

EXPOSED

IN BOSTON



SHEPPARD FERGUSON

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, incidents and dialogue are products of the author's imagination. References to real places, buildings, organizations or establishments are used fictitiously to provide a sense of authenticity.

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For Liz, from the beginning.
For NHC, a meandering road.



DAY 1

SATURDAY

Susan Kessel focused on Rick's strong jaw, thin nose, dark eyes, all overdramatized by the Boston restaurant's lighting. His exceedingly good looks didn't need the spotlight; they were a pleasure. Too bad they were all wrong.

A lot had changed in the two years since Susan had moved from Milwaukee. Back then, naive as she was, she never would have considered engineering an intimate relationship with Rick, or risking a change in their commercial relationship. Since arriving in the city, sitting in Rick's chair had been her only self-indulgence, though a pragmatic one; hair had been something to get out of her face, so she could frame others in her camera's viewfinder. Once a month, she watched herself, reflected in the salon mirror, while Rick transformed her. He'd pushed her incrementally to become more daring. Looking at herself, while Rick did his thing, had also brought her face-to-face with the load she'd carried from Milwaukee, the weight she'd put on becoming a newspaper photographer. In Milwaukee, beer had been a key to her success—plenty of bar visits after work to be “one of the guys.” The alcohol had also dulled her constant nerves. Even though she'd landed staff photographer positions, breaking into the field had been an all-out battle. Her girlfriends in law school had warned her: “Don't go into a profession with no women, Susan, even if a woman has run for Vice-President.” Warnings or not, the day she decided photography was her life was the day she became a photographer.

At the end of Rick's sessions, the woman she saw in his salon's mirrors looked pretty for sure. Beautiful, Rick insisted, which had given her the

courage to engineer a date with one of Boston's more highly regarded hairdressers. Her look was certainly different from the easy prettiness she'd had as a University of Wisconsin co-ed, maybe more than four years of brutal work had given a new edge to her features, an edge easier to see as her size diminished. Regardless, dating her hairdresser was a mistake: the odds were, if she let his hands leave her head she would never get them back to her hair.

She hadn't worried when engineering the date, or thought for a second about her motivations, evolving risk-taker that she was. She simply knew she'd reached the end of celibacy. She was tired of herself, at least of herself as her one and only sexual partner for nearly five years and she needed to fix the problem. Photography had been her passion. "The Obsession," Rick called it. Twelve to sixteen hour days were the norm—no choice. Boston was like Milwaukee: she was the only woman camera. The guys didn't much like having her in the lab. Gabbing with Rick once a month, as he fondled her hair, was her only social life, the only time a man touched her. Luckily, Jake O'Malley, the senior photographer at the paper, after thirty years on staff, liked her and made her day-to-day work life bearable. He had taken her into his family, which did give her a family life. But, she couldn't exactly date the O'Malley family.

Rick, his hand on her back, had guided her into the restaurant's lobby, and she had felt surprisingly high-spirited and relaxed having already decided, while dressing, to maintain her celibacy this evening in order to end it with a friend and a hairdresser. The silks she was wearing synced with her haircut—men in the lobby noticed her—a feeling she'd lost in her working life, usually decked out in battered jeans, baggy tops, with camera bags and bodies hanging from her. One of the men's gazes had been particularly direct and unapologetic. Probably in his early fifties, he was crisply tailored in a European suit. Nearly as handsome and in shape as Rick. Her stare at him matched his directness. Their eyes had snared. She'd felt a jolt. No doubt about the quiver she felt, not something provoked by the fabrics swishing against her. An older guy could do that to her? How desperate was she?

Earlier, fumbling with the make-up she rarely wore, then slipping and sliding into seriously feminine clothes for her evening out had given her a buzz, as had her anticipation of correcting the imbalance between photography and interpersonal contact. She didn't quite believe that "all work and no

play makes Susan a dull girl,” since all work had produced results. Enough people were saying her photography was terrific so even she believed them. She had become a photographer, outside-in, inside-out. No doubt about it. She lived it. So, she was ready for a social life, ready for play, ready to test whether celibacy had enhanced her creativity.

The date had been an excuse to visit Newbury Street, not on assignment for a change. The last time she'd shopped dresses or silks was her wedding. She'd been a large size four then. She'd been nearly a size twelve leaving Milwaukee. On Newbury Street she was a size eight, bordering on size six depending on the label. Some tightness was fine; she wasn't buying sweatshirts and had some curves again, in the right places. She'd bought an expensive silk teddy, something she'd never owned. As she dressed in her apartment, she was enjoying her appearance despite a few bulges, which she couldn't wish away. But then, like a ton of bricks, the reality of what she was doing had landed on her: the sole reason for her anticipated night with Rick was because he was the only male she knew socially in Boston and she wasn't about to just go out to pick up some male, any male. She was still a Midwestern girl. Lingering in her psyche, along with an all-seeing god occasionally looking over her shoulder, was an idea that sex necessarily coupled with a “meaningful” relationship. This, despite her own experience. Supreme sex for her had happened after high school graduation, during July 1982, a red-letter month in her life, every day, every red-hot-letter day of it. At month's end they'd parted; her only lingering regret was that there wouldn't be more sex with him. Her college boyfriend, eventually her husband, had been Mr. Right, a good guy, a companion, and their sex had been cozy. So when the passion for photography overcame her, it felt so much like her unrestrained excitement of that heated July that it had blown their marriage out of the water. To live with someone, marry someone, her feelings had to match those she had for “The Obsession.” She watched herself in her mirror, adjusting the silk cocktail dress. No problem imagining another pair of hands sliding down the silk, especially up the silk. But for sure, not Rick's hands, she would keep them in her hair. No reason to cancel the evening. She'd have a whole dinner to work it out with him, diplomatically, and enjoy dress-up while she did.

Sipping white wine with Rick, waiting for their appetizers, she wondered about her reaction to the older man's stare in the lobby—the thrill

she'd felt. Queasy, she wanted to think there was no explanation for her reaction, no explanation. She photographed men like him all the time—maybe they didn't quite look like him, but they were wealthy, powerful figures in Boston. They didn't notice her and she didn't notice them. So what the hell? With Rick, no longer an object of fantasy, she was fantasizing about one of them, an older man? A mysterious stranger? Where had that come from? Susan Kessel, femme fatale? From not being used to silk sliding against her body? The high heels jacking her off the floor hadn't lifted her that high, not to a different altitude. She'd shed some pounds, that was apparent, but her ambition was to be a photographer, not a seductress, even if it were remotely possible.

When her eyes had adjusted to the lighting, she'd again noticed him. He was across the room at a table with three men. The maître d' kept hovering around them. An important party? A mini-money convention? The glance she'd received from the gent in the lobby had felt x-ray like, as if he could see everything she was wearing, or through it. Which had been a pleasant punch to her gut. Unlike the sourness that Susan's gut was currently processing from watching the group across the room—a familiar throbbing in her belly and in her head. "A sip of wine will make it go away," she thought for about a second.

"Do you know who those men are?" Susan interrupted the flow of Rick's banter. "The four men with the maître d'." She pointed in their general direction.

"Maybe," he said. "You mean the guy in the suit?"

"And the older man with him," she said, thinking that Rick had also noticed the guy, or at least his suit. Next to him an older, gray-haired man looked familiar to Susan though she couldn't place him—her instincts told her he shouldn't be sitting there, as did her increasing heart rate. Twice before that year she'd photographed people who shouldn't have been together at public events. A married State Senator kissing "the other" woman out in the cold on New Year's eve at Boston's First Night. A Congressman laughing it up at a Celtics game with a contractor whom she'd photographed leaving the courthouse after his bribery conviction. In Milwaukee, at first she'd been too afraid of blowing her job to risk following her instincts. But once she had begun following them it had taken six months for her work to land her the Boston job. Again in Boston she'd

started gingerly, self-protectively, constantly aware of her professional vulnerability: she had a job that for many photographers was a life-long ambition. But she was changing. She'd received as much notice on the editorial side of the paper from those two unassigned photos as she had from anything else she'd done. The usual photo assignments were boxing her in and she intended to break out.

The buzz inside her was irresistible. She couldn't wait. She lifted her bag to her silk-sheathed lap, reached inside it for her Leica, attaching the mini-flash by feel. The Leica was small enough so she carried it whenever she wasn't loaded down with the paper's Nikons. She adjusted its settings and checked the flash to be sure the ready light was on.

"What?" Rick asked looking bewildered. "What are you doing?"

"I'm a terrible date, Rick. I really didn't expect work to rear its ugly head, not here." She paused trying to think of how to explain. "Oh, screw it, I'll try to explain in a minute."

She stood up. Gear in hand, discreetly at her side, she moved towards the table with the four men. She usually worked in pants and sneakers, so her camera felt wrong with the swish of the silk dress sliding against her stocking-clad legs, advancing with light jolts on the unstable heels. But her connection to the camera tightened as she closed in on the table. No one took notice of her crossing the room: her outfit camouflaged her perfectly. Even the men at the table didn't look her way until she said, "Hello, gentlemen."

That moment, they all looked at her.

She lifted the camera, stepped back to frame the group, closed her eyes and pressed the shutter. She counted to three then pressed again, then repeated one more time. After she had fired the third frame and opened her eyes, the men were beginning to get to their feet. One of them had raised a napkin to cover his face. "Too late," she thought. She also knew that they were all momentarily blinded by the flash against which she had closed her eyes. "Fucking bitch," she heard, and a few other street-level profanities, as she turned to stride back to Rick in the quieted restaurant.

"What the hell was that about?" he said, as she sat down and shoved the equipment into her bag. She looked over towards the table she'd just left. The men were still standing. They seemed just to be getting their bearings as the *maître d'* rushed over to them.

“What were you thinking? What were you doing?” Rick asked urgently, but keeping his voice down. “How am I going to ever show my face in here again?” Susan had to breathe, calm the adrenaline rush. Maybe she should have kept moving to the door, but she had come in Rick’s car. She looked over at the men talking with the maître d’. The older, gray-haired gent had his hands on the forearms of two others as if trying to calm them. The maître d’ talked. The man with the x-ray eyes stood up. He and the older man had their hands on a third man, as if holding him in place. Finally, the standing man turned and headed towards her.

“I’m sorry, Rick. I’ll try to explain, but we’re getting a visit.”

As the man closed on their table, she wondered whether his wandering eye looked at every nearby woman or whether his gaze had really been a compliment. The look had made her feel naked which, to her surprise, had felt lovely. Distracting when working, good reason to wear jeans and sweat shirts. And totally different from the glare he was currently giving her.

He stood over them for an eternity—it seemed like minutes—looking very, very angry and very, very elegant, perfectly coiffed in a suit unusually well-cut for New England. Long enough for her to wonder about her own insanity: what had compelled her to take their picture? Four years of celibacy? Trying to attract any male that moved? Bizarre attraction or professional instinct? Anything for the adrenaline rush she wasn’t going to get from Rick?

Not clear. What was clear was standing over them.

“Who do you think you are?” were his first words. “You don’t look like a simpleton.”

“Well, thank you,” she said, surprised she could say anything louder than her pounding heart.

“I don’t know what you think you were doing. Either you made a mistake, or you made a very bad decision. So, correct it. Make things simple, Miss. Give me the film. This has been a complete invasion of privacy. I don’t know what you’re up to, but let’s avoid the obvious complications. Give me the film. Give me the film, we’ll pretend it didn’t happen. Everyone will calm down.” His tone was quiet, dark, threatening. A familiar style that matched his suit? She said nothing.

“You’re making a serious mistake. We can have you in court in two minutes flat, on charges more severe than you can imagine.”

“I don’t think so. Give it a try,” Susan answered.

“Monsieur Harrington, Monsieur Harrington,” the maître d’ babbled, appearing next to him.

“Harrington, he’s a banker,” Susan remembered. “I should know that.” She had photographed him a couple of times, she couldn’t quite remember where. Most likely at one of her hated boardroom-and-charity-event shoots—assignments that might be bread-and-butter in the business, but not why she was a photographer. Most likely, he hadn’t given her a glance, dressed in her jeans and sweatshirt work outfits.

“Robert, I was the one accosted,” Harrington said to the maître d’. “Why don’t you attend to the other diners? If anyone is very upset, I’ll send them a bottle of wine.”

“Oh, Monsieur, I’m sure that won’t be necessary. Madame, you disrupted the entire restaurant,” he continued.

“Robert, she knows that. Why don’t you tend to the other diners,” Harrington repeated.

“She disrupted the whole restaurant,” the maître d’ repeated, then faded away.

“As for you Miss?” Harrington reached his hand out, waiting for her film.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” she said, reaching into her bag and handing him her business card. Her voice was controlled, vaguely mimicking his, belying the terror she was beginning to feel. He was a very big tuna in Boston’s very small pond. Anyone in the city with a position to speak of knew everyone else; at least it certainly seemed that way at the paper. They all appeared to be linked. Throwing the paper up as a shield may not have been the smartest idea she’d had since landing her job. That had been an earth-shaking event for her from which her move of five minutes earlier might shake her loose. She should have stopped, waited for her rational mind to catch up, controlled her instincts before she walked across the restaurant, very possibly her first steps onto an unemployment line.

“I presume you know who I am,” he continued.

“Yes,” she answered. He had just reintroduced himself.

“Well then, you may have a sense that you are an irresponsible little fool. You can’t imagine the mess you will be in if you don’t give me that film.”

“Mr. Harrington, can I help it if you are seen dining in a restaurant with the wrong crowd? You know, this is a public space? A free country?”

she said, regretting the rhetorical “free country” bit. Hepburn or Bacall wouldn’t have been so sanctimonious.

He stopped dead for a moment, as if re-appraising her.

“Let me put this as politely as I can, young woman,” he continued, condescendingly articulating each word. “You are going to get your pretty ass kicked if you don’t give me the film.”

“You’ll have to try kicking it. Or take me to court,” she said, thinking, “pretty”—when was the last time anyone but her hairdresser had called her “pretty”?

“Court will have nothing to do with it...” Visibly, Harrington was getting angrier and having a hard time constraining it—a previously invisible vascular system had appeared on his forehead. “Your publisher will.”

Rick stood up. “Mr. Harrington, she really didn’t mean anything by it,” he said. Harrington looked surprised.

“Oh, Rick. Just sit down,” Susan said. He did.

“You are a silly ass,” Harrington continued. “You don’t know what you are getting into. I suggest you get out while you’re still ahead.”

“You are repeating yourself, Mr. Harrington. Your dinner is getting cold.”

“Give me the film, woman.”

“You have my card. Monday would be a better time to discuss this, don’t you think? We’re disturbing other diners,” Susan said, beginning to feel comfortable in the protective cocoon of the restaurant, if not the role. She was no Katherine Hepburn.

“You’re making a very grave mistake which you will regret,” Harrington replied before turning and strutting away.

Elated, Susan sipped her wine, toasting herself—she didn’t like being front-and-center. One of the things she liked about her profession: she photographed front-and-center from the sidelines. So far, she was winning against Harrington. “Trust your instincts, girl,” she thought. “The man wouldn’t have made such a fuss if nothing were going down at his table.”

Meanwhile, Rick babbled at her from across their table, which at that moment seemed like his own world. She’d get to him, maybe soothe him in a moment. But what had she done? Why? She looked across the restaurant. Harrington was talking to the older man who was shaking his head. Somehow, his sitting next to Harrington had set her off. A major banker with whom? Presuming that the photos were properly exposed

and in focus, she had three shots which included a confirmed, powerful banker, a vaguely familiar man, and two unidentified others. A really stupid snapshot, she wondered? Certainly, when she'd been a kid, when she'd been in college, when she'd been married, when she'd worked for the Milwaukee paper, she wouldn't have made a move like this. She'd been so very, very careful and so very grateful for anything she got. It would never have occurred to her to try to sleep with her hairdresser, much less to spend more than two weeks' pay on a dress, shoes and lingerie for one date. So far, she was ahead: She hadn't been thrown out of the restaurant. Harrington couldn't complain to the paper until Monday, unless he called the publisher at home. Even then, nothing would happen until Monday. Nevertheless, she let out a small groan. After two years in Boston her instincts were getting out of control; she couldn't just sit and enjoy an expensive dinner. Why couldn't she just sit and enjoy her appetizer? She'd developed the discipline to cut tens of thousands of pleasure-filled calories from her life, had the fat she'd taken off her hips gone to her head?

"Boy, was he pissed," Rick was saying as Susan rejoined his world. "I don't blame him. People trying to have a nice dinner, then you come along. Do you always carry that damned camera? Even on a date?"

"Apparently so. You've heard me talk about photography when you're working on my hair, right? Remember, "The Obsession?" I know what I'm doing." An inane non sequitur: better to keep her mouth shut.

Rick's beautiful face had come undone. He looked incredulous. "Okay, okay, okay. That's your talk. But what just happened, happened. You just pissed off one of the best-known bankers in the city, in one of the best restaurants in the city. I eat in this restaurant. I bank at his bank. And you know what you're doing? I don't think so. I thought I knew you better than I do, or I wouldn't be here. We don't know each other very well, do we?"

"My point exactly," Susan thought, from her earlier conversation with herself.

"At least, he doesn't know who I am, does he?" Rick continued. "Let's just be sure of that." He paused and looked at her. "Maybe that's okay, then. What if we just pretend this didn't happen, like he said, enjoy our dinner and get a little mellow?" He lifted his glass towards her and looked

into her eyes. She tipped her glass against his, but avoided his look. She stared across the room.

Ceremoniously, a pair of waiters placed silver-dome-covered plates in front of them, lifting the domes grandly, revealing their main courses. Susan made a gesture of quiet applause. The waiters bowed slightly. “Keeps the food hot, I guess,” she commented to Rick. He tucked right into his two plump little birds. By comparison, her meager sole didn’t hold her attention. She looked up from her fish and again at the four men she’d photographed earlier. Actually, the fourth man, the one with the napkin over his face, was just returning to their table. Susan controlled her flight instinct. Like a good girl, she ate her dinner.

“Boy, you eat fast,” Rick said. “Another glass of wine?”

“Rick, again I have to apologize for being a genuinely lousy dinner partner,” Susan said.

“You’re not,” Rick replied. “You look great. Not like the first time you came into the salon. You’ve changed. Really lost some weight. I never knew you could be a clotheshorse. Not that I’ve ever seen you in real clothes before.”

“Tell you what,” Susan said. “Thanks for the compliment. But, I’m not the clothes kind of horse.” Rick looked confused. “More of a work kind of horse. I mean thanks,” Susan said. “I’m glad you like the way I look.”

“I dunno,” Rick said. “So how do you like the restaurant?”

“Very good. But, Rick, actually, I am seriously being a lousy dinner partner, I am going back to the paper.”

“Come on Susan, I know you’re obsessed, but this is ridiculous. And Harrington isn’t bothering us...”

“I probably am ridiculous, but I have to,” she said standing up. “I’m very sorry about this, Rick.” She turned and, taking care not to trip on her spiked heels, walked out of the restaurant, directly across the street, to a cab with its roof light on.

“You available?” she asked. The cabby reached back and opened the door without a word. She slammed it. The cab accelerated away from the curb, jerking her back into her seat.

“*Boston Star*,” she directed. The old cab seemed to meander through the empty downtown streets, bouncing and bumping on their scarred, uneven surfaces. The emptiness felt primal: dark shadows, blotches of

light, single people on sidewalks who looked small and vulnerable in contrast with the occasional groups leaving bars or restaurants, who looked vital and strong and, for the moment, appealing. She felt a pang at her decision to divorce, to not have somebody to go home to. Especially at a moment like this when she may have gambled on a losing hand. But the trade-off, marriage for photography, decided entirely on her instincts, had filled her with years of exhilaration. She felt alive every day, as she had the entire month she was with Will, her first lover. More than enough interesting people surrounded her daily so she wasn't lonely, never bored. But after nearly five years of photo-thrills, she was recognizing that she wasn't wired celibate.

She sat back enjoying the night scenery. Boston delighted her as much as it scared her parents. They had conceded it didn't frighten them as much as New York would have. She smiled at the thought of her parents' fear of that city and wondered whether her ambitions would take her there. For the moment she loved Boston. She relaxed, shutting off her worries about what she'd just done, until the cab passed the expressway entrance she had expected to take. Instead, it drove by South Station in the direction of Fort Point Channel and South Boston, which felt wrong.

"Driver, did you hear me? I'm going to the *Star*?"

"Yeah, I heard ya," the driver said gruffly.

"I've never been this way."

"You're not from here," he dismissed her. His abrupt answer made her feel easier. It sounded honestly contemptuous. She'd never used this route. But, Boston was a never-ending maze. "Just cool it," she thought. She sat back to learn a new route.

They entered the warehouse blocks that separated downtown from "Southie." The cab turned a sharp corner into a small street between two looming facades. The cab slowed, but its grinding and squeaking were louder because of the cobblestone street. At the far end of the block two figures stood in the shaft of light projected by an open door. The tail lights of a car glowed just beyond it. As they approached, she could see the car was some kind of Cadillac. The two men in the light wore dark suits.

"Fuckin' hoods," the driver muttered as they drove by. "Don' want them get the wrong idea. Think you're snooping or something. Bang, bang. They don't give a shit. Assholes."

Not exactly South Boston folk heroes, Susan mused. She also relaxed and scolded herself for her suspicions about the cab driver's intentions. As he'd recognized, she wasn't from Boston. His route was a fine nighttime shortcut though gangland.

"Evening, Miss. Why look at you!" Billy, the old gent who was night security guard beamed at her.

"And?" she replied.

"Don't think I've ever seen you in a dress."

"Me neither," she said giving him a big smile. Her heels clicked loudly in the empty halls. She'd now walked maybe all of three hundred yards in them. The only mileage she'd done in heels since going home to her parents at Christmas, four months before. The racket she was making didn't slow her down. She was eager, excited to get to the darkroom, to see the processed film. It seemed a long way to the photo department, at the back of the building on the second floor.

Moving at a quick, noisy clip she turned the corner. Like riding a bike and discovering she had no brakes, with a clatter she crashed into the ladder on which Howie, the maintenance man, was retouching a spot near the ceiling. The gallon paint bucket fell over, clanked against the ladder, doused yellow down the front of Susan's dress, then rolled across the floor leaving a large pool of paint.

Susan was stunned and speechless. She looked down at herself. The pool of paint was expanding across the hall away from her feet, sparing her shoes. She stepped back.

Howie was just as dumbstruck. Having not been knocked off of his ladder, he climbed down. "Look what ya did. The mess. Don't you look where y're going? God damn!"

He had every right to scream, but he was surprisingly restrained, always a sweet man. Entirely her fault, she said nothing, just looked down at the paint on her skirt front and shook her head. Served her right. "Sorry," she said sheepishly.

"That's latex," he replied. "It'll all come out if you get it into water and wash it right away. You got plenty of sinks in the photo department, give it a try. I gotta clean this up now..." He was standing still, shaking

his head as she moved on towards the Photo Department at the end of the hall.

Camera bags had been piled on the worktable against one wall. Saturday night, 10:45. Whoever had been shooting sports was back, probably in one or two of the film loading closets, spooling film for developing tanks. Sports consumed lots of film. She usually shot eight or more rolls at a basketball game. She crossed the room to her locker for spare clothes. Photography was a surprisingly dirty job. In Milwaukee, she'd often come back from assignments wet or muddy or sooty. There, she'd learned to keep spare clothes. She'd discovered Boston was no cleaner. But, her locker was empty except for an old green, translucent plastic, raincoat. She wasn't working this weekend and had taken her spare clothes home to wash. She wound the film back into the cartridge and removed it from the Leica, then tucked the camera into her bag. It was her own camera, the paper's were Nikon single reflex cameras, more versatile for news work, too bulky to just schlep around.

She kicked off her shoes then, feeling the department's grimy floor, thought better of it, stepping back into them. Even if she didn't believe the heels were long for her photography world, bare-feet in pantyhose were not an option.

Most of the loading rooms were closets with a countertop on which to load light-tight developing tanks with film in the dark before taking them out to the "wet" side of the department where the film could be processed with lights on, and photographers could smoke. The door to the only loading room with a sink was ajar. It was a mini-darkroom used when film needed to be inspected by eye while being processed. Conveniently, one entire side of the space was a deep sink.

Raincoat and film cartridge in hand, Susan stepped in, flipped on the light and closed the door. She adjusted the thermostatically controlled faucet to 100 degrees and pulled off her dress dropping it into the flowing water at the bottom of the stainless steel sink. She looked down at herself, assessing the damage. Funny thing, darkrooms weren't equipped with mirrors. The teddy she'd thought of as nearly beige, because she hadn't wanted to admit that it was actually gold when she bought it, wrapped her tightly.

If the dress and shoes had been an indulgence, this had been over-the-top, bought from *Good & Bad*, a luxurious lingerie shop where she'd only meant to browse. It had cost a third of the dress. The shop did have mirrors and she'd liked the way she looked in it, the teddy's flashiness distracted from her love handles. No built-in support, but its snugness and cut gave her top a nice profile without wearing a bra. Protected by the silk dress it remained paint free. "Good, good silk," she thought. Gently, she moved the fabric beneath the faucet until the water ran clear and she spread it on the sink bottom, a slight flow of water running over it. She dried her hands, readied a stainless-steel developing tank, a film spool and a church key on the counter before turning off the lights.

In total darkness, film canister in her left hand, church key in her right, she enjoyed the familiar motions of twisting and prying off the cartridge's tin end, then slipping the roll into her the palm. Using her teeth, she ripped off the narrow end of the film then tucked it into the stainless reel, comfortably spooling until over half the film's length was snug between ridges. She'd only exposed three frames of the thirty-six possible. Again, she used her teeth to tear the film then threw away the last half of the roll. The restaurant adrenaline had faded. Her nerves were those that unsettled her every time she processed film until, looking at the negatives on a light box, she confirmed that they were properly exposed, developed and sharp under a loupe. Until that moment, she was never confident that she had nailed an assignment. Plenty could go wrong: mechanical failure, bad exposure, worn out chemistry. No way to know until the image was there on the processed negative—or not. Her first year in Milwaukee she'd photographed the mayor distractedly walking into the swimming pool after a personal confrontation with his nemesis at a recreation facility dedication—the lens cap had been on her Leica—no pictures. No more lens caps. Fear of failure nerves heightened the excitement, the anticipation and, ultimately, the rush she felt when she had it in the can, as the movie people liked to say.

Her three undeveloped frames in the developing tank were just "information," photography at its most basic. Not, by any stretch of the imagination, "graphic art." But, pray God, newsworthy. She didn't know precisely what had driven her to photograph Harrington and his dinner partners. Maybe somewhere in her brain were archived images of Harrington and the gray-haired man which, when her synapses cross-referenced them, prompted

a misalignment signal of some kind—the subliminal, instinctual message which she had responded to. Was it as misguided as her not so subliminal instinct to doll herself up to bed Rick? Her rational mind had vetoed that before she'd finished dolling herself up, way before they'd even sat down in the restaurant. Though, relatively, if the sex had been great, losing her hairdresser's professional services wouldn't have been such a great loss—in no way comparable to losing the job she'd always wanted on a big Eastern paper because of a moment's instinct. That wouldn't be so easy to digest.

She opened the door into the brightness outside the developing closet to a loud whistle. “Hey, babe, right on over,” Greg said from across the room. He had an eight roll developing tank in his hands. “Nice outfit. Saturday night in Spring. Feelin’ it. Good time to be had by all. Give me a shot, Susan. I can do two things at once.”

“Oh, shut up,” she said, stepping back and slamming the door. He was the last person she wanted to see her stripped down to a gold silk teddy and heels. The rigid creases of the old plastic raincoat scratched against her. All the closures didn't work so she had to wrap it around herself pinning it with her arms. The glamor she'd felt moments before was a short-lived sensation. She stepped out again.

“Didn't have to change, just for me,” Greg said. “I liked the first look better—very hot. This is more ambiguous, but peekaboo is kind 'a fun. Looking like that, I am ready to ask you out again. Forgive you for refusing me last time.”

She didn't have to change for Greg. She didn't have to do anything for Greg. She had nothing to say to Greg, so she didn't. Their mutual feeling, for months. Not her fault that his photography sucked dead bears. Not her fault that he sucked.

She mixed the developer carefully, enough for two rolls though she only needed half as much, leaving nothing to chance. The coat kept falling open. She kept her back to Greg and focused on the processing. After fifteen minutes, there they were: three frames, a little dark, slightly over-exposed, but not too dense. She hung them in the heated drying cabinet next to Greg's seven rolls, she didn't have the patience to let them air dry. Greg said nothing further and left. She checked on her dress. No obvious paint. It looked like it would survive the flow of water. So far, so good. Gently, she wrung it out, draping it on the sink's edge.

She pulled the nearly dry film from the dryer and held it up to the light, curiosity getting the better of her. As she did, she heard the door open.

“Hawt diggidy dawg,” Jake said. “There are rewards for geezers like me working Saturday night. Party-girl’s here.” He wolf whistled.

“Damn, Jake,” she blushed rewrapping the plastic around herself. “Silly me. You better damn well look the other way. Kathy would never forgive me if you had a heart attack because I got you too excited. I’ll do my best not to. But sometimes, a girl can’t help how she affects people. Not to mention dirty-minded old men. Better leave the danger zone.”

“*Saturday Night Susan*, is it? How’ve I missed her these twenty-four months? Coming in, Howie told me you were a hazard. Didn’t tell me what kind of hazard. Moonlighting burlesque?”

“Give it a rest, Jake. My dress had paint all over it.”

“That’s what Howie said. But as you are, Susan, quite fine with me. Quite lovely. Really. Be my guest. But, we won’t say anything to Kathy.”

“Oh, Jake, stop it, will you?”

“You’re pretty when you’re angry.”

“I’m not angry.”

“That true? I must not have said the wrong thing. Let me think.”

“Give me a break, will you.”

“All right. I won’t address your nubileness any more. What’s up? I don’t believe you are supposed to be on tonight.”

She handed him the film, not worrying about the plastic coat.

“Three over-exposed shots of men in suits in a restaurant,” he said. “Exciting stuff.”

“They’re not over-exposed.”

“Now, calm down, lass. They’re half-a-stop or more over. But they’ll print. No problem. So, what’s got you so churned up?”

“I’m not sure.”

He looked at her curiously. “Why don’t you tell father O’Malley all?”

“Because you’re on a deadline.”

“Takes me a while to get the cigar going. I’ve got that much time.”

She hitched herself up onto the counter, setting the negative strip down next to herself. Beginning to pull the coat around herself, she realized what she was or wasn’t wearing didn’t really matter with Jake O’Malley. Over fifty, he had been with the *Star* since high school and was her godfather at

the paper. A Jake, thirty years younger, would suit her just fine. But, the godfather role was all she wanted from this Jake. Not many people like him in the world. She loved being the new aunt to his grandkids, and she went all mushy watching Jake and his wife Kathy tease each other.

The beat-up, olive drab, metal chair groaned with his weight. Susan watched his routine: He pulled out a thick, stubby cigar. He slid it from its cellophane wrapper. He admired it. He threw the wrapper on the floor. Carefully, he bit off an end and spat it onto the floor. He peeled the band from the cigar and dropped it on the floor. The matches were deep in a pocket of his tattered, tweed sports coat. He struck one, held it to the cigar then puffed. When his match hit the floor, she knew he was ready. She recounted the restaurant incident as best she could.

Listening, he puffed in silence, leaning back for a minute when she was through.

“Okay,” he finally said. “You’ve gone through all of this trouble to get a shot of Harrington with someone you think you recognize and these other gents. What’s the punch line?”

“Punch line?”

“Come on, lass. Don’t keep me on the edge of my seat. Who’re the other gents? What have they done?”

“I told you, I don’t know.”

“You really don’t know? I thought you were saying that for effect. You don’t know?” he repeated for emphasis, then produced a series of eloquent shrugs and rotations of his cigar as he reflected. “You disrupt a highly fashionable Boston restaurant. You accost a dinner party of four suspiciously-respectable-looking men, one of whom we know for sure is a prominent figure with Boston’s biggest bank. You offend the man you were dining-out with, then walk out on him. You risk opening up the *Star* to ridicule, maybe to a lawsuit. Finally, you end the evening by exposing yourself in your undies to your colleagues and a fifty-year-old father of four. Cowgirl, sounds like you’ve gone too far even for the far West, and certainly for Boston. Susan, I think you had better put your clothes back on and be sitting demurely in that banker’s reception room Monday morning. Or we may not have the pleasure of your company by Monday night.”

For a moment tears welled up in Susan. The way he said “clothes back on” was very harsh. Jake had never spoken to her like this in over two years.

But the job-warning bell had been ringing ever since she'd clicked the shutter. Protectively, she pulled the scratchy plastic around herself.

"I know there is a story," she said. "I just know it. I may not have done this stuff for decades like you, but I haven't been sitting on my hands for the last four years. Every instinct tells me..."

"Susan," Jake interrupted, raising his cigar. "Most likely you are wrong. Too ambitious for your own britches—if you were wearing any. So, I'd bet against you. You are probably wrong. But, you could be right. Stranger things have happened. You've stuck your neck out just about as far as it will go. But, right or wrong, there is one piece of advice I can give you, one thing I have learned during my decades, which will serve you well." He paused enjoying her anticipation. Grinning slightly, he said, "No matter what, it'll wait 'til Monday. Monday morning, make a couple of prints. Maybe someone around here will know something. Right or wrong you know there's going to be a shit-storm. Now, I do have a deadline thirty-five minutes from now."

The last of the adrenaline left her. Jake had pretty well talked down her excitement. So much for her intuitive photo exploit. Even the thrill she felt at being a little sexy had disappeared. She watched him walk to the loading room he always used, cigar clamped in his teeth, which guaranteed the room was pretty much always his. "Don't know how you can close the door with that thing burning," she said. He closed the door.

She felt pig-headed, hated that Jake could be right. Her nearly five years as a newspaper photographer couldn't just be ignored. They counted. But he was right about the weekend: wash the dress, do the laundry, spend twenty-four mundane hours on Sunday, then get to the paper early Monday. She jumped down from the counter landing with a jolt on the heels which were not mundane. She shed the scratchy plastic onto the counter she'd been sitting on. After Jake's depressing lecture, she allowed herself to feel free in the heels and teddy, sashaying across the room, returning to the little darkroom for her wet dress. Might as well enjoy the sensations, pretty soon she'd be back in sweats. She stuffed the damp dress into a canvas utility bag, put the scratchy coat on again, slung her shoulder purse with the Leica over her head and left.

"Space-shot," she thought, the elevator settling at the ground floor. She pushed "two." She hadn't filed the negs. Clearly, she was tired, frazzled and

somehow out of her element. The negative strip had been on the counter next to where she'd been sitting, talking to Jake. Which was the first place she looked. No negs. "What the hell?" She thought of Harrington. There was no way anyone could have gotten in and taken them. They'd been right there, next to her. She looked down along the dark gray base of the counter. A sliver of reflection from the almost invisible strip propped on edge could just be seen. Swept off by the stiff plastic coat when she jumped down? Irrationally, she was feeling someone, somehow, had stolen them and her heart was pounding. More out of control instincts. "I am paranoid, I am fantasizing," she thought as she inserted the negative strip in an eight-and-a-half by eleven envelope, filing it under her birth date of the prior year. Anyone searching for it would have a hell of a time finding it, as if anyone was going to be looking. She could be pretentious beyond her own belief, as if these pictures were on her road to a Pulitzer. Dream on. She really was a ditz.

"Oh, Miss Kessel..." the security guard greeted her as she approached him to call her a cab.

"Quiet evening, Bill?" she asked.

"Yes, quiet. Not so quiet upstairs, I heard," he grinned at her. "But, what I wanted to tell you is that there was a guy here looking for you. He said he'd wait for you in his car, by the entrance to the lot."

"Thanks, Bill," she said.

"Damn you, Rick," she thought, pausing a moment. "Oh, screw it," she said out loud heading for the door. When she'd walked out of the restaurant, she knew she hadn't created "closure" on the evening for Rick. And, from her hours in his barber's chair, listening, listening, listening—she knew how important "closure" was to Rick. "Closure" with the business partner he'd split from, "closure" with clients who left him. Closure, closure, closure. She should have known he wouldn't wait for days to get closure with her. He'd get closure before midnight. Her heels clicked harshly on the parking lot pavement.

Arms grabbed her so hard she bit her tongue. Her struggle didn't loosen the grip a fraction. She began to scream. But her mouth was covered by a rough hand and Bill was twenty feet away behind a door. They pushed her into a shadow around a corner of the building where she couldn't be seen from the entrance. Four arms held her. All of the adrenaline from earlier

exploded inside her. Rage pumped through her at the unwanted contact, at her helplessness. She tried biting the hand.

“Calm down, lady or I’ll bash your face in.”

She pulled against them. Nothing.

“Bitch, I’m going to hurt you.”

Susan stopped struggling. She wasn’t a fighter. She had to fight her anger to let herself go limp.

“That’s better,” he said. “I’m going to uncover your mouth. Make a noise and you’ll lose teeth. Got it?”

She could barely hear him over the sound of her pounding blood, but she nodded. “What the hell could she do?” He released her mouth.

“We want the pictures. Go get ‘em, we’re done.”

“Yeah, and who’re you working for?” a second voice said.

“You’re hurting me, I can’t think,” she said.

They loosened their grip.

“You want the pictures?” she said. Then heard the door to the paper opening nearby. This was her moment. She slammed her heel down on a foot, struck out with her elbows as hard as she could and screamed with all her might.

Right into a hand, which slammed down on her mouth completely muffling her cry, as the iron grip of the men entrapped her again.

“She’s crazed,” the voice said. “This won’t work. Use the stuff.”

It smelled like a dentist’s office or hospital before everything faded away.

The smell lingered as she regained consciousness. Disoriented, for a moment she thought she was in a hospital. The car shook her into reality. She felt the soreness on her tongue. She remembered the arms entwining her. The threats. Chloroform? Ether? Silly photos: a non-descript picture of four men at dinner. So she was being abducted? Kidnapped? Too strange. Too bizarre. Funny idea. The car hit some kind of bump. Not funny, not a funny idea. The odor lingered. The car’s suspension shuddered on the rough road. Each bump jarred her senses, jolted her back to life. Her face burned as her anger came back. “Think. Do something. No. Think. Think first, carefully. Don’t move. Stay still.” Her bag pulled at her shoulder. The heat and mass of the men pressed either side of her. Front seat of a car. The elbow of the man on her left kept rubbing against her: steering motions. Her head lay back, resting on her right cheek. She

opened an eye. A thick neck partially covered by a nylon collar filled most of her field of vision. Beyond, through the car window she could see darkened storefronts occasionally relieved by the lights of a pizza shop, a Dunkin Donuts, a bar. A building-by-building inventory of a neighborhood north of Boston that she may have visited, but only on assignment. At least it was urban, maybe civilization. She lay motionless. She'd better act before they left "civilization." Her heart pounded. A strange stillness filled her, as though this wasn't happening to her. Totally unfamiliar, she didn't know what it was. She could only assume the worst. Whatever.

She lifted her head.

"Act normal, lady," the driver said. "Wrong move and you'll be sorry. Shut your mouth."

"Oh, come on," she said, her voice slightly more than a squeak. She said it in a straightforward way then looked at each of them. They were her age, late twenties. Fleshy at the collar, non-menacing bland faces, overweight. Both smoked, windows open. "Thanks for opening the windows," she said.

"Shut-up," the second guy barked.

"Just being appreciative, sir." Her comment dripped with sarcasm. "Mistake," she thought as his elbow smashed her solar plexus. Puke rose in her throat. Stupid comment. She gasped for breath. No one had ever hit her. She jacked forward. Her head bounced off of the car's padded dash. Her body felt beyond control, wheezing, gasping, bubbling with unsettled bile and rushing gastric juices. Indignity added to her fury, as much as pain. "Ommm," she thought as her uncontrolled gasping for air continued. "Ommm," she thought, straining to relax her taut nerves and muscles. Finally, the low sound of an "ommm" immersed from her chest. With it she regained a semblance of composure.

The driver rammed his elbow into her chest knocking her back into the seat. Her knee jerked up, flipping open the raincoat and uncovering much of her thighs. These guys liked roughing her up. "No shit," she thought. Didn't make sense. Making sense wasn't a priority, not with these guys. Jumpy as hell. A motion, a sound and WHAM! One good thing: she wasn't going to puke. The men were silent. Revere beach? Lynn? Didn't much matter. A really, really bad thing: she was no match for them. They were really, really strong, at least compared with her. It made her furious. She despised helplessness. Clearly, she'd be done with as they pleased. She was sweating

despite the cool spring air. A false move and she would be puking on the floor. There was a Kung Fu studio next to her yoga studio. She should have been going there.

Her instincts struggled with her reasoning. This had to be about her pictures in the restaurant. Nothing else in her life was even a remote possibility. So, the good news was a confirmation of her instincts. The bad news? If she disappeared, no one would find the negs in her files even though she'd shown them to Jake and told him about them. Of course, Rick had been there. All thoughts that didn't link with what she was feeling: the end of this trip wasn't going to be a good one for Susan Kessel.

"He wants to know who she's working for," the guy on her right said.

"She's crazy, needs some work," the driver replied.

His comment didn't make it easier for her to function. She closed her eyes, to calm herself, to distance herself from panic. When she opened her eyes, she noticed the guy on her right's gaze. It kept focusing on her thighs. She'd forgotten how little she was wearing. He lit another cigarette. Did she sense anticipation? That really made her feel like puking. "Can I ask something," she said. Then waited for the blow. When it didn't come, she sat up a bit more, opening the coat, uncovering herself, waist down. The teddy's gold silk pulled tautly across her crotch, reflecting the streetlights as they passed by. The driver was now glancing at her too, at least at the abbreviated version of herself that was highlighted.

"Who sent you?" she asked.

"Shut-up!"

"Come on, what's this all about?"

"Shut the fuck up!"

The photos, she knew. The rest... Not good. Her instincts had gotten her into this, and now they were all she had to go on.

"How about a cigarette, sailor," she said doing her damndest, swimming in adrenaline to sound both meek and alluring so he could focus on her crotch. "How about it?" she repeated.

"Give her a cigarette, Joey. Shut her up," the driver said.

Susan looked his way. He was driving. The lightshow in her lap held both of their attention. What they were imagining... She didn't have to go there. Then Joey passed his cigarette in her direction. Even under the circumstances, the idea of putting his cigarette in her mouth revolted her.

She took it from him. She spread her legs a bit further. The fabric couldn't have been much thinner or tighter. Glinting, shiny, she was all there in gold relief. The guy took her cigarette and lit a new one for himself. Gave it back to her. Tense. She was tense. They all were.

"Where we going?" She asked. Neither guy said anything. Neither hit her. Progress. She had to pretend to enjoy the smoke and not choke. She lifted the cigarette towards her lips. The stiff plastic coat moved further off her left shoulder. The teddy's snugness squeezed her left breast, ready to pop out from the taut silk. She tugged the coat's plastic. The driver grabbed it open.

"Don't block the view," he said in a raw whisper, not glancing at her, but staring down her front as he stopped at a red light. Her brow burned with the intensity of their gazes, with her own panicky nervousness, and then with her sudden recognition that this was her moment to move: she could see the play she had to make—she was fourth and about a hundred to make it—it was all she had. The intersection's brightness gave the driver all the view he could wish for without actually peeling the silk off her.

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