

NAKED HEART

by

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CHAPTER ONE

There should be a law against you,” said the corn-silk blonde sharing Penn’s table.

“For making women wet?” Penn asked.

The leg touching hers quivered. “Arrogant *and* hot. How can I resist?”

A concentrated whiff of scent engulfed Penn, as though driven by a sharply exhaled breath. Through a haze of powdery musk she smelled salt and desire. She could close out this deal right now, she thought, but the blonde wasn’t really her type. Too much makeup, and too brittle. Or maybe just too hetero.

Penn was flirting with her anyway. She had time to kill.

She glanced around the low-lit bar, searching the crowd for the man she was supposed to meet. It wasn’t her kind of place. Lobbyists. Bankers. Business execs. No sign of Colonel Gretsky. She returned her attention to the woman on her right and wondered what her real name was. Not that it mattered. If she wanted to called herself Roxy Delice, who was Penn to argue? In certain occupations, her own included, anonymity made sense.

She reached into the shadows under the small round table and ran her hand up Roxy’s firm inner thigh. The ultrasheer stockings crackled beneath her palm. The faint static was the closest she’d come to a current of awareness. She continued past the lace stocking top to the naked band of flesh beyond, determined to

give her flagging interest every opportunity. Slippery moisture coated her fingertips, flowing through the flimsy satin panties. She pushed her thumb against the hot flesh beneath the fabric barrier.

Roxy's breasts rose with a jolt. Her glossy pink lips spelled out her terms. "Normally it's a thousand for the whole evening, but for you, I'm negotiable."

Penn had already guessed she was chatting with a professional. That was okay. She was the last person alive to judge how anyone made their living. She held Roxy's seductive stare. "For you, I won't charge a dime, either."

The blonde laughed, revealing a glimpse of someone real beneath the makeup, a girl next door long forgotten. Penn decided she could go there, after all, even though she usually hunted a different type. Degrees of queerness always factored into her enthusiasm, or lack of it. Roxy was probably on the straight side of bisexual. Penn preferred to bed women who weren't settling for a consolation prize. She was far from second best and chose sexual partners who could appreciate that fact.

Still, Roxy was here and willing, and Penn wasn't always so picky. She eased her damp fingertips from their snug haven between Roxy's thighs. The reaction was instinctive, the body straining for renewed contact. Penn heard a swift, hungry intake of breath.

"I guess I could take the night off," Roxy said unevenly. "Are you worth it?"

"A question I ask myself daily."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Well, you have other options." Angling a sideways look across the room, Penn noted, "Chunky and married at ten o'clock. He couldn't keep his eyes off that nice ass of yours when you were coming back from the restroom."

Roxy sized the executive up in a quick, fleeting glance. "Ninety seconds. And he'd expect a discount since he didn't use the full half hour."

Penn shifted her whiskey sour aside and wiped her juice-coated fingers on the cocktail napkin. “Who would you normally target?”

“You mean, if I hadn’t decided to let you put your hand up my dress?”

“Out of curiosity, what made you so...receptive?” Penn could have paraphrased with *How bisexual are you?* But she really didn’t care enough to be interested—another bad sign.

“If I have a drink with another woman, I don’t get hit on by ten guys who think they can get laid for free.” Roxy’s jaded smile didn’t reach her eyes. “I prefer to take my time and choose the right john.”

Penn refrained from asking the obvious question. She wouldn’t get a real answer and, besides, it was no business of hers how this woman had arrived at her career choice. She didn’t want to know. Only one salient fact mattered: was she in the mood to have sex with a woman who’d sparked so little desire in her that she would only be going through the motions?

She sipped her drink pensively and thought about wandering through Inner Sanctum, breathing in the sexual fog, waiting for her senses to react. A walk. A quick, hot look. A mouth worth kissing. Once she spotted the ideal plaything, she would study her for a while before provoking a response. Women knew when they were being watched, and Penn liked to make their necks prickle. An ancient awareness always forced them to turn around eventually, seeking out the predatory gaze they sensed.

Aroused by the thought, she swirled the pale amber fluid in her glass. The chase, in all its incarnations, turned her on. After she quit the CIA, she’d expected her highly tuned instincts to fade, but the change of scenery wasn’t a change of personality. Instead she found ways to compensate for the adrenaline rushes she missed—she worked with the colonel and she chased unattainable women. A shrink would have a lot to work with, if Penn ever felt the need to prostrate herself on a couch and pay money to be told she had issues. But life was short and, in

her case, precarious. She refused to suffer guilt over her nature; indulging it was more fun.

“I’d probably choose *him*.” Roxy indicated a middle-aged man in a brown suit. “Road warrior from Wisconsin. Check out the briefcase. He’s got all the important stuff with him because he doesn’t want to leave it in his hotel room. He won’t tip housekeeping, either.”

“Wisconsin?” Penn couldn’t see where that detail came from. “Cabin luggage tag on the handle?”

“I’m good, but not that good.” Roxy giggled. “I overheard him when I came in. Something about tickets for a Packers’ game.”

“Why him?” Penn scanned the other solo males. There were plenty to choose from. Several had been staring at Roxy’s hard nipples for the past fifteen minutes.

“He won’t score with anyone else in here. He tried already and struck out. But he won’t call an escort service, either, because his wife reads the credit-card statements and she’s not stupid. So he’s desperate.” She cocked her head thoughtfully. “He’s also the undemanding type. And tired. That’s always a plus.”

“You could be a detective.”

“Fidelity testing? Yeah, I’m a real expert.”

“That’s a profitable field these days. So I’ve heard.”

“What’s your line of work?”

“Security,” Penn replied vaguely. “Between gigs, I help out at a friend’s nightclub.”

“Were you ever a cop?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. You seem kind of...lawless.”

“This from a woman who flouts the legislation of our fine state on a daily basis.”

“Don’t get me started on why I’m supposed to *give* my services away, but men who make porn get to *sell* their product.”

Penn stroked the professionally manicured hand resting on the table. “I’ve spoiled the mood. I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.” Again the girl next door surfaced in a soft, regretful smile.

Penn sighed inwardly. She had hoped to get beyond her lukewarm interest in Roxy, but the spark wasn’t there. If they had sex, it would be a routine transaction. No challenge. No uncertainty. She would have appreciated that in her twenties, when she was all about instant gratification. But these days she seemed to need hurdles and risks to stay interested. She wondered if her change of job really was to blame for her listlessness. She had a weird loss of urgency around getting laid. Maybe, at thirty-six, she was slowing down. The thought made her cringe, and she was about to make an offer her new friend couldn’t resist when Roxy reached into her purse and produced a business card.

With a mixture of puzzlement and invitation, she said, “Want to meet me some time when I’m not working? Grab a coffee, maybe?”

Penn took the card and mumbled something noncommittal. No wonder the woman was confused. Penn had been sending mixed messages since their first “hello.” Embarrassed, she offered, “Can I walk you to your car.”

“No need. The cheesehead’s on the cell phone to his wife. Watch me make him dump the call.” Roxy gave the guy a big, wet, pouting smile followed by a coy wave. She couldn’t have been more obvious. Or phony.

Mr. Wisconsin flushed and grinned, instantly smitten. It was a Viagra moment.

“Jesus, they’re such suckers.” Penn laughed softly. She had counted on that fact when she had a real career. The CIA derived some of their best humint from sex sting operations.

“If they didn’t think with their dicks I’d be out of a job,” Roxy said with equanimity.

She stood and planted a quick kiss on Penn’s cheek, as though they were friends who’d shared a Friday night drink. Watching them, the john shoved his cell phone in his breast pocket and

smoothed his hair. Roxy sashayed toward him, flipping Penn a tiny farewell wave.

Penn strolled out of the bar without looking back. While she waited for the elevator, her beeper came alive and she read the text message she'd been expecting all evening. She dropped Roxy's card into a trash bin and keyed a reply once she was in the elevator, proposing a new time and place for her rendezvous with the colonel. With each letter she typed, she was aware of her own edginess. She'd just turned down a woman she didn't want, but she was restless anyway, her libido signaling that three weeks without sex was a drought that had to break soon. There had been plenty of opportunities. Some had even involved the risk of failure with women who were hard to get, usually an unbeatable recipe. But Penn had allowed every hot possibility to pass her by.

Puzzled that she could feel horny but disinterested at the same time, she crossed the parking garage toward her blue-black BMW M6. The car absorbed her paychecks like they were wax polish, but she had a weakness for classy vehicles. This one looked like a large luxury coupé but performed like a Formula One sports car. She pictured a woman sprawled naked across the hood, a regular fantasy. Her senses responded at full volume. If the October weather wasn't turning bitter she'd be tempted to park somewhere discreet and explore that idea with a Ms. Right-for-Tonight. Assuming she could find one. And also assuming she wouldn't just give up on the whole idea and go home to watch porn alone and jerk off like a loser.

The M6 unlocked itself as though it had heard her footsteps. In fact, it had simply responded to the plastic remote card in her side pocket. Before she could reach the driver's door she noticed a woman changing the tire on her white Lexus a few vehicles away. Penn hesitated, but her better angels delivered a swift kick to the seat of her pants and she marched over.

"Do you need help?"

A pair of startling sapphire eyes stared up at her from a pale semi-shrouded face. The woman wore a paisley muffler wrapped

tightly over her mouth and around her head, tucked into a bulky camel coat. Her slender, beautiful hands were smeared with grime, which, Penn decided, was completely unacceptable.

“Sit in your car and get warm,” she said. “I’ll deal with this.”

“You’re very kind. Thank you.”

Was she just cruised? Penn looked twice at the stranger and decided her imagination was running wild. Right now, the stranded babe was probably preparing to call hubby and explain why dinner was late. Penn waited for her to close the driver’s door and completed the tire change with her teeth chattering. No good deed goes unpunished, so she broke the crystal lens of her favorite Chopard wristwatch as she removed the jack.

Mumbling, “Goddammit,” she closed the trunk and slipped between the parked cars to tap the driver’s window.

It rolled down and the woman thanked her again in a throaty voice with traces of a Baltimore accent. She was still bundled up like her next destination was a dogsled event. “Have a nice evening,” she said, and this time Penn *knew* she was being cruised.

If she weren’t freezing and disheartened, she might have done something about the unspoken invitation, but her mojo was inert. Smiling with genuine regret, she let this one go. “Enjoy yours, too.”

She didn’t wait for the woman to drive away. All she could think about was thawing out her hands. The M6’s plush interior was chilly—Penn left the heat-at-rest function disabled, preferring the slight shock of cold before driving. She allowed the cool to sharpen her senses for a few seconds then hit the ignition button. Soothing heat infused the driver’s seat and quickly transformed the frigid space into a warm, luxurious cocoon. She stared at the empty passenger side and felt another rush of dismay. If she planned to satisfy her needs anytime soon, she would have to deal with whatever was distracting her.

Maybe she was bored with being single. It had to happen

sometime. She wasn't aware of any latent nesting urges, but perhaps she was in denial and using sex as a cheap placebo for love. What a cliché: the lonely, emotionally stunted failure unable to commit to the hard work of a real relationship. A basket case addicted to meaningless encounters with strangers who made her feel briefly alive.

Most women her age were in some phase of an LTR. Newly in love, or thrilled and having babies, or disillusioned and moving out, or divorced and getting back in the game. They weren't creeping around strangers' apartments at three a.m., trolling for a missing sock so they wouldn't have to field phone calls the next day because they left clothing hanging off a sofa arm. No, none of them were having that kind of fun.

Fuck them. Penn didn't accuse happy couples of being tamed into the grind of suburban life, settling for boring sex with the same familiar women who took them for granted. She didn't respond to the condescending pity of nesters by pointing out that she wasn't missing out on a whole lot.

Irritated, she backed carelessly out of her parking space and followed the exit arrows into the night. No, she wasn't pining for a picket fence and a partner who wanted more "us" time. Work wasn't the issue, either. Gretsky had an assignment to discuss and, although he'd missed their meeting tonight, he would connect soon and her bank account would be replenished. There was plenty of well-paid freelance employment for disenchanting former CIA officers.

She headed automatically for Eighth Street and decided she was getting herself worked up over nothing. She could get a woman anytime she wanted, and if she were honest, she knew exactly what was affecting her game. Lila Sylvette. The problem with no answer.



Penn left the M6 in one of the reserved parking spots at Inner Sanctum, strolled to the side entrance, and entered her pin in the biometric lock before inserting her thumb to be read. She was one of the few people authorized to open the side and rear doors from outside the building. She glanced up at the security camera, making sure it was operational. The feed was transmitted to Lila's penthouse on the top floor and to the security posts on each level. Lila had leased a single floor when she started her club a decade earlier, but as she progressively took over more space it made sense to buy the building. With her father as her silent partner, she'd rebuilt the interior, creating one of the hottest club atmospheres in DC.

"Ms. Harte?" One of the stewards nailed Penn as soon as she walked in the door. "Thank God you're here. I was on my knees, darling. I swear. Just *praying* for you to come in early."

"What's up, Felix?" she asked.

"A catastrophe in the making." Felix was prone to exaggeration, but he was one of the best stewards in the club. He tugged distractedly at one of the thick silver nipple rings that peeped through his mesh vest. "We have ourselves a chastity-cage drama."

"Christ, not again." Penn dropped her duffel bag on the floor in the staff area, opened a spare locker, and hung up her jacket.

"Things were going so well." Felix glumly handed her a tank with the club's logo emblazoned above glow-in-the-dark pink lettering that read "Management."

Penn unbuttoned her shirt. "Is Lila downstairs?" Her best friend had a way with the clientele and could usually defuse a situation with a few good-humored words and complimentary drinks.

"She's not having a good day so she went to bed."

Penn removed her broken watch. It was still functional and read ten o'clock. Inner Sanctum didn't come alive until midnight, and on work nights she usually arrived around that time so she

would be present during the one-to-three-a.m. peak. When the club wasn't taken over for theme and fetish events, it made money as an upscale urban venue. Tonight, the place would be jammed with the perverati for Lila's monthly Hedonism party. There would also be a heavy sprinkling of tourists unfamiliar with the club's etiquette. With the demise of VelvetNation and several other Washington, DC nightspots, a broader range of clubbers had invaded Inner Sanctum over the past year. The regular kink crowd was tolerant of the newcomers but didn't welcome disrespectful opportunists. Security issues were the inevitable consequence.

"Have you dealt with the problem?" she asked.

"We thought we had, but she came back ten minutes ago. Just hideous. Straight out of Housewife Road and wearing *the* worst pleather pants. Hubby slapping her ass with a plastic quirt from God knows...Home Depot. They seem to think one of Mistress Adele's slaves is simply *dying* for a threesome."

"So they have good taste, but no brains?"

Felix tittered. "They tied something to his cage and tried to lead him around. I was about to fetch poor darling Lila when you arrived."

"Let her rest," Penn said. "How bad is it?" Mistress Adele didn't take kindly to her slaves being handled without her consent.

"The suburbanites are still walking upright." Felix sniffed disdainfully. "That won't last."

Penn set the tank top aside and yanked a pair of black combat pants from her duffel bag. "I'll finish changing here and meet you at the security station."

She had intended to take a shower in her upstairs room, then visit with Lila before starting her shift, but she always took care of business first. Now that the evening lines were starting to form, the head of security and his crew were busy. Lila preferred that her stewards handled minor problems on the dance floor and

in the other public areas. Security was only called in if a clubber ignored diplomatic warnings.

Penn laced her boots and made sure the Smith & Wesson compact strapped to her left calf had the safety on. The stewards didn't carry. She and several trusted members of the security team were the only people armed. Lila hated the idea that guns were necessary at all and flatly refused to carry a weapon herself, a fact that made Penn uneasy. If religious whackjobs were willing to shoot doctors and bomb abortion clinics, queer and kink venues seemed like an obvious target.

She crammed the rest of her gear into the locker and took the narrow side exit to the coat check at the front of the building. Felix was waiting for her in the office next door, watching the dance-floor and dungeon monitors.

"How's the situation?" Penn asked.

"They've adjourned downstairs."

He pointed to a tall man standing behind a petite blonde, his arms draped over her shoulders. The heteronormatives were engrossed in a scene that made Penn squint at the small screen. Two pale, identically corseted beauties were involved in an intricate bondage-and-whipping ritual. Each was a mirror image of the other. Long, sleek limbs. Small hips. Straight dark hair almost to their narrow, confined waists. Penn could not imagine standing upright in stiletto heels like theirs, let alone moving with their steely grace.

Felix cupped his cheeks between his slender hands. He looked awestruck. "Aren't they *too* sublime." He was downright gushy, a change from his usual bitchiness. "Of course that vile little beast, Nariko, picked them up from the airport. Heaven forbid any of *us* give offence with our surly presences."

As he rambled, Penn stared at the monitor in dry-mouthed fascination. She wasn't surprised by much anymore, but the women transfixed her. There was something intuitive in the way they worked, as though they functioned as two halves of a whole.

There was a perfectly conceived choreography that explored the boundaries of pain and pleasure. Each move was precise yet languidly unselfconscious.

The usual churning chaos around the fringes of the dungeon had given way to strange stillness. Penn had the impression that everyone present felt they had a role to play in the tableau before them, if only that of fortunate voyeurs. Even one of the regulars, a bondage master in dated chaps and leather cap, stood with his arms folded and his eyes riveted. The wind seemed to have been squeezed from the trouble-making tourists. Slack-faced, they too had surrendered to the moment.

“God,” Penn breathed. “Are they twins?”