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INTERMIX BOOKS
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INTERMIX BOOKS
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA



USA • Canada • UK • Ireland • Australia • New Zealand • India • South Africa • China

penguin.com

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A MATTER OF CHOICE

An InterMix Book / published by arrangement with the author

PUBLISHING HISTORY

Jove mass-market edition / January 2012
InterMix eBook edition / September 2013

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For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) LLC,
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ISBN: 978-1-101-63106-5

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Prologue

James Sladerman frowned at the toe of his shoe. He'd been frowning since the summons from Commissioner Dodson had reached him in the squad room that morning. After blowing out a long stream of smoke, Slade crushed out the cigarette in the mosaic ashtray to his left. He barely shifted his body. Slade knew how to wait.

Only the night before he had waited for more than five hours in a dark, chilly car in a neighborhood where it paid to watch your back as well as your wallet. It had been a tedious, fruitless five hours, as the stakeout had produced nothing. But then, Slade knew from long experience that police work consisted of hours of endless legwork, impossible boredom, and paperwork, punctuated by moments of stark violence. Still he preferred the five-hour wait to the twenty minutes he had spent in the commissioner's carpeted, beige-walled outer office. It smelled of lemony polish and now, his own Virginia tobacco. The keys of a typewriter clattered with monotonous efficiency as the commissioner's secretary transcribed.

What the hell does he want? Slade wondered again. Throughout his career Slade had studiously avoided the politics of police work because of an inherent dislike of bureaucracy. In his climb from cadet to detective sergeant, there had been little opportunity for his path to cross Dodson's.

Slade had had brief personal contact with Dodson at his father's funeral. Captain Thomas C. Sladerman had been buried with all the glory and honor that comes from serving on the force for twenty-eight years. And dying in the line of duty. Mulling over it, Slade recalled that the commissioner had been sympathetic to the widow and the young daughter. He'd said the right things to the son. Perhaps on some level he had been personally grieved. Early in their careers Dodson and Sladerman had been partners. They had still been young men when their paths had separated—one finding a niche in politics and administration, the other craving the action of the streets.

On only one other occasion had Slade had one-to-one contact with Dodson. Then Slade had been in the hospital, recovering from a gunshot wound. The visit of the commissioner of police to a mere detective had resulted in talk and speculation that had embarrassed Slade as much as annoyed him.

Now, he realized, it would be all over the station house that the old man had called him in. His frown became a scowl. For a moment he wondered if he had committed some breach in procedure, then became furious with himself for behaving like a kid hauled before the school principal.

The hell with it, he decided, forcing himself to relax. The chair was soft—too soft, and too short. To compensate, Slade curved his spine into the back and stretched out his long legs. His eyes half closed. When the interview was over, he had the stakeout to look forward to again. If it went down tonight, he'd have a few evenings free to spend at the typewriter. With any luck—and a solid month without interruptions—he could finish the novel. Blocking out his surroundings, he mentally reviewed the chapter he was working on.

“Sergeant Sladerman?”

Annoyed by the distraction, Slade lifted his eyes. Slowly his expression cleared. He realized he'd

wasted his time staring at the floor when the commissioner's secretary provided a far more appealing view. His smile was at once appraising and charming.

"The commissioner will see you now." The secretary answered the smile, wishing he'd looked at her like that before, rather than sitting in sullen silence. He had a face any female would respond to—bit narrow, angular, with dark coloring that came from Italian ancestors on his mother's side. The mouth had been hard in repose, but now, curved, it showed both promise and passion. Black hair and gray eyes were an irresistible combination, especially, she thought, when the hair was thick and a bit unruly and the eyes were smoky and mysterious. He was an interesting prospect, she thought as she watched Slade unfold his long, rangy frame from the chair.

As he followed her to the oak door he noted that the ring finger of her left hand was bare. Idly, he considered getting her phone number on the way out. The thought slipped to the back of his mind as she ushered him into the commissioner's office.

There was a Perillo lithograph on the right wall—a lone cowboy astride a paint pony. The left wall was crowded with framed photos, commendations, diplomas. If Slade found it an odd combination, he gave no sign. The desk, with its back to the window, was dark oak. On it were papers in tidy stacks, a gold pen and pencil set, and a triple picture frame. Seated behind them was Dodson, a dark, tidy little man who had always reminded Slade more of a parish priest than New York's commissioner of police. His eyes were a calm, pale blue, his cheeks healthily ruddy. Thin wisps of white wove through his hair. All in all, Dodson was the picture of avuncular gentleness. But the lines in his face hadn't been etched by good humor.

"Sergeant Sladerman." Dodson motioned Slade to a chair with a gesture and a smile. Built like his father, he thought briefly as he watched Slade take his seat. "Did I keep you waiting?"

"A bit."

Like his father, Dodson thought again, managing not to smile. Except that there'd been talk that the son's real interest lay in writing, not in police work. Tom had always brushed that aside, Dodson remembered. *My boy's a cop, just like his old man. A damn good cop.* At the moment Dodson was banking on it.

"How's the family?" he asked casually while keeping those deceptive blue eyes direct.

"Fine. Thank you, sir."

"Janice is enjoying college?" He offered Slade a cigar. When it was refused, Dodson lit one for himself. Slade waited until the smoke stung the air before answering. Just how, he wondered, did Dodson know his sister was in college?

"Yes, she likes it."

"How's the writing?"

He had to call on all of his training not to reveal surprise at the question. His eyes remained as clear and steady as his voice. "Struggling."

No time for small talk, Dodson thought, tapping off cigar ash. The boy's already itching to be gone. But being commissioner gave him an advantage. He took another slow drag of the cigar, watching the smoke curl lazily toward the ceiling. "I read that short story of yours in *Mirror*," Dodson went on. "It was very good."

"Thank you." What the hell's the point? Slade wondered impatiently.

"No luck with the novel?"

Briefly, almost imperceptively, Slade's eyes narrowed. "Not yet."

Sitting back, Dodson chewed on his cigar as he studied the man across from him. Had the look of his father, too, he mused. Slade had the same narrow face that was both intelligent and tough. He

wondered if the son could smile with the same disarming charm as the father. Yet the eyes were like his mother's—dark gray and thoughtful, skilled at keeping emotions hidden. Then there was his record, Dodson mused. He might not be the flashy cop his father had been, but he was thorough. And thank God, less impulsive. After his years on the force, the last three in homicide, Slade could be considered seasoned. If an undercover cop wasn't seasoned by thirty-two, he was dead. Slade had a reputation for being cool, perhaps a shade too cool, but his arrests were clean. Dodson didn't need a man who looked for trouble, but one who knew what to do once he found it.

“Slade . . .” He allowed a small smile to escape. “That's what you're called, isn't it?”

“Yes, sir.” The familiarity made him uncomfortable; the smile made him suspicious.

“I'm sure you've heard of Justice Lawrence Winslow.”

Curiosity came first, then a quick search through his mental file. “Presided over the New York Appellate Court before he was elected chief justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court about fifteen years ago. Died of a heart attack four, maybe five years ago.”

Facts and figures, Dodson mused. The boy didn't waste words. “He was also a damn fine lawyer, a judge who understood the full meaning of justice. A good man. His wife remarried two years ago and lives in southern France.”

So what? Slade thought with fresh impatience as Dodson gazed broodingly over his shoulder.

“I'm godfather to his daughter, Jessica.” The same question zipped through Slade's mind as Dodson focused on him again. “She lives in the family home near Westport. Beautiful place—a stone's throw from the beach. It's quiet, peaceful.” He drummed his fingers against the desk. “I imagine a writer would find it very appealing.”

There was an uncomfortable premonition which Slade pushed aside. “Possibly.” Was the old man matchmaking? Slade almost laughed out loud. No, that was too ridiculous.

“Over the last nine months there has been a rash of thefts throughout Europe.”

The abrupt change of subject startled Slade so much that the surprise showed clearly on his face. Quickly he controlled it and lifted a brow, saying nothing.

“Important thefts,” Dodson continued. “Mainly from museums—gems, coins, stamps. France, England, Spain, and Italy have all been hit. The investigation has led the respective authorities to believe the stolen articles have been smuggled into the States.”

“Smuggling's federal,” Slade said briefly. And, he thought silently, has nothing to do with a homicide detective—or some justice's spoiled daughter. Another uncomfortable thought came to him which he ignored.

“Smuggling's federal,” Dodson repeated, a bit too amiably for Slade's taste. He placed the tips of his neat fingers together, watching the younger man over them. “I have a few connections in the Bureau. Because of this case's . . . delicate nature, I've been consulted.” He paused a beat, long enough for Slade to comment if he chose to, then went on. “Some substantial leads in the investigation point to a small, well-respected antique shop. The Bureau knows there's an operator. From the information I have, they've narrowed down the possibilities for dump sites, and this shop is one of the . . . chosen few,” he decided dryly. “It's believed someone on the inside is on the take.” Pausing, he adjusted the picture frame on his desk. “They want to put an operative on it, inside, so that the head of the organization won't slip away from them this time. He's clever,” Dodson mused, half to himself.

Again Dodson gave Slade a moment to question or comment, and again he went on as the other man remained silent. “Allegedly, the goods are hidden—cleverly hidden—in an antique, then exported to this shop, retrieved, and ultimately disposed of.”

“It seems the Feds have things under control.” Barely masking his impatience, Slade reached for a

cigarette.

~~“There’s one or two complications.”~~ Dodson waited for the hiss and flare of the match. “There’s no concrete evidence, nor is the identity of the head of the organization known. A handful of accomplices, yes, but we want him . . . or her,” he added softly.

The tone had Slade’s eyes sharpening. Don’t get interested, he warned himself. It has nothing to do with you. Swallowing the questions that had popped into his head, he drew on his cigarette and waited.

“There’s also a more delicate problem.” For the first time since Slade had walked into the room, he noticed Dodson’s nerves. The commissioner picked up his gold pen, ran it through his fingers, then stuck it back in its slot. “The antique shop alleged to be involved is owned and operated by my goddaughter.”

Dark brows lifted, but the eyes beneath them betrayed nothing. “Justice Winslow’s daughter.”

“It’s generally believed that Jessica knows nothing of the illegal use of her shop—if indeed there is illegal use.” Dodson reached for the pen again, this time holding it lengthwise between both hands. “I know she’s completely innocent. Not only because she’s my goddaughter,” he went on, anticipating Slade’s thoughts, “but because I know her. She’s every bit as honest as her father was. Jessica cherishes Larry’s memory. And,” he added, carefully setting down the pen, “she hardly needs the money.”

“Hardly,” Slade muttered, picturing a spoiled heiress with too much time and money on her hands. Smuggling for kicks, he mused. A change of pace from shopping and parties and jet-setting.

“The Bureau’s closing in,” Dodson stated. “The next few weeks could bring the whole mess down around her ears. It might be dangerous for her.” Slade controlled the snort of derision. “Even the shield of ignorance isn’t going to protect her once things come to a head if her shop’s involved. I’ve tried to convince her to come to New York for a visit, but . . .” His voice trailed off. Amused exasperation moved over his face. “Jessica’s stubborn. Claims she’s too busy. She tells me I should come visit her.” With a shake of his head, Dodson let out what passed for a sigh. “I considered it, but my presence at this point could jeopardize the investigation. However, I feel Jessica needs protection. Discreet protection. Someone trained to deal with the situation, who can stay close to her without causing speculation.” A smile touched his eyes. “Someone who could assist the investigation from the inside.”

Slade frowned. He liked the conversation less and less. Taking his time, he stubbed out his cigarette. “And how do you expect me to do that?”

Dodson smiled fully. He liked the irritation in Slade’s voice as much as the directness. “Jessica will do what I want—to a point.” Leaning back in the overstuffed leather chair, he relaxed again. “She’s been complaining lately about the mess her library’s in, about not having enough time to sort through and catalog. I’m going to call her, tell her I’m sending the son of an old friend of mine and her father’s. That’s true, by the way,” he added. “Tom and Larry knew each other some years back. Your cover’s simple enough. You’re a writer who needs a quiet refuge for a few weeks, and in turn, you’ll sort out her library.”

Slade’s eyes had darkened during Dodson’s casual rundown. “Jurisdiction—” he began.

“Some paperwork,” Dodson interrupted easily. “It can be taken care of. After all, it’s the boys from the Bureau who’ll make the collar when it’s time.”

“I’m supposed to play librarian and baby sitter.” Slade gave a snort of disgust. “Look, Commissioner, I’m that close to wrapping up the Bitronelli murder.” He brought his thumb and forefinger together. “If—”

“You’d better be,” Dodson interrupted again, but with a hint of steel in his voice. “The press is

having a great time making the NYPD look like fools on that one. And if you're so close," he added before Slade could toss back a furious retort, "you should be able to leave for Connecticut in a couple of days. The Bureau is interested in having a cop on the inside. A cop who knows how to keep his eyes and ears open. They've checked you out and agree with my choice."

"Terrific," Slade muttered. Standing, he prowled the room. "I'm homicide, not robbery."

"You're a cop," Dodson said shortly.

"Yeah." Baby-sitting for some snobby little heiress, Slade thought darkly, who was either smuggling for thrills or too dizzy to see what was going on under her nose. "Terrific," he muttered again.

Once Janice was out of college, he thought, he could quit the force and concentrate on his writing. He was tired of it. Tired of the misery he came in contact with almost every day of his life. Tired of the dirt, the futility, tired of the nasty little pieces of humanity his job forced him to deal with. And tired too of seeing the look of relief in his mother's eyes each time he came home. With a sigh, he resigned himself. Maybe a couple of weeks in Connecticut would be a nice change. A change anyway.

"When?" he demanded as he turned back to face Dodson.

"Day after tomorrow," Dodson said smoothly. "I'll give you a complete briefing, then I'll call Jessica and tell her to expect you."

With a shrug, Slade went back to his chair to listen.

Chapter 1

Fall touched the trees and stung the air. Against a hard blue sky, the colors were vibrant, passionate. The ribbon of road cut through the hills and wound eastward toward the Atlantic. Whipping through the open car windows, the wind was chilled and fragrant. Slade wondered how long it had been since he had smelled that kind of freshness. No city smells of sweat and exhaust. When his book was accepted, perhaps he could move his mother and Janice out of the city—a home in the country maybe or near the shore. It was always *when* or *as soon as*. He couldn't afford to think *if*.

Another year on the force—another year of scraping up tuition money—and then. . . . Shaking his head, Slade turned up the radio. It wasn't any good thinking of next year. He wasn't in Connecticut to appreciate the scenery. It was just another job—and one he resented.

Jessica Winslow, he mused, age twenty-seven. The only child of Justice Lawrence Winslow and Lorraine Nordan Winslow. Graduate of Radcliffe, senior class president. She'd probably been head cheerleader, too, he thought with a sneer. All button-downed and pony-tailed. Ralph Lauren sweaters and Gucci loafers.

Struggling to be open minded, he continued his catalog. Opened the House of Winslow four years ago. Up until two years ago she did the majority of buying herself. Good excuse to play around in Europe, he thought as he punched in the car lighter.

Michael Adams, Jessica Winslow's assistant and current buyer. Thirty-two, Yale graduate. Figures Slade reflected, exhaling smoke that rushed out of the open window. Son of Robert and Marion Adams, another prominent Connecticut family. No firm evidence, but someone Slade was instructed to keep his eye on. He leaned his elbow on the window as he considered. As chief buyer, Adams would be in a perfect position to handle the operation from overseas.

David Ryce, shop assistant for eighteen months. Twenty-three. Son of Elizabeth Ryce, the Winslow housekeeper. Dodson had said he was often trusted with running the shop alone. That would give him the opportunity to handle the local operation.

Systematically, Slade ran through the list of the Winslow staff. Gardener, cook, housekeeper, daily maid. Good God, he thought in disgust. All that for one person. She probably wouldn't know how to boil an egg if her life depended on it.

The gates to the Winslow estate stood open, with room enough for two cars to pass easily. Slade turned into the long, macadam drive, lined with bushy, bloomless azaleas. There was a burst of birdsong, then silence. He drove nearly a quarter of a mile before pulling up in front of the house.

It was large but, he had to admit, not oppressively so. The brick was old, mellowed by sun and sea air. Smoke rose from one of the chimneys on the hipped roof. The gray shutters weren't just decorative, he noted, but could be used for practical purposes if a storm rose up off the Sound. He smelled the chrysanthemums before he saw them.

The blossoms were huge, growing near the base of the house. They were rust, gold, and copper, complimenting the violent red of bushes. It charmed him, as did the lazy odor of woodsmoke. This

wasn't indolence but peace. He'd had too little of that. Shaking off the mood, Slade walked up the steps to the front door. He lifted a fist and knocked, hard. He hated doorbells.

In less than a minute the door opened. He had to look down, quite a distance down, to see a tiny, middle-aged woman with a pleasantly ugly face and gray-streaked hair. He caught a whiff of a pine-scented cleaner that reminded him of his mother's kitchen.

"May I help you?" The accent was broad New England.

"I'm James Sladerman. Miss Winslow's expecting me."

The woman scrutinized him with cautious black eyes. "You'd be the writer," she stated, obviously not overly impressed. Stepping back, she allowed him to enter.

As the door closed behind him, Slade glanced around the hall. The floor was uncarpeted, a gleaming blond oak that showed some wear under the careful polishing. A few paintings hung on the ivory-toned wallpaper. A pale green glass bowl sat on a high round table and overflowed with fall flowers. There were no overt displays of wealth, but wealth was there. He'd seen a print of the painting to his right in an art book. The blue scarf that hung negligently over the railing of the steps was silk.

Slade started to turn back to the housekeeper when a clatter at the top of the steps distracted him.

She came barrelling down the curved staircase in a flurry of swirling blond hair and flying skirts. The hammer of heels on wood disrupted the quiet of the house. Slade had a quick impression of speed, motion, and energy.

"Betsy, you make David stay in bed until that fever's broken. Don't you dare let him get up. Damn damn, damn, I'm going to be late! Where are my keys?"

Three inches away from Slade, she came to a screeching halt, almost overbalancing. Automatically he reached for her arm to steady her. Breathless, she brought her eyes from his shirt front to stare at him.

It was an exquisite face—fair skinned, oval, delicate, with just a hint of cheekbone that added a rather primitive strength. Indian? Viking? he wondered. Celtic? Her eyes were large, the color of aged whiskey, set below brows that were lowered in curiosity. The faintest line appeared between them. A stubborn line, Slade reflected. His sister had one. She was small, he noted. The top of her head barely skimmed his shoulder. Her scent was reminiscent of fall—something musky—blossoms and smoke. The arm beneath his hand was slender under a thin wool blazer. He felt the stir inside him—man for woman—and hastily dropped his hand.

"This is Mr. Sladerman," Betsy announced. "That writer."

"Oh yes." The smile cleared away the faint line between her brows. "Uncle Charlie told me you were coming."

It took Slade a moment to connect Uncle Charlie with Dodson. Not knowing if he was smothering an oath or a laugh, he accepted her extended hand. "Charlie told me you could use some help, Miss Winslow."

"Help." She rolled her eyes and cleared her throat. "Yes, you could call it that. The library. . . . Look, I'm sorry to rush off the minute you get here, but my assistant's ill and my buyer's in France." Tilting her wrist, she grimaced at her watch. "I have a client coming to the shop ten minutes ago."

"Don't worry about it." If this frazzled lady can run a business, I'll volunteer to walk a beat, he decided, but gave her an easy smile. "It'll give me a chance to get settled in."

"Fine. I'll see you at dinner then." Glancing around, she muttered again about keys.

"In your hand," Slade told her.

"Stupid." With a sigh, Jessica uncurled her fingers and stared at the keys in her palm. "The more I have to rush, the worse it gets." Lifting amused eyes to his, she brushed her hair from her shoulders.

“Please don’t bother with the library today. It may shock you so much that you’ll run away before I can smooth things over. Betsy . . .” As she dashed for the door Jessica looked over her shoulder. “Tell David he’s fired if he gets out of bed. ’Bye.”

The door slammed behind her. Betsy clucked her tongue.

Ten minutes later Slade inspected his suite of rooms. They were nearly as large as the apartment he had grown up in. There was a faded carpet on the bedroom floor that he recognized was not *old* but *antique*. In a small, black marble fireplace, wood was neatly laid for burning. Crossing to the sitting room, he saw a sturdy desk topped with a vase of the chrysanthemums, a brass paperweight, and a feather quill. Without hesitation, he cleared it off to make room for his typewriter.

If he had his way, his writing would be more than a cover. When he wasn’t baby-sitting, he’d get some work done. Of course, there was the library to fool with. On an exasperated sigh, Slade turned his back on his typewriter and went back downstairs. He roamed, filing the position and layout of rooms in the cop’s part of his mind, their descriptions in the writer’s.

In his tour of the first floor, Slade could find no fault with Jessica’s taste. It was only the nouveau riche who went in for ostentation. The Winslow woman preferred muted colors and clean lines. In her clothes, too, he mused, remembering how she had looked in the dun-colored blazer and skirt. Still, the blouse she’d worn had been a deep, almost violent green. That just might indicate something else.

Slade stopped to run his fingers over the surface of a rosewood piano. Compared to this, he mused, the battered upright his mother treasured was so much kindling. With a shrug, he wandered to the next door.

The library. He caught the scent of old leather and dust as he looked on the largest private collection of books he’d ever seen. For the first time since he had walked into Dodson’s office, Slade felt a stir of pleasure. A quick study told him that the books were well read as well as carelessly filed. He crossed the room and mounted the two stairs to the second level. Not filed at all, he corrected, but simply jumbled. He ran a long finger along a row of volumes. Robert Burns tilted onto a copy of Kurt Vonnegut.

A big job, he concluded. One he might have enjoyed if it had been his only purpose. He took one long look around before absently pulling out a book. There was nothing he could do about Jessica Winslow at the moment, he thought as he settled down to read.

Jessica swerved into the parking area beside her shop, relieved to see it empty. She was late, but her client was later. Or, she thought with a frown, he’d grown tired of waiting and left. With a half-hearted oath, she hurried to unlock the front door. Quickly she went from window to window, letting the shades snap up. Without slackening pace, she headed for the back room, tossed her purse aside, then filled a small kettle with water. She gave the struggling ivy in the rear window a quick douse before setting the kettle on the stove. Halfway out of the room, she went back to turn the burner on underneath it. Satisfied, she wandered into the main shop.

It wasn’t large—but then Jessica had never intended it to be. Intimate, personal. Yes, it was that, she thought, with her signature on it. The shop was more than a business to her; it was an accomplishment, and a love. The business end—invoices, filing, books—she ran meticulously. All of her organizational efforts went into the shop, which perhaps was the reason for her lack of order elsewhere.

The shop was the focus of her life, and had been since she'd conceived of it. Initially she'd needed something to give some purpose to her life after college was behind her. The idea for the shop had germinated slowly, then had grown and developed. Jessica had too much drive, too much energy, to drift. Once she had decided to start a business, she'd moved quickly. Then that same drive and energy had made it work. It turned a profit. The money itself meant little, but the fact that her shop made it, meant everything.

She'd spent six months scouring New England, then Europe, for the right pieces. A large inventory hadn't been her goal, but an exclusive one. After her opening the response had begun as a small trickle, mostly friends and friends of friends. Justice Winslow's daughter running a shop had brought out the curiosity seekers as well. Jessica hadn't minded. A client was a client, and a satisfied one, the best advertising.

For the first two years she'd run the shop alone. Indeed, she had never considered that her business would outgrow her. When it had, she'd hired Michael Adams to handle the overseas buying. He was charming, capable, and knowledgeable. The women customers adored him. Gradually their relationship had mellowed from business to friendship to easy affection.

As business had continued to thrive, Jessica had hired David Ryce. He'd been hardly more than a boy, at loose ends, bored enough to find trouble if it got in the way. Jessica had hired him because they'd grown up together; then she had come to depend on him. He was quick with figures and tireless with details. He had a streak of street sense that made him a good man to have in business.

Street sense, Jessica mused. James Sladerman. Odd that the term would bring him back to her mind. Even in that quick exchange at the foot of the stairs, she'd felt something in him. It told her he was a man who would know how to handle himself—in business, maybe. In an alley, definitely. With a half-laugh, she stuck her hands in her pockets. Now why should she think that?

The fingers that had gripped her arm had been strong. His build had been wiry. But no, it had been his eyes, she thought. There was something . . . hard in his eyes. Yet she hadn't been repelled or frightened, but drawn. Even when he'd looked at her for those first three or four seconds, with that intensity that seemed to creep beneath her skin, she hadn't been afraid. Safe, she realized. He'd made her feel safe. That was odd, Jessica decided, catching her bottom lip between her teeth. Why should she suddenly feel safe when she had no need for protection?

The door of the shop jingled open. Pushing speculation aside, Jessica turned.

"Miss Winslow, I apologize. I'm very late."

"Don't give it a thought, Mr. Chambers." Jessica considered telling him that she'd also been late, then decided against it. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Behind her, the kettle whistled. "I'm just making tea. Why don't you join me before we look over the new snuffboxes?"

Chambers removed a rather fussy hat from a balding head. "Wonderful. I do appreciate you calling me when you get a new shipment in." He smiled, revealing good dentures.

"You don't think I'd let anyone see the snuffboxes before you." In the kitchen Jessica poured boiling water into cups. "Michael found these in France. There are two I think you'll be particularly interested in."

He preferred the ornate, Jessica thought with a smile as she lifted the tray. He loved the foolishly gaudy little boxes that men with lace cuffs used to carry. She glanced at Chambers' stubby form and wondered if he pictured himself as a cavalier or perhaps a Regency buck. Still, his fascination with snuffboxes had made him a regular customer who had more than once recommended her shop to other people. And he was rather sweet in his fussy little way, she thought as she placed the tea tray on a table.

“Sugar?” she asked him.

“Ah, I shouldn’t.” Chambers patted his ample middle. “But perhaps one cube.” His glance flicked briefly down to her legs as Jessica crossed them. A pity, he thought with an inward sigh, that he wasn’t twenty years younger.

Later he left happily with two eighteenth-century snuffboxes. Before Jessica could file the invoice she heard the grumble of an engine. Glancing up, she saw the large delivery truck pull in front of the shop. She read the company logo on the side of the steel doors and frowned a bit. She could have sworn the delivery that Michael was shipping wasn’t due until the following day.

When she recognized the driver, Jessica waved, then walked to the front door to meet him.

“Hi, Miss Winslow.”

“Hello, Don.” She accepted the itemized list he handed her, muttering about not expecting him until tomorrow. He shrugged.

“Mr. Adams put a rush on it.”

“Mmm.” She jiggled the keys in her pocket as she scanned the list. “Well, he seems to have outdone himself this time. And another delivery on Saturday. I don’t . . . oh!” Her eyes lit up with pleasure as they fixed on one item. “The writing desk. The Queen Anne. I meant to tell Michael to keep his eyes open for one, then forgot. It must be fate.” Of course, she should uncart it first, at least take a look. No, impulses were the best, Jessica decided. Smiling, she looked back up at the driver. “The rest comes in here, but that goes to my home. Would you mind?”

“Well . . .”

It was easy to justify using the smile. Jessica could already see the desk in the front parlor. “If it’s not too much trouble,” she added.

The driver shifted to his other foot. “I guess it’ll be all right. Joe won’t mind.” He jerked his thumb at his partner, who had opened the wide double doors of the truck.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it. That desk is just what I’ve been looking for.”

Feeling triumphant, Jessica went to the back room for more tea.

As she had burst out hours before, Jessica burst in through the front door of the house. “Betsy!” She slung her purse over the newel post. “Did it come?” Without waiting for an answer, she dashed toward the front parlor.

“Since you were six, I’ve been telling you to slow down.” Betsy came through the parlor doors, intercepting her. “At least then you wore sensible shoes.”

“Betsy.” Jessica gave her a quick, hard squeeze that held as much impatience as affection. “Did it come?”

“Yes, of course it came.” The housekeeper straightened her apron with a tug. “And it’s sitting in the parlor just like you told me. It’ll be there whether you walk sensibly or run like a fool.” The last of the sentence was wasted, as Jessica was already rushing by her.

“Oh, it’s lovely!” Gently, she ran a finger over the wood, then quickly began to examine it on all sides. It was a delicate, airy little piece. A woman’s desk. Jessica opened the slant top, then sighed at the unmarred interior. “Really lovely. Wait until David sees it.” She opened one of the inner drawers. It slid out smoothly. “It’s exactly what I’ve been looking for. What luck that Michael came across it. Crouching, she ran a hand down one of its slender legs.

“It’s pretty,” Betsy admitted, thinking that the carving would be one more thing to keep dust out of. “I bet you could have sold it for a pretty penny too.”

“The advantage of owning a shop is being able to cop some of the merchandise for yourself.” Rising, Jessica shut the lid again. Now all she needed was a frivolous little inkwell, or perhaps a porcelain box to set on top of it.

“Supper’s nearly ready.”

“Oh, supper.” Shaking her head, Jessica brought herself back to the moment. “Mr. Sladerman, I’ve neglected him all day. Is he upstairs?”

“In the library,” Betsy announced grimly. “All day. Wouldn’t even come out for lunch.”

“Oh boy.” Jessica combed a hand through her hair. He hadn’t looked like a man who would have much patience with disorganization. “I really wanted to ease him into that. Well, I’m going to go be charming so we don’t lose him. What’s for supper?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Stuffed pork chops and mashed potatoes.”

“That should help,” Jessica muttered as she headed for the library door.

She opened it slowly, enough to stick her head inside. Some things, she decided, you don’t rush into. He was sitting at a long work table, surrounded by pillars and piles of books. A thick pad was in front of him, and the pencil in his hand was worked halfway down. His hair fell over his forehead, but she could see his brows drawn together in concentration. Or annoyance, she mused. She put on her best smile.

“Hi.”

He looked up, eyes pinning her. Jessica could feel the little prickles of power all over her skin. She absorbed it, intrigued by the sensation. Without being aware of it, her smile had faded into a look of puzzlement.

Who is this man? she wondered. It was curiosity as much as courage that had her coming all the way into the room. The lamp on the desk slanted across his face, highlighting his mouth and putting his eyes in shadow. She didn’t feel safe with him this time, but unsettled. She continued toward him.

“You’ve got a hell of a mess here,” Slade said shortly, tossing his pencil aside. It was better to attack than let himself dwell on how beautiful she was. “If you run your shop like this”—he gestured widely—“it’s a miracle you’re not bankrupt.”

The specific complaint eased the tension in her shoulders. There’d been nothing personal in that look, she assured herself. She’d been foolish to think there had been. “I know it’s terrible,” Jessica admitted, smiling again. “I hope you’re not going to do the sensible thing and walk out.” Gingerly, she lowered a hip to the table before lifting a book at random. “Do you like challenges, Mr. Sladerman?”

She was laughing, he noted. Or her eyes were. But he sensed very clearly that she laughed at herself. A reluctant smile tugged at his mouth as he struggled to study her objectively. Maybe she was innocent—maybe not. He didn’t have the same blind faith as the commissioner. But she was beautiful and he was attracted. Slade decided the attraction was going to be difficult to work around.

Letting out a long breath, he gazed around the room. How much choice did he have? “I’m going to take pity on you, Miss Winslow . . . I have a fondness for books.”

“So do I,” she began, then had to deal with another of his cool, direct looks. “Really,” she claimed with a laugh. “I’m just not neat. Do we have a deal, Mr. Sladerman?” Solemnly, she offered her hand.

He glanced at it first. Soft and elegant, he thought, like her name and her voice. With a quick curse at fate for making the commissioner her godfather, Slade took her hand in his. “We have a deal, Miss Winslow.”

Jessica slid from the table, keeping his hand in hers when he would have drawn away. Somehow

she'd known it would be hard and strong. "How do you feel about stuffed pork chops?"

~~They were tender and delicious. Slade ate three after his stomach remembered the lack of lunch.~~ And, he thought after a slice of cheesecake, this case had some advantages over the one he'd just wrapped up. For two weeks he'd made do on cold coffee and stale sandwiches. And his partner hadn't been as easy to look at as Jessica Winslow. She'd guided the conversation expertly during the meal and had ended by tucking her arm through his to lead him back to the parlor.

"Have a seat," she invited. "I'll pour you a brandy."

As he started to cross the room the desk caught his eye. "That wasn't here this morning."

"What?" With a decanter in her hand, she glanced over her shoulder. "Oh no, it just came this afternoon. Do you know anything about antiques?"

"No." He gave the desk a cursory study before taking a chair. "I'll leave that to you, Miss Winslow."

"Jessica." She poured a second brandy before crossing to him. "Do I call you James or Jim?"

"Slade," he told her as he took a snifter. "Even my mother stopped calling me Jim when I was ten."

"You have a mother?"

The quick, unconscious surprise in her voice had him grinning. "Everybody's entitled to one."

Feeling foolish, Jessica sat across from him. "You just seem to be capable of arranging the whole business without one."

Both sipped brandy, and their eyes met over the snifters. Jessica felt the moment freeze, out of time, out of place. Do minds touch? she thought numbly. Wasn't she sensing at that moment the turbulent spin of his thoughts? Or were they hers? Brandy slipped, hot and strong down her throat, snapping her back. Talk, she ordered herself. Say something. "Do you have any other family?" she managed.

Slade stared at her, wondering if he had imagined that instant of stunning intimacy. He'd never felt that with any woman before, any lover. It was ridiculous to imagine that he'd felt it with one he barely knew. "A sister," he said at length. "She's in college."

"A sister." Jessica relaxed again and slipped out of her shoes. "That's nice. I always wanted a brother or sister when I was growing up."

"Money can't buy everything." Slade shrugged with the words. Seeing the puzzled hurt on her face he cursed himself. If she was getting to him already, what would it be like in a week?

"You're quick with clichés," Jessica observed. "I suppose that's because you're a writer." After another sip of brandy, she set the glass aside. "What do you write?"

"Unpublished novels."

She laughed as she had in the library, drawing another smile from him. "It must be frustrating."

"Only daily," he agreed.

"Why do you do it?"

"Why do you eat?"

Jessica considered for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I suppose it's like that, isn't it? Have you always wanted to write?"

He thought of his father, how he had bragged that his son would be the next Sladerman on the force. He thought of his teenage years, when he had written his stories in longhand in spiral notebooks late into the night. He thought of his father's eyes the first time he had seen his son in uniform. And he thought of the first time he'd had a short story accepted.

"Yes." Perhaps it was easier to admit to her what he had never been able to explain to his family. "Always."

"When you want something badly enough, and you don't give up," Jessica began slowly, "you get

it.”

Slade gave a short laugh before he drank. “Always?”

She touched the tip of her tongue to her top lip. “Almost always. It’s all a gamble, isn’t it?”

“Long odds,” he murmured, frowning into his glass. “I usually play long odds.” He studied the amber liquor, which was almost exactly the shade of her eyes. She shouldn’t be so easy to talk to, he mused. He’d find himself saying too much.

“Ah, Ulysses, I wondered where you were.”

Lifting his eyes, Slade stared at a large, loping mop of fur. It lunged, unerringly, into Jessica’s lap. He heard her groan, then giggle.

“Damn it! How many times do I have to tell you you’re not a lap dog. You’re breaking my ribs.” She twisted her head, but the wet, pink tongue found her cheek. “Stop!” she sputtered, pushing impotently. “Get down,” she ordered. “Get down right this minute.” Ulysses barked twice, then continued to lap his tongue all over her face.

“What,” Slade asked slowly, “is that?”

Jessica gave another mighty shove, but Ulysses only rested his head on her shoulder. “A dog, of course.”

“There’s no ‘of course’ about that dog.”

“He’s a Great Pyrenees,” she retorted, quickly running out of breath. “And he flunked obedience school three times. You mangy, soft-headed mutt, get down.” Ulysses let out a long, contented breath and didn’t budge. “Give me a hand, will you?” she demanded of Slade. “I’ll have internal injuries this time. Once before I was stuck for two hours until Betsy got home.”

Rising, Slade approached the dog with a frown. “Does he bite?”

“God, I’m suffocating and the man asks if he bites.”

A grin split Slade’s face as he looked down at her. “Can’t be too careful about these things. He might be vicious.”

Jessica narrowed her eyes. “Sic ’em, Ulysses!” Hearing his name, the dog roused himself to lick her face again, joyfully. “Satisfied?” Jessica demanded. “Now grab him somewhere and get me out.”

Bending, Slade wrapped his arms around the bulk of fur. The back of his hand brushed Jessica’s breast as he shifted his grip. “Sorry,” he muttered, dragging at the dog. “Good God, what does he weigh?”

“About one twenty-five, I think.”

With a shake of his head, Slade put his back into it. Ulysses slid to the floor to lay adoringly at Jessica’s feet. Taking a deep gulp of air, Jessica closed her eyes.

She was covered with loose white hair. Her own was disheveled and curled around her shoulders, the color, Slade observed, of sun-bleached wheat. With her face in repose, the slant of her cheekbone was more pronounced. Her lips were just parted. Their shape was utterly feminine—the classic cupid bow but for the fullness in the lower lip. It spoke of passion—hidden, quietly simmering passion. The mouth and the cheekbones added something to the tearoom looks that had Slade’s pulse responding. He couldn’t want her, he told himself. That wasn’t just irresponsible, it was stupid. He stared down at the dog again.

“You should do something about training him,” he said shortly.

“I know.” With a sigh, Jessica opened her brandy-colored eyes. Her affection for Ulysses made her forget the discomfort and the mess he usually created. “He’s very sensitive really. I just haven’t got the heart to subject him to obedience school again.”

“That’s incredibly stupid,” Slade tossed back. “He’s too big not to be trained.”

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