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Opening Extract from...

Ambition

Written by Immodesty Blaize

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AMBITION

Immodesty
Blaize



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Chapter 1

Sienna Starr released her firm, zeppelin-like breasts from her bra, smiling to herself in the knowledge that she looked incredible, dressed in nothing but diamonds and a spotlight. Turning to face her audience, cheers and wolf whistles filled the air as she elegantly draped herself over the enormous five-foot-high, deep-cut diamond, twinkling and blinking in the light beside her. She languidly stretched into the perfect pin-up pose, her lethally long legs glistening with a sprinkle of gold dust.

Mounting the prop with cat-like grace, she perched there dramatically on the slowly rotating diamond, silky black hair cascading down her back, curls bouncing softly on the smooth caramel skin of her shoulders. The music ended with a shudder. Sienna grimaced. This was the second time this week Murray had screwed up her track midway through her crescendo. She hauled herself off the diamond and took her bow on the tiny stage, smiling through gritted teeth. The crowd hadn't noticed the blunder as they whooped and clapped at the picture of perfect Amazonian beauty before them, only for the vision to be snatched away by blood-red curtains swooping in front of Sienna, their velvety whisper drowned out in the catcalls of the

audience but their distinctive aroma of stale smoke and sweat all-pervading.

‘He left me out there in silence like a lemon again!’ wailed Sienna as she clattered from the stage through the wings and straight into the cramped dressing room. ‘I mean, how hard is it to play a song right to the end, for chrissake! Give me strength!’ There were murmurs and grunts of support from the cast of girls from behind their mascara wands and blusher brushes as they busied themselves getting ready for their own acts. ‘If I’ve made it through that audition, there’s more than a few things I won’t miss about this place,’ grumbled Sienna as she flopped into the chair at her station and crossly yanked off her glossy wig to reveal her own chestnut locks crammed beneath a wig cap. She popped the cascading raven hair onto one of the mannequin heads on her dresser before reaching for a sharp, fiery red bob.

‘Oh, come on, Sienna, don’t act all innocent. I bet you already had that part before you even set foot in the audition,’ piped up Britney from behind her hand mirror as she sat tweezing her eyebrows at the next dresser.

‘I’m sorry?’ Sienna laughed uneasily as she roughly pulled on her wig.

‘You heard.’

‘Sure I heard, but I’m not sure I understood?’

‘Well, put it this way,’ Britney sighed, lowering her mirror to look Sienna in the eye, ‘you’d only been dancing

for, like, ten seconds and you were featuring here, then ten minutes later you were headlining. I don't suppose your name had anything to do with that?'

'Britney Ferry, how could you say that!' shrieked Honey from across the room, pitching her afro comb through the air, and missing its target by an inch. 'Sienna got here fair and square, by working her butt off and being a damn fine dancer. And it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that she inherited that talent but she's got here with her own hard work. Jeez, girl, there's enough bitches making the world unpleasant without having one of them here in this veal crate of a dressing room. Now get back to your moustache!' There was a collective gasp and Britney retreated behind her hand mirror. An awkward silence descended on the room, punctuated only by the sounds of Candy crunching loudly on her carrot sticks as the strains of a boisterous audience filtered through from the club.

Sienna hastily teased her wig into place as she willed her blushing cheeks and the prickling sensation behind her eyes to subside. She was more than capable of defending herself but, even so, she was grateful to her friend Honey for speaking up on her behalf. The last thing she wanted was a catfight with Britney backstage. Neither did she want to prolong her embarrassment at Britney's cruel dig by looking upset. Being known as the daughter of Tiger Starr was a mixed blessing as far as Sienna was concerned. As much as she was driven to

follow in her famous mother's footsteps, Sienna also wanted to make Tiger proud by doing it on her own genuine merits. Theirs had been a terrible, poignant, bittersweet roller coaster of a love story, and Tiger had forfeited so much for her daughter throughout her life that now it was Sienna's turn to give something back.

Sienna's naked ambition had once been her downfall and it also had brought her own mother's reputation crashing down beside her in spectacular fashion only a few years earlier. Sienna had always believed Tiger Starr was her glamorous big sister. Growing up in the intimidating wintry shadow of an aloof, untouchable famous icon, Sienna's jealous insecurity had led her to a desperate act. But, with fate favouring sweet irony as so often it does, it was Sienna who naively orchestrated the investigative press story that would reveal to the world that Tiger was her mother. She had unwittingly lifted the lid off the terrible truth of how she came into the world. At the tender age of fourteen, her mother had had her own childhood brutally ripped away from her. Raped by her teacher, Tiger had been forced to relinquish her baby daughter to the care of her staunch Catholic parents before being virtually banished from her home. Tiger – then known as Poppy Adams – had reinvented herself with a new identity. But she had endured the torture of many years of painful silence for her child's sake – watching the daughter she loved grow up to become a

resentful 'sibling'. Once Sienna had unwittingly shone the spotlight on the truth, it mercilessly unpicked every memory, every conversation, everything she thought to be real, and shone a whole new light on a whole different life.

Of course Tiger had made it clear that she had never given up hope of them being able to rebuild their lives together, and after twenty-three years the two women had been able to forge their rightful bond as mother and daughter. Sienna had grown up a lot in the last couple of years. When she thought back to the bitchy, arrogant little cow she'd once been – thinking the world owed her something; spoilt rotten and cosseted by her surrogate parents, taking her famous 'sister' for everything she could get out of her, and spreading her ill-will like some jealous, covetous brat – she felt thoroughly ashamed of herself, and of course sticking half of Colombia up her nose had really been the icing on the cake. But life had forced its lessons upon her in the cruellest way – what child ever deserved to live with the knowledge that she had been born out of such cruelty and abuse upon her mother? But like Tiger, Sienna was a survivor. Adversity had carved her into the figure of a dignified young woman albeit, like her mother, with a shadow behind her eyes that betrayed the sadness and scars of her past. But now that Sienna possessed a freshly chastened humility, she also found herself without the security of her former tough shell, nor the bald confidence her coke habit had once

given her. Britney's spiteful words had stung her back there. Whilst past events might offer her some kind of defence, Sienna had learned her lesson about airing her dirty laundry in public. Britney's outburst wasn't the first of its kind to come from bitter and jealous showgirls and it certainly wouldn't be the last either. That would be Sienna's cross to bear for the time being at least. Fortunately, something had already caught her eye in the mirror to distract her from her rapidly descending miserable cloud of frustration.

'What the hell's that?' Sienna asked, turning to point at the huge shadowy mass eclipsing the doorway to the props closet.

'We're not really sure,' chimed Candy and Shandy, looking up in unison from their leg stretches.

'It arrived in the second half,' explained the exotic-looking new co-feature, Paige, as she wrestled her gown over her shapely hips. 'Damn that last slab of cheesecake,' she cursed.

'Well, whatever it is, it looks like a giant poop,' declared Candy.

'Yeah, and it's like . . . as big as my car!' gasped Sienna, wide-eyed.

'And it keeps catching on my costume every time I walk past,' moaned Shandy. 'This room is small enough as it is. If that snags on my lace and crystals there'll be hell to pay.'

'But what is it?' asked Sienna again, sidling up to the

unidentified mass of painted brown paper mâché, examining it for clues. ‘Wheels?’ she murmured to herself, poking at little castors with her painted toes.

‘It’s for the new speciality act,’ revealed Honey with a dramatic whisper. ‘She debuts tonight. She’s here for a month apparently. Fanny la Mouche. She’s out on the fire escape warming up.’

‘Oh, the glamour,’ sighed Sienna.

‘What does la Mouche mean?’ lisped Candy, hair pins now poking out from between her plump red lips as she worked away at securing her headdress.

‘Who knows,’ shrugged Honey, ‘but Ma and Pepper have been booking some rather avant garde acts these last few months, dontcha think?’

‘Ma’s been a bit avant garde herself lately, I reckon,’ replied Candy. ‘Maybe dementia’s finally setting in. That or chronic gin-induced euphoria. Mother’s ruin indeed,’ she sighed, eliciting grunts of agreement from Shandy.

‘Well, I’d like to know what made her think that big ol’ poop might be sexy,’ said Paige, inching her dress zipper carefully up her back.

‘It’s not a poop!’ giggled Honey. ‘It can’t be. That’s a whole other show! Ma and Pepper wouldn’t be catering for those types yet, not ’til things get real quiet out there at any rate!’

‘How can it possibly get quieter than this?’ questioned Candy, raising her eyebrows incredulously and gesturing

in the direction of the stage. 'You see bigger crowds at the all-you-can-eat buffets across the Strip!'

'Ladies and gentlemen!' came the muffled boom of the compère, filtering through to the dressing room on a wave of cheers. 'Without further ado, it's time for double trouble with our resident twin temptresses; try and contain yourselves, fellas! Please welcome to the stage Candy Labra and Shandy Leeeeear!'

'Oh jeez, we're up,' squeaked Candy, securing the last pin in her huge candelabra headdress and cracking her knuckles before following Shandy swiftly through to the stage, their thousands of dangling crystals clanking and tinkling as they went.

'You know what, girls?' announced Sienna, brandishing a lipstick in the air as she addressed the room, 'if we do get into the Follies' new show, maybe I *will* miss this decaying old dump. Where else would you get a poop on wheels on the same bill as identical twins on chandelier trapezes? God bless the Monte Cristo.'

'It's not a poop!' chorused the girls loudly by way of reply.

Sienna had been at the Monte Cristo for two years now. When she had first set foot in the place it had a reputation for having the best, in fact the *only*, genuine burlesque in town. Its eccentric proprietors had an equally formidable reputation. Now in the dusk of her eighties, Pepper was an elegant yet feisty choreographer who had spent her best years building her own legendary status as

a burlesque star alongside the vintage greats: Lili St Cyr, Blaze Starr, April March and Sienna's own grandmother, Coco Schnell. Ma 'Toots' Barker had also been a burlesque legend in her lifetime, but Ma had readily given up the hot lights for a life of luxury as the moll of a notorious Baltimore mobster.

The Monte Cristo had been one of Pinkie Di Carlo's nightclubs in the fifties in addition to outfits he had in Atlantic City, Baltimore and Cuba. Pinkie was omnipresent, running those joints with a rod of iron with the vixen-like Ma at his side. During the fifties the Monte Cristo had been a magnet for politicians, big player movie stars and every fellow heavyweight in the Mob, from Bugsy Siegel to Meyer Lansky, and Pinkie was the charismatic 'goodfella' in the epicentre. The FBI were all over his businesses like a rash, and Pinkie brazenly flirted with them in his own inimitable style, thriving off the drama, ultimately knowing he was always one step ahead. He never took life too seriously like that. Pinkie knew the name of his über glamorous club would conjure associations with the Cuban cigar, which is why the logo on his matchbooks was of the identically named French fried ham sandwich instead; that was just his mischievous humour all over. He was also known as being able to charm his way out of anything. Despite oft-whispered tales of violence and bloodshed, Pinkie's charm made it all strangely unbelievable somehow. In fact there was speculation over the full reach of his crime

syndicate; rumours abounded that his rackets were merely gambling based and the Monte Cristo was simply a laundering operation; spending his days despatching bullet-riddled corpses in the Nevada desert just didn't seem Pinkie's style. Yet there was no doubt 'the Monte' was the social hub; the ultimate backroom that brought all the major players together from every walk of life. Pinkie led the high life: perilous, thrilling, lavish. Life was good. Until one day back in 1976, Pinkie disappeared. Just like that.

Ma took over the club in impassive silence, stepping into the lion's den and taking over her man's affairs unquestioningly. Word had it that Pinkie's 'numbers' racket, a lottery extortion of sorts, was his unglamorous undoing, and after the FBI swooped, he jumped bail and headed for Acapulco before the floodgates of questioning turned on his other 'ventures'; but Pinkie didn't leave before signing his property portfolio over to his mistress. One by one Ma offloaded his clubs but kept his favourite going: the Monte Cristo. It seemed it was her one enduring link to the past, to Pinkie; her one great love.

Ma cleaned out the gambling but kept the burlesque and nude revues going, right throughout burlesque's wilderness years, battling the new and more popular American trends of the 1980s for table dancing, go-go and neon Lycra. She watched her crowds diminish and the revenue fall away, but she held things together with

savings stashed away from years of creative living with Pinkie; she resolved to weather the storm and keep his club alive in the spirit he would have wanted. Sure enough, when burlesque started to make its comeback in the late 1990s, she saw the return of the glamour crowd. Only gone were the politicians, mobsters and Hollywood bombshells, now replaced by celebrities and sporting heroes' wives. The FBI still kept their wiretaps going on the Monte Cristo, holding out for that one key to Pinkie's whereabouts. Mob connections ran deep and Ma knew she was being watched and looked after from afar, and even to this day both she and Vegas stayed tight-lipped about what happened back in '76.

Pepper joined forces with Ma Barker when, after thinking about setting up her own burlesque club in Vegas a few years back, she quickly realised she wanted Ma as an ally, not a competitor. Pepper was received with open arms; true legends were supportive of each other, and the showgirl 'family' always took care of their own, much like the Mob. Sienna had been beside herself when she made it through the auditions for the Monte, especially after her mother had regaled her with outrageous stories of Pepper and Ma's heyday. Even when Pepper had retired from the limelight she had choreographed many a show for Tiger over the years.

Sienna still remembered her first night at the Monte like it was yesterday – she still recalled those butterflies she felt as she tentatively stepped out in front of her

audience for the first time – and she still cringed at the memory of her ill-fitting wigs and her clumsy costume malfunctions as she shook her tail feathers for dear life up there on that glamorous little catwalk. But her gusto, not to mention the combination of an incredible pair of tits and never-ending legs, ensured Sienna Starr was a big hit from the start. Huge. All the dancers praised her with knowing nods for having Tiger Starr's 'heat' and 'fire', which in truth made Sienna a little bashful, to have that kind of connection with her own mother. She was quickly promoted to headline regularly, and sure enough, that intoxicating feeling of being the high-voltage glamorous starlet had stayed with Sienna every single time she performed since. She finally understood what had held her mother in its grip for all these years.

But it seemed that the more polished Sienna became as a performer, the shittier the club became. There was no denying Pepper was simply running out of energy, and Ma's drinking was getting the better of her. The carpets stank of sour champagne and disinfectant, rotting with sugary spillages, cigarette ash and the dirt of life, the flock had all but rubbed from the wallpaper which was now ripped and peeling, the stage was littered with pock marks and splinters, and all except a handful of lights in the lighting rig had checked out long ago, which often resulted in a less than flattering shading on any performer not stretched wind-tunnel-tight with facelifts.

Pepper and Ma hadn't been uncovering the hot new acts for months now, and the once A-list crowd of actresses, supermodels, celebs and rock stars had rapidly given way to the raincoat brigade who didn't want the hustle of a clip joint and who could make a warm beer last the whole night. All the best acts who performed to the once-incredible audiences now bypassed the Monte in favour of the sleek casinos. Ma and Pepper couldn't even afford those girls now anyway. Those who were still hanging on in there were performing out of loyalty to Ma and Pepper, and a desperate yen to recapture the Monte Cristo's glory years, although deep down everyone knew they had seen the last of those halcyon days.

'What're these big-ass panties doing on *my* rail?' demanded Britney in the dressing room. 'Where's the name tag . . . *ugh!* These have clitty litter in them! *Ugh!*'

'Wooh, someone's been getting excited in their gusset out there!' howled Shandy, breathless from her performance.

'Yeast infection more like! Ugh, these must be riff-raff chorus-girl panties. Get them away from my beautiful gowns!' wailed Britney, flinging the offending sequined knickers at the fire escape.

'Calm it, Brit, we don't have a house mum on wardrobe any more,' snapped Candy. 'Anyway, who's nicked my bloody Elnett? That was a full jumbo can!'

'Here, I've got mousse,' said Shandy.

'It's not the same! I need my Elnett back, now!'

As the rabble of the hot cramped dressing room continued about her, Sienna hurriedly pulled on her extravagantly rhinestoned red ringmaster jacket and reached for her beloved leather bullwhip, mounted in a neat coil on the wall above her dresser. One last check in the mirror revealed an exquisite sight – six feet of pure leggy loveliness, clad in hundreds of thousands of crystals. Her bejewelled G-string settled between her pert peachy buttocks as her intricately rhinestoned bustier peeped from beneath her sparkling ruby tailcoat edged in gold braid and epaulettes; even her stocking tops twinkled with Swarovski as they clung snugly to the smooth curve of her sleek thighs. One thing her mother had taught her was never to underestimate the power of the rhinestone. Finishing off Sienna's ensemble were jet-black feathered plumes radiating from her headdress, freshly steamed and fluffed up, and bobbing perkily as she now strode out of the dressing room and into the wings.

'Have a good one, babe,' she heard Honey shouting after her as she settled in the wings, kneading the leather of her trusty whip in her gloved hands and contemplating her big entrance. She needed to regain her ground after the last undignified exit from her diamond act. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, and desperately tried to muster a few butterflies in her stomach in preparation for the straggly yet rowdy crowd. Oh, for a two thousand-seater theatre with audiences sipping champagne, dreamed Sienna. A sharp tap on her shoulder

brought Sienna's head whipping round to look beside her. There stood Amanda from the chorus line grinning gormlessly, her scrawny frame barely filling the tiger-striped body suit she was zipped into. She looked more like a neutered malnourished house cat in blue eye shadow than a ferocious, exotic wild animal needing to be tamed.

'Amanda, what a surprise. Where's my usual girl?'

'Chastity? Um . . . she had an unfortunate date with the Ritalin, she peaked a bit too early . . . she's out the back talking to the wall again,' ventured Amanda feebly.

'Christ,' sighed Sienna, tapping her stiletto irritably as she looked to the heavens and bit her tongue, making a mental note to ask Ma to allocate her a more competent assistant for tomorrow.

'So you've been taught the routine?' she asked.

'Sure have. Be gentle!' giggled Amanda.

'Gentle? Amanda, I'm a lion tamer out there. Have you actually seen my act? I need you to be—' Sienna regarded Amanda breaking into a goofy smirk as she nervously fiddled with her quilted tiger ears. 'It doesn't matter,' Sienna sighed kindly. 'Just – try and be cat-like at least. Slink.'

'Slink – like a snake?'

'No, that's slithering,' explained Sienna patiently. 'Just be elegant, okay, and for God's sake keep moving when I aim for you with the whip.'

'Yes ma'am,' said Amanda, breaking into another wide-eyed grin.

'And none of that stupid smiling!' whispered Sienna as

she heard Griselda the tranny compère winding up their introduction.

‘But we’re told to smile—’ started Amanda.

‘Just smoulder!’ hissed Sienna. ‘Or at least look like you’re angry!’

‘Oh, I never get angry, ma’am.’

Sienna rolled her eyes as she braced herself for her entrance. ‘Lions led by donkeys,’ she muttered.

‘Oh, is there a donkey coming on stage too?’

Blue cheered and wolf whistled from his vantage point in the audience as Sienna brought her routine to a roaring climax, cracking her whip like a warrior before snaking it around her curves as her long legs straddled her glittering circus podium centre stage. He smiled to himself, seeing shades of that familiar Tiger Starr fire up there even on the modest stage, and enjoyed a tiny shiver of excitement at the news he was about to tell Sienna. He caught her eye as she struck her final pose and signalled for her to join him after her act.

Five minutes later she appeared at his side in her ever-glamorous civvies, panting for breath. She flung her arms round Blue’s hulking bulk and tweaked his little pencil moustache playfully.

‘How’s my favourite fairy?’ sighed Sienna, giving him a squeeze.

‘I’m fabulous, devotion. And look at you! Looking divine, darling, loving the lounge suit, very Liz,’ gushed Blue, ‘but

who the fuck was that bit of candyfloss in the catsuit on stage with you? I've seen more talented inbreeds.'

'Blue!' scolded Sienna. 'God, I can tell you've been working with Brandy Alexander.'

'Hmm, yes, darling, Brandy's reputation precedes her. Sharp as Ajax and bitter as lemon, that one. Stunning though. She must have a painting in the attic,' said Blue, rattling his champagne glass in view of the bartender. 'Two more over here, Jeffrey! In fact make it a bottle!'

'Oh no, sweetheart, I only want a glass—' started Sienna.

'You're kidding!' said Blue. 'We have something to celebrate, young lady!'

Sienna regarded him thoughtfully through narrowed eyes, wondering if he was bluffing her. 'Blue, don't get my hopes up. Have you actually got news on the casting?'

'Let's just put it this way, you're one step closer to being the next – um – Tiger Starr!'

'No way . . . did I get in?'

Blue gave a little nod and a teensy tear of happiness squeezed itself onto his cheek. 'Not just a chorus-line dancer, darling. With your knockout figure you're going to be one of the "Venus in Furs" showgirls.'

Sienna squealed like a banshee, turning heads away from the stage as she jumped up and down at the bar, her thick chestnut hair tumbling about her shoulders as she span herself round in excitement. Abruptly she stopped. 'But sweetheart – Pepper – what will I say to her?' she gasped, her full lips quivering.

‘Oh, give me a break,’ laughed Blue. ‘You can’t flutter an eyelash in this town without everyone knowing. She knew before me! She’s always known it was only a matter of time before she’d lose you to a bigger show, darling.’

‘You’re kidding! Oh God, so who else—’

‘Well, I’m sure they’ll find out soon enough . . . but you mustn’t say anything until it’s announced by the casino. Honey Lou and Paige Turner got through too. Congratulations, darling,’ said Blue, reaching his bulging arms round Sienna for a bear hug.

‘Oh wow!’ gasped Sienna. ‘Paige! The gorgeous new girl! Maybe I should invite her to move in with me and Honey. It would be perfect with all three of us working on the same show! Oh Blue, this is just the best news – ever! Wait ’til I ring Mum!’ And with that Sienna ripped herself from the embrace and dashed off to the dressing room, all legs and hair. Blue turned his face to the stage, still grinning with pride at Sienna’s achievement. She had deserved this break, and she had worked hard for it. Blue also knew she had given a false name in her audition; that girl sure as hell wanted to prove she could do it on her own.

As Brandy Alexander’s personal dresser in the show, Blue got to hear everything, from chorus-line chatter to the casino bosses’ plans before they had even made them. More than any leading lady, Blue was the real reigning queen of the Follies Hotel Casino. And he couldn’t be more thrilled that Sienna would be working on its biggest show yet – ‘Venus in Furs’. Blue had been Tiger Starr’s

best friend and confidante for many years, and, charged with the role of fairy godmother to Sienna, Blue was immensely proud of her progress, and even more pleased that he'd get to keep an even closer watch on her, now they were both working on the same show. He had seen the naïve Sienna of yore being ruthlessly taken advantage of in the past, and since she was blossoming into quite the starlet, the last thing she needed was to let the seductive and highly addictive charms of Vegas distract her from the glittering prize she deserved.

Blue swigged his champagne and surveyed the ragtag audience before him. Spotting a couple of the well-known local lounge lizards at the bar, he raised his glass to them with a cheeky nod and a wink. Imagining Sienna having to bite her tongue not to tell the girls the amazing news backstage, Blue couldn't help wondering if she wouldn't be sad to move on from the Monte, but he had a gut feeling Sienna would always be there for Pepper whether she was dancing at the club or not. Pepper was virtually family, and birds of a feather stick together. Blue turned to the stage as Griselda introduced Fanny la Mouche. As the velvet curtains parted to the thudding grind of The Cramps' 'Human Fly', Blue's jaw dropped as an angular string bean of a girl unfolded herself from the sunroof of a large brown paper mâché dump on stage and posed there, clad in shimmering bottle-green spandex and a shiny black helmet sporting huge red rhinestoned fly eyes.

'Fanny the Fly?' murmured Blue, nearly dropping his

champagne flute in horror. ‘Oh Jesus and Mary, she’d better not be getting any chocolate mousse out . . .’

‘Cheers, baby, and congratulations! Here’s to my beautiful woman,’ murmured Max, holding aloft his Scotch. ‘With you on a winning streak like this, I think you’re going to bring me luck tonight.’ He leaned in close to Sienna, his breath warm and heavy. She tilted her face up to his, letting him plant a deep kiss on her soft lips as his free hand wrapped around her tiny waist, pulling her in close. For a moment she forgot there was anyone else in the room as she drank in the musk of his skin and clung to his taut, broad chest. She wondered if life could get any better as she finally pulled away to look into his beautiful hazel eyes. Max planted a tender kiss upon her nose, sending butterflies fluttering feverishly through Sienna’s stomach. Her moment of reverie was curtailed by the croupier clearing his throat gently.

‘Mr Power, are you in or out?’

‘I want to change dealers,’ answered Max curtly, pulling away from Sienna abruptly, a flash of irritation in his eyes as his casino host appeared from the ether by his side.

‘Mr Power, may I escort you to another table,’ whispered the host.

‘No, just change the damn dealer.’

‘Of course, sir.’ Before Sienna could blink, Max had three new hands of blackjack in place under a new croupier. Knowing she had lost Max’s attention again, Sienna settled

into her seat, a tiny sigh squeaking its way from her lips as her eyes lustfully grazed over her boyfriend's striking profile. Sometimes she had to pinch herself to remind herself that she was Max Power's girlfriend. After her last ass-hat of a boyfriend had got her hooked on cocaine, slept around and, well, tried to kill her mother, Sienna was certainly due a Prince Charming, and it looked as though Max Power fitted the job description perfectly. At thirty-two years of age, he was a beautiful six foot three inch-tall strapping package of dark brooding looks with an overseas telephone number as a bank balance. The only son of Kerry Power, the infamous self-made Irish tycoon, Maximilian Power had made his own mark on the world as the genius entrepreneur behind Silver Slipper Airlines – a luxury airline that specialised in recreating the vintage glamour travel of yore. Passengers had exclusive VIP lounges sheltered from the riff-raff of the airport, and upon boarding ate caviar and foie gras to the strains of Frank Sinatra, with 1950s-style pin-up perfect hostesses pouting their Marilyn lips whilst serving up gimlets and dry martinis with their prim white lace-gloved hands. Lavish in-flight entertainment ranged from manicures and beauty treatments to vintage film classics, from *Casablanca* to *Scarface*. A well-appointed cocktail lounge on every aeroplane maintained the vintage bachelor-pad chic.

Max was a risk taker, there was no doubt. He had set up Silver Slipper Airlines in the wake of 9/11 to cries of alarm and outrage from those around him who merely

saw a lunatic attempt at radical business to try to compete with his father's legendary meteoric rise. Most wondered why Max didn't just quietly live off his father's billions and keep his head down. Why be greedy and foolishly meddle in business he clearly knew nothing about? What they didn't know was that Kerry Power had every intention of making his son learn the hard way – as he had. There would be no free rides for family. Kerry's sadistic streak was well concealed; few knew he exerted the iron grip of his power to create obstacles for poor Max as sport, in life as well as business; his son always had to be ten steps ahead. Max developed a head for business early in life out of necessity. Kerry didn't believe in things like pocket money – instead, he set 'tasks' for his son. For Max's thirteenth birthday there were no remote control cars or computer games; instead Kerry bought him a shitty street in Belfast. The birthday card read 'What the Luftwaffe and terrorism couldn't manage, the Planning Service have. I've generously given you a few years to plan how to develop your new street into something pretty you'd want the Powers to live in. You'll thank me.'

It was no wonder that by fourteen Max was unofficially 'selling' his first business in shoe polishing for the prefects at Eton, or that by sixteen he was expelled for running a book for organised dormitory bare-knuckle fights. By the time he was twenty-one, Max had turned his street into a little goldmine, not by following his

father's misleading clue of a luxury development, but by installing low-overhead, high-revenue high-rise flats, laundrettes and betting shops. If Max saw an opportunity for making money, he had learnt to go after it, and as the years rolled on his appetite for risk grew. So at the age of twenty-three, in the wake of one of the world's most pivotal events in history, counter-intuitiveness told him he could temper the public's unease at the prospect of a bleak and frightening future by offering them refuge in the safety of the past. For the few hours they were travelling they could take shelter in the cocoon of a fantasy world.

It was his first big business gamble and everyone was watching, waiting for him to fall. Support and investment was a problem; it became apparent to Max that the fickle finger of fate had ensured his family connections would go against him; few seemed to want to do business with any relative of the fearsome and rapacious Kerry Power. Max persisted against all odds, and he was duly rewarded; Silver Slipper Airlines became his first big business triumph. He had floated the company after just five years and share prices continued to rocket. Needless to say his father publicly shrugged off his son's success as beginners' luck; and he certainly never mentioned to a soul that he had actually warned all major investors not to back the venture. He had enjoyed testing just how resourceful and determined his Maximilian could be; after all, who wanted a sappy little coward for a son? What

didn't kill him would only make him stronger, in Kerry Power's eyes.

By the time Max set eyes on Sienna Starr at the Monte Cristo he was easily the most eligible bachelor on either side of the Atlantic. And like many men before him, it wasn't long before he was a regular 'John' at the club, in amongst the ever-increasing raincoats, and always in his corner seat; entranced by Sienna's exquisite performances . . . not to mention her killer legs. Of course, all the girls knew exactly who Max Power was, and he had a regular stream of burlesque beauties shimmying up to his table of an evening, vying for his attention – and always swatted away accordingly by Ma Barker, who was determined her customers should enjoy the shows undisturbed.

The one woman Max would have wanted to entertain at his table was Sienna, but she never came. It only served to water the tendrils of intrigue; of course Sienna's mother had equipped her with the golden rule of keeping herself unattainable to her male admirers. 'When you step off the stage, watch you don't step off the pedestal,' Tiger used to warn her. Sure enough, that picture of the perfect alluring goddess under the spotlight that Sienna portrayed, oozing sexual confidence, commanding every pair of eyes in the room, had Max hooked. It had taken him two months before he could secure a conversation with Sienna, by which time he would have swum through shark-infested oceans to get her. They had been together

for six months now, a world record by all accounts for Max Power, since he had certainly been known to take advantage of having his pick of the ladies. But now in the echelons of the glitterati, Max Power and Sienna Starr were as enviable a couple as they were successful and beautiful.

Sienna whipped her head round as a buzz of activity went up in Max's entourage stationed at the doorway to the private gambling salon. The casino host slid from out of nowhere into place at Max's side.

'Mr Power, Ms Brandy Alexander is here for you,' he murmured discreetly as the dealer smoothly scooped Max's latest pile of lost chips from the green felt.

'Is she now,' replied Max evenly. 'Always wanted to meet her. My baby's going to be in her show, you know,' he grinned, planting his hand firmly on Sienna's thigh.

'Oh, I'm only a showgirl,' mumbled Sienna modestly into her drink, waving her hand dismissively. 'It's nothing, I—'

'Bring Ms Alexander in,' interrupted Max. 'My girl should meet her in person.'

Sienna gasped as the security ushered the new guest into the salon. Brandy cut a breathtaking presence in a long, slim cream gown, folds of smooth satin clinging to her breasts like thick cream over peaches and skimming over straight, snake-like hips. A mane of sun-kissed hair was swept back as though held in the grip of a strong breeze, the natural glossy waves offsetting her razor-sharp

cheekbones and strong jaw. Brandy's stride forwards was slow, for dramatic effect, as her green eyes locked on to Max.

'Good evening, Mr Power, I was told you were here at the Follies,' purred Brandy. 'I couldn't let you visit without extending a . . . personal welcome.'

'Pleasure to meet you, Brandy,' said Max, extending a hand. 'I've heard so much about you – I can't believe our paths haven't crossed before.'

'Indeed,' Brandy replied coolly, flicking her gaze over to Sienna, who was respectfully standing to attention.

'I'm sure you must know my girlfriend, Sienna?' asked Max, putting his arm about Sienna's shoulders. 'She's going to be in your show. That's why we're here celebrating.'

Brandy paused to look Sienna up and down.

'Celebrating? How romantic of you.' She spoke slowly. 'You know, I have the final say on all my dancers,' she continued, 'and I never forget a face – or a name, Miss . . . ?'

'Starr,' answered Max, 'daughter of—'

'Tiger Starr. Yes, I know of her, of course,' smiled Brandy enigmatically. 'Intriguing, Sienna, I swear I had you down on my files as Brigitte Bordeaux. How . . . curious.'

Max sniggered into his hand and Sienna blushed beetroot.

'Yes, what a ridiculous name indeed, Mr Power, I must reprimand my assistant for that little mix-up. Anyway, Sienna did an excellent audition, you know,' Brandy

said, turning back to Max with her smile on professional full beam, the flush on Sienna's cheeks finally subsiding.

'Hear that, babe? Brandy thinks you're excellent. Like mother like daughter, eh?' Sienna cringed as Max squeezed her proudly.

'Well, I shall leave you both to your celebration. What a pleasure to meet you both and, er, see you in rehearsals . . . Sienna.' Brandy winked, turned on her Jimmy Choos and swept from the room.

'Max, I think it's time for me to head home,' said Sienna, concealing the tremble of embarrassment from her voice.

'What? We just got started! I'm about to hit a winning streak!'

'Oh. Do you mind if I leave you to it? I have been working tonight, remember. You can come back to mine when you're finished?'

'Sure. You okay, baby? You were quiet back there. Don't tell me you were starstruck?'

'Er, yeah, I guess I must have been a little,' replied Sienna with a grimace, knowing now was not the time to explain that Brandy had a terrifying reputation and simply frightened the crap out of her. It seemed as if she'd already got off on the wrong foot by being caught out lying about her name in auditions. Brandy wasn't the kind of woman to sympathise with a girl who was trying to make it on talent or hard graft. Everyone knew,

and conveniently forgot, that Brandy had masterminded her own career over the years in genius stepping stones from escorting, to clever casting-couch manoeuvres on everyone from celebrities to directors and every piece of frantic, determined social networking in between. And if she was as insecure about her own performance talents as Blue had witnessed as her dresser, there was also no way Brandy would want any relative of Tiger Starr within a hundred miles of her show. But Max would never understand all that, decided Sienna. Best to change the subject.

‘How about I warm the bed up for you?’ she suggested with a coquettish smile.

‘That’s more like it. Take the limo home, I won’t be too late. If Lady Luck smiles on me in the next couple of hours I’m bringing home something black and quilted from Chanel for my lady, okay?’ Max swept Sienna’s hair away from her shoulder and kissed her softly on the neck. ‘I want you in Manolos and stockings later, nothing else,’ he whispered into her ear.

‘In that case, don’t expect any sleep, darling,’ Sienna said as she reached for Max’s upper thigh and squeezed lightly.

‘Thank you, sir, enjoy the rest of your evening,’ said the casino host, smiling as he handed over a large white gift bag emblazoned with the Chanel double ‘C’ logo. ‘Security will escort you straight to your limousine.’ Max

hummed as he strode through the casino, trailed by his allotted goons, swinging his gift for Sienna in one hand. He hadn't actually won at all tonight, but as with all 'whales' like Max, the casinos liked to take care of their every whim to lure them and their millions back to their tables; limos, jets, personal shopping – a complimentary Chanel purse was a drop in the ocean against the big money Max had just disposed of back there on the green felt. At least Sienna would interpret the gift as meaning he had a lucky night; he definitely didn't want her thinking he was just some loser. He'd make his money back the following night anyway.

'Mr Power, we must stop bumping into each other like this,' came a familiar voice behind him. Max swung round, coming face to face with Brandy Alexander, a voluminous silver fox fur slung over her shoulder, its paws dangling forlornly at her breast, and a diamante heart-shaped clutch swinging off her manicured little finger.

'Hello again,' smiled Max warmly, 'and please, call me Max.'

'You partying, Max?'

'No, I'm off home.'

'Alone?' Max sensed the casino security breathing heavily behind him. He turned and nodded for them to leave.

'I need to grab a few hours' sleep – no rest for the wicked,' he explained.

'You didn't answer my question,' said Brandy crisply, turning away and sashaying towards the car valet. Max

hesitated for a moment before rushing to her side obediently. 'I mean, really, the night is young, Max,' she continued. 'I heard you're quite the party boy.'

'You heard right.' He was quiet for a few seconds. 'Actually . . . I'm just about to go party.'

'Oh? Things are looking up.'

'At my girlfriend's. Party of two.' Max couldn't keep the smirk off his face. Brandy wobbled on her heels and came to a standstill.

'I see. Can I at least offer you a ride?' She spun round to look at him enquiringly as a silver Bentley screeched up beside her. The car hop jumped out to hold the door open for her, only to be waved away with a flick of bright red talons, leaving the pair alone.

'Thanks for the offer but I have a ride,' said Max firmly.

'Hmmm. I'll bet I go faster than your ride. I'm known for unparalleled performance,' replied Brandy, turning the atmosphere cold with a faint sneer.

'Well, my ride doesn't have as many miles on the clock,' retorted Max sharply. Brandy's eyes flashed with fury before she grabbed at his neck and clamped her lips to his. Max pulled back immediately, dropping the Chanel bag in his haste.

'What the – I don't wanna do this.'

'Chanel? For me?' gasped Brandy, looking down at the bag, her hand leaping for her breastbone dramatically. 'Why thank you, you shouldn't have. But you really didn't have to throw it at me, darling.'

'I said no. I'm not doing this.'

'Oh, you're not, huh?' scoffed Brandy. 'Oh, lighten up, for God's sake, it's just a bit of fun. I don't believe you don't want to anyway. I think the truth is you can't.'

'Excuse me?'

'I know you want me, everyone wants a piece of Brandy. You're just scared. Big boy like you? Can't handle me?' Max narrowed his eyes at the beautiful woman before him as he felt the prickle of red mist descend upon him. Just who did this arrogant, hard, puffed-up bitch think she was talking to? No-one ridiculed Max Power. He took in her flawless, lightly tanned skin, her sharp nose with a smattering of honey freckles, full soft lips, golden highlights amongst soft chestnut hair, a smooth Botoxed brow, and green eyes glazed with a blend of sex and spite. Max grabbed for Brandy's wrist, making her yelp in surprise. He wanted to shake her, slap that mocking sneer from her face. Yet he found himself mesmerised as she held his gaze, slowly licking her lips before letting a hint of a smile curl its way across the corners of her mouth. Max turned her away from him and pushed her slowly up against her car, leaning his weight into her back.

'No, babe, you can't handle *me*,' he whispered in Brandy's ear as he grasped roughly at the satin of her gown, pulling it up about her slim boyish hips to expose firm bare cheeks. Max pushed his hand between her legs, his fingers sliding into her as she spread herself, purring

like a cat. He groaned softly and held his hand up there in the moistness, faltering as he buried his face deep in the thick, soft fox fur at her shoulders, feeling a wave of sickly nausea as he breathed in her heavy, cloying perfume. Slowly he began to slip his fingers in and out, his other hand reaching to unzip his fly. Brandy cried out in pleasure as he finally grabbed her waist and slammed his huge cock into her.

A solitary drip of champagne plopped into Sienna's champagne flute on the bedside dresser, and as she popped the empty bottle back into its now-tepid ice bucket she chastised herself inwardly for managing to drink the whole lot on her own. She had drawn a hot bubble bath once she got home, before dressing in her finest silk stockings and highest heels ready for her gorgeous Max. Knowing he would be a little while, she had indulged in the guilty pleasure of a generous slice of chocolate cake in bed whilst savouring her *National Enquirer* from cover to cover. She knew that indulgences like carbs and partying would be out of the question once she was in the Follies. With their weekly weigh-ins looming, Sienna had a final few days to cram in some last enjoyment of her remaining bad habits before her new life of lettuce, water and vitamin pills beckoned.

Now, with the champagne gone and the birds starting to sing outside, Sienna slipped her heels off and snuggled beneath the covers with a little sigh. Max was

obviously on a good roll at the casino. At least that would mean incredible morning sex when he eventually got home. A shiver ran up her thighs at the thought. She nuzzled into the sheets, wondering if life could get any better. Finally her world was taking shape – nothing but calm seas ahead after all her traumas of the past. She had a focus, she had landed her first part in a big Vegas show, she had friends, she was having a fabulous time living in her mum's plush pad in Vegas with her best friend Honey, her fairy godmother Blue was nearby to watch over her, she was on track to making her mum proud as punch of her, and finally she'd found her beautiful Mr Right who loved and respected her and was about to come home to her arms. For the first time ever, life is truly wonderful, thought Sienna as a blissful wave of sleep rolled over her.