearance fees. If she seduced the crowd, it would be worth its weight in platinum for her album.

Athena sauntered past the throng of gawking men and starry-eyed women, slipping into the pulsating darkness. Her entourage was immediately met by Shawn Kensbrook, club promoter extraordinaire and co-owner of the Kitten Club. Just three years ago, what was now the Kitten Club had been an abandoned warehouse in Manhattan's meatpacking district. It was destined to be torn down by developers or vermin, whichever got there first. Kensbrook was able to

mount an army of backers to buy what was widely considered a sinkhole. Through his A-list Rolodex, Kensbrook turned a pile of rubble into Gotham's hottest nightspot since the heyday of Limelight. Its clout had grown to the point where *New York Magazine* had referred to it as "The Oprah Winfrey of music promotion." If you had to jump on one couch to get maximum exposure, the Kitten Club was the place to jump.

Shawn was decked out in a wool Versace suit that ran $2,200 and burned off a thousand calories a night. Shawn had purposefully bought it a size too small, the fabric stretching over his taut frame. Athena knew the only thing he worked harder at than promoting his club was promoting his body. Unlike most in the entertainment field, Kensbrook accomplished it solely through weightlifting, protein bars and the best personal trainers money could buy. Bastard didn't even drink.

Shawn pecked Athena on the cheek and ushered her through the crowd to the DJ booth in the back. She shook hands with a guy Shawn introduced as DJ Stix, a light-skinned black man wearing sunglasses rimmed with diamonds. No doubt they were real. Kensbrook would want his employees to dazzle in every way, no matter the price.

Athena's manager, a twitchy man named Eddie, would be standing by in case she got the crazy urge to sing without proper electronic vocal support. Athena had an army of producers who made sure she sounded perfect in the studio. Live, anything could happen.

After the current song ended, Stix turned down the music and Kensbrook picked up the house microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, kittens, cats and lions of all ages," he said. "It is my pleasure to introduce you to the Queen of

all Media, her royal highness herself, the woman whose debut album drops *this Tuesday,* give it up, show your love, for the beautiful Athena Paradis!"

The crowd roared as Athena waved, blowing imaginary kisses, flaunting her body and striking glamorous pose after pose. She was a god among mortals. She knew it, they knew it, and they all loved it.

Suddenly a deep, throbbing bass began to reverberate through the club. Squeals of joy leapt from the lips of heavy-breathing men and women. Then, after a dozen bass thumps, the synthesizer kicked in, and the club came alive.

The sweaty bodies congealed into a solid mass as the expertly arranged rhythm sent ripples through them, electricity making every person sway, every person bounce, every one of them belonging to her.

Sweat coated Athena's upper lip. She licked it, shuddered at the sensation, and knew the night would be a memorable one. The blue Missoni dress clung to her body, the fabric matted on her curves like tissue paper. The dress had been air-mailed by Ottavio Missoni himself, specifically for Athena to wear tonight.

She could feel DJ Stix's eyes drinking her in. He didn't even pretend to look away. Even Shawn Kensbrook couldn't help but steal an eyeful as she danced and spun to the beat. Athena looked at them with a seductive grin, then raised the volume a few notches, the bass thumping harder.

The music consumed the night. And then Athena jumped on top of the turntables.

The crowd stopped dancing, stared at her, cheered her on. She ran her hands over her body, made every one of them feel like they could be her lover.

Athena *owned* them. Every single one.

Somebody handed Athena a clear glass. She drank it in two gulps. Vodka tonic. With a hint of lime. She could feel the ecstasy tab kicking in. The whole world became a velvet dream, soft, wet and inviting. She kissed the air, watched as her lips sent waves of passion through hundreds.

When the song ended, Stix took Athena's hand and escorted her back to her nine hundred pounds of bodyguard. The lips pleaded with her to stay, reaching and pawing as she was led through the crowd.

Shawn Kensbrook ducked through the prying arms. Athena's lead guard recognized him, parted the way. Shawn was dripping with sweat. She envied that he could experience such ecstasy while sober. He threw his arms around her. Whispered into her ear.

"Athena, hon, that was off the *charts.*"

"No," she said. "Come Tuesday, that's number one on the charts." Shawn smiled, nodded.

"Look at this, I mean, will you *look* at it? All these people here for you…what's that feel like?"

She smiled at him, flicked her tongue into his ear. She felt him shiver. Felt him grow hard in an instant.

"You'll never know."

Shawn watched as the bodyguards whisked her away. The bouncers parted the curtains, flung open the doors. Her limo waited just beyond the red carpet. It would take her to Nikos's SoHo loft, where he'd have champagne, strawberries and other goodies waiting. They'd do it all night before passing out naked on his satin sheets. Tomorrow she would see her photo in newspapers across the city.

Athena stepped onto the red carpet and waved to her fans. Her new fans. Her old fans. Fans who would give anything for her. She took one step onto the carpet. Smiled. And then a crack

of thunder filled the air, and a bullet smashed through her skull.

And just like that, her blood staining the carpet an even darker red, the Goddess Athena died.

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