

# Confessions

*of a*

## Suicidal Policewoman

### Prologue

His eyes were gray, lifeless, like bullet tips. And they were trained on a yellow cab he'd followed from a Meatpacking District nightclub.

A slick, well-dressed hombre who'd been flashing cash, buying drinks, and handing out hits of coke to every big-titted woman in sight was a passenger in that cab. And predicate felon, Paco—*El Loco*—Castalia planned to rob him.

The cab moved along snowy 109th Street in Spanish Harlem, stopped by a fire hydrant, and the cab's rooftop, available light popped on; the hombre had arrived at his destination.

Paco steered his beat-up Hyundai to the curb fifty feet behind the cab, placed the car in park, killed the engine. He scanned the area for witnesses. Spotted a dreadlocked teenager—a lookout for one of those deadly Jamaican drug gangs—sheltered from the cold in a tenement doorway; he'd be no problem. Paco looked east, then west. But there was no one else on the pre-dawn streets, no traffic, no movement of any kind.

Paco racked a round into the chamber of an untraceable, .45 automatic and stuck it into his waistband. Then he checked that his five-shot, .38 backup gun was fully loaded and easily accessible.

The hombre exited the taxi, stumbled drunkenly over the icy sidewalk, fought to keep his balance.

Paco stepped out of his car, pulled the .45.

*Headlights.*

Paco turned, saw a police car cruising in his direction.

“*Ala puta!*” Paco bolted back to the Hyundai, dove inside, dropped down low in his seat. His stomach did a three-sixty. Sweat broke through his skin. He thought about what to do with his two weapons: shove them under the seat, toss them out the window? A three-time loser, he could not afford another gun possession arrest.

The police car prowled by.

*Whew.*

Paco threw open the car door. Rushed out.

The hombre was nowhere in sight.

Paco ran to the corner. Peered into several tenement vestibules. Dashed across the street, his eyes everywhere. Ears cocked for sound. *Nada*. The hombre had vanished.

“*Putá!*” Paco threw his hands up in utter frustration. He kicked a small snowdrift, stomped it until the heel of his sneaker-clad foot hurt. Then he limped despondently back to his car.

Paco stepped into the Hyundai, lit a cigarette, and thought about where he could get his hands on some money—rob the White Castle he’d robbed twice before?—and tried to calm down. He cracked the driver’s side window, let the smoke stream out and the winter air in. The interior of his car was suddenly illuminated from the rear by high beam headlights.

*Now what?*

Paco scrunched down low in his seat, squinted into the Hyundai’s side-view mirror.

A battered, nondescript van cruised down the street and double-parked alongside Paco, effectively blocking him in. The van’s headlights died and its engine shuddered to a stop.

*What the fuck?*

Paco was about to honk his horn, tell the *estúpido* driver to move, or else, when the van’s four doors flew open and five large men wearing black ski masks and carrying shotguns alighted.

Paco ducked.

One of the masked men ran around to the back of a tenement. The others charged up the stoop and accosted the dreadlocked Jamaican drug lookout. They shoved him through the vestibule door and disappeared into the building.

*Boom!* A shotgun blast punctured the winter morning.

Up and down the block apartment lights flicked on. Curtains parted. People looked down onto the street. But Paco knew that no one would call the police, or acknowledge that they’d seen or heard anything. In *el barrio*, staying healthy, remaining in the United States, meant minding your own business.

Paco kept his eyes on the tenement.

The front doors crashed open and the masked gang shoved and kicked six bloodied and battered dreadlocked men down the stoop onto the street. Paco saw that one of the masked men was hurt, having difficulty walking. He was bent over, holding his arm in obvious pain.

“You’re outta here, evicted,” the fattest of the masked men told the battered Jamaicans. “You ever come back, and I’ll fucking kill you.”

One of the Jamaicans said something Paco did not understand. The fat masked man cracked the guy on the bridge of his nose with the butt of his shotgun. He crumbled, blood gushing, to the slushy sidewalk.

“Now, get `im the fuck outta here,” the fat masked man said. The cowering men did as they were told. They picked up their companion and, with great difficulty, carted him away.

“His arm’s broke.” A skinny masked man crossed in front of Paco’s Hyundai, opened the van’s side door, and helped the injured man in. Skinny pulled off his mask—he had surfer-blond hair and blue eyes. “Whaddaya wanna do?”

A black and a Hispanic unmasked and looked at the fat guy.

“We’ll take him to the hospital.” The fat guy yanked off his own hood, turned in Paco’s direction—Paco gaped, peered over the steering wheel in disbelief. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Hey.” The guy who’d gone around to the back of the building, now unmasked, was standing alongside the Hyundai. “We got a witness.” He gestured at Paco.

“Great,” the Hispanic said, glaring into the Hyundai. “Just fuckin’ great. Now what?”

“The mooks seen our faces,” the black said.

“Yeah,” the fat guy said. “He has.” The fat guy finger-combed a thick gray mustache, stepped over to the Hyundai, and used the butt of the shotgun to shatter the passenger side window. He leaned in and saw a .45 pointing at his face. He looked at the weapon, then the man holding it, and a look of recognition spread across his craggy face. “Hello, Paco.”

“*Buenos días*, Officer Tesser.” Paco’s voice was steady, his gun hand unwavering. Until he noticed the blond guy with the shotgun pressed against the Hyundai driver’s side window.

“Gimme the gun,” Tesser reached into the car with a gloved hand. “C’mon, hand it over.”

“*Lo siento*,” Paco struggled with his face. “*No problema*, Officer Tesser.” He handed over the .45.

“You can call me Mark.” Tesser’s twisted smile revealed pointy, rodent small teeth. “I retired from the force.”

“*Ay carumba*,” Paco said.

“Outta the car,” the blond guy said. “Now.”

Paco felt the blood drain from his face. His breathing became labored. He looked at the five men’s faces. If they were not cops, what were they planning to do? “Officer Tesser, I see nothing,” Paco said convincingly. “Nothing. I swear.” He used his right hand to make the sign of the cross. “I swear on the Virgin Mary.”

“Sorry, Paco,” Tesser said.

“Sorry?” Paco said. “Sorry for what?” But Paco knew what. If ever apprehended by the police, he could and would inform on Tesser and his gang, tell the DA what he had witnessed, use the information as leverage, make a deal for a reduced sentence.

And Tesser knew it.

“Out!” The blond guy repeated.

Paco shook his head, his hands tight on the steering wheel.

The blond guy yanked open the Hyundai door, made a grab for Paco.

“*Policía! Policía!*” a woman was leaning out of her apartment window, screaming into her cell phone.

The armed men looked toward the second floor, momentarily distracted. Paco slammed the car door into the blond guy. Dove out onto the slushy, potholed blacktop. He rolled under the van to the other side. Scampered to his feet. Bolted to the opposite side of the street. Ducked behind a parked car.

*Bam!*

A shotgun blast shattered the parked car’s windows. The next one took out two tires. Paco pulled his backup gun, returned fire. Squeezed off three quick shots. Tesser’s men scrambled for cover.

“Hold your fire,” Tesser yelled to his men. “Hold it.” The shooting stopped. “Give it up, Paco,” Tesser said.

“*Jupa mis guebos!*” Paco said.

A Tesser man laughed. “I think he just told us to suck his balls.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tesser said. “Spread out.”

Paco saw that the gang was on the move. They’d catch him in a crossfire if he stayed where he was.

Paco jumped up. Squeezed off the last two rounds. Made a run for it. Beat feet toward Second Avenue, feet pounding, heart pumping, hoping for the first time in his criminal career to run into a patrolling police car. But there were no cops in sight; he had to get off the street.

Paco leapt over a pile of ravaged garbage bags. Darted up a stoop. Kicked a tenement vestibule door open. Took five flights of steps two at a time.

He burst onto the roof. Stopped. Fought to catch his breath. Listened; the gunmen were not following.

He heard police sirens.

*Finally!*

Paco walked to the street-side of the roof and, using the ledge for cover, peered down. The nondescript van sped off and made a squealing left on Second Avenue. A moment later three police cars roared down the street and skidded to a stop. The cops alighted, guns drawn. They checked the area, searched inside a dozen tenement vestibules. But the complainant, the woman who'd screamed from the window and called 911, was nowhere to be seen. There was no van. No men with guns.

The cops got back into their cars and drove away.

Paco leaned against the ledge, his legs so adrenaline-drained he could barely stand. He took a moment to light a cigarette—his lungs burned—one eye on the street just in case Tesser circled back. After a few minutes, he flicked the butt off the roof. Watched as it sailed, sparks flying, to the ground.

Paco moved cautiously but quickly across the dark roof, sidestepping all manner of big city debris—piles of bricks, old tires, discarded furniture. He leapt across a perilous four-foot-wide courtyard chasm onto the next roof that fronted East 108th Street. He opened the rickety roof door and, even though the gunmen had gone, took a moment to listen before he descended.

*Silence.*

Paco made his way down the stairs, thinking hard about whether he should take a chance and go back to his car, or make his way to the subway.

Paco stopped in the building vestibule, opened the front door, and looked out onto the street; first left, then right. There was no movement on the block, only the sound of a car alarm somewhere in the distance.

Paco hit the street, stuffed his hands in his pockets, tucked his head into the collar of his coat, and headed away from his car, toward the subway.

The ex-cop Mark Tesser stepped from the shadows, pointing Paco's own .45 at him.

"Sorry, Paco," Tesser said and pulled the trigger.

## Chapter 1

"That was a dumb movie," Destiny Jones said as we walked out of the Loews Orpheum Theater at 86<sup>th</sup> Street and Third Avenue into a light, wet snow.

The sidewalk was clogged with hunkered-down, determined New Yorkers. Traffic was at a standstill. Several frustrated drivers had their vehicle windows rolled down and were cursing one another. One rage-faced taxi driver looked ready to commit homicide.

Off to our right I spotted two loitering gangsta types probing the movie theater crowd, picking through faces—a team of predators searching for a victim?

"What was dumb about it?" I said. "I mean, the acting was good." I considered telling Destiny to go ahead without me, follow the gangstas, tail them until they made their move, pulled guns, and tried to rob someone—all I needed was one good felony collar to rescue me

from the Building Maintenance Division and propel me back to the streets. “And I related to the story.”

“The setup was dumb.” Destiny shrugged into her faux-fur coat, positioned her wool scarf high on her long, sleek neck, and flipped her fur-lined hood atop her elegantly cornrowed head. “You get fired in today’s corporate world—”. She ducked to avoid a passing eye-poking umbrella. “They don’t let you ‘finish out the week.’ They have security escort you out of the building.”

The gangstas moved down the street, turned into the Papaya King hot dog stand; so much for me making a felony arrest. “And you know this how?” I buttoned my dark blue overcoat, pulled on kidskin gloves, braced my six-foot one-inch, two hundred pound frame against the harsh, wet wind.

“Oh, I’ve been fired before,” Destiny said.

Screeching brakes.

The sound of crunching metal.

The rage-faced taxi driver sprang from his vehicle and shook his fist at a driver who had just rear-ended him. That’s when I spotted a man in a hooded black ski parka eyeballing me. The guy saw that I was looking back and averted his gaze—a little too quickly. Something about him was familiar.

I popped open my oversized umbrella, offered Destiny my arm. “A cocktail, me lady?”

“Yes, kind sir.”

A sudden wind gust nearly turned my umbrella inside out. I held on with both hands as we negotiated our way across 87<sup>th</sup> Street, stopped for a red light at 88<sup>th</sup>. I turned and looked back toward Papaya King; the guy in the black ski parka, face now obscured by his hood, was walking slowly in our direction.

The light changed. We sloshed cautiously across Third Avenue. Took baby steps as we made our way down a slushy 88<sup>th</sup> Street hill, past rows of shambling tenements that commanded stratospheric rents, heading to Second Avenue.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “Are you telling me you’ve been fired in the past, and escorted from your place of employment by security?”

Destiny turned her high-voltage smile at me. “Sho ‘nuff.”

We squeezed by a group of middle-aged women heading in the opposite direction. They were having a tough time picking their way up the hill.

“More than once?”

Destiny used her gloved fingers to count, lost count, shuffled her fingers, and counted again. “Once when I was teaching grammar school. Three times in retail sales. Twice when I was an executive assistant.”

I glanced behind us. Spotted the guy in the hooded black ski parka, three quarters of a block back, close to the building line in the tenement shadows. *What was this about?*

I felt for my off-duty .38. “That must have been embarrassing,” I said distractedly, my mind on Ski Parka. “Having security escort you out.”

“Not in the least,” Destiny said. We turned north on Second Avenue. “But I was really pissed off,” she added. “Gave ‘em a hard time whenever I was fired. Screwed with the security staff, took my time packing my personal belongings, really broke balls, caused major scenes.”

“Why not go quietly?”

“Guess you could say—”, She gave me a mock-hard nudge. “I’ve got problems with authority.”

“Ah.” I smiled warmly at my former partner. “Which is why you became a New York City cop.”

“Precisely.”

We paused just outside Elaine’s Restaurant to allow several departing customers to exit and claim the sleek, chauffeur-driven limos that were idling curbside.

Ski Parka came rushing down 88<sup>th</sup> Street, skidded to a stop at the corner, glanced furtively in our direction, and then crossed over to the opposite side of Second Avenue.

“We’re being followed,” I said, annoyed.

“Duh?” Destiny said. “I spotted him at the theater.”

“Recognize him?”

“Not with that hood.”

A familiar, toothless panhandler lurched over. “Get that door for you?” He held the restaurant’s outer door open. “Have a nice evening.”

“Thank you.” I handed the bum the usual \$5 and squirmed Destiny through the double doors.

The bar area was occupied by mostly neighborhood regulars that evening. I shook a few hands and absorbed Elaine’s classic salon atmosphere: the dark wood, the framed book jacket covers on the walls, the bentwood chairs, and checkered tablecloths. Sinatra played on the restaurant’s sound system.

I glanced at the much sought-after tables, noticed two undercover narcotics cops hunched over a table in back with a couple of organized crime types; the undercovers would ignore me. I would ignore them. There was Kirk Douglas at a table speaking to Kathleen Turner. A few TV stars and network news anchors were scattered around the room. That’s not to mention the usual assortment of brash bridge-and-tunnel types, celebrity gawkers, and the ever-present hangers-on and anxious wannabes.

“Beckett.” Vernon, Elaine’s bartender, waved to me. He pointed at a couple of businessmen who were paying their bill. The suits slipped off their bar stools, gathered up their coats, squeezed past Destiny and me. We hurried to claim our “reserved” seats at the cramped mahogany bar.

I helped Destiny off with her coat, hung it on a brass hook atop several sodden furs.

“Hey, gorgeous.” Vernon stopped in front of Destiny, reached across the bar for her hand and kissed it. “How’s the honkie treating you?”

“Like a plantation slave.” Destiny squinted at me. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Of that,” Vernon said, “I’m certain.”

Vernon was a Catholic high school classmate of mine, and the only reason I frequented the lovingly seedy little Second Avenue saloon most Saturday nights.

“Gimme a beer,” I said.

“Yassuh, masser.” Vernon dug deep into the ice bin and handed me a frosty Coors Light, no glass. “What’ll it be for you, my sistah?”

“Long as the masser’s buying,” Destiny said, “I’ll have a glass of that divine sauvignon blanc.”

“I’m buying your wine?” I said for management’s ears. Fact was Vernon was well aware of just how low a police officer’s salary was. And so he gave us special treatment, didn’t charge for most of our drinks.

“Count your blessings, white boy,” Destiny said. “I’m only having one.”

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “Another headache?”

“No. My hubby’s making dinner.”

Vernon served her wine. “Frozen pizza, again?”

Destiny shot Vernon a look that could scorch blue steel. “How’d you like five fingers shoved up your fucking nose?”

“Michael,” a voice off to my right said.

I saw a startlingly obese woman on her way out the door. “Hi, Julie.” Julie Gunder was a five-night-a-week Elaine’s regular, a former Naval Intelligence officer who had once hired me as a private investigator—although she never paid me.

“You get my message?” Gunder positioned a wool scarf around her turkey neck, buttoned her tent-sized coat, pulled on large mink mittens.

“Got it.”

“We all set?” Gunder said.

I gave her the thumbs up sign. “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon. Plaza Hotel.”

“Four P.M.” Gunder said as she waddled off.

“Hey,” Destiny said. “Isn’t that the one who owes you the money?”

“Yeah.” I watched Gunder walk out. Spotted the guy in the hooded black ski parka loitering by the restaurant door. He stepped aside, allowing Gunder to exit.

He strode into the bar.

## Chapter 2

“I see him,” Destiny said. She adjusted the .22 Beretta that was hidden beneath her waistband. “Maybe he’s not following us,” she said. “He could’ve been coming here for dinner.”

“Since when did you start believing in coincidence?”

I felt Ski Parka standing behind me and braced myself.

“Michael Beckett,” Ski Parka said.

I turned on my stool. “I know you?”

“We worked together, up in the 41 Precinct,” Ski Parka said. “I was about fifty pounds thinner then.” He patted his ample belly. “Retirement’s been good.”

It took me a long moment to recognize the former cop.

“Mark Tesser?” I said.

“That’s me.”

Once a hard body, Tesser now looked like one of those cartoon characters who swallows an air hose and is blown up to four times his size. His North Face ski parka was a size too small. His unruly hair and thick mustache were now completely gray.

“How’s it going?” I shook his calloused hand.

“Going good.”

I said, “You remember Destiny.”

“I sure do.” Tesser shook her hand. “Thought that was you two coming out of the theater,” he said. “You look like a couple of celebrities.”

“So you followed us?” Destiny said.

“Well, yeah.”

“Dumb-ass thing to do.” Destiny squinted at Tesser.

“Uh hum—buy you a drink, Tesser?” I said.

“Twist my arm,” Tesser said.

“You’ll excuse me.” Destiny popped off her stool and threaded through the crowd toward the ladies’ room.

“What’ll it be?” I said.

Tesser ordered a vodka, rocks. I worked on my beer.

“Look, I never got the chance to tell you at the time,” Tesser said and sat on Destiny’s stool, “but I was real sorry to hear about D’Amato.” He was referring to my former partner and friend who’d committed suicide—a long story. “Terrible thing, that.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Tesser’s vodka came. He lifted his glass, toasted. “To Police Officer Vinnie D’Amato; rest in peace.” He threw back his drink.

“D’Amato.” I lifted my bottle, took a sip.

Elaine’s front door opened and a blast of cold air preceded a group of chattering, aging man-eaters. They paused to check out the pickings at the bar. Apparently didn’t see anything they liked and moved on to a table.

“So, how’re things?” Tesser said. “You still moonlighting as an actor?”

“No,” I said. “Doing PI work. I ran an investigation a few months ago. Got stiffed for the fee. I do bodyguard work whenever I can get it. Why? You got something going?”

“I just might.” Tesser lowered his voice. “How’d you like to make five hundred for an hour’s work?”

“Yeah, right,” I said. “Who do I have to shoot?”

Tesser glanced around to see that no one was close enough to overhear. “I’m a rocker.”

As an Irish cop raised in a family of cops, I’d known about rockers since I was a boy—a secret society of cops and ex-cops who protect businesses and individuals from organized crime shakedowns, bar owners from local gangs, even evict drug dealers from residential buildings—for a price. Although many active duty cops deride rockers as common criminals, others feel that they perform a necessary service. “After all,” my police lieutenant father once told me, “rockers only deal with scum the law can’t touch, and,” he winked, “they never hurt anyone who doesn’t deserve to be hurt.”

Tesser said he’d been working for a local landlord who had purchased distressed, foreclosed buildings up in Spanish Harlem. The buildings were now infested with squatters. If the landlord could manage to quickly evict those illegal tenants—the civil courts took too long—then rehabilitate the buildings, he could sell them for a handsome profit. Tesser said that’s where he came in. It was his job to put together a team to go into the apartments and “rock” the squatters out. “One of my men broke his arm,” Tesser said. “I need a replacement.”

I told Tesser I had no problem with rocking thugs and criminals. But I wasn’t about to forcibly evict some down-and-out family from a cold-water dive that served as home. “Thanks for the offer.” I drained my bottle. “Think I’ll pass.”

“No, you won’t.” Tesser said. “Not a Boy Scout like you.”

I gave Tesser a sideways glance. I didn’t know if it was the vodka talking, but I didn’t like his tone. “You got something to say?”

“Gotta admit.” Tesser threw back his next drink. “I wasn’t surprised when Internal Affairs found heroin in your car.”

“Really.” All at once I was reminded that Tesser was never one of my favorite people. We’d been 41<sup>st</sup> Precinct co-workers but never actual friends. I mean, I’d never had a problem with him and Tesser had a reputation as a good cop. But he’d had his own crowd: a small group of slick, shifty elitists who, I now remembered, kept to themselves.

“Why’s that?” I eye-strafted the former cop.

“Relax,” Tesser said. “I’m on your side. Everyone knows you were framed. There’s no way you’d filch drugs. That was your problem. You weren’t a team player.” Tesser gestured to Vernon. “Two more.” He turned back to me. “Explain it to me: You arrest one of the biggest drug dealers in the city. The dealer offers you fifty-thousand *cash* to let him go. And what do you do? You charge him with attempted bribery on top of everything else—what is that? You should have taken the money. I mean, who would’ve known?”

“I would.”

“See? That’s the difference between you and me, Beckett. You always took policing personal, like you were better than the rest of us. Like you were some sort of white fucking knight.”

Frankly, I was surprised. I didn’t know that Tesser, or anyone else, felt that way about me.

Tesser rested his elbows on the bar. “Look, everyone knows about your baby sister, that she died from a drug overdose.”

I bristled. “Leave my sister out of this.”

“Fine. Point is, you made a lot of enemies when you tore up the city looking for her supplier.”

“Tough shit.”

“That’s exactly the attitude that got you suspended, taken off the street—where you working now, huh? Headquarters, right? Building Maintenance? You’re a fucking ‘broom’ for Christ’s sake. What kind of job is that for an active street cop?”

“I did my job, Tesser.”

“Yeah. And got fucked for it.”

Vernon served the drinks.

“In the end, the drug dealers won.” Tesser picked up his drink and toasted. “You and your integrity lost.”

I placed my right hand on the bar, thinking I just might crack Tesser on the mouth. “You seem to know an awful lot about me, for a retired guy.”

“Hey, I still go to the PBA dinner dance every year. 10-13 Club meetings. People talk.”

“Yeah. Well, this talk is over. Nice seeing you again, Tesser. You know the way out.”

“Aw, c’mon. Don’t be like that.”

I turned my back.

“All right, look, I’m sorry. I get carried away sometimes. I’m an asshole. I’m sorry. Really.”

“Apology accepted,” I said. “See you around.”

But Tesser didn’t walk away. He just stood there.

“Look. I need you, man,” Tesser finally said. “These squatters I’m gonna rock, they’re not some poor, down and out immigrant family. They’re a Mexican drug gang, part of the Sinaloa cartel. They scared off the building superintendent, beat the living hell out of the landlord. Threatened his kids—a two-and a five-year-old—if he went to the police. Question is, you gonna let them get away with it, or you gonna help me evict them?”

*Drug dealers.* Tesser was baiting me.

I took a thoughtful swallow of beer; I didn’t care for Tesser’s outspoken opinions, but \$500 was a lot of money to me right then. “When?”

“Tomorrow morning, five A.M.”

I considered the offer. I didn’t have to be in purgatory until 1600 hours. The drug gang was located in Spanish Harlem. My dead sister Shannon had bought her drugs in Spanish Harlem.

“Well?” Tesser said.

“I don’t know.”

“C’mon, Beckett,” Tesser said with a sudden, warm backslapping familiarity. “These gangbangers are real punks. We’ll take `em by surprise. The eviction will be a piece of cake.”

I could see Destiny coming back from the ladies room. “Okay,” I said. “Count me in. Don’t say anything to Destiny.”

“I won’t.” Tesser pulled a business card from his ski parka pocket and handed it over. “Call me later for the details.” Tesser stepped back allowing Destiny to reclaim her stool.

“Well, I’ve got to run,” Tesser said. “Got places to go, people to see, and things to do.”

“Come again.” Destiny leaned back and crossed her legs. “When you can’t stay as long.”

“Good one,” Tesser laughed. “Beauty *and* a sense of humor.”

“A laugh a minute,” Destiny said. “That’s me.”

## Chapter 3

“He’s an asshole.” Destiny watched Tesser leave.

“Ya think?”

Destiny settled onto her seat, glanced around and fielded the ever-present smiles and silent come-ons from every man, and some women, within sight. A truly distracting beauty, Destiny was dressed elegantly as always in a cashmere sweater, slacks, and heeled boot. Her dark cornrowed hair was pulled away from her mocha face. Her makeup was salon perfect—not that she needed makeup, or the stylish clothes. Destiny would look great wearing rags.

Vernon topped off Destiny’s wine. Gave me another beer.

“How’s Solana?” Vernon said, referring to my girlfriend Solana Ortiz, a writer on the TV show *Law & Order*.

I looked into my fresh beer for a beat. Good a friend as Vernon could be, I didn’t care for the fact he was a loose-lipped gossip. “She’s working.”

“Again? She’s always working.”

A waiter called a drink order to Vernon who quick-stepped to the service area at the far end of the bar.

“Dickhead,” I said, eyes on Vernon.

“Articulate,” Destiny said.

I took my time, considering whether to trust my wholly unsympathetic ex-partner with my relationship troubles. I wasn’t in the mood to be worked over. I started cautiously: “I’ve been thinking.”

“How refreshing.”

“Solana and I are having issues.”

“A relationship with issues. How positively extraordinary.” Destiny sipped her wine.

“Solana’s depressed all the time.”

“Living with you would depress me too.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“Everything was great until she moved in with me,” I said. “We had great fun, laughed a lot. Now she spends most of her time at work. When she’s home she mopes around.”

“You ask her what’s wrong?”

I nodded. “She says I wouldn’t understand.”

“She’s probably right.”

“We don’t communicate anymore. We never make love. My gut tells me she’s involved with someone else.”

Destiny scowled at the idea. “You should be so lucky.”

“You hate her,” I said.

“She hates me.”

“She . . . respects you.”

“Great,” Destiny smirked. “I’ll die a happy woman.”

“Forget it,” I sulked. “Sorry I troubled you with my problems.”

“OK. I apologize,” Destiny said. “You wanna discuss your relationship? Fine. First you gotta admit that you attract neurotics.”

“Like who, for instance?”

“Solana, for instance. And what about the Rogues Gallery of Looney Tunes you dated before her. Let’s see: first there was the legal assistant who wouldn’t have sex with you unless you held a loaded gun to her head.”

“Here we go—”.

“And then there was the makeup artist. She was so unstable that you hid all your steak knives whenever she came to your apartment. And let’s not forget my all-time, personal favorite, the one who hustled your for thousands, then stole your credit cards and maxed them out: Enia the Romanian Slut.”

Vernon stopped in front of us. “She’s been in.”

I looked at him. “Who?”

“Enia,” Vernon said.

“I thought she hightailed it back to Romania,” Destiny said.

“She did,” I said.

“Well, she’s back,” Vernon said. “Been in with her husband.”

“Husband?” I said, jarred.

“Well. Well,” Destiny said. “Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world . . . .”

I looked off into space, found myself trying to conjure up an image of my former lover’s husband. I couldn’t.

“What’s he like?” I said, doing my best to hide the embarrassing fact that I really wanted to know.

Vernon shrugged. “Seems like a nice enough guy. A landlord. Owns a small hotel a few blocks from here, up on 94<sup>th</sup> Street. The German Hotel, I think it’s called.”

“Great,” Destiny said. “You can press charges for the stolen credit cards. Maybe even get the money she scammed back.”

“Give it a rest, Destiny,” I said. “Can’t you?”

Destiny almost spit up her wine. “No. Don’t tell me.” She put her glass down with a thud. “You still have feelings for that grifter, after all she’s done to you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“So you’ll press charges?”

“Look,” I said. “I can’t *prove* she stole the credit cards.”

“What about the money she scammed?”

“She can keep it.” I drank some beer. “Long as she owes me that money, she’ll stay away. It’s the price of getting rid of her.”

*Raised voices.*

I looked to my right, located the source of the noisy exchange: a bickering middle-aged couple sitting at a four-top, against a brick wall beneath the montage of hardcover book jackets. I used friendly force to shift an acquaintance from my line of sight and focused on the couple—a frumpy, albeit attractive, older woman and a fat jerk sporting a ridiculous-looking red road-kill toupee and cheap suit. From their facial expressions, I could tell that Road-kill was berating the woman. His hands and mouth were working overtime.

“That looks like trouble,” Destiny said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“He’s gonna hit her,” Destiny said.

“We’re off duty.” I turned back to the bar, nursed my beer.

“Right,” Destiny said. “Like you’re gonna sit there and let some creep slug a woman.”

“Slut!” the guy with the red road-kill toupee said, his voice now loud enough to be heard above Sinatra’s “The Lady is a Tramp”. “You’re a goddamned whore.”

“Please,” the woman said, mortified. “Let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Road-kill said. He tore his wide polyester tie loose and clawed at his collar.

A waiter intervened. “I’ll have to ask you to lower your voices.” He placed the couple’s check on their table and added crisply. “I’ll collect that when you’re ready.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “We’re leaving.”

“Fuck we are.” Road-kill flung a scorched look at those sitting closest to him. “We’re not going anywhere.” He picked up his vodka on the rocks.

The woman snatched the drink from Road-kill’s hand.

And Road-kill slapped her, hard, across the face.

There was an audible gasp and the room fell silent.

“Told you so,” Destiny whispered.

But I was already off my stool. I cleaved through the bar crowd and pulled up a chair beside Road-kill.

“Fuck you want?” he said to me.

I smiled, then used my index finger and thumb to grab Road-kill’s ear and slam his face hard on the table—plates and glassware rattled—applying more than enough painful pressure to hold him there, immobilizing him.

“Like to hit women?” I whispered harshly.

“Ohmygod,” the woman said.

“Easy, Beckett,” Vernon said from across the bar. “We don’t want any trouble in here.”

I looked up. Everyone in Elaine’s was watching me.

“There’s no trouble.” I flashed my warmest smile and applied more pressure to Road-kill’s ear. “You’re not gonna cause any trouble, right?”

“No,” Road-kill yawped. “No problems.”

“Don’t hurt him,” the woman said.

It always killed me how quickly battered women came to their tormentor’s defense. “This your husband?” I said.

The woman nodded.

“You all right?” I said.

“I’m fine.” Angry red finger marks striped the side of her face. The shock of being struck was wearing off, and tears were beginning to well.

“You want to press charges?”

“No. He didn’t mean it.” She addressed those around her. “He’s never hit me before.” The purple remains of a poorly disguised black eye said otherwise.

“Why don’t you go on home,” I said kindly. “I’ll entertain your hubby till he calms down.”

“No. I can’t,” the wife said.

“Go!” Road-kill growled, “you fucking whore.”

The wife bit her lower lip. “You won’t hurt him?”

I assured her I wouldn’t—*not much*.

Road-kill’s wife left money for the check on the table, gathered her belongings, and hurried out the door.

“You gonna behave?” I asked Road-kill.

“Yes.”

With a snap I released the jerk. He sprang up in his seat, massaging his ear. “That fucking hurt.”

“That’s the whole idea.” The sound level and restaurant routine were slowly returning to normal. So was my surly new friend.

“Move aside,” Road-kill said.

I almost laughed. “Not a chance.” I sat back. “You heard what I told your wife.”

“Gonna be my ex,” Road-kill said. “The fucking whore. I could kill her for what she’s doing to me.”

I didn’t like his tone or the intent look in his eyes. “Divorce,” I said, “would be a more sensible option.”

“Michael.” Destiny gestured that Road-kill’s wife had gotten into a cab and was gone.

“All right.” I pushed my chair back, allowing Road-kill some space. “Get outta my sight.”

Road-kill grabbed his coat and walked unsteadily out the door, most probably heading south to the sea of bars along Second Avenue.