

Secrets Of Lies

Jeffrey Birch

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Dr. Hanford Morgan sits in his car staring at the mansion in the distance a block away having agreed to go. He was powerless to say no. What she asks he does.

Windows are fogging in the rain. Not heavy yet. That's on the way – the storm in full force. Storms have been coming in succession for more than a week. Some kind of anomalous weather pattern the guy on TV repeated three nights in a row. He runs a hand over the windshield, clearing the glass temporarily for the few seconds more he wants to study the residence before going in.

Lights are on. The first floor is ablaze but the second nearly lost to the night and rain. It's late, long past midnight. Templeau is up, home, maybe alone, maybe not. Seems like too many lights if he were away with her. But it couldn't be *her*. She's at the beach house. He left her standing in the satin nightgown on the porch watching him drive away. Templeau will be with one of his teen-aged lovers if he's with anyone.

Victor Templeau, philandering husband, zillionaire and managing partner of the Templeau Fund, the phenomenally successful hedge fund is the object of her hatred. A criminal and serial rapist of young girls she scoffed the night before, loathing in her voice, rolling to him in the dark, hands on him, satin sheets rustling – had stolen from her something more valuable than money. That's what she said adding, "You have to make him give it to you. It's in the safe, in his office. I'm counting on you, Han. Don't disappoint me, darling."

She hasn't told him the current teen lover's name. Maybe she doesn't know. Not something a cheating spouse would offer. She found out about the affair, the 'teen fuck fest' she calls it. Her language is sometimes coarse. Got hold of his cell phone and scrolled through the calls. Earlier tonight when Morgan was with her, before he left for the mansion she said, dry-eyed that he'll pay through the nose. She often speaks with clichés peppering her language.

Templeau was smart enough not to have made this lover, the most recent, a contact with a name, just the same number called repeatedly with an equal numbers of returned calls. She called the number one time, she said. Was curious, needed to know, to be sure. The voice sounded young, laughed at her and hung up. The girl must have alerted Templeau because he kept the phone with him after, she said.

She said once before when they were together in an offhand manner like it wasn't important that she didn't care what he did. But he thinks she does at some level. Married to Templeau for ten years has to mean something. They still live in the same house together officially, legally and at the times when she says she has to briefly be there for the sake of *appearances*. Sleep in the same bed he imagines but doesn't ask that question. Maybe not. He hopes not.

She laments sometimes that it was a loveless marriage after the first year. Is she now getting even with him? Tit for tat? Cuckolding the philandering bastard or getting her physical needs met? She has them – most everyone does. He doesn't know, doesn't really care about that either. She's with him and is like no one he's ever known.

He wonders if he's her first lover apart from her husband. She's implied he is but not exactly said it. He wants to be. She laughs when she says he's cuckolding her husband. Uses the word. Serves the bastard right, she says, words spitting like venom. Is

he revenge or is it the infidelity game played by the filthy rich? He wonders if Templeau knows about him and cares if he does – if she's told him, threw it in his face.

She said she brought her own money to the marriage. Sneered when she said it, that it felt like a dowry, a bride price, not a combining of wealth – not mutual. The beach house is hers from her family. “The bastard can't touch it.”

Templeau had not made his fortune then, at the beginning. He had prospects, she confided, and he was good-looking with his black hair and French features but he'd put on weight. She said the last part with disdain, not disappointment in her voice.

The last time they were together at the beach house before tonight, last night, she said that she loved him, her voice husky with ardor. “I love you, Han.” And he'd replied that he loved her too. He'd never said that to a woman. It felt awkward to say in reply, not being first. What choice is there then, being second: me too, ditto, back at you, thanks?

If love has a definition, he loves her he thinks. Sex with her is intense – over-the-top, leaves him breathless. She's the more experienced. The thought that edges into his mind in the car, in the rain, watching the house is what she loves is their lovemaking. But she laughs with him saying he makes her happy, her voice sounding sincere. Still, he wonders.

Morgan stares at the gun as he turns it in his lap. The steel barrel glints dully in weak light from the dashboard. She gave it to him that evening just before he left for the mansion saying that her husband has guns in the house, several. It's a precaution she said. He remembers asking why she has it and she'd said casually, smoking a cigarette, that it's for protection when she's alone at the beach house and sighed then saying again that the beach house is hers and where she comes when she can't stand it any longer with him.

Her next words travel again through his head. “He won't just give it to you. You can expect him to refuse. You'll have to force him at gunpoint. I must have what's in the safe. Tell him my lawyers say I can take him to the cleaners. Show him the pictures. Tell him I know what he's been doing.” She pushed a big envelope across the bed. “Show him. Tell him he can have the house, the boat. I don't want his teen fuck fest castles.” Her upper lip curled at the insult. “Just what's in the safe. That's all and I destroy the photos the private detective took. They could be more prurient but there's so many they establish a pattern of wanton infidelity. Make sure he understands the trade. Tell him, Han. Tell him, darling Han.”

She stubbed out the cigarette then – he hates her smoking, and stood from the bed in her pearl-colored satin gown and bare feet, stretching arms reaching high just before he left for the mansion after their lovemaking. The big diamond ring, four carats, he guesses sparkled in moonlight pouring through French doors. The diamond bracelet slipped from wrist to forearm and the billowy sleeves gathered at her elbows. She has beautiful arms, beautiful everything. He remembers wondering how Templeau can cheat when he can have Lola every night.

The night is dark under dense clouds pouring down rain now. He's waited a few minutes too long. He doesn't care about that. What matters is inside hers and Templeau's house.

A third check of the gun. Some kind of revolver. Nothing has changed with it. Nothing can in ten minutes. Six bullets in place. Morgan homes the cylinder into the frame again. Time to go.

Brandishing it is not what he hopes will result from the meeting. She said the pictures and documents in the envelope should be more than enough. She repeated, “Tell him all I want is what’s in the safe that’s mine and the divorce. He can fuck as many silicone-boobed teen-aged strippers he wants.”

She handed him a key then and recited the security system code numbers to memorize. “Go in the side door, turn off the alarm if it’s on. The pad is to the left. If he’s not roaming around the house, he’ll be upstairs with the latest one.” Her laugh sounded forced. “That would be the best, to find him naked in bed with one of his equally naked chippies and then roll out the evidence in front of them. Drop the photos slowly on the bed one by one. The kid is one of the stars. That’ll take the turgor out his bean.” She can be colorful with her language.

Morgan is breathing hard even before jogging to the house, silently closing the car door, standing in the rain. He runs to the side door as Lola directed. Dark clothing is lost to the night and rain but lights seem everywhere – streetlights and neighboring house yard lights cut through the weather but the street is quiet – no dog walkers, no one but him. The one block dash and along the circle drive, around the stone structure takes time. The rain is falling harder, the pavement slippery. He’ll be soaked and look like a wet dog in front of Templeau.

It’s a big house, a mansion on mansion row. Morgan stops at the back door. It’s locked. He expects that. She said it would be. The key slides easily onto the lock. The door swings silently inward. Fingers find the pad and silence the alarm. It’s activated.

Glancing about he sees that the kitchen is large with expensive appliances. Lights are on. She said he fancies himself a chef without formal training. Imagining Victor Templeau laboring over a six-burner commercial gas range is difficult but many people have hobbies. Morgan likes sports cars, studies them, has a few posters but doesn’t own one.

The house is quiet, eerie as he moves silently through rooms, many rooms. That also takes time. More than he expects. Suddenly, he’s afraid. The gun trembles in his hand. He’s an intruder committing armed unlawful entry. Templeau can shoot him and claim self-defense. Morgan slides the gun into a pocket, holding it but it’s out of sight, less confrontational he thinks as he moves from room to room. He imagines trading shots, Templeau falling to the floor, him unhurt. Still, as he roams through rooms he doubts he can pull the trigger. He’s a doctor, for God’s sake.

After fifteen minutes, no one is on the first floor. Morgan ascends the broad, winding staircase. He needs to know if Templeau is in the house. Stopping at the top, he listens for voices and hears none. Morgan’s brow pinches wondering if Templeau is asleep or possibly in the passionate embrace of the girlfriend as Lola suggested, hoped she said. Just desserts and all that. Humiliating, hilarious to imagine she said through a laugh. “God. I’d love to be there and see his face,” she’d said, her face in a snarl.

Another fifteen minutes confirms the house is empty on the first and second floors. Templeau is not in the master suite but the bed is rumped, satin sheets in a knot, Lola’s sheets, and blankets tossed around. Someone has been in it recently since a large wet yellow stain is on the bottom sheet. Urine. Other rooms look like scenes from an architectural magazine like staged sets. Two people living in the house couldn’t spend time in six, no, seven bedrooms.

Morgan noticed a door in the kitchen when he came in that probably leads to a cellar since he hasn't spotted a wine cellar on the first floor. A light illuminates the stairs. Lola commented that her husband has a wine collection worth more than most average people's houses. She exaggerated the word "average." Average people she said. Lola and Victor Templeau are not average but Morgan is average in terms of wealth. Wealth brings privilege and possessions. Morgan has neither but until Lola, he didn't feel it.

He makes his way back to the kitchen, finds the gun again, grips it and stares down the steps. He can see to the bricked floor below. No mysterious descent, no one lying in wait at the foot of the stairs. The third step creaks. His breath catches as he freezes in place and tears the gun from the pocket, pointing it down. Still quiet.

Huge houses have huge basements. This one has halls and doors that open onto rooms that open onto other rooms. He moves through them. He finds the wine cellar. It's enormous, as she said.

Morgan hitches a step entering a workroom with tools. In the center of the floor a young woman lays on her back. She's pretty in a gaudy sort of way where Templeau's wife, his lover, is beautiful in a sophisticated sort of way. The girl has large, firm breasts, good bones in her face and great legs. Her breasts are obviously augmented that Lola said her husband lusts for, ample of hips with a round, kewpie doll face with smeared makeup. She's dressed in a diaphanous nightgown with nothing beneath and she's dead.

Kneeling down, he looks for what killed her. She's quite young, late teens, no more. Challenging to gauge her age beneath the makeup but too young to be here. Not likely a heart attack. No visible bullet holes, or knife wounds. No apparent contusions or obvious swelling. No signs of strangulation on her neck. Poison is a possibility. Eyes are open but beginning to cloud. She's been dead a short time. Her face is in repose but with a slightly surprised expression like she can sit up at any second apart from the eyes – dead eyes. Checking for a pulse in her neck, he finds none. He notices the yellowish stain on the nightgown beneath her hips. She was in the bed and died there, releasing her bladder with death. He's completing his emergency medicine residency. He knows what death looks like. He lifts an arm. It moves freely. No rigor mortis yet signaling she died less than four hours ago.

Morgan stands, jams the pistol back in a pocket. Something happened to end this young woman's life by accident or intent. Templeau must have panicked and carried her body down three floors. He might have gone for help to dispose of the body deciding any calls were risky. If so, he might return at any moment.

"Time to get out of here."

Before he dashes up the stairs, he finds his phone and takes a dozen photos from different angles with a couple of close ups of her face. A few of the shots capture the room and its detail. Tools and furniture can be replaced but not easy to pull up the brick floor or make a window disappear. Pocketing the phone, he mumbles, "Solid gold. Solid, gruesome gold. Lola will get whatever she wants."

Returning to the car, rain is falling harder, coming down in sheets, shoved by a stiff wind, buffeting him – big, cold drops with humidity that makes him sweat under the jacket. With the engine running, he sits eyeing the house. Fifteen minutes later, the biggest Lexus he can recall pulls into the circle drive stopping beyond the house. Behind, a white panel van without markings that Morgan can see stops in front of the entrance.

Victor Templeau, he recognizes him, jumps from the car, bounds up the steps and into the house. Lola showed him photos of her husband from the envelope shot by the PI saying don't shoot the bastard unless he tries to shoot you. It's Templeau, no doubt. Immediately, lights are extinguished. The house is dark in seconds.

The sudden knot in his stomach concurrent with the lights being extinguished is severe. "I forgot to reset the alarm. Maybe he won't remember." Morgan considers that if Templeau does, the only person to turn it off is she, his wife. "Maybe a maid but not the maid at two in the morning." As the house darkens, lost in the pelting rain, the man in the van enters with a swaggering, confident gait. He's a big man, burly, hands stuffed in pockets, shoulders hunched to the rain that drips from his billed cap.

Morgan waits. Thirty minutes later, the van driver emerges carrying over his shoulder what has to be the body wrapped in black plastic. He throws it carelessly in back like a rug and slams closed the doors. Templeau is not in sight, stripping the bed probably, wadding Lola's sheets for disposal. Frantic, frightened or heartlessly methodical. He only knows Templeau through Lola's vituperative comments.

"He's getting rid of the body and the evidence." Morgan knows the urine stain carries DNA – her DNA.

The van drives away as rain falls harder, wind stiffening as if trying to slow it. It ploughs forward crashing along the flooded street. Morgan follows the van through Charleston, south from the city to a remote beach location. It pulls into a dark parking lot. The guy gets out, walks to the rear double doors and hefts the body over a shoulder. In one hand is a shovel. Morgan follows well behind. The rain abruptly ceases as if it gives up resistance. What happens can't be stopped. Morgan is afraid to intervene. He watches.

The guy walks over a hummock many feet from the water where sea grass meets sand. It's above the tide line and a few rocky outcroppings dotted the area. The South coast of South Carolina is a beach building area. Since the Civil War, the beach at Sullivan's Island for example has extended many yards out to where the officer's mansions of Fort Moultrie that once were beachfront properties are now several blocks from the water. Ocean currents have carried sand from places as far north as New Jersey. There's no danger something buried here would be exposed in years to come. Morgan has learned that somewhere.

Morgan drops on the soggy grass to watch the guy dig from a safe distance. Forty minutes later, he's excavated a deep hole and rolls the body in. After back filling, he moves several sizable boulders over the grave and evens the sand with the shovel. Rain begins again but without its former enthusiasm and helps to mask the grave. Morgan sees that with shoreline winds blowing sand, the grave will quickly be invisible. As the guy straightens, Morgan dashes to his car, drives away with lights off narrowly missing a concrete barrier. After a time he sees the van has not seen him and slowly relaxes fingering the gun in a pocket. "Could I have shot the guy or Templeau? I held the gun in Templeau's house. I think I could have pointed it at him at least," Morgan whispers the words nervously as he drives as if someone can overhear. But he's escaped and seen where the body is buried. Morgan realizes he saw two extraordinary things: the place where the girl died and where she's been buried. To admit either to the police involves Lola and him in a way not easily explainable and perhaps illegal. He entered the home with a gun to take something from its owner. Morgan feels the folded envelope with the photos in a pocket of the jacket realizing he should not have gone, not have acquiesced to

her. Too late for that. “I couldn’t refuse her and I can’t come forward now. I can’t do that to her, or me.”

Morgan recalls as he races to her after leaving the desolate beach that merely one week has passed since meeting Lola Leigh Templeau. Every available minute since of her choosing has been spent at the beach house walking in the ebb and flow of the ocean as it meets the sandy shore, his trousers rolled, she barefoot in short dresses or billowy trousers, him holding her shoes, her body close or lounging in the big house, making love and making love again.

It began at a restaurant. Ocean Fresh was relatively new in Charleston. The reservation was seven days in the happening. Morgan made it for his friend Mike and him, also a resident at the same hospital. Mike received a call that he needed to take a shift in his internal medicine residency at Charleston Presbyterian and had to cancel explaining the resident scheduled to work was in a car accident and he was next on the list. Morgan could relate.

Since he wanted to experience the restaurant, he went alone.

They'd met or more accurately, she'd invited him to her table after furtive, then open looks across the room. She was movie star beautiful and he was both surprised and flattered at the attention. A waiter, hers, approached his table and whispered the invitation fighting to hold a straight face hiding amusement or envy. Whatever.

"Have my bill brought the lady's table. I'll leave from there." His meal was finished and he'd been considering coffee but that could wait. He approached.

She smiled but only slightly saying, "Please join me." Her voice was soft, breathy, inviting.

He could see she was older close up. Thirties maybe to his twenty-six. She held his eyes as he sat.

"Thank you."

"We seem to be the only orphans. I'm Lola." She extended a hand across the table trailing a diamond bracelet. Her left was in her lap.

"Hanford Morgan."

Her eyes never left him. "What do you do, Hanford Morgan when your not dining alone in restaurants that are hard to get a table in?"

"I'm in my last year of residency at Charleston Presbyterian Hospital."

"A physician."

"Soon to be, officially."

"Do you have a specialty?"

He wanted to joke saying gynecology or cosmetic surgery but said emergency medicine.

Her penetrating stare seemed to look deep within him and he flushed uncontrollably, forced to look down.

He cleared his throat and met her eyes again. "And you? You don't seem the type to be dining alone."

"What type would that be?"

He could feel the flush warm his neck and face. "I, I don't know that I have a description for solitary diners. My dinner companion, a male colleague, had to cancel at the last second. I wanted to experience the restaurant." Morgan wondered why he felt the need to say his date was with a guy.

“I’m here for the same reason although I did not have someone who cancelled. Dr. Morgan. May I call you Hanford?”

“Everybody calls me Han.”

“Do you have a car, Han?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve drunk more wine than I should. Could you drive me home?”

“Oh. Well, of course. Is it Miss or Mrs.?” He probed wondering why he asked. He was just driving her home.

“That doesn’t matter.” She motioned to the waiter for her bill and Morgan asked for his. When they arrived, she claimed both.

“Really, I can’t let you do that.”

“Her laugh was breathy and low. “Taxies are expensive and you don’t know how far you’re driving.”

Most of an hour was spent getting to the beach house. Morgan noticed her head lolled against the seat back with eyes closed. She was arrestingly beautiful in the punctuated interval of streetlights that washed warmly over her face. Turning onto a lane, the lights ended. It soon terminated at a crossing road that bordered the Atlantic.

“Four drives ahead. Right turn on the drive. Stop at the house.”

A moon just past full shimmered across the water in the distance. Silvery light outlined the house. It was a craftsman style structure with unfinished cedar shake siding, square angled columns, shutters, a wraparound porch and a widow’s walk. It was large, grand and sat prominently on a low rise that fronted the beach. With the engine stopped, he turned to her uncertain of what to do.

“Han? Walk me to the house.”

“Sure.” He walked around the car, shoes sinking in sand over their tops and opened the door.

She handed him her high-heeled shoes and offered her left hand. A big stone in a ring reflected moonlight in subtle colors. Wedding rings are on the left hand he remembered. She slid out and led him by the hand through a low picket fence with an arched arbor dividing it. The bricks on the walk were sprinkled with drifted sand. He guessed no amount of sweeping kept them clear for long.

Still holding his hand, they climbed the wooden steps and stopped at the door. Finding a key in her purse, she handed it to him. “Unlock the door, Han. I’ll disable the security system.”

The house was dark but she turned on no lights. Moonlight guided her through familiar spaces with Han in tow along a hall to a bedroom with French doors that opened onto the porch and overlooked the ocean. Moving purposefully, she pulled them open. The distant sound of surf met his ears. She stood him behind, staring at the moon over the water.

“I love the sound. Never tire of it. I’ll be back in a moment. Don’t leave, Han or you’ll disappoint me.”

She slipped around him into the darkness, brushing a shoulder with hers. As she passed close, her scent was intoxicating but restrained like she sprayed a mist and walked through it.

He walked onto the porch. It was a warm night after a hot, humid day but the ocean breeze felt wonderful. The sound of a door opening returned him to the room, eyes

accustomed to the darkness. A glimpse of her was all he saw in a gown that shimmered like water. She led him to the side of the bed. It was turned down; a maid he guessed.

“Take your clothes off.” She slid into the bed. He heard the bedding rustle with her movements.

“I...really...Lola...”

“Don’t talk, Han.” Her voice was husky, different.

In seconds he was naked beside her as she began and he the willing recipient. After, as both were breathing hard with a hand on his damp chest she said, “Promise me you won’t leave tonight.” Her voice was soft without the yearning from before, sleepy, contented.

“I promise.”

The Atlantic shore faces east and the rising sun. As it found his face, traveling into the room, he was awakened and reached for her but the bed was cold. Then he saw her standing on the porch watching the ocean in the shimmering gown.

“Do you always watch the sun come up?”

She turned to him. “Only when I’m happy.” Her smile was warm but small, restrained, controlled. “Use the bathroom. The blue toothbrush is new. Get dressed. We’ll have breakfast on the porch.”

When he came out, she was dressed in loose trousers like Katharine Hepburn might have worn and a sleeveless knit top above bare feet. She stood leaning in the French door jamb, arms folded, ankles crossed.

“Do you have a girlfriend, Han? Did you cheat on her?”

He shook his head. “No girlfriend. I’m married to the hospital for a while longer.”

Lola seemed to relax at that. “Is she demanding?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. “You’re married, though, aren’t you?”

“I told you that didn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

Lola sighed. “Yes, I suppose it does.”

She devoted ten minutes to explaining her relationship or absence of one. After she finished, he said, “You still live in the house in town, then.”

“I’m here alone as often as I wish but there are times I must be at the house. It’s complicated. I have obligations. We have associations, friends in common. Marriages with assets can be complicated. Things are tangled together. I have to watch out for myself. I’ve said all I care to about my marriage.

“Okay.”

“I’ll be here tonight. I want you to return after dark. To come to me.” She stared with longing into his eyes. “There’s something I need you to get for me but not tonight. Later. The side door will be unlocked tonight.” She stared at him with a sigh. “We’ve only just met but I have a feeling about you, for you that I can’t explain. It happens sometimes but rarely. I can feel you’re special, Han.”

Get what, he wondered.

That was the first time with Lola and every night for the following week. He had called in favor after favor, promised his resident colleagues anything they asked to give him the nights free from ER duty. He worked double shifts day after day.

On the seventh night, after lovemaking he found especially intense, Lola said, in her after-sex dreamy voice. "I need you to do something for me tonight. What I mentioned on our first night."

"Anything."

She explained what he was to do. The fear builds with each word. Why didn't he ask before saying anything? He can't say no. Not now.

The rain stops again as his car speeds to her but his clothes are damp, clammy against his skin from before. The clock on the dash glows 2:45 AM. It's late but she'll be waiting, wanting to know. The drive to the beach house is another ten minutes at that time of the morning. He chances a police stop, racing on deserted streets. The gun feels heavy in a pocket, the phone in another next to the envelope.

He parks behind the house, where she told him. The side door is unlocked. Moving through rooms to her bedroom he sees it's dark. Lola is not in bed. He imagines telling her with them naked beneath the satin sheets. Later, he hopes. Wandering farther toward the front of the house, he sees the open French doors from the bedroom to the porch. The point glow of a cigarette brightens and fades. He wishes she didn't smoke even on occasion as she does. To remonstrate her induces ire. Lola doesn't accept criticism, at least from him.

Her body is masked in darkness. Approaching, she says, "I saw you pull in." She doesn't look at him, tossing the cigarette over the porch rail. "I expected you before now." She turns to him her face mostly a silhouette asking in an even voice, "Did you get it?"

"No. Your husband wasn't home."

He hears her sigh, irked at his failure. He waits for a few seconds, withholding the photos in his phone, sensing her disappointment, perversely enjoying it until he produces them, holding his phone for her to see, seeing the change, anticipating her words. "My God, Han. This is..." She hesitates, searching for a word. "Unbelievable."

They discuss what happened. He relishes recounting every detail, controlling the information, an alpha male protecting his woman. She asks questions, has him repeat parts, scrolls through the images repeatedly, eyes riveted on them.

"I hope I haven't put you in danger."

Hearing the words, he wonders at their sincerity or if she really means that she wonders if she were in danger.

"No. No one saw me in the house. It was empty. The key and the code worked."

Her smile is warm as she kisses him saying, dear Han.

His mind shifts to what he's done; accepting a gun, entering a home in search of the owner, holding it, pointing it. Templeau could have shot him for the criminal he was. He questions again if he could have pulled the trigger. I'm a physician, Dr. Hanford Morgan, emergency medicine he had blurted to the windshield as he waited for Templeau to return. I don't carry guns into people's homes much less use them. He remembers his words.

She'd urged him, insisted on the going and pushed the gun into his hand with the envelope. Maybe she thought he would kill Templeau and her problems would be solved. He feels used suddenly but God he loves her. He can't think of anything she could ask he wouldn't do. Pondering his feelings he abruptly wonders how he'd have responded if she actually asked him to kill her husband. Could he go that far for her? The question lays unanswered as she takes his hand leading him inside.

"Something happened. I was delayed getting back. That's why it took longer."

"What?"

"Nothing relevant. My old car got wet and didn't start for a while."

She pushes him on the bed leaning over, naked beneath the gown. He can feel her breasts against his chest.

“Take those wet clothes off.”

He does. His eyes have adjusted. He can see her now. God, she is so beautiful he thinks as they slide beneath the sheets. She props onto an elbow.

He wants her desperately.

“Where did you take the photos? It’s in our basement somewhere.”

“I found her in one of the rooms. I can’t tell you which one. There are many.”

“I never go down there.”

Han goes over what happened again. Needs to say it. At the end, he says, “There may be a problem...for us, for you.”

She blinks, concern mapping her expectant face but waits, wordless.

“I turned off the alarm as you said but forgot to turn it on as I ran from the house. I...I’d just found a body in your basement and wanted to get out of there. When he came home, he might have noticed it was off. He had to have been in panic mode but...he might have noticed.” He takes a breath. “Would he have thought it was you if he noticed?”

Lola’s brow furrows. “He wouldn’t expect me to come that late. No reason I would unless he thought it was to catch him in the act. As you said, maybe he didn’t notice.”

“Does anyone else have the code?”

Lola’s eyes shift. “A maid but not in the middle of the night. He fired his valet recently.” She makes an inscrutable face he can’t read. “He has a twenty year old daughter from another marriage. She might have it. I didn’t give it to her. Lives across town. They aren’t on good terms but she might have it, a key, the code.”

“I hope this doesn’t put *you* in danger.”

“What’s dangerous are the photos you took. He’ll kill to get those if he finds out. The ones I gave you in the envelope don’t matter now.”

“Yes, I suppose they are. The ones I took. Would he commit murder?”

“I have no doubt. Did Victor kill her, his girlfriend, his teen aged whore?”

“She died in the bed. She was very young. Not likely, she had a heart attack. Could she have had some congenital problem that killed her? Unlikely but possible. Or poison. Or smothered by his body.” He shrugs. “All I can say is she died in bed. An autopsy is required to determine cause of death and obviously that won’t happen.”

“Poison?”

“It’s a possibility, I guess but as I said an autopsy is required and the body is gone.”

How do you know that? That she died in bed, our bed?” She scoffs. “That shit! That dirty bastard!”

Her bladder released with death. That’s common. The sheets were stained with her urine in what was obviously the master bedroom. I saw that before I found her in the basement.”

“And then someone followed him home, took her away wrapped in plastic like garbage and did something with her?”

“In a white panel van. I don’t know where.” Han lied.

Lola shakes her head. “Send the photos to me. I need to have them.”

“All right.”

“Do you have a printer?”

“Not at my apartment. At the hospital but that’s too risky.”

“I’ll take care of getting them printed. This changes everything. He’s a caged animal, Han and dangerous like he wasn’t before. Thank you, darling. We must be very careful how this is used.”

He wonders why he lied about following the van. It tasted bitter in his mouth like burnt coffee.

Morgan is exhausted but yearns for her. She knows that and rolls to him.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning, darling.”

She’d called him that word, darling and saying she loved him one time in an offhand way that seemed indifferent. God, he loves her, will do anything for her, became a criminal for her. Does she really? Love him. He doesn’t know.

The next morning a brilliant sun in a cloudless sky bathes the bedroom with a warming light. She’s up when he was forced awake by it, blinking with annoyance and seeing again the bed empty. He groans, wanting more sleep. After padding to the bathroom, he finds her again on the porch, leaning over the rail watching waves lap at the shoreline in the distance. Hearing him approach behind, she tosses the cigarette into shrubbery.

“You couldn’t have gotten much sleep,” he offers.

“Or you.” Her shoulders might have inched higher dismissing his concern. He isn’t sure. “I have to go to New York for a few days.”

“When do you leave?”

“Today. I’ll let you know when I’m back.”

“Will you stop at the house in town first?”

“That’s not your concern.”

Her tone is different, abrupt, irritated.

“Is everything all right?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...just wondering if... What’s in New York?”

“I’m working. Four days to shoot it.”

“You didn’t tell me you had a job.”

“You find that surprising?” She turned, her face cold, devoid of expression.

“No. It’s...you never mentioned it. That’s all.”

“I’m an actor, Han. It’s for a television commercial. My agent called with the offer and I may be in L.A. next month. I’m up for a part in a movie.”

“Really. I didn’t know. How long will you be away?”

She turns back to the rail, staring at the Atlantic. “For as long as it takes.”

“Do you still want me to go back to the house? To confront your husband? Get it?”

Lola sighs and places a hand to his cheek offering a small smile, her face softening. “Dear Han, Dr. Morgan. My sweet lover. I know I told you to go back but last night after our love making, and after your return, I thought more about the pictures. As I said, they change everything. I need time to think that through and decide what they mean. What I should do. There are people I need to speak with.” She stares into his eyes.

“I need to do that alone, Han. For a short time. Just for a short time, darling.” This time the word sounds forced, contrived even.

He hears the words, “What *I* should do,” and asks, “Are we over?”

She laughs, not low but high and light, a mirthful trill. “Dear, sweet Han. No darling. I’ll let you know when you can come again. And, Han? After you send me the pictures, erase them from your phone. That will be best. It’s for your protection. Will you do that as soon as you send them?”

“Of course, whatever you think.” He feels like a high school boy having an affair with a teacher who abruptly rejects him. Suddenly, he’s embarrassed.

“I need to be getting to the hospital. I have a shift coming up in ER.” The shift isn’t until that night but he wants to run, to be away. “I’m leaving now.”

She turns back to the rail. “I understand. Duty calls. Don’t call me. I’ll let you know when I’m free. If you’ve put me into your contacts, better to remove me. You know the number.”

He hears but keeps walking to the bedroom to collect his things and leaves the envelope on a nightstand. Taking a look around and breathing deeply he knows he might never see the room or smell her presence again. She might as well have stabbed his heart with an ice pick, the pain is so intense. “Goodbye, Lola. I’ll miss you.” The words come in a whisper she doesn’t hear.

