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HELLO, DARKNESS

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SANDRA BROWN

HELLO, DARKNESS

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Acknowledgments

Up until six minutes to sign-off, it had been a routine shift.

“It’s a steamy night in the hill country. Thank you for spending your time with me here on 101.3. I’ve enjoyed your company tonight, as I do each weeknight. This is your host for classic love songs, Paris Gibson.

“I’m going to leave you tonight with a trio of my favorites. I hope you’re listening to them with someone you love. Hold each other close.”

She depressed the button on the control board to turn off her microphone. The series of songs would play uninterrupted right up to 1:59:30. During the last thirty seconds of her program, she would thank her listening audience again, say good night, and sign off.

While “Yesterday” played, she closed her eyes and rolled her head around on her tensed shoulders. Compared to an eight- or nine-hour workday, a four-hour radio show would seem like a snap. It wasn’t. By sign-off, she was physically tired.

She worked the board alone, introducing the songs she had selected and logged in before the show. Audience requests necessitated adjustments to the log and careful attention to the countdown clock. She also manned the incoming telephone lines herself.

The mechanics of the job were second nature, but not her delivery. She never allowed it to get routine or sloppy. Paris Gibson the person had worked diligently, with voice coaches and alone, to perfect the Paris Gibson “sound” for which she was well known.

She worked harder than even she realized to maintain that perfected inflection and pitch because after 240 minutes on air, her neck and shoulder muscles burned with fatigue. That muscle burn was evidence of how well she had performed.

Midway through the Beatles classic, one of the telephone lines blinked red, indicating an incoming call. She was tempted not to answer, but, officially, there were almost six minutes left to her program, and she promised listeners that she would take calls until two A.M. It was too late to put this caller on the air, but she should at least acknowledge the call.

She depressed the blinking button. “This is Paris.”

“Hello, Paris. This is Valentino.”

She knew him by name. He called periodically, and his unusual name was easily remembered. His speaking voice was distinctive, too, barely above a whisper, which was probably either for effect or disguise.

She spoke into the microphone suspended above the board, which served as her telephone handset when not being used to broadcast. That kept her hands free to go about her business even while talking to a caller.

“How are you tonight, Valentino?”

“Not good.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yes. You will be.”

The Beatles gave way to Anne Murray’s “Broken Hearted Me.”

Paris glanced up at the log monitor and automatically registered that the second of the last three songs had begun. She wasn’t sure she’d heard Valentino correctly. “I beg your pardon?”

“You will be sorry,” he said.

The dramatic overtone was typical of Valentino. Whenever he called, he was either very high or very low, rarely on an emotional level somewhere in between. She never knew what to expect from him, and for that reason he was an interesting caller. But tonight he sounded sinister, and that was a first.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I’ve done everything you advised me to do, Paris.”

“I advised you? When?”

“Every time I’ve called. You always say—not just to me, but to everybody who calls—that we should respect the people we love.”

“That’s right. I think—”

“Well, respect gets you nowhere, and I don’t care what you think anymore.”

She wasn’t a psychologist or a licensed counselor, only a radio personality. Beyond that, she had no credentials. Nevertheless, she took her role as late-night friend seriously.

When a listener had no one else to talk to, she was an anonymous sounding board. Her audience knew her only by voice, but they trusted her. She served as their confidante, adviser, and confessor.

They shared their joys, aired their grievances, and sometimes bared their souls. The calls she considered broadcast-worthy evoked sympathy from other listeners, prompted congratulations, and sometimes created heated controversy.

Frequently a caller simply needed to vent. She acted as a buffer. She was a convenient outlet for someone mad at the world. Seldom was she the target of the caller’s anger, but obviously this was one of those times, and it was unsettling.

If Valentino was on the brink of an emotional breakdown, she couldn’t heal what had led him to it, but she might be able to talk him a safe distance away from the edge and then urge him to seek professional help.

“Let’s talk about this, Valentino. What’s on your mind?”

“I respect girls. When I’m in a relationship, I place the girl on a pedestal and treat her like a princess. But that’s never enough. Girls are never faithful. Every single one of them screws around on me. Then when she leaves me, I call you, and you say that it wasn’t my fault.”

“Valentino, I—”

“You tell me that I did nothing wrong, that I’m not to blame for her leaving. And you know what? You’re absolutely right. I’m not to blame, Paris. *You* are. This time it’s *your* fault.”

Paris glanced over her shoulder, toward the soundproof door of the studio. It was closed, of course. The hallway beyond the wall of windows had never looked so dark, although the building was always dark during her after-hours program.

She wished Stan would happen by. Even Marvin would be a welcome sight. She wished for someone, anyone, to hear this call and help her get a read on it.

She considered disconnecting. No one knew where she lived or even what she looked like. It was stipulated in her contract with the radio station: She didn’t make personal appearances. Nor was her likeness to appear in any promotional venues, including but not limited to all any print advertising, television commercials, and billboards. Paris Gibson was a name and a voice only, not a face.

But, in good conscience, she couldn’t hang up on this man. If he had taken to heart something she’d said on air and things hadn’t turned out well, his anger was understandable.

On the other hand, if a more rational person disagreed with something she had said, he simply would have blown it off. Valentino had vested in her more influence over his life than she deserved or desired.

“Explain how it’s my fault, Valentino.”

“You told her to break up with me.”

“I never—”

“I heard you! She called you the night before last. I was listening to your program. She didn’t give her name, but I recognized her voice. She told you our story. Then she said that she had become jealous and possessive.

“You told her that if she felt our relationship was constricting, she should do something about it. In other words, you advised her to dump me.” He paused before adding, “And I’m going to make you sorry you gave her that advice.”

Paris’s mind was skittering. In all her years on the air, she’d never encountered anything like this. “Valentino, let’s remain calm and discuss this, all right?”

“I’m calm, Paris. Very calm. And there’s nothing to discuss. I’ve got her where no one will find her. She can’t escape me.”

With that statement, sinister turned downright scary. Surely he didn’t mean literally what he’d just said.

But before she could speak her thought aloud, he added, “She’s going to die in three days, Paris. I’m going to kill her, and her death will be on your conscience.”

The last song in the series was playing. The clock on the computer monitor was ticking toward sign-off. She cut a quick glance at the Vox Pro to make certain that an electronic gremlin hadn’t caused it to malfunction. But, no, the sophisticated machine was working as it should. The call was being recorded.

She wet her lips and took a nervous breath. “Valentino, this isn’t funny.”

“It isn’t supposed to be.”

“I know you don’t actually intend—”

“I intend to do *exactly* what I said. I’ve earned at least seventy-two hours with her, don’t you think? As nice as I’ve been to her? Isn’t three days of her time and attention the least she deserves?”

“Valentino, please, listen—”

“I’m over listening to you. You’re full of shit. You give rotten advice. I treat a girl with respect, then she goes out and spreads her legs for other men. And you tell her to dump me, like I’m the one who ruined the relationship, like I’m the one who cheated. Fair’s fair. I’m going to fuck her till she bleeds, then I’m going to kill her. Seventy-two hours from now, Paris. Have a nice night.”

Dean Malloy eased himself off the bed. Groping in darkness, he located his underwear on the floor and took it with him into the bathroom. As quietly as he could, he closed the door before switching on the light.

Liz woke up anyway.

“Dean?”

He braced his arms on the edge of the basin and looked at his reflection in the mirror. “Be right out.” His image gazed back at him, whether with despair or disgust, he couldn’t quite tell. Reproach, at the very least.

He continued staring at himself for another few seconds before turning on the faucet and splashing cold water over his face. He used the toilet, pulled on his boxers, and opened the door.

Liz had turned on the nightstand lamp and was propped up on one elbow. Her pale hair was tangled. There was a smudge of mascara beneath her eye. But somehow she made her makeshift look fetching. “Are you going to shower?”

He shook his head. “Not now.”

“I’ll wash your back.”

“Thanks, but—”

“Your front?”

He shot her a smile. “I’ll take a rain check.”

His trousers were draped over the armchair. When he reached for them, Liz flopped back against the heaped pillows. “You’re leaving.”

“Much as I’d like to stay, Liz.”

“You haven’t spent a full night in weeks.”

“I don’t like it any better than you do, but for the time being that’s the way it’s got to be.”

“Good grief, Dean. He’s sixteen.”

“Right. Sixteen. If he were a baby, I’d know where he was at all times. I’d know what he was doing and who he was with. But Gavin is sixteen and licensed to drive. For a parent that’s a twenty-four-hour living nightmare.”

“He probably won’t even be there when you get home.”

“He’d better be there,” he muttered as he tucked in his shirttail. “He broke curfew last night, so I grounded him this morning. Restricted him to the house.”

“For how long?”

“Until he cleans up his act.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“Stay in the house?”

“Clean up his act.”

That was a much weightier question. It required a more complicated answer, which he didn’t have time for tonight. He pushed his feet into his shoes, then sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for her hand. “It’s unfair that Gavin’s behavior is dictating your future.”

“*Our* future.”

“~~Our future,~~” he corrected softly. “~~It’s unfair as hell. Because of him our plans have been~~ put on indefinite hold, and that stinks.”

She kissed the back of his hand as she looked up at him through her lashes. “I can’t even persuade you to spend the night with me, and here I was hoping that by Christmas we’d be married.”

“It could happen. The situation could improve sooner than we think.”

She didn’t share his optimism, and her frown said as much. “I’ve been patient, Dean. Haven’t I?”

“You have.”

“In the two years we’ve been together, I think I’ve been more than accommodating. I relocated here without a quibble. And even though it would have made more sense for us to live together, I agreed to lease this place.”

She had a selective and incorrect memory. Their living together had never been an option. He wouldn’t even have considered it as long as Gavin was living with him. Nor had there been any reason to quibble over her relocation to Austin. He had never suggested that she should. In fact, he would have preferred for her to remain in Houston.

Independently, Liz had made the decision to relocate when he did. When she sprang the surprise on him, he’d had to fake his happiness and conceal a vague irritation. She had imposed herself on him when the last thing he needed was an additional imposition.

But rather than opening a giant can of worms for discussion now, he conceded that she had been exceptionally patient with him and his present circumstances.

“I’m well aware of how much my situation has changed since we started dating. You didn’t sign on to become involved with a single parent of a teenager. You’ve been more patient than I had any right to expect.”

“Thank you,” she said, mollified. “But my body doesn’t know patience, Dean. Each month that passes means one less egg in the basket.”

He smiled at the gentle reminder of her biological clock. “I acknowledge the sacrifice you’ve made for me. And continue to make.”

“I’m willing to make more.” She stroked his cheek. “Because, Dean Malloy, the hell of it is you’re worth those sacrifices.”

He knew she meant it, but her sincerity did nothing to elevate his mood, and instead only increased his despondency. “Be patient a little longer, Liz. Please? Gavin is being impossible but there are reasons for his bad behavior. Give it a little more time. Hopefully, we’ll soon find a comfort zone the three of us can live within.”

She made a face. “‘Comfort zone’? Keep using phrases like that and, next thing you know you’ll have your own daytime TV talk show.”

He grinned, glad they could conclude the serious conversation on a lighter note. “Still headed to Chicago tomorrow?”

“For three days. Closed-door meetings with folk from Copenhagen. All male. Robust, blond Viking types. Jealous?”

“Pea green.”

“Will you miss me?”

“What do you think?”

“How about I leave you with something to remember me by?”

She pushed the sheet away. Naked and all but purring, lying on the rumpled bedding of which they'd already made love, Elizabeth Douglas looked more like a pampered courtesan than a vice-president of marketing for an international luxury-hotel chain.

Her figure was voluptuous, and she actually liked it. Unlike most of her contemporaries, she didn't obsess over every calorie. She considered it a workout when she had to carry her own luggage, and she never denied herself dessert. On her the curves looked good. Actually, they looked damn great.

"Tempting," he sighed. "Very. But a kiss will have to do."

She kissed him deeply, sucking his tongue into her mouth in a manner that probably would have made the Viking types snarl with envy. He was the one to end the kiss. "I've really got to go, Liz," he whispered against her lips before pulling back. "Have a safe trip."

She pulled up the sheet to cover her nudity and pasted on a smile to cover her disappointment. "I'll call you when I get there."

"You'd better."

He left, trying to make it look as if he wasn't fleeing. The air outside settled over him like a damp blanket. It even seemed to have the texture of wet wool when he inhaled it. His shirt was sticking to his back by the time he'd made the short walk to his car. He started the motor and set the air conditioner on high. The radio came on automatically. Elvis's "Are You Lonesome Tonight?"

At this hour there was virtually no traffic on the streets. Dean slowed for a yellow light and came to a full stop as the song ended.

"It's a steamy night in the hill country. Thank you for spending your time with me here on 101.3."

The smoky female voice reverberated through the interior of the car. The sound waves pressed against his chest and belly. Her voice was perfectly modulated by eight speakers that had been strategically placed by German engineers. The superior sound environment made her seem closer than if she'd been sitting in the passenger seat beside him.

"I'm going to leave you tonight with a trio of my favorites. I hope you're listening to them with someone you love. Hold each other close."

Dean gripped the steering wheel and rested his forehead on the back of his hands while the Fab Four yearned for yesterday.

. . .

As soon as Judge Baird Kemp retrieved his car from the Four Seasons Hotel parking valet and got in, he wrestled loose his necktie and shrugged off his jacket. "God, I'm glad that's over."

"You're the one who insisted we attend." Marian Kemp slipped off her Bruno Magli sling backs and pulled off the diamond clip earrings, wincing as blood circulation was painfully restored to her numb earlobes. "But did you have to include us in the after party?"

"Well, it looked good for us to be among the last to leave. Very influential people were in that group."

Being a typical awards dinner, the event had run insufferably long. Following it, a cocktail party had been held in a hospitality suite, and the judge never passed up an opportunity to campaign for his reelection, even informally. For the remainder of their drive home, the Kemps discussed others who had been in attendance, or, as the judge derisively referred to them, "the good, the bad, and the ugly."

When they arrived home, he headed for his den, where Marian saw to it that the bar was kept well stocked with his favorite brands. “I’m going to have a nightcap. Should I pour two?”

“No thank you, dear. I’m going up.”

“Cool the bedroom down. This heat is unbearable.”

Marian climbed the curved staircase that had recently been featured in a home-design magazine. For the photo, she’d worn a designer ball gown and her canary-diamond necklace. The portrait had turned out quite well, if she did say so herself. The judge had been pleased with the accompanying article, which had praised her for making their home into the showplace it was.

The upstairs hallway was dark, but she was relieved to see light beneath the door of Janey’s room. Even though it was summer vacation, the judge had imposed a curfew on the seventeen-year-old. Last night, she had flouted the curfew and hadn’t come in until almost dawn. It was obvious that she’d been drinking, and, unless Marian was mistaken, the stencil that clung to her clothing was that of marijuana. Worse, she’d driven herself home in that condition.

“I’ve bailed you out for the last time,” the judge had bellowed. “If you get another DWI, you’re on your own, young lady. I won’t pull a single string. I’ll let it go straight on your record.”

Janey had replied with a bored, “So fucking what?”

The scene had grown so loud and vituperative that Marian feared the neighbors might overhear despite the acre of manicured greenbelt between their property and the next. The quarrel had ended with Janey stomping into her room and slamming the door, then locking it behind her. She hadn’t spoken to either of them all day.

But apparently the judge’s most recent threat had made an impression. Janey was at home and by her standards, it was early. Marian paused outside Janey’s door and raised her fist about to knock. But through the door she could hear the voice of that woman deejay Janey listened to when she was in one of her mellow moods. She was a welcome change from the obnoxious deejays on the acid rock and rap stations.

Janey tended to throw a tantrum whenever she felt her privacy was being violated. Her mother was disinclined to disturb this tenuous peace, so, without knocking, she lowered her hand and continued down the hallway to the master suite.

• • •

Toni Armstrong awoke with a start.

She lay unmoving, listening for a noise that might have awakened her. Had one of the children called out for her? Was Brad snoring?

No, the house was silent except for the low whir of the air-conditioning vents in the ceiling. A sound hadn’t awakened her. Not even the soughing of her husband’s breath. Because the pillow beside hers was undisturbed.

Toni got up and pulled on a lightweight robe. She glanced at the clock: 1:42. And Brad still hadn’t come home.

Before going downstairs, she checked the children’s rooms. Although the girls got tucked into their separate beds each night, they invariably wound up sleeping together in one. Only sixteen months apart, they were often mistaken for twins. They looked virtually identical now, their sturdy little bodies curled up together, tousled heads sharing the pillow. Toni pulled a

sheet up over them, then took a moment to admire their innocent beauty before tiptoeing from the room.

Toy spaceships and action figures littered the floor of her son's bedroom. She carefully avoided stepping on them as she made her way to the bed. He slept on his stomach, legs splayed, one arm hanging down the side of the bed.

She took the opportunity to stroke his cheek. He'd reached the age where his demonstrations of affection made him grimace and squirm away. As the firstborn, he thought he had to act the little man.

But thinking of him becoming a man filled her with a desperation that was close to panic.

As she descended the staircase, several of the treads creaked, but Toni liked a house with the quirks and imperfections that gave it character. They had been lucky to acquire this house. It was in a good neighborhood with an elementary school nearby. The price had been reduced by owners anxious to sell. Parts of it had needed attention, but she had volunteered to make most of the repairs herself in order to fit the purchase into their budget.

Working on the house had kept her busy while Brad was getting settled into his new practice. She'd taken the time and effort to do necessary repairs before finishing with the cosmetic work. Her patience and diligence had paid off. The house wasn't only prettier in appearance, but sound from the inside out. Its flaws hadn't been glossed over with a fresh coat of paint without first being fixed.

Unfortunately, not everything was as easily fixable as houses.

As she had feared, all the rooms downstairs were dark and empty. In the kitchen, she turned on the radio to ward off the ominous pressure of the silence. She poured herself a glass of milk she didn't want and forced herself to sip it calmly.

Maybe she was doing her husband a disservice. He might very well be attending a seminar on taxes and financial planning. He had announced over dinner that he would be out for most of the evening.

"Remember, hon," he'd said when she expressed her surprise, "I told you about it earlier this week."

"No you didn't."

"I'm sorry. I thought I did. I intended to. Pass the potato salad, please. It's great, by the way. What's that spice?"

"Dill. This is the first I've heard of a seminar tonight, Brad."

"The partners recommended it. What they learned at the last one saved them a bundle in taxes."

"Then maybe I should go, too. I could stand to learn more about all that."

"Good idea. We'll watch for the next one. You're required to enroll in advance."

He'd told her the time and location of the seminar, told her not to wait up for him because there was an informal discussion session following the formal presentation and he didn't know how long it would last. He had kissed her and the kids before he left. He walked to his car with a gait that was awfully jaunty for someone going to a seminar on taxes and financial planning.

Toni finished her glass of milk.

She called her husband's cell phone for the third time, and as with the previous two calls got his voice mail. She didn't leave a message. She thought about calling the auditorium where the seminar had taken place, but that would be a waste of time. No one would be there at the

hour.

After seeing Brad off tonight, she had cleaned up the dinner dishes and given the children their baths. Once they were in bed, she had tried to go into Brad's den, but discovered that the door to it was locked. To her shame, she'd torn through the house like a woman crazed looking for a hairpin, a nail file, something with which she could pick the lock.

She had resorted to a screwdriver, probably damaging the lock irreparably, but not caring. To her chagrin, there had been nothing in the room to validate her frenzy or her suspicion. A newspaper ad for the seminar was lying on his desk. He'd made a notation about the seminar on his personal calendar. Obviously he had been planning to attend.

But he was also very good at creating plausible smoke screens.

She had sat down at the desk and stared into his blank computer screen. She even fingered the power button on the tower, tempted to turn it on and engage in some exploration that only thieves, spies, and suspicious wives would engage in.

She hadn't touched this computer since he had bought one exclusively for her. When she saw the labeled boxes he'd carried in and placed on the kitchen table, she had exclaimed, "You bought another computer?"

"It's time you had your own. Merry Christmas!"

"This is June."

"So I'm early. Or late." He shrugged in his disarming way. "Now that you have your own when you want to exchange email with your folks, or do some Internet shopping, or whatever you won't have to work around me."

"I use your computer during the day when you're at the clinic."

"That's my point. Now you can go online anytime."

And so can you.

Apparently he had read her thought because he'd said, "It's not what you're thinking, Toni." Here he had propped his hands on his hips, looking defensive. "I was browsing in the computer store this morning. I see this bright pink number that's small, compact, and can do just about everything, and I think, 'Feminine and efficient. Just like my darling wife.' So I bought it for you on impulse. I thought you'd be pleased. Obviously I was wrong."

"I am pleased," she said, instantly contrite. "It was a very thoughtful gesture, Brad. Thank you." She looked askance at the boxes. "Did you say *pink*?"

Then they'd laughed. He'd enfolded her in a bear hug. He'd smelled like sunshine, soap, and wholesomeness. His body had felt comfortable, familiar, and good against hers. Her fears had been assuaged.

But only temporarily. Recently they had resurfaced.

She hadn't booted up his computer tonight. She'd been too afraid of what she might find. If a password had been required for access, her suspicions would have been confirmed, and she hadn't wanted that. God, no, she hadn't.

So she had done her best to restore the busted doorknob, then had gone to bed and eventually to sleep, in the hope that Brad would awaken her soon, brimming with knowledge about financial stratagems for families in their income bracket. It had been a desperate hope.

"I've certainly enjoyed your company tonight," the sexy voice on the radio was saying. "This is your host for classic love songs, Paris Gibson."

No seminar lasted until two o'clock in the morning. No therapy-group meeting lasted until the wee hours either. That had been Brad's excuse last week when he had stayed out most of

the night.

~~His explanation had been that one of the men in his group was having a difficult time coping. “After the meeting, he asked me to go get a beer with him, said he needed an understanding shoulder to cry on. This dude has a *real* problem, Toni. Whew! You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff he told me. I’m talking *sick*. Anyhow, I knew you would understand. You know what it’s like.”~~

She knew all too well. The lying. The denials. The time unaccounted for. Locked doors. She knew what it was like, all right. It was like this.

This was creeping her out. Like, really creeping her out.

He'd been gone for a while now, and she didn't know when he would be coming back. She didn't like this scene and wanted to leave.

But her hands were tied. Literally. And so were her feet. The worst of it, though, was the metallic-tasting tape he had secured over her mouth.

Four—maybe five—times in the past several weeks, she had come here with him. On those occasions they had left drained of energy and feeling mighty good. The expression “screwed their brains out” sprang to mind.

But he had never suggested bondage or anything kinky. Well . . . nothing *too* kinky. This was a first and, frankly, she could do without it.

One of the things that had first attracted her to him was that he seemed sophisticated. He had been a definite standout in the migratory crowd comprised mostly of high school and college students looking for drink, dope, and casual sex. Sure, now and then you had your pathetic old geezer lurking in the bushes wagging his weenie at anybody unfortunate enough to glance his way. But this guy was nothing like that. He was way cool.

Apparently he had thought she was a standout, too. She and her friend Melissa had become aware of him watching them with single-minded interest.

“He might be a cop,” Melissa speculated. “You know, working undercover.”

Melissa had been on a real downer that night because she had to leave for Europe the following day with her parents, and she couldn't imagine anything more miserable. She was trying like hell to get glassy-eyed stoned, but nothing had taken effect yet. Her outlook on everything had been sour.

“A cop driving that car? I don't think so. Besides, his shoes are too good to be a cop's.”

It wasn't merely that he had looked at her. Guys always looked at her. It was the *manner* in which he had looked at her that had been such a major turn-on. He'd been leaning against the hood of his car, ankles crossed, arms casually folded over his midriff, perfectly still and despite his intensity, seemingly relaxed.

He didn't gawk at her chest or legs—consistently the objects of gawking—but looked straight into her eyes. Like he knew her instantly. Not just recognized her, or knew her by name, but knew *her*, knew everything there was to know about her that was important.

“Do you think he's cute?”

“I guess,” Melissa replied, self-pity making her indifferent.

“Well, I think he is.” She drained her rum and Coke, sucking it through the straw in the provocative way she had perfected by practicing for hours in front of her mirror. It suggestiveness drove guys crazy and she knew it, and that's why she did it.

“I'm going for it.” She reached behind her to set the empty plastic cup on the picnic table where she and Melissa had been sitting, then came off it with the sinuous grace of a snake sliding off a rock. She shook back her hair and gave the hem of her tank top a tug while drawing a deep, chest-expanding breath. Like an Olympic athlete, she went through

preparatory routine before each big event.

~~So it had been she who had made the first move. Leaving Melissa, she had sauntered toward him. When she reached the car, she moved in beside him and leaned back against the hood as he was doing. "You have a bad habit."~~

Turning only his head, he smiled down at her. "Only one?"

"That I know of."

His grin widened. "Then you need to get to know me better."

With no more invitation than that—because, after all, that was the reason they were there—he took her arm and ushered her around to the passenger side of his car. In spite of the heat, his hand was cool and dry. He politely opened the door and helped her into the leather-upholstered seat. As they drove away, she shot Melissa a triumphant grin, but Melissa was rummaging through her pouch of "mood enhancers" and didn't see.

He drove carefully, with both hands on the wheel, eyes on the road. He wasn't gaping at her and he wasn't groping and that was certainly a switch. Ordinarily, the minute she got into a guy's car, he'd start grabbing at her, like he couldn't believe his good fortune, like she might vaporize if he didn't touch her, or change her mind if he didn't hurry up and get on with it.

But this guy seemed a bit detached, and she thought that was kinda cool. He was mature and confident. He didn't need to gape and grope to assure himself that he was about to go laid.

She asked his name.

Stopping for a traffic light, he turned to look at her. "Is it important?"

She raised her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug, the rehearsed one, the one that pushed her breasts up and squeezed them together better than any Wonderbra could have. "I guess not."

He left his eyes on her breasts for several seconds, then the light changed and he went back to driving. "What's my bad habit?"

"You stare."

He laughed. "If you consider that a bad habit, then you really need to get to know me better."

She had placed her hand on his thigh and in her sultriest voice said, "I look forward to it."

His place was a major letdown. It was an efficiency apartment in a guest hotel. A tacky real estate banner strung across the front of the two-story building advertised special monthly rates. He was in a seedy neighborhood that didn't live up to his car or clothes.

Noticing her disappointment, he'd said, "It's a dump, but it's all I could find when I first moved here. I'm looking for something else." Then he added quietly, "I'll understand if you want me to take you back."

"No." She wasn't about to let him think she was a stupid, prissy high school girl with no spirit of adventure. "Shabby chic is in."

The apartment's main room served as both living area and bedroom. The galley kitchen was barely shoulder width. The bathroom was even smaller than that.

In the main room was a bed and nightstand, a four-drawer bureau, an easy chair with a floor lamp beside it, and a folding table long enough to accommodate an elaborate computer setup. The furnishings were garage-sale quality, but everything was neat.

She went over to the table. The computer was already booted up. With only a few clicks of the mouse, she found what she anticipated finding. She smiled at him over her shoulder and said, "So you weren't out there tonight by accident."

“I was out there tonight looking for you.”

“Specifically?”

He nodded.

She liked that. A lot.

The Formica bar separating the kitchen from the living area was used as shelving for photographic equipment. He had a 35-millimeter camera, several lenses, and various attachments including a portable tripod. It all looked intricate and expensive, out of place in the crummy apartment. She picked up the camera and looked at him through the viewfinder.

“Are you a professional?”

“It’s only a hobby. Would you like something to drink?”

“Sure.”

He went into the kitchen and returned with two glasses of red wine. Cool. Wine showed that he had refined tastes and class. It didn’t jibe with the apartment either, but she figured that his explanation for it was a lie. This probably wasn’t his main residence, only his playground. Away from the wife.

Sipping her wine, she glanced around. “So where are your pictures?”

“I don’t display them.”

“How come?”

“They’re for my private collection.”

“‘Private collection’?” Grinning at him slyly, she twirled a strand of hair around her finger. “I like the sound of that. Show me.”

“I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?”

“They’re . . . artistic.”

He was looking at her in that straightforward way again, as though measuring her reaction. His stare caused her toes to tingle, her pulse to race, and that hadn’t happened in a long time in the company of a guy. It was usually she who created tingles and racing hearts. It was rare and wonderful to be the one unsure of exactly what was about to take place. Exciting as shit.

Boldly she declared, “I want to see your private collection.”

He hesitated for several seconds, then knelt down beside the bed and pulled a box from beneath it. He removed the top and took out a standard photo album bound in faux black leather. As he came to his feet, he hugged it close to his chest. “How old are you?”

The question was an affront because she prided herself on looking much older than she was. She hadn’t been carded in years—but a glimpse of the butterfly tattoo on her right breast usually made a bouncer too stupid to ask for an ID. “What the hell difference does it make how old I am? I want to see the pictures. And anyway, I’m twenty-two.”

Clearly he didn’t believe her. He even tried unsuccessfully to hide his smile. Nevertheless, he set the album on the table and stepped away from it. Trying to appear nonchalant, she walked over to it and flipped open the cover.

The first photo was graphic and startling. From the angle at which the close-up had been taken, she assumed—correctly, she discovered later—that it was a self-portrait.

“Are you offended?” he asked.

“Of course not. Do you think I’ve never seen one erect?” Her response wasn’t nearly as blasé as she made it sound. She wondered if he could hear her pounding heartbeat.

She turned the page to the next shot and then to the next, until she had gone through the

entire album. She studied each photograph, pretending to be as analytical as an art critic. Some were in color, some in black and white, but all except the first one were of naked young women provocatively posed. Anyone else might have considered them obscene, but she was too sophisticated to get uptight over exposed genitalia.

But by no stretch were they “artistic” studies of nudes. They were nasty pictures.

“Do you like them?” He was standing so close behind her now she could feel his breath on her hair.

“They’re okay.”

Reaching around her, he flipped back through several of the pages until he came to a particular shot. “This one’s my favorite.”

She didn’t see anything that made this girl so special. Her nipples looked like mosquito bites against a flat, bony chest. You could count every rib and her hair had split ends. She had zit on her shoulders. A veil obscured her face, probably for good reason.

She closed the album, then turned to him and gave him her most seductive smile. Slowly she pulled her tank top over her head and dropped it to the floor. “You mean it’s been your favorite up till now.”

He caught his breath, then released it on a staggering exhalation. Moving slowly, he took her hand and placed it beneath her breast so that she was cupping it in her palm as though offering it to him.

He gave her the sweetest, most tender smile she’d ever seen. “You’re perfect. I knew you would be.”

Her ego soared. “We’re wasting time.” She unzipped her shorts and was about to remove them when he stopped her. “No, leave them there, low on your hips. Just like that.” Quickly he reached for his camera. Apparently it was loaded with film and ready to fire, because he put his eye to the viewfinder.

“This is going to be great.” He moved her closer to the floor lamp near the easy chair and adjusted the dingy shade, then backed away and looked through the camera again. “Lower the shorts just a little more. There. Right there.”

He clicked off several shots in rapid succession. “Oh, lady, you’re killing me.” He lowered the camera and looked at her with pure delight. “You’re a natural. You must’ve done this before.”

“I’ve never posed professionally.”

“Amazing,” he said. “Now go sit on the edge of the bed.”

He knelt on the floor in front of her and positioned her the way he wanted her. Legs. Hands. Head. Before he picked up the camera again, he kissed her inner thigh, sucking her skin against his teeth and leaving a mark.

For another hour, the picture taking continued along with the foreplay. By the time they actually did it, she was past ready. Afterward he refilled their wineglasses and lay beside her stroking her gently all over and telling her how beautiful she was.

She had thought, *Now, here’s a guy who knows how to treat a woman.*

When they finished their wine, he asked if he could take more pictures. “I want to capture your afterglow.”

“So you’ll have the before and after?”

He laughed and kissed her quickly and with affection. “Something like that.”

He dressed her—yes, he had personally dressed her as she used to dress her dolls. H

returned her to the park on the lake where they'd met and saw that she got safely into her car. As he closed the door, he kissed her lips softly. "I love you."

Whoa! That had taken her aback. A hundred guys had told her they loved her, but usually as they were fumbling to get a rubber on. More often than not these professions of love took place within the steamy interior of their cars or pickups.

But love had never been proclaimed softly, tenderly, and meaningfully. He'd even kissed the back of her hand before he let her go. She'd thought that was awfully sweet and gentlemanly.

They'd been together several times since that first night, and it was always good kicks. But soon, and predictably, he'd started whining. Where were you last night? Who were you with? I waited for hours, but you never showed up. When can I see you again?

His possessiveness took the fun out of being with him. Besides, the newness and novelty had begun to wear off. His photography didn't seem exotic anymore, just weird and often creepy. It was time to bring this to a halt.

Maybe he sensed that she'd decided to break it off tonight, because it had started off badly. They'd quarreled immediately after he picked her up. From there things had grown progressively worse.

He'd gone bizarre and scary on her with this bondage shit. Leaving her tied up for what was going on hours now. What if this dump caught on fire? What if there was a tornado or something?

She didn't like it. She wanted out of here. The sooner the better.

Before he left, he had at least turned on the radio and tuned it to Paris Gibson's program. That provided her with some company. She didn't feel quite as abandoned as she would have felt in a total silence that accompanied the total darkness.

So she lay there listening to Paris Gibson's voice and wondering when the hell he was coming back and what other fun and games he had in mind.

The red light on the control board went out. Valentino had hung up.

It was several seconds before Paris realized that the only sound she heard was that of her own heartbeat. The music had stopped. On the log monitor she saw a series of zeros where descending numbers should be counting down the time remaining on a song. How long had she been broadcasting dead air?

With twenty-three seconds left in her program, she depressed her microphone button. She tried to speak. Couldn't. Tried again.

"I hope you've enjoyed this evening of classic love songs. Please join me again tomorrow night. I'll be looking forward to it. Until then, this is Paris Gibson on FM 101.3. Good night."

By depressing two control buttons, she was off the air. Then she was off her tall swivel stool like a shot, yanking open the heavy studio door, racing down the dark hallway, and barreling into the engineering room.

Except for a box of take-out fried chicken on Stan's desk, the room was empty. She continued running down the hall, turning right at the first intersection of corridors and literally slamming into Marvin, who was dragging a dirty rag along an interior windowsill.

She gasped, "Have you seen Stan?"

"No." One thing you could say about Marvin—he was a man of few words. If he spoke at all, it was in monosyllables.

"Has he already left?"

This time, he didn't even give her a verbal reply, only a shrug.

Leaving the janitor, she ran to the men's restroom and pushed open the door. Stan was at the urinal. "Stan, come here."

Stunned by the interruption, he whipped his head around. "What—I'm sorta busy here, Paris."

"Hurry up. This is important."

She rushed back to the studio and wheeled her stool over to the Vox Pro. It recorded each incoming call for optional playback. There was also a mandatory recording made of everything that went out over the air. But that was another machine and another matter. Right now, she was interested only in the telephone call.

"What's going on?" Stan strolled in, looking at his wristwatch. "I've got plans."

"Listen to this."

"Remember, my shift ends when you sign off."

"Shut up, Stan, and listen."

He leaned against the edge of the control board. "Okay, but I really need to be leaving soon."

"Shh." Valentino had just identified himself. "This is a repeat caller."

Stan appeared more interested in the crease of his linen trousers. But when Valentino told her she would be very sorry, her coworker's eyebrows shot up. "What's that mean?"

"Listen."

He was quiet through the remainder of the recording. When it ended, Paris looked at him expectantly. He raised his narrow shoulders in a quick shrug. "He's a kook."

"That's it? That's your assessment? He's a kook?"

He snuffled. "What? You don't think he's *serious*?"

"I don't know." Turning, she punched the hotline button on the board. That was the telephone line provided for the deejays' personal use.

"Who're you calling?" Stan asked. "The cops?"

"I think I should."

"Why? Nutcases call you all the time. Wasn't there one just last week who wanted you to be a pallbearer at his mother's funeral?"

"This is different. I talk to a lot of people every night. This one . . . I don't know," she added uneasily.

When her 911 call was answered, she identified herself and gave the operator a brief description of what had happened. "It's probably nothing. But I thought someone should hear this conversation."

"I listen to your program on my nights off, Ms. Gibson," the operator said. "You don't sound like the type to panic. There'll be a squad car there shortly."

Paris thanked her and hung up. "They're on their way."

Stan winced. "Do I have to hang around?"

"No, go on. I'll be fine. Marvin's still here."

"Actually he's not. He split. I saw him leaving on my way here from the men's room, where I was rudely interrupted midstream. A surprise like that, a guy could get hurt, you know."

She was in no mood for Stan tonight. "I doubt you'll suffer any damage." She waved him out. "Go on. Just lock the door behind you. I can let the police in."

Her nervousness must have conveyed itself and made him feel like a deserter. "No, I'll wait with you," he said glumly. "Go brew yourself some tea or something. You look rattled."

She *was* rattled. Tea sounded like a good idea. She headed for the employee kitchen, but never made it. An obnoxious buzzer sounded throughout the building, announcing that someone was at the main entrance.

Reversing her direction, she rushed toward the front of the building and was relieved to see two uniformed policemen on the other side of the glass door. Never mind that they appeared to be fresh out of the academy. One of them looked too young to shave. But they were a business and introduced themselves with stiff-lipped laconism.

"Thank you for coming so quickly."

"We'd been out this way and were headed back when we got the call," one explained. He and his partner were looking at her strangely, as most people did when they first met her. The sunglasses made them instantly curious.

Without acknowledging either her glasses or their curiosity, she led Officers Griggs and Carson through the labyrinth of dark corridors. "There's a recording of the call in the studio."

The unremarkable exterior of the building hadn't prepared them for the electronic sophistication of the studio. They gazed about them with curiosity and awe. She brought them back on track by introducing Stan. Their acknowledgments were clipped. No one shook hands. Paris used the mouse on the Vox Pro computer to play Valentino's recorded call.

No one spoke while they listened. Officer Griggs stared at the ceiling, Carson at the floor. When it ended, Griggs raised his head and cleared his throat, seemingly embarrassed by

Valentino's crude language. "Do you get calls like this often, Ms. Gibson?"

~~"Weird and kooky sometimes. Heavy breathers and dirty propositions, but nothing like~~ what you've just heard. Never anything threatening. Valentino has called before. He tells me about a wonderful new girlfriend, or a recent breakup that left him heartbroken. He's never said anything like this. Never anything even close to this."

"You think it's the same guy?"

They all turned to Stan, who had ventured the idea.

He continued. "Somebody else could have borrowed the name Valentino because they've heard him on your show and know that he's a regular caller."

"I guess it's possible," Paris said slowly. "I'm almost positive that Valentino's voice is disguised. It never sounds quite natural."

"That's not a common name either," Griggs said. "Do you think it's legit?"

"I have no way of knowing that. Sometimes a caller is reluctant to give even a first name, preferring to remain totally anonymous."

"Do you have a way of tracing calls?"

"Ordinary caller ID. One of our engineers added software to the Vox Pro that would give us a readout of the number, if it was available. Each call is also date and time stamped."

She brought up the information on the computer screen. There was no name, but a local telephone number, which Carson jotted down.

"This is a good start," he said.

"Maybe," Griggs said. "Considering what he called to say, why would he use a traceable number?"

Paris read between the lines. "You think it was a hoax?"

Neither of the policemen answered her directly. Carson said, "I'll call the number, see if anyone answers."

He used his cell phone, and after listening through numerous rings concluded that no one was going to pick up. "No voice mail either. Better call it in." He punched in digits, then while he was giving Valentino's number to whomever was on the other end, Griggs told her and Stan that the number would be traced.

"But my guess is that it was a guy using a name he'd heard on your program and just trying to get a reaction out of you."

"Like the sickos who make obscene phone calls," Stan said.

Griggs bobbed his cropped head. "Exactly like that. I bet we find a lonely drunk or a group of bored kids trying to have some fun by talking dirty, something like that."

"I hope you're right." Paris hugged herself and rubbed her arms for warmth. "I can't believe someone would do this as a joke, but I certainly prefer a joke to the alternative."

Carson disconnected. "They're on it. Shouldn't take long."

"You'll let me know what they find out?"

"Sure thing, Ms. Gibson."

Stan offered to follow her home, but it was a halfhearted offer and he seemed relieved when she declined. He bade them good night and left.

"How can we contact you when we know something?" Griggs asked as they wended their way through the building, toward the entrance.

She gave him her home telephone number, emphasizing that it was unlisted. "Of course, Ms. Gibson."

It surprised the two policemen that she was the one to lock up the building for the night. ~~“Are you here alone every night?” Carson asked as they walked her to her car.~~

“Except for Stan.”

“What does he do and how long has he worked here?”

He doesn't do much of anything, she thought wryly. But she told them that he was an engineer. “He’s on standby if anything should go wrong with the equipment. He’s been here for a couple of years.”

“Nobody else works the night shift?”

“Well, there’s Marvin. He’s been doing our janitorial service for several months.”

“Last name?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Never can tell about people,” Griggs said. “Do you get along with these guys all right?”

She laughed. “Nobody gets along with Marvin, but he’s not the type to make a scary phone call. He only speaks when spoken to, and then he more or less grunts.”

“What about Stan?”

She felt disloyal talking about him behind his back. If she spoke candidly, it wouldn’t be a flattering description, so she told them only what was relevant. “We get along fine. I’m sure neither of them had anything to do with that call.”

Griggs smiled at her and closed his small notebook with a decisive snap. “Doesn’t hurt to follow up.”

• • •

Her home telephone was ringing when she let herself in. She rushed to answer. “Hello?”

“Ms. Gibson, it’s Officer Griggs.”

“Yes?”

“Did you get in okay?”

“Yes. I just disengaged my alarm. Have you learned anything?”

“That number belongs to a pay phone near the UT campus. A squad car was dispatched to check it out but nobody was around. The phone’s outside a pharmacy that closed at ten. Place and parking lot were deserted.”

In effect, they were back to where they had started. She had hoped they would trace the number to a sad and lonely individual like Griggs had described, a lost soul who had threatened her and an imaginary captive in a dire attempt to get attention.

Her initial misgivings returned. “So what now?”

“Well, there’s not really anything to be done unless he calls again. I don’t think he will, though. It was probably someone just trying to rile you. Tomorrow night, we’ll have squad cars patrolling the area around that phone booth, watching for anyone lurking in the vicinity.”

That wasn’t satisfactory, but it was all she was going to get. She thanked him. He and his partner had done what was expected of them, but she wasn’t ready to concede that Valentino’s call was a prank and nothing to worry about. Even the origin of the call was worrisome. Wouldn’t someone seeking attention leave obvious clues so that he could be traced and identified, chastened by the police, maybe even written up in the newspaper?

Valentino had used a public telephone so the call couldn’t be traced. He didn’t want to be identified.

That disturbing thought was uppermost in her mind as she made her way through the living

area of her house, down the hallway, and into her bedroom. As always when she returned home from work, the rooms were dark and silent.

The houses neighboring hers were also dark and hushed at this hour, but there was a difference. In those houses, the prayers of children had been heard before they were tucked in. Husbands and wives had kissed good night. Some had made love before settling beneath the blanket. They shared a bed, body heat, dreams. They shared their lives. Darkness was relieved by nightlights, small beacons of comfort that shone in rooms littered with toys and shoes, with the accoutrements of busy family life.

The nightlights in Paris's house only emphasized the sterile neatness of the rooms. Her movements were the only source of sound. She slept alone. That wouldn't have been her first choice, but that's the way it was, and she had come to accept it.

Tonight, however, the solitude was unnerving. And the cause was Valentino's call.

She'd had years of experience listening to voices, picking up nuances in speech, detecting underlying messages, separating truth from lies, and hearing more than what was said out loud. She was able to draw several conclusions about a person based strictly on his or her inflections. Calls had left her feeling happy, sad, reflective, annoyed, and, on occasion, downright angry.

None had left her feeling afraid. Until tonight.

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