

NOTE FROM DIANE:

This is from a standalone mystery novel that I wrote a few years back, shortly before *Samantha Kidd* and *Madison Night* were published. Because those other two characters elbowed this out of the way first, and then Poly and Margo came along, Poor Nadine Martin and Slim Foster have been waiting their turn. This is multiple POV, set in Los Angeles, and is a little darker than what I normally write.

Enjoy! Xoxo,

Diane



Chapter 1

“I would have killed to perform tonight,” Nadine said to the bartender, jiggling ice inside her nearly empty drink.

“You're a singer?” he asked, while he towel-dried a glass.

She nodded, but didn't speak for a few moments. “Actually I'm a salon receptionist. But a friend of mine convinced the owner that I could sing. He booked me for next week.”

“So you're casing the joint? Checking us out?”

“Something like that.” She was starting to mellow out. A couple of drinks and she wouldn't feel so scared to be in a bar all by herself.

“I'm Slim,” he said, and held out his hand. Slim was well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders that filled out the green and turquoise Hawaiian shirt he wore with white trousers. His hair was almost black. He wore it longer in the front than the back, and parted it on the side by a shock of white that he repeatedly pushed out of his eyes. In the darkness of the Bar Nadine couldn't make out the color of them except that they were dark. His features could have been lifted from a Greek portrait: aquiline nose, red lips, strong jaw line. The classic features were anachronistic to the bright floral print of his

shirt, but somehow the resulting package was that of a man who'd gotten comfortable in his own skin a long time ago.

She reached up and shook it. "Why do you wish you were singing tonight?"

"It's not very busy and the crowd is nice. Plus, the band sounds kind of like what I do—sixties lounge classics--so these people might have liked me. The drummer up there is part of my trio. Next week I'm scheduled between a Spanish politico guitarist and a Rush tribute band. Not sure I belong there."

A svelte black woman interrupted their conversation and snapped her fingers in the bartender's face. "Crown and Cola," she ordered. Her body was on display in a low-cut jersey dress that clung to her every curve. Nadine had been planning to order another drink but already felt the effects of the first. She wrapped her hands around the glass and watched Slim make the other woman's drink. Her eyes felt fuzzy. Slim took the twenty dollar bill and made change at the register, but when he turned back she was gone with her drink. He set fourteen dollars in ones next to an abandoned cardboard coaster.

"What were you saying?" he asked.

A suave man with a pencil-thin mustache approached from behind and tapped her on the shoulder. "Nadine Martin?"

She whirled around. "Yes?"

"Joffrey Curtis. We spoke on the phone." He extended his hand. "We need you to go on tonight. There's been a cancellation. These guys can back you up. Write up your set list. You've got about," he checked his watch, "ten minutes until you're due on stage." He gestured toward the bartender. "Slim, the man at table four wants a bottle of Glenfiddich. Take care of him, he's a good customer. And pour the singer a shot of courage. On me." He patted Nadine's shoulder and walked away.

"I can't sing tonight. I'm not ready." She buried her head in her hands, trying to grasp the situation through her gin and tonic haze.

"Be careful what you wish for," Slim whispered. "You just said you'd kill for this opportunity." She looked terrified. "I bet you'll be great." He reached under the bar and pulled out a couple of cocktail napkins and a magic marker. "Write your song list on here. It will calm you to focus on something you already know."

She started writing a list. "Thirteen Men. Love Potion Number 9. Fever. Black Coffee. Girl from Ipanema. Daddy." Her train of thought was interrupted by a throaty voice.

“Got a light, baby?”

Nadine looked up at the woman addressing the bartender and was slammed by envy. Now that was a bombshell.

Nadine looked down at the lap of her bright pink linen dress. She'd made it herself after finding a stash of unused late sixties sewing patterns in a yard sale on Mount Washington a few years back. The square collar framed her face, and the A-line cut of the dress was flattering, but neither would attract attention. At home Nadine had been happy with the way the dress looked.

Nadine had never been comfortable trying to be sexy. She'd been described as cute more often than beautiful and had given up trying to change that. The sixties vibe she adopted to distinguish herself from the sea of other cute girls out there complimented her set, but cute girls turn into cute women, and when you add a couple of pounds to soften the edges, cute gets lost. When you start with a bombshell, you get sexy. And when you add a couple of pounds to a bombshell, you still get sexy. And Sexy was standing less than a foot to her left.

The tall, tanned Amazon wore an ocelot fur coat that came down to her shapely calves. Her highlighted golden-brown hair bounced around her face, framing high cheekbones, arched eyebrows, and full lips. Without moving her head, Nadine's eyes flashed between this specimen of womanhood and Slim, who was casually cleaning the barware. The bombshell stood, cigarette raised to her plump lips, staring at him. They would have looked good together, if thirty-six inches of polyurethaned wood and a couple of bottles of Budweiser didn't separate them. He made no move to light her smoke.

The bombshell leaned on the counter, letting her coat drop down over one shoulder. A lacy bra strap decorated her creamy shoulder. Joffrey walked behind Nadine to the jukebox and the bombshell turned in his direction. A generous flash of cleavage showed from under the ocelot coat. Without thinking, Nadine looked down at her own chest. With the right bra, she could hold her own against most women, but this one was out of her league.

“Joff, baby, you miss me?” the bombshell called out.

The bar owner offered a tight smile. “Janice, darling. You've been away from us for far too long.” He abandoned the jukebox and embraced her loosely. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that this woman was not his type.

He told Slim to get the bombshell a drink. A dim light from behind the bar reflected off his gold initial ring as he gestured toward the top shelf of liquor. He glanced at Nadine's empty glass and tapped his hand on the highly lacquered bar twice like he was sending off a cab. "And don't forget about the singer's shot. She looks like she needs it."

The bombshell's eyes connected with Nadine's and held for a few seconds. Nadine, dressed in her uniform of secondhand chic, felt naked. The bombshell—Janice's—eyes were unfocused. She stumbled backward half a step and righted herself. Nadine recognized the look in her eyes. She couldn't help wondering what pain-relieving pills The bombshell had taken earlier that night. Percocet? Vicodin? Something illegal? During the darkest days after her mother's death, Nadine would have paid top dollar for those drugs.

"Baby, you heard the boss. Pour me a shot of Tequila for old time's sake. Pour one for your little friend here, too."

Slim went methodically about his business. The bombshell turned her back on the bar and looked around the room. She finger-waved toward a booth in the darkness where Nadine barely made out a beefy-looking man in a suit. Slim pulled two lemon wedges from a white plastic container and set them on a cocktail napkin like the one Nadine was writing on. He pushed the shot glass across the bar. The bombshell licked the back of her hand seductively and shook salt onto it. "He's really good, you know," she said to Nadine, and laughed. She downed the shot, locked eyes with Slim, and bit into the juicy lemon wedge. When she pulled it out of her mouth, her fingers lingered between her lips. She slowly pulled them out and smiled at him. "I got something for you," she said, and reached her wet fingers inside the collar of her fur coat. She toyed with a silver chain that held a small key, then pulled it over her head.

"I don't want anything from you."

"Consider it a payment for services rendered." She dropped the key and the chain into her empty shot glass. "Unless you want to charge me for something else," she finished.

"The shot's on the house."

"Thanks, baby," she cooed. She blew him a kiss then sidled off into the dark interior of the bar.

Slim tossed the contents of the glass into the trash, then wiped his hands dry on the front of his Hawaiian printed shirt. He picked up the second shot and poured it down the

drain, replacing it with a steaming mug of coffee. "I'm not giving you a shot. You don't need it." He glanced at the cocktail napkin in front of Nadine. "Is that your list?"

She shielded the flimsy piece of paper with one hand but nodded.

"Write up another one. Leave it with me. For safekeeping." His voice was soothing. The way he instructed her on her pre-show routine calmed her. Methodical. Not nerve-racking. Nobody had to know that this would be her first time singing in public. She sipped again at the steaming mug and took her time copying the list of songs onto a second napkin. When she was finished with her two lists, she extended one to him.

He looked over it and smiled. "Not bad. I like almost all of your choices." He shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans and left to cash in a couple of bills for quarters for the pool table.

"Almost? What don't you like?" she called from behind him.

"Number five. Reminds me of someone I knew once. Considered it her theme song."

"Girl from Ipanema'? It's a crowd pleaser." Nadine stared at her list. The lyrics escaped her. Focus. She took several deep breaths and drank her black coffee, too nervous to ask for something to cut the bitter taste. Before she was ready, the band returned to claim their instruments and Joffrey Curtis signaled that her time was up. Slim returned to the spot in front of her, resuming his ritual of washing and drying the tumblers in the trough of suds behind the bar.

"Slim? When's the last time you felt like you wanted to die?"

"This morning." He smiled, the left side of his mouth turning up slightly more than the right. "But then you walked into the bar tonight and I knew everything was going to be okay."

Nadine tipped her head and raised her eyebrows, as if to call bullshit on his praise.

He smiled wider. "Go get 'em, Tiger," he said.

The guitarist called out an introduction and the drummer struck up a samba beat with a set of brushes against his snare. She stumbled her first couple of steps after getting down from the bar stool, falling against a blue padded swivel chair, grabbing the back to right herself. Hands connected with her ass. Laughter of the crowd sounded behind her.

When she reached the microphone, she caught the eyes of the drummer. He nodded once. There was no going back now. She scanned the room, feeling the beat and the notes the guitarist picked out. A large businessman winked at her, then pushed his chair away

from the table and left the room. She tapped her foot, waiting for the right moment to let her voice slice through the smoky club.

She took a deep breath, ready to begin. But it wasn't her voice that sliced through the club, it was a piercing shriek that resonated from the kitchen and caused everyone to forget Nadine was about to sing.