

CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE--EYES AND APPLE PIE

If emeralds wept, their tears would be the colour of my eyes. The clear, chrome green is so intense the pupils drink it in and seem to vanish under certain lights.

Marion, who lived and worked next door, was jealous as all hell.

"I need the props," she used to sigh. "Cards and tea leaves, palms and birth charts. Otherwise my clients wouldn't give me the time of day. But you? You're lucky. Insta-otherworldly."

A communicating door linked our apartments, never locked but seldom used. Marion preferred the corridor outside with its lemongrass and curry smells whenever she popped over. We lived above a row of shops in Little Italy, but Asian pressure on the edges of the neighbourhood had supplanted memories of Tuscany with memories of Singapore. The cafe] and the bridal shop below us--Gato Nero and Lucia's, respectively--still claimed the street for Rome, but the culinary fugue upstairs foretold a second fall.

"It smells so good," she'd always comment, lingering in the hall.

"Doesn't it?" I'd answer, motioning her in.

She'd smile, happy of an ally, unaware of what the ritual revealed: Marion Harper wished that she were someone else. Advancing toward sixty, her hair had gone that driftwood shade of Anglo-Saxon drab you see on Tilley-ed women haunting birding

stores and Third-World shops. Ageing so *undifferently* preoccupied a small, disgruntled corner of her mind. In adolescence she read Nin and Woolf, wrote poetry to trees, and defined herself by all the things she wasn't. In latter days she clung to borrowed otherness--the smell of Asian cooking, which she loved as an idea more than with her nose--to reinforce a flagging sense of nonconformity.

Did she know I knew? Hard to say. She scarcely knew herself. She was good at what she did--very good--but her Tarot cards and birth charts couldn't tell her what I got from just the colour of her hair and four small words.

It smells so good...

* * *

Whenever clients called--their first time, anyway--their gaze inevitably landed on a clipping from the *Sun*, framed in ebony and hanging in the space between two deep-silled parlour windows. *Rags to Riches* screamed the big, bold type. Underneath, a little smaller, *Jobless Man Hits Jackpot*. Alliteration must have been the headline fiat of the day.

At some point in those visits, the telephone would ring. The computer in my study was set up to make the call. I'd excuse myself just long enough for clients to get curious and read that David Ase, age twenty-eight, had won the undivided spoils of the largest Super 7 ever, a record still unbroken. The photo with the article was staged: a functionary handing me a cheque. From

the rictus on his face, one could easily suppose a Gollum in his head, muttering and hissing, "*Mine, all mine, my preciousss.*"

The story plumbed its subject with the insight of a comic book. Where were you when you found out? What were you doing? How did you feel?

And, of course, the one that always has them hanging on their seats: *What will you do now?*

Four years old, the story wasn't accurate. Hustler's what I told them when they asked about my job. A male prostitute. An escort, if you like, though that's just fig-leaf talk for what amounts to lounging at the curb while men drive by and check you out for bulges in the places they're supposed to be.

Perhaps the paper thought it wasn't work.

Could have fooled me.

There's more to hustling than a pretty face and shaking what your momma gave you. The real trick, what brings the money in, is getting in a client's head and giving him exactly what he wants. If he doesn't have to spell it out, if you just seem to *know*, a tip is sure to grease the bills already in your wallet.

But it's never easy turning into someone else's fantasy. You have to split yourself in two, one half empty like a vinyl waterbag, the other sensitive to clues. When they start pouring in you let them fill your empty half. Your skin remains your own, but its shape is contoured from the inside by a stranger's need. Do it right, and your client thinks he's lucked into the greatest fuck and soul-mate of his life.

With more money than he'd ever spend and all his life ahead