

DIARY OF A MANHATTAN CALL GIRL

Tracy Quan



A NANCY CHAN NOVEL

diary
of a
manhattan
call girl

TRACY QUAN

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[1 - Ménage à Quoi?](#)

[MONDAY, 1/31/00](#)

[MONDAY NIGHT](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 2/2/00](#)

[THURSDAY, 2/3/00](#)

[2 - Through the Hooking Glass](#)

[FRIDAY MORNING, 2/4/00](#)

[MONDAY AFTERNOON, 2/7/00](#)

[TUESDAY, 2/8/00](#)

[FRIDAY AFTERNOON, 2/11/00](#)

[SATURDAY, 2/12/00](#)

[SUNDAY, 2/13/00](#)

[MONDAY, 2/14/00](#)

[3 - Mau-Mauing the Flatbackers](#)

[TUESDAY, 2/15/00. The morning after the night off](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 2/16/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[THURSDAY, 2/17/00. Pumpkin time—home at last](#)

[FRIDAY, 2/18/00](#)

[MONDAY, 2/21/00](#)

[TUESDAY, 2/22/00](#)

[THURSDAY, 2/24/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[4 - Origin of My Species](#)

[5 - The Folks Who Live on the Hill](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 3/1/00](#)

[SATURDAY, 3/4/00](#)

[MONDAY, 3/6/00](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 3/8/00](#)

[6 - As Above, So Below](#)

[SATURDAY, 3/11/00](#)

[MONDAY, 3/13/00](#)

[TUESDAY, 3/14/00](#)

[FRIDAY, 3/17/00](#)

[SATURDAY, 3/18/00](#)

[7 - Johns and Lovers](#)

[SUNDAY EVENING, 3/19/00](#)

[MONDAY MORNING, 3/20/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[TUESDAY MORNING, 3/21/00](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 3/22/00](#)

[8 - One of the Girls](#)

[THURSDAY AFTERNOON, 3/23/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[SATURDAY, 3/25/00](#)

[MONDAY, 3/27/00](#)

[THURSDAY, 3/30/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[9 - A Hooker's Home Is Her Castle](#)

[FRIDAY, 3/31/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[MONDAY, 4/3/00](#)

[TUESDAY, 4/4/00](#)

[FRIDAY, 4/7/00](#)

[10 - Only Collect](#)

[MONDAY, 4/10/00](#)

[TUESDAY, 4/11/00](#)

[FRIDAY, 4/14/0. First day of storage](#)

[MONDAY, 4/17/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[11 - Hetero Doxy](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 4/19/00](#)

[TUESDAY, 4/25/00](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 4/26/00](#)

[TUESDAY, 5/2/00](#)

[12 - Origins Again: The Sex of Money](#)

[13 - The Bad Seed](#)

[MONDAY, 5/8/00](#)

[LATE EVENING](#)

[TUESDAY MORNING, 5/9/00](#)

[14 - In-Laws and Outlaws](#)

[LATER TUESDAY](#)

[LATER STILL](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 5/10/00](#)

[WEDNESDAY,5/17/00](#)

[THURSDAY, 5/18/00](#)

[FRIDAY, 5/19/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[MONDAY, 5/22/00](#)

[LATER](#)

[15 - Turn of the Century](#)

[WEDNESDAY, 1/31/01](#)

[FRIDAY, 2/2/01](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

for
Mike Godwin

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All professions are conspiracies against the laity.

—*GEORGE BERNARD SHAW*

Everything is more glamorous when you do it in bed. . . .

—*ANDY WARHOL*

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Ménage à Quoi?

MONDAY, 1/31/00

Dear Diary,

Today I had the most embarrassing experience—with one of my regulars. Howard was flat on his back enjoying our threesome with Allison when I decided to straddle him backward—something I've done hundreds of times. So I carefully lowered my body, confident that my acrobatics looked like zero effort.

Howard stood firm inside of me, but I threw in a just-in-case moan for good measure. With my shoulder blades resting against his chest, all he could see was the back of my neck. Lying still in that position is more work than bouncing up and down, but it's usually the perfect strategy when you're doing a session with another girl. Howard can't check to see whether her tongue is really where it's supposed to be. And besides, it's his favorite position.

I felt serene. Supple. At the top of my game. Allie slithered down to the edge of my bed, placing her head somewhere between my legs—and his. I felt her long blond hair tickling my thighs. My cue to start moaning louder: “She’s *soooo good* at that . . . she’s licking my clit! Tell her not to stop! Oh please don’t stop . . .”

Unfortunately, when I thought Allison was pretending to do *me*, she was really doing Howard.

“Hey!” she whispered, when he had disappeared into the shower. “When you were telling him about that stuff, I was tickling his balls with my tongue!”

“You were?” I was indignant. “We’re supposed to pretend you’re eating my pussy! If you’re going to change the routine, you have to tell me,” I hissed. “You know I can’t see what you’re doing from that angle!”

“*He* seemed to like what I was doing!”

“Well,” I was forced to concede, “I suppose that’s what really matters.” But still. How annoying.

Turning my attention to the bedroom phone, I quickly checked my voice mail. Jasmine’s crisis of clarity—“Thursday. Don’t be late. Harry at five P.M.!”—was a welcome distraction. Then voice mail from Eileen: “I gave your number to Steven G. He’s dying to meet another Oriental. But he’s kind of kinky, so call me first. It’s for today!” Eileen Wong’s clients tend to be impulse buyers with a hundred strange quirks. And a message from Steven himself, sounding bashful but eager: “Hi, uh, well, I have to call you back. Hello? Are you there? I’m on my way to an ATM. I’ll call back in ten minutes. There was street noise in the background. Car phone? Pay phone? Hard to tell. He sounds like the type of guy who’s cautious enough to use a pay phone when he calls a working girl. Probably married. Or maybe just self-conscious and paranoid about whatever it is that turns him on.

Allison mumbled apologetically into her cashmere sweater as she pulled it over her face: “Honestly, I thought you could see me, Nancy! I didn’t know . . .” As her pale shoulders disappeared into the sweater, her silly ingratiating grimace *almost* made me back down.

“How can I possibly see you if I’m staring at the ceiling?” I retorted crossly.

Howard returned, a towel wrapped around his soft damp middle, smirking with satisfaction. I was furious with myself for revealing a trade secret. To a john I’ve been seeing for more than five years. But I brazened it out with professional blitheness. As I bade him farewell, he winked and said, “See you next Monday—I’ll bring two Oscars. You both earned them!” I flashed him a cool smile.

Allison followed me into the bathroom, pondering her latest dilemma out loud. “Guess who called Jack! He’s trying to make an appointment with me!”

This is so typical. Whenever I’m annoyed with Allison, she tries to distract me with her problems.

Jack can still find new girls through the back pages of *New York* magazine, but he’s barred from the beds of girls like us who trade customers privately. Shouldn’t Allie know better than to contemplate seeing Jack?

From behind the shower door, I reminded her, “We blacklisted him! Nobody wants to see Jack after what he did. And neither do you.”

“Well, maybe I *do*,” she said petulantly. “He misses me and he’s offering me a lot of money. Maybe I should reconsider this—this blacklist thing.”

We blacklisted him because of what he did last year—and Allie was the *first* girl to experience the terrible fallout of Jack’s behavior. How can she forget? Much less forgive?

I pointed the handheld showerhead between my thighs, then aimed it cautiously at my breasts, avoid splattering my hair. It’s an occupational hazard, showering four times a day: My hair has to look great for work, yet I’m constantly in danger of wrecking it . . . Catch-22!

“He offered me a thousand!” Allie was saying. “Just to see me for—you know, the usual.”

His normal rate is three hundred dollars. A grand for half an hour! That's hard to turn down. But Allison doesn't need to hear that. She needs to learn how to say no and mean it.

"After what he did to us, I think it would be a major betrayal for *any* girl to make an exception," told her.

"But I have—I mean, Jack and I *had*—a different kind of . . ." Her voice grew squeaky and faint. "Well, anyway, I'd like to hear his side of the story."

Yeah, I'll *bet* she would! For a thousand dollars, who wouldn't? But the point is, your word's not worth much if you say yes to everything that looks financially appealing. Or easy.

"His *side*? He has no side. I don't care how much he pays, dealing with him is just too risky."

"He's so easy," Allie pointed out. "And he wears a condom for *everything*."

"We're not talking about *that* kind of risk! And you have to stop thinking in the short term! He gives you a grand today and that's great. What happens later? What if you lose all your contacts with the other girls? Jack's generosity won't make up for that. Ever."

As I slid the shower door open, Allison handed me a towel. That childish pleading look again! Even though we're the same size—we can trade bras—I suddenly felt like the huge clumsy playmate of a delicate fine-boned little girl. I stared into the bathroom mirror and saw, reflected back, a surprisingly graceful neck. Not the awkward galumphing outcast—a ghost from early puberty—that I sometimes imagine myself to be. And my hair had kept its shape.

Like me, Allie looks easily ten years younger than she really is. If we were aging at different rates would we have stayed friends for so long? In fact, I wonder sometimes if looks are the basis for *most* female friendships: the looker who takes up with a lesser looker because it bolsters her ego; the attractive girl who (having learned *that* lesson) seeks out pretty friends so she won't have to deal with another woman's jealousy raging out of control—it's easier to manage your own insecurities, after all. Those of another girl can be hard to read, impossible to quell, and therefore highly dangerous. Allie and I have our problems—I know in my heart that it's not the healthiest friendship—but where looks are concerned, ours is a bond between equals. And that's important.

"I didn't agree to *do* anything with him," Allison was insisting. "We're just talking about it."

"You shouldn't even be talking to him," I warned her.

If I wasn't as pretty, she'd suspect me of sabotaging her out of jealousy. And if *she* wasn't as pretty, she'd hate me for being so dismissive of male admiration. Allie appeared to be listening respectfully, but she became distracted and started glancing at her watch. I gave up.

Before she left, Allison begged me not to mention Jack's phone calls to Jasmine. "You know how she jumps to conclusions!" she simpered. "Jasmine's so judgmental. And she might tell everyone." She tucked four hundreds into a shiny pink Louis Vuitton backpack and zipped it shut.

Maybe I *should* take the cut from Allie, instead of relying on her to send me back a date, but her parting words killed that possibility: “Oh, good! I can pay my rent now. Thanks! I’ll send you someone soon. Okay?” Catching the look on my face, she added, “February’s rent! It’s due *tomorrow*! I have to get to the bank.”

“You’re seeing guys to pay the rent *the day before it’s due*—?” Before I could finish, the phone interrupted me. Allie headed for the elevator as I grabbed the ringing phone.

“I think I missed Steven’s call,” I told Eileen. “I have to go out now. I can see him around seven.”

“Oh. *Bummer.*” Eileen sighed. “You have to get this guy while he’s hot. He’ll call next week. Do you have sheer stockings? They have to be sheer, not stretch. And *please* don’t wear platforms—John likes real heels.”

“Platforms? Why would I wear platforms with a john?”

“You wouldn’t believe what the last girl wore. These new girls! Listen, I know he’ll call. He wants to see an Oriental—badly. Don’t let him make an appointment for the next day, though. He’ll screw you up. If he calls when you’re not busy, that’s the best way to see him. He’s very fast. Three fifty. Be cool and bitchy but don’t order him around. He’s not a slave. But he wants to worship you . . .”

What kind of guy knows the difference between sheer and stretch stockings? For \$350, I’m quite intrigued. Eileen and I trade a lot of business—we both have clients who go for the petite Asian look, though I think my guys are less fixated on it. (A lot of my clients enjoy Allison, too—maybe it’s the blond contrast.) Funny how every call girl I know ends up with a certain *type* of regular. Eileen’s customers are fetishistic, Jasmine’s are among the quickest. I’m not sure how to define a typical Allison client . . . not sure I *want* to.

“Hey, by the way. I’ve been getting these calls,” Eileen said. “Hang-ups! And voice mail with lots of stupid breathing. Ever since I heard from you-know-who.”

“Oh god. Jack?”

“Yeah. The nerve! He acts like nothing happened, you know? Like we don’t *know*.”

“Well, don’t let on!” I said, alarmed. “Just tell him you’re busy and get off the phone—*politely*.”

When you blacklist a client, he’s not supposed to know about it.

“Look, I don’t have to humor him—not after what he did to *me*! Blabbing to that—”

“If he finds out he’s being blacklisted, he might take it out on you in some way! What’s more important? Being right? Or being happy? And safe?”

“Well, I hung up on him, okay? I told him to leave me alone. And now I’m getting these calls. I blame it’s Jack! He has no right to do this.”

Between Allison wanting to make up with him, and Eileen self-righteously provoking him, I really don't know what to do. ~~The whole idea was to turn the volume *down* on this guy in the hopes that he would just go away and stay out of our circle. Ever since he—~~

Yikes—almost 3:30. All the cabs are changing shifts! It will be a nightmare getting across town. Must log off *NOW, SOON*, five minutes ago, if I really plan to be on time for therapy.

MONDAY NIGHT

Despite the traffic, I actually snagged a taxi quickly, by offering an off-duty cabby twenty dollars. Stuck in Central Park traffic during the crosstown pilgrimage to Dr. Kessel's funky West Side office, I couldn't stop thinking about Allison and Jack. She still has a soft spot for the guy. Her taste in men has always been appalling. And yet she has a natural talent for this business. Strange. . . . And Eileen will be pissed if she hears that Allison has been talking to him. As will Jasmine. And everyone else. Oh god. And they'll be furious with me if they find out that I knew and didn't tell them. Why do I let Allie put me in these impossible binds? Why do I tolerate it?

As I emerged from the park, I spotted a big picture of Tony Soprano's shrink on the side of a bus shelter. This week, the Sopranos are everywhere—magazines, bus shelters, you name it—and everyone seems to identify with Tony for some reason. But my shrink's much hipper than Dr. Melfi. For one thing, she's on a first-name basis with her patients. And, unlike Tony, I'm a savvy veteran of self-absorption, as unembarrassed about seeing a shrink as I am about getting a monthly haircut. And yet. Just like Tony, I must take this radical leap of faith! In my case, it's about leaving my cozy East Side cocoon for the shopless tree-lined wasteland that is Riverside Drive.

I may be one of Manhattan's therapized elite, but I'm still coming to terms with some aspects of the process—like having my recently blown-out hair savagely *reblown* by the punishing wind off the Hudson. Examining my hair—again—in the lobby mirror of Dr. Kessel's solid prewar building, I was struck by the hugeness of her lobby. It's like being in a cathedral. The West Side, whether indoors or out, is so disorienting. Leaving the East Seventies is like getting squeezed out of a grid-shaped world into wideavenued *anarchy*.

I sat patiently in Dr. Wendy's waiting room, taking in the unchanged ethnic pottery, the Arts and Crafts furniture, while another patient went overtime. I've never told Wendy how simple it is to eavesdrop in that second chair to the left of the bookshelves.

"I can't stand it!" a female voice was saying. "I don't want to be confined or constrained in any way. . . . I don't like it when he asks for a date on *Wednesday* . . ." The voice became muffled and my listening spree ended. Minutes later, a mousy girl—unaware that the acoustics had been working against her—strolled past, carrying a Coach briefcase. I was impressed. Some guy is trying to constrain *her*? Maybe she's more interesting than she looks. . . . My turn.

After ranting—not too audibly—about Allison for a few minutes, I noticed a bemused expression

on Dr. Wendy's face.

"I feel betrayed," I grumbled, but I didn't go into the Howard mix-up. It would take half my session just to explain the physical mechanics, let alone the irritating dynamics, of my three-way with Allison. Instead, I sputtered on as best I could about Allison and Jack, trying to get the feelings accurate without discussing the money or the other girls or any of the classified details. I wanted to tell her about Eileen, but I stopped myself.

Finally, I said, "I guess I'm stuck with Allison. With her lousy judgment and her silly narcissism. And the fallout."

"Is this why you came back?" Wendy interrupted. "Because of your relationship with Allison?"

"No." I fell silent. It's been over a year and there's quite a lot Wendy doesn't know. And not just because I have to withhold so much business info in our sessions. "It's a relationship with a guy. I'm—*ju*—we're—in love. We got involved last spring."

"Well, perhaps we should get caught up on that. Is he a client?"

"No, a straight guy."

"When you say he's a straight guy, you mean . . . ?"

I held up my left hand as if it were a shield and spun my ring around. I told her: "He works on Wall Street. His boss is Pamela Knight. She was on *Moneyline* last week. He's one of her bright young rising stars." Wendy's dark lashes flickered, but I couldn't tell whether she recognized Pam's name. "He wouldn't understand my business. He's always had a straight job. His entire life he's been so—*s*—normal that he doesn't even know how normal he is. The other night, we were watching *The Sopranos* and he started telling me how corporate life is just like a Mafia hierarchy. Where does he get these ideas? The most unusual job he ever had was a stint as a golf caddie in college! He would never understand how his girlfriend could have a job that's—well, not exactly legal." To say the least. "And all the guys I've been with."

"But most of your clients are, essentially, straight guys and *they* understand. Don't they?"

"Y-yes. Pretty much."

"Obviously, it's not his work that sets your boyfriend apart from your clients."

"Okay," I said. "It's not him. It's me! He doesn't know I'm a hooker. I'm pretending to be a straight chick. And it's working! And that makes him a straight guy. It's . . . I feel like Dr. Frankenhooker."

Wendy smiled. "Well, it's how he perceives you rather than who he might actually be. If you feel like you're shaping his reality, it's a heady but onerous responsibility—"

"And his sister's an assistant D.A.!" I interrupted. "And my cousin Miranda introduced us. So if Matt finds out what I really do, he could freak out and say something to her. To my family! To *h*

family.”

“Hang on,” she said. “Just refresh me on Miranda. She’s older than you? A sort of big sister?”

If I can keep track of my clients’ stories, why can’t my shrink keep track of mine?

“No. Miranda’s almost ten years *younger* than me,” I seethed. “After college she moved to New York and bought a co-op loft. Uncle Gregory pays all her bills. That’s her dad. *He’s* older. I mean he’s my mother’s eldest brother.”

“Yes.” Dr. Wendy looked alert. “I remember now.” She did not apologize for the oversight, and wasn’t sure she understood how irked I was. Wendy adjusted her glasses. The red frame unfashionably large, make her look a bit like an office manager. Her frizzy hair always looks like needs a good cut. But she’s got these sexy almond-shaped eyes—and a worked-out body—that save her from looking frumpy.

I suppressed my irritation and added, “Miranda has no idea what I do for a living. She doesn’t think about how other people make ends meet. You know the type.”

“Yes. I remember. And I know the type.”

Miranda’s downtown existence is entirely subsidized by Uncle Gregory, and she’s blissfully unaware of our parents’ income disparities—which is quite handy. She never asks how I get by because she’s never had to get by. Miranda fancies herself a class traitor and sees me as the chic fog. When she discovered Matt at a gallery opening, she deemed him “too East Side” for her downtown sensibilities but perfect for me. She takes real pride in our resulting courtship, but I wonder what she would say if she knew about my very East Side profession.

“It’s not that my family is so refined,” I added. “It’s just that we don’t talk openly about money. Miranda probably thinks I get money from my parents, too. If she thinks of it at all.”

I glanced at my engagement ring again, then looked up at Wendy.

“It’s a lovely ring,” Wendy said. “So . . .” The inevitable question: “How do you feel about it?”

“Like a fraud.” There was more silence, as our time ran out. “Not entirely like a fraud,” I added quietly. “More like . . . a successful fraud. My girlfriends in the business see this as a victory. And my regulars are delighted for me. It’s like being an athlete who’s just won a trophy and everyone expects you to make an effective speech and maybe win more trophies and endorse a breakfast cereal—except that I could lose the endorsement if my corporate sponsor finds out who I really am. I’m terrified!”

“So. If your corporate sponsor finds out who you really are?” She echoed my words back. “What then?”

I stared at her, defeated by the enormity of her mental exercise.

“Maybe,” she proposed, “your ‘corporate sponsor’ appreciates a side of you that *is* real, but it’s not

the complete you. That's not the same thing as being a fraud."

"Maybe," I said, unable to look away from my substantial-yet-tasteful diamond.

"Are you still keeping a journal? It might be helpful at a time like this."

"Sort of. But I lost a whole month! Trying to encrypt it in Word! Don't ask."

Wendy nodded sympathetically. "You should consider getting an iBook." My shrink, the Ma hugger. I guess it goes with all that ethnic pottery.

On my way home, I popped into what looked like a reputable lingerie shop on Broadway. I requested sheer stockings—supplies for Steven, Eileen's client. A tattooed salesgirl with eyebrow rings and a vacant smile—was she also on Ecstasy, perhaps?—tried to sell me fishnet thigh-highs. Then, sensing my dismay, she steered me toward a rack of sheer black pantyhose with virtual lace "garters" built into the sides. Interesting, and rather pretty, but not what this new client is looking for. I was about to demand the manager—was there a responsible adult in the shop who understood "garter belt"?—when my cell phone rang. Steven, the cause of this maddening culture clash.

"I was just thinking about you," I chirped. Suddenly I remembered Steven's specs: bitchy, not chirpy. "No, tomorrow looks uncertain. . . . Confirm with me in the morning. I can't talk," I added in a firmer voice. "I'm shopping." For him, actually. But I didn't say that because, well, it's like telling a john you're at the drugstore picking up some more K-Y.

Sheer stockings, like a girl's lubrication, should simply materialize, out of the erotic ether. *Do not let daylight in upon magic.*

The salesgirl drifted away, in search of easier customers. Unable to resist a bargain, I snatched up three pairs of half-price thong panties—cute little animal prints. Perfect for Ted P., who likes to watch me changing my underwear in his office, and the more panties per minute the better. Some fetishes are so easy to shop for. Others must wait.

WEDNESDAY, 2/2/00

Every girl has a favorite customer. Plus, a john whom she barely tolerates in order to meet her weekly quota. In between the two extremes are bread-and-butter guys—the mainstay of a call girl's business. You plan for bread-and-butter guys, cultivate them, seek them out. But you never plan to have a favorite john.

Allison's favorite was Jack.

Last summer, he practically went into mourning when she decided (for the umpteenth time) to quit the business. Jack didn't want Allison to know he was seeing other girls, and he mostly saw his friends so he could mope about how much he missed her. To have a regular who's so easy—a quick

blow-job-with-a-condom— and so devoted! We all sort of envied her. Who wouldn't? Jack seemed like the perfect client.

Until he got a call from Tom Winters, a twisted IRS agent who was auditing Allison and calling everyone she knew. Winters wanted to prove that she had vast reserves of hidden wealth; he couldn't believe that she simply had no savings or real assets after more than five years in the Life. Winters was curious about Allison's lifestyle—her apartment, her prices, even her body. (He asked one girl Allison had had a lot of expensive plastic surgery. Yes, paying cash for major cosmetic work leaves a major trail, if you're being audited for undeclared income.)

Jack told the IRS how much he paid Allie and how often. He described the furniture in her living room. Never mind that these antiques came from her grandmother. Winters was convinced he could "prove" that Allie spent gobs of undeclared income at big-ticket antique shops. Auditing call girls was more than a job for Tom Winters: it was a hobby, an obsession, a calling.

And Jack didn't just tell him about Allison. He told the IRS how they had been introduced—about the other girls she worked with, like me and Eileen, and he ended up providing Tom Winters with a list of private call girls on the East Side. Allison lost many of her best clients—along with the best part of her mind—all because of Jack, the weak link. Winters decided to LUD her, as they say. He got a printout of her Local Usage Dialing records and started checking up on everyone she had ever called. He used her phone records to connect the dots and came up with some alarmingly accurate theories. He threatened her clients with professional and marital embarrassment—i.e., the tax audit from her meaning lots of loaded questions aimed at surprised wives, prickly bosses, and gossipy junior associates. Allison's clients were terrified of being linked with a "known tax evader."

One night last fall, Allison woke me with a drunken hysterical call: "You're the only person who had this information! I should have known!"

"Allison?" I whispered, trying not to wake my exhausted boyfriend.

"How else could the IRS know all these things? How else could they know that Fred came over my place on Tuesday, May the fourth? Or the name of the girl who sent him?" she wailed in a high pitched voice.

I sat up fast and moved away from Matt, hoping he couldn't hear her.

"What are you talking about?" I asked in a horrified whisper.

"I'm talking about that IRS agent—who I never should have seen today!" She stopped suddenly and I heard a deep raw sob. "*He knew everything!* My clients, my prices, he even knows I charge extra for—*for—*" There was a humiliated whimper that made me cringe. "So, when did you turn me in?"

"Please calm down," I begged as her accusations grew clearer.

"I'm not as stupid as you think!" she cried. "You won't get away with this. I've got stuff on you too!"

When I hung up, I was shaking.

“What time is it?” Matt demanded angrily. “Who *was* that? Why are all your friends either in trouble or causing trouble?” he railed. “What is wrong with you? Do you have even one normal girlfriend?”

The weeks that followed were harrowing. I did not speak to Allison and barely spoke to my boyfriend, for fear of saying something incriminating. Matt started quizzing me.

“What’s going on in your life? Was Allison threatening you?” When I tried to brush the whole thing off as girlish hysteria, he refused to believe me. “You were trying to hide your conversation the other night! Why?” My distress made him angry. “What have you *done*?” he demanded.

For the first time, I was forced to consider just what Allison, in fact, had on me. We’ve been trading customers for five, maybe six, years. She knows my boyfriend. We’ve had dinner with each other’s families. She’s the only working girl I’ve ever introduced to my mom or my cousin, and yet she’s the most unstable. What was I thinking when I allowed her into my personal life? Allison even knows where I hide my cash—whatever I don’t spend, that is. I hired a lawyer, the notorious Barry Horowitz who normally defends rich sociopaths—like those Dalton kids who hacked off that homeless man’s hand in Central Park. I hired him to defend myself against my best friend! And against Tom Winters, the IRS agent, who was also asking people about *my* furniture and *my* clients and looking for a weak link in *my* life.

Tom Winters was neutralized before he could get to my boyfriend. By mid-November he was front-page story in the Post, a public embarrassment for the U.S. Treasury Department. He had been caught—on tape—doing the very thing he accused every call girl in New York of doing: pocketing undeclared income. Winters had used his government job to extort cash from terrified shopaholic hookers who were caught spending far more than the income they declared on their tax returns. A small Barneys shopping bag filled with hundreds did him in. (It’s amazing how much cash you can fit into a bag that was designed to carry a bottle of foundation.)

When Allison came to her senses, I felt like I was waking from a bad dream. You know, that moment when you’re not sure it *was* a dream and you’re not sure you’re awake yet?

Jasmine had cautioned me last fall about making up with Allie. “If a girl ever threatened *me* like that—you don’t get to do that in this business! Not without consequences. And if it wasn’t for that silly bitch, your boyfriend wouldn’t have been asking you all those questions.”

Yes, Allie got me into trouble with my boyfriend, but I managed to get myself out of it. I’ve kept his mind off “all those questions” by keeping Allie at arm’s length. I never converse with her when he’s around, always turn my cell off when I’m with him, and, to date, he’s none the wiser. Yes, I am always looking over my shoulder and sometimes I need to be alone just to decompress from my own shadow, but that’s the cost of making friends with the girls you work with. (Some hookers refuse to socialize with the other girls—and who can blame them?)

I persuaded Jasmine not to tell anyone about Allison’s insane threats. Allison needed to get back o

her feet and replace the business she had lost. If the other girls knew she had threatened to turn someone in, they'd be shocked—and she would never get any business from them again. Eileen, for example, is angry enough at Jack; I can just imagine how she'd take it if she knew about Allie's recent conversations with him.

Allie has never been the sharpest eyebrow pencil at the makeup counter. Her reputation as the natural blonde with the wonderful voice—too-dim-to-hurt-a-flea—has been her meal ticket. And not just with men! Allie's the kind of girl madams adore because she's too disorganized to steal their customers. During the last seven years, she has decided to quit the business at least four times. Professional call girls regard her as harmless competition. Fortunately for Allie, nobody knows about her angry threats. Well, nobody but me. And Jasmine.

Today, Jasmine remarked, "That girl owes you big-time. You protected her reputation." We were walking back from the nail salon, after an emergency pedicure (for Jasmine, due to a stubbed toe) and a routine manicure (for me). I still haven't said anything to Jasmine about Allison and Jack.

"If I were a bitch," she continued. "I'd blackmail Allison and she'd be paying *me* to keep your secret. How much do you think it's worth? Three hundred a week? If it's any more than that, it's not worth it, she might as well quit the business. But I think she could come up with a couple of hundred. The logic of blackmail—"

"Don't even *think* that way!" I said in horror.

"Please, Allison's so kinky she'd fucking *love* it, having to turn tricks to pay off some evil blackmailer. Wasn't she claiming to be a sex addict last summer? This is right up her alley!"

"Stop it," I moaned.

"Oh, come on. She's lucky I'm *not* a bitch. Therefore I won't do all those things—which, by the way, I know she would love to have done to her. That girl loves attention, and if there's one thing a blackmailer gives you, it's attention."

I suppressed a spiteful giggle. "Blackmail is *not* something to joke about," I said primly.

Jasmine became eerily calm. "No," she agreed. "It's not." We were standing at the corner of York and Seventy-ninth, waiting for the light to change.

"And not being a bitch is not some sort of unique accomplishment that you get a great big medal for," I added.

"Maybe not," Jasmine allowed, heading into the crosswalk, "but it should be."

Uh-oh. Five o'clock. Time to rinse off my camphor mask, rewind the video, change the sheets. Milton's due to arrive any minute now!

This morning, an emergency rendezvous with Allie at the health club. I was climbing backward on the StairMaster when she appeared, flushed and damp, in flower-print running shorts and a cropped t-shirt.

“I have to talk to you,” she panted. “I need your advice. You’re the only person I can talk to. . . Why—uh—are you doing it like *that*?”

“It’s supposed to work the glutes,” I said through clenched teeth. “Can you just broadcast your problems a little louder?”

When I got to the women’s locker room, Allie had already showered. She was standing in front of a full-length mirror, sprinkling talc-free powder on her breasts. The nine-to-fivers had cleared out and the moms had gone off to Power Yoga, leaving the room empty.

“It’s about Jack,” Allie began. Then, frowning at her image in the mirror, she added, “Does my tummy look sort of . . . huge today? I feel so puffy.”

“Your abs look fine,” I reassured her. “What’s going on with Jack?”

She patted the thin strip of blond hair between her legs with a powder puff, then stood on the scale—carefully setting the powder puff aside before she dared look at the number settings. She stepped off the scale, began pulling her panties on, then confessed, “I—um—ran into him last night.”

“Ran into him?” I squinted at her furiously. “You *saw* him, didn’t you.”

“No! I mean, yes, but not the way you mean. I ran into him because—” She blushed. “He surprised me. I was coming home from a call, and Jack was standing outside my building holding a huge bouquet of lilies! You know I love lilies.”

“Allie. A john who shows up without an appointment is a *stalker*. Even if—*especially if*—he’s carrying your favorite flowers. You could have been walking home with a straight friend—with a boyfriend or something—and then what? Sneaking up on a hooker is pathological and disrespectful,” I told her. “Not to mention ungentlemanly.”

“Well, I *was* nervous when I saw him standing there,” she admitted. “But he was very polite and he just gave me the flowers, said good night, and walked away.”

“God, how creepy.”

But at least he didn’t make a scene in front of her doorman.

“And when I got upstairs there was a note. Do you want to see it?” She pulled a small envelope out of her gym bag.

~~I know why you're holding back from seeing me. I'm truly sorry about what happened, and you always be special to me. I think about you constantly. I miss everything about you. Please give me chance.~~

All my love, J.

“Then he called this morning! I think I should see him. He’s being very generous. He’s offering me a lot of money, and you’ve always said I should treat this more like a business. Well, this is a business decision for me.”

“You should set some sort of weekly quota for yourself. But that doesn’t mean you can’t have standards. Some things are not for sale,” I pointed out. “While he’s thinking about you constantly, he’s making breather calls to Eileen. He’s a loose cannon.”

“She doesn’t *know* it’s him. Eileen doesn’t even have Caller ID! How can she say that?” A tow truck attendant entered the changing room, and we both clammed up. “Welllll,” Allie mumbled. “Don’t tell Jasmine. Or any of the other girls. Promise me you won’t say a word. But I asked him for two thousand. And he agreed.” Despite wanting to elude everyone’s disdain, she looked rather pleased with herself. “Soooo,” she said, with a hint of smugness. “What would you do?”

Every girl has a favorite john, and who this guy is tells you a lot about the girl. Jasmine’s favorite is Harry from Darien, who keeps a black Town Car waiting while he’s getting a blow job upstairs in his socks and wing tips. Because he’s her steadiest customer and a quickie, she hasn’t raised his price in two years. In my case, there’s Milton. Unlike Harry, Milt is no quickie. Sometimes, he’s a lot of work. But he spends far more than my other regulars, and he’s willing to help if I get myself into a financial pickle. How could I *not* like him? He’s *financially* faithful. And the bottom line with a favorite john is that deep down you like it when he’s faithful. Allison’s favorite? A spineless weasel who married into a real estate family, who ratted on us all to the IRS because he was afraid his rich wife would find out about his midday excursions to call girls. Though he likes a bit of variety, he’s really obsessed with Allie. And who else would be flattered to hear that a john “thinks about her constantly”? Most professionals would run for the hills if a client said that.

“When you have a business,” I told Allie, “you have to set your own standards. Weed out the undesirables. Being a call girl is like being responsible for a really hot restaurant. Some people get a little dessert on the house, and some don’t even get in the door. Jack shouldn’t be able to get a reservation. He’s been tainted by this IRS mess, and we can’t afford to have him around.”

“You’re blaming the victim. That IRS agent threatened to ruin his life! You’re not being fair to him.”

“That IRS guy threatened to ruin *my* life, too. But I didn’t become an informant, did I?”

“But you don’t have children! Jack has a family, a marriage, people who depend on him.”

“Jack’s ‘children’ are grown! It’s not as if Jack’s wife was going to get custody of two people in their late twenties!”

“No,” she agreed. “But he didn’t want to hurt her. He was trying to protect his family. You shouldn’t condemn him for that.”

“He blabbed to the IRS about us—and now they have every reason to think they can come back for *more*. What kind of man ‘protects his family’ by turning himself into a sitting duck?” I asked. “Even if what he did was justifiable, we can’t afford to deal with him. What if he gets subpoenaed? Even in conversation, every transaction you have increases the risk.”

Allison appeared to be listening, so I pressed on.

“Look,” I said very patiently. “Your girlfriends have been sticking together and *we’re* not seeing this guy—”

“That’s why he keeps calling me!” she said brightly. “And offering me so much money! None of the other girls will see him. Maybe I should ask for *three* thousand.”

I shrank back in horror.

Through the Hooking Glass

FRIDAY MORNING, 2/4/00

Last night, after our appointment with Harry, Jasmine dragged me to the Mark for a martini. Not wanting to show up blotto for dinner with my fiancé, I opted for a ladylike Kir Royale—“just one.” Jasmine ordered her usual: Absolut, straight up, with an olive.

“I’m worried about Allison,” I confided.

“Stop the fucking presses!” Jasmine sputtered. “When have you *not* worried about Allison? What sort of problem might Her Blondness be causing—I mean, having—this week?”

I told her about Jack’s showing up at her building without an appointment and Allison’s late-bright idea, the \$3,000 question. “Don’t discuss this with Allie,” I added. “Promise you won’t say a word about what I’ve told you!”

Jasmine gave me a searing look that unnerved me.

“Allie might say something about us to Jack,” I explained. “Do you want him as an enemy? What does he know when he might get interviewed again by the IRS? Or if she might tell him that we turned her back against him . . . not that we did exactly . . .”

My sheepish voice trailed off into a maze of denial. I tried not to think about the sin I was committing. Spilling one best friend’s secret (against her specific wishes) to another best friend! Was there a special place in hell? I hope there’s a waiting list.

“That girl . . .” Jasmine was muttering darkly. “That girl’s soul is composed of cotton candy.” (I see what Allie means about Jasmine being judgmental.) “She’s a moral idiot!”

And if Jasmine knew that Allison had asked me to keep a secret? Would she trust me not to blab her business around? But I would never tell Jasmine’s secrets to Allie. That’s the difference. I swallowed the rest of my apéritif. The sweet alcoholic potion was doing its job, morphing into a weird elixir of self-justification, smoothing out my wrinkled conscience.

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