

## Chapter One

A tall, slender woman in a tank top, tight shorts, heels, and a silver wig sashayed past the parked SUV in Clayton, Connecticut on East Chestnut Street, making eye contact with the man behind the wheel. The model of the car, a Lexus LX, indicated wealth—a doctor or lawyer. Dentist, maybe. The late June sun had just set, but sufficient ambient light remained to allow her to make out the driver’s key features: white, middle-aged, well-dressed, and probably lonely. With any luck, she’d found a hard-up suburban dude, prowling for Friday night action after a long work week, who didn’t know how much this business transaction ought to cost.

Perfect.

She stopped, jutted out her skinny little hip, and smiled at the man. He smiled back and nodded. Bingo. Time to negotiate the specifics and close the deal. She sauntered to the driver’s side and leaned into the open window, in a pose that would maximize the exposure of cleavage. Cool air washed over her, providing welcome relief from the relentless late June humidity. “Wanna party?” she said, smiling.

“I heard this is the party district,” he said, returning her smile. Up close, he looked a little older—don’t they all?—and not as wealthy. A businessman, rather than a lawyer or dentist. Balding, a bit out of shape. Nice suit, tie, tan lines around a missing wedding ring. “I was hoping we could hang out together. Privately?”

“Sounds great. I know a good place.” She wiggled an eyebrow and sashayed around the car to the passenger side. He clicked it open. She slid in and

reached across to grab his leg. “Whatcha in the mood for tonight, honey?”

“I...I’m new at this,” he said. “I’m not clear on how this all works. Do I pay now, or—”

“We’ll get to that,” she said. “First we work out what you want. While you drive. Take us to 16th and Fir Street.”

He started the car, then placed his hand on hers—still on his leg. It remained there when she slid her hand up and squeezed his crotch. Already hard. This one might not take ten minutes. He leaned toward over and tried to kiss her.

“Whoa! Baby, wait a minute,” she said. “No kissing, okay? Come on, don’t be so nervous. Drive.”

He nodded, said “sorry sorry sorry,” and put the car in gear. Pulled away from the curb. “So, is there like a standard package, a price list? I mean, that’s how we do it in my business. Home security stuff, you know? You want alarms, it’s X, automatic alerts is Y—”

“Sure, sure,” she said. “You tell me what you want, I tell you what it costs. Don’t worry, you’ll love what I can do for you.”

He nodded. “I bet. My ex-wife, she doesn’t do anything other than the, uh, ‘standard’ stuff. Religious and all, you know? So, half the stuff, I don’t even know what to call it. What do you call when you, uh, when I, um...when it’s not regular front-to-front, but kind of front-to-back...?” Sweat rolled off his scalp, dripping onto his expensive suit. “You know...up the bum?”

“Anal?” She laughed. “Sure, sure. But that’s extra.” Dollar signs floated in front of her eyes. He might not last past applying the lube.

“You do? Oh, great. How much would...and I assume it’s all cash...?”

She laughed. “You’re not trying to pay with Bitcoin, are you, honey?”

He laughed too, a nervous titter. “No, no, of course not,” he said. “Don’t worry, I have cash. So, how much should I...”

She sighed. Her pimp told her always, *always* make them ask for the service first. But with this guy, that might take all night. He was so ready to pop, he might take longer to pay her than screw her.

And he was so desperate, he might pay anything.

“Six bills,” she said. “Touching my titties or anything else is extra. And you wear a condom or it’s double.”

“Six?” He gulped. “Okay, I might be a few bucks short. But my ATM is right up here.” He pulled the car over to the curb and unbuckled his belt. “I’ll only be a second.”

“Dude, hurry,” she said. “You’re on the clock.”

“I sure am,” he said, smiling.

She gazed at him, puzzled, for a moment. Then realization struck. She scrambled to find the door handle. Pulled it. Nothing. Tried to unlock the door. Nothing. Turned back and saw his face...in duplicate. The second one being on the Clayton Police Department ID he’d shoved into her face.

“You’re under arrest,” said Police Detective Robert Grimes, “for prostitution. You have the right to remain silent...”

Val Dawes opened the passenger door to the Lexus and tugged the young woman by the arm onto the sidewalk. She flashed her badge and ID, then slipped them into the back pocket of her jeans. “Hands on the roof,” she said.

“Spread ’em. Come on, you know the drill.”

The woman complied, cursing but not resisting. Val cuffed and searched her. Not that she could hide much under her skimpy outfit.

“You’ve Mirandized her?” Val said to her partner, Bobby Grimes, still sitting behind the wheel.

“Of course,” he said. “I ain’t the rookie here, you are.” He jumped out of the car and circled around, taking his sweet time. So typical. The women do the work and bear the risks, the men take the money and the glory. In some ways, her situation and Destiny’s weren’t dissimilar.

She spun the woman around, for the first time getting a look at her face. It looked familiar. A slender nose, pointy chin, dark brown eyes. Pale skin stretched thin over bony cheeks. Makeup almost covering faint bruises along her jaw and a scar above her left eyebrow.

“Destiny?” Val said when recognition dawned.

The woman’s eyes grew wide, and she cowered a bit. “Do I know you?”

“Another of your high school classmates?” Grimes wise-cracked, opening the back of the SUV. “At the rate we’re going, you might have to have your next reunion at city lockup.”

“No. Hold on a sec.” She pushed the door shut with her foot and lifted the suspect’s chin with two fingers. Tears wet the woman’s face. “Destiny Mathers? It is you, isn’t it?”

“What is this, the fucking Masked Singer?” The woman spit onto the pavement. “You want my name, check my ID.”

Val cursed and stared off into the darkening sky for a moment. A few

months before on patrol, she'd stopped a man from beating Destiny to a pulp in her apartment building. "How the hell did you end up here?" Val asked her.

"The fuck you care," Destiny said. "Come on, let's go get this over with. I gotta make my one phone call."

Val re-opened the back door, pushed her inside, then slid in next to her. The SUV, repossessed from a drug raid, lacked the usual security features of a departmental cruiser, so procedure required that one of them ride in back with the suspect. "You heard her, Bobby," she said to Grimes. "Let's go."

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Val booked Destiny at Clayton Police Headquarters and met Grimes on the fourth floor in the Women's Anti-Violence Emergency Squad Office. Mayor Megan Iverson had established the WAVE Squad three months before to stamp out crimes against women. The police chief put Sergeant Brenda Petroni in charge, who recruited Val to the group on Day One.

In recent weeks, with violent crime rates dipping in the city, the chief had requested WAVE's help in addressing a spike in prostitution in the city. They focused their efforts on the troubled "Alphabet Soup" District, so-called because the street names progressed in alphabetical order, each for a tree species that no longer graced the district's decaying urban core.

"Another newbie," Grimes told Petroni, a solidly built forty-something woman with short brown curls. "No priors. Dawes says she was an assault victim a few months back, unrelated to her profession."

"So far as I know," Val said. "No indications arose then that she turned tricks for a living. In fact, her attacker's been living in Clayton Cottage for two

months.”

Petroni smiled at Val’s use of the term Clayton cops used for city lockup. “All that means is, he wasn’t, or isn’t, her pimp. But I get your point. It seems everyone we haul in from the the Soup District is new to the game. It makes me wonder if something bigger’s going on.”

“One thing that’s different about this Destiny chick,” Grimes said, “is her age. She’s twenty. Most of the others have been teenagers—some as young as fourteen.”

“Destiny looks younger than her age,” Val said. When Grimes scoffed, she added, “At least, she did when I met her.”

“Okay, let’s look into it,” Petroni said. “Dawes, you have a history with her. Think she’ll talk to you, or did busting her poison that well?”

Val cast a glance at Grimes, who made a face of disgust, but said nothing.

“It’s worth a shot,” Val said.

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Val joined Destiny in a tiny cement-block interrogation room. The chamber reeked in equal measures of sweat and disinfectant, and warm air flowed from a noisy vent near the ceiling. Flickering overhead lights seemed to make the room even hotter.

A tall, uniformed African American cop named Damari Price stood at silent attention by the door. Young, clean-shaven, and fit, with dark eyes always on alert, Price’s foreboding appearance often got him tagged with suspect-guarding duty.

“How’s she doing, Damari?” Val asked in a low voice.

After a one-shoulder shrug, Price muttered, "A little scared, I think. Like most first-timers."

Price exited to stand guard outside, and Val glanced at the one-way mirror that lined the far wall of the hot, stuffy room. Grimes would observe their interview from a tiny room behind the glass.

"So, Destiny," Val said, taking a seat across a small table from her. "I didn't expect to meet up with you again like this."

"Yeah, well, I must've missed all those party invites," Destiny said with a sneer.

Val sighed. "Okay. I guess I deserve that. How've you been doing since we last saw each other?"

"Fucking peachy, as you can tell," Destiny said, indicating her skimpy attire.

"What was that, a month ago or two, in court?" Val asked.

Destiny shrugged. "You say so."

Val waited, and when no more words came, she leaned back in her seat.

"Come on, girl. Help me out. How did you get from there to here in such a short time?"

Destiny shot her a sharp, questioning stare. "It's not like 'there' was such a hot place to be, Officer."

In spite of herself, Val smirked. The woman had a sense of humor. "Were you turning tricks back then?"

"Who's turning tricks?" Destiny said, snarling. "Fucking hell. I ain't talking without no lawyer."

Val nodded. “That’s your right, of course. Listen, I’m not here to get you to talk about what you did tonight. I’m interested in your story. How this all started. You had a job when I last saw you. What happened?”

“I lost it, obv.”

“Okay. And then?”

“Then I fucking got hungry, okay?” Destiny glanced around her as if hoping someone would rescue her from the Idiot Brigade. “I have bills to pay. Rent. The state said I can’t get unemployment because I was fired, and that’s bullshit, anyway. What options does that leave a girl like me? I ain’t a user, so dealing’s out. What’s left?”

Val heaved a deep breath. “So, it’s just a money thing?”

Destiny scoffed. “You think it’s about changing the world or some shit?”

“No, I guess not.” Val tapped a pencil on the table, thinking. Somehow, she had to break through to this kid.

She stopped herself at that thought. *Kid*. The woman, three years younger than Val, clearly hadn’t enjoyed the benefits of a college education or police academy training. Val, still a rookie uniformed cop, lacked the masterful interrogatory skills of her partner, Grimes, or their boss, Sergeant Petroni. But they’d trusted her to tap into something, to somehow relate with this woman. Shared age and gender, perhaps? Intuition? Empathy?

She searched her memory for everything she knew about Destiny, anything that would connect them. Such as the first time they’d met, after her assault.

“You still living at Merrybrook Apartments?” Val asked her.

Destiny made a sour face. “That was Rafe’s place.” Her attacker and



mother's ex-boyfriend.

"So, where will you stay tonight?"

Destiny shook her head in disgust. "I hadn't planned on sleeping, dude. I was planning on working."

"Right. But that's out. So, where will you go?"

Destiny gazed at her in amusement. "Back to the Bar and Grill, is my guess."

Val chuckled. Cops had their pet name for lockup, inmates had theirs.

"What if I said you had other options?"

Laughter. "I'd say you're a liar."

"I'm serious."

"Yeah, so'm I. We done?" Destiny rattled the cuffs still binding her wrists.

"Who's coming to get you? Anyone?"

Destiny said nothing, just shook her head.

"Your Man isn't upset that you're off the clock, not earning him his eighty percent?"

Destiny locked eyes with her, new respect showing there. "In here, he can't kick my ass. You hear what I'm saying?"

Val nodded, reappraising Destiny's appearance. Her pale skin, almost translucent where the makeup had smudged off, stretched thin over her bony jaw and cheeks. Her eyes appeared hollow and tired. She looked emaciated.

"You hungry?" Val asked her.

Destiny's eyes lit up, her posture straightening. "Always."

"Let me get you some food." Val stood and rapped twice on the door. Price

opened it. "Grab her a sandwich and a drink from the machines," she said, handing him some cash. Price nodded and closed the door.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Destiny said.

"That you will," Val said.

Sure enough, Price returned with a tuna sandwich, Coke, and a bag of chips a few minutes later. He stood guard inside the room and Val unshackled one of Destiny's wrists, locking the other to the arm of the chair. "Eat," she said. "That's yours."

Destiny blinked, then tore the wrapper off the sandwich and ate half of it in four bites. She sucked down half the soda in one gulp and shoved fistfuls of chips into her mouth.

"Feel better?" Val asked her.

"I ain't doing nothing for that," Destiny said. When Val shot her a questioning glance, Destiny mimed a humping motion. Price laughed.

Reddening, Val waved her off. "On the house," she said.

Destiny offered her unshackled wrist to Val. "You gonna tie me back up?"

Val wagged her head. "I trust you."

The woman's eyebrows rose, her eyes blinking.

"Does your pimp feed you when you're out of funds?" Val asked.

"He likes me to call him my manager."

"Okay. Does he?"

A wry smile. "Not anymore."

"He used to? When?"

"At first. Like, three, four weeks ago. Says dudes like girls with a little meat

on their ass.”

“No doubt. I get that a lot, too.” Val indicated her wiry frame, recalled the unkind names boys taunted her with back in high school: Titleless Wonder. Broomstick. The Androgynous One. “So, what does he do for you, then? Your manager, I mean.”

“Customers.”

“Seems like he takes more than he gives on that front. Did I get his cut right? Eighty percent?”

Destiny nodded, thought a moment. “Protection.”

“From whom?”

“From...” Destiny fought for words. “Bad dudes.”

“The customers he’s so proud of sending you? If he’s supplying clients, why do you have to walk the streets?”

“It’s just...he’s got other girls, too, you know.”

“Right.” Val huffed. “You don’t have to repeat what he tells you. It’s bullshit, anyway.”

“You don’t know.” She looked away, a sour expression on her face.

“Yeah, I do know, Destiny.” Val kept her voice soft. “And you know I know. Don’t you?”

She squirmed in her seat, biting her lip. Finally, she gazed back up at Val. “Any chance I could squeeze another sandwich out of you?”

Val waited a moment before answering. “If it means we get to talk some more.”

Destiny lowered her eyes, folded her hands in her lap. “We could talk

some,” she said after a while.

“Better get more,” Val said to Price.

He returned moments later. This time, ham and cheese replaced the tuna, with popcorn instead of chips.

“Figured I’d mix it up some,” Price said with a smile. He waved off Val’s cash. “On me this time.”

Again, the food disappeared in under two minutes.

“Feeling talkative now?” Val said.

Destiny glanced at Val for a moment, then at Price. “Aight. Alone, if that’s all right.”

Price exited, showing respect on his face for Val.

“Okay,” Val said, “it’s just us girls now. What do you want to tell me?”