

Catching a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror behind the bar, Jane Mallory realized that there were times when she enjoyed her work. Clad in a slinky silver gown – cut high and low in all the right places – surrounded by gorgeous Victorian architecture and shedding large bills like used cocktail napkins, this was definitely one of those moments. So what if she had a difficult evening ahead of her? She could pause for a moment's indulgence. So what if it took her a few moments to determine *which* reflection was hers as she waited for the bartender to mix her drink?

When the martini glass was proffered towards a startlingly pretty brunette with hair falling straight to her waist, *then* Jane got her bearings. It wasn't the first time she had forgotten which face she had donned for a particular activity, but she couldn't help feeling like the problem was becoming more frequent. Maybe other shape-shifting novae felt the same way. *If only I knew other shape-shifting novas, then I could ask them*, Jane thought wryly, sipping her drink and surveying the crowd.

A visual treat in itself, the crowd consisted of many of Europe's self-declared high-society, all crowded onto the rooftop terrace of Rome's Mecenate Hotel. For once, Jane's deliberately beautiful features blended in with the crowd – almost – and she knew that most spectators had already dismissed her dress as the *low* end of designer – and darling, who can be bothered with *that*? That suited Jane just fine, as she had her own reasons for being there, and they had nothing to do with seeing people, or being seen.

As usual, the chance to be on parade whilst simultaneously acting charitably had brought the idle riche out in droves. Following the severe temblors that had leveled a significant part of Rome's city center in '08, the city fathers embarked upon a radical rebuilding plan: to recreate the ancient city as it was two thousand years ago. It would be a slum clearance and tourism boost rolled into one. With the new technologies being churned out by Project Utopia, the notion of fully restoring the ancient Coliseum and the temple of Augustus wasn't quite so ambitious as it would have been even ten years ago, and the Italian government had enthusiastically endorsed the project.

But such an undertaking, whilst promising millions of dollars in tourist revenues in the future, requires a lot of money up front. And so began the cycle of fundraisers, charity dinners and general hands-out appeals for help from those with too much money and the wish to appear cultured. This month, it was the turn of this luxurious hotel to host a gala, with the gaily decorated terrace offering a gorgeous view of the work in progress. Jane had to admit that it was a site to behold. In only three years, the Coliseum had already been completed, and the Temple of Jove had only a few bits of scaffolding still clinging to it. The city architects were predicting completion by 2014, *if* the money kept coming in.

*This event will certainly help. A thousand dollars a plate, an auction of some old bottles from the hotel's cellar that might not have turned to vinegar in the meantime, and a casino to pry a little more cash out of people's pockets*, Jane thought wryly. *No wonder it cost me two hundred bucks just to get past the maitre d'hotel – and I wouldn't have even gotten that far if it wasn't for my talents*. Jane suppressed a smile at that. A few suggestive words had done wonders for facilitating the passage of palmed bills. During the past year's wanderings, Jane's ability to make irresistible suggestions had proven as useful as her ability to shape-shift.

Pulling her mind back to the present and the task at hand, Jane kept scanning the crowd for a familiar face. *I hope he didn't decide to skip this party*, she worried. *I've spent too much of my own money setting this up*. Money had become an urgent problem to Jane in the past few weeks. *If Joseph Farber's not here and I have to write this off, I don't know what I'm going to do*.

Just as her panic blossomed, Jane spotted Farber heading towards a craps table on the other side of the terrace. She exhaled heavily and hoped her relief wasn't noticeable. Farber, meanwhile, was *quite* eye-catching – a handsome and fit thirty year old cutting a figure in an Armani tuxedo. Jane had to admit that the pictures she had seen didn't really do him justice. Jane watched him carefully. True to form, no particular woman hung on Farber's arm, but he seemed happy enough chatting with an assortment of female acquaintances as he moved across the terrace. Jane decided to sit back and take her time. The evening was still young, by local standards. Farber had a reputation for playing hard – even if he left the work to his father, whose money he was happily spending as he gadded about Europe. *Give him time, Jane...*

Jane kept a discreet eye on Farber for the next two hours – the auction gave her ample opportunity for that – and by midnight, she was letting Farber spot her watching him. She was certain she saw a spark of interest in return. He had put away a few drinks and she suspected he was feeling ready for a little sport. *So let's play*, she thought firmly, putting down her seltzer over ice and sauntering in his direction.

Joseph Farber was holding up one of the several bars on the terrace, and had been for the past half an hour. As Jane approached, she could smell the alcohol on his breath, but she suspected he had probably built up quite the tolerance after a lifetime of playing with the jet-set. *Let's not assume he's going to be a pushover, but let's just go for broke – I haven't got time to waste.*

Conjuring up a winning smile – which Jane had to admit wasn't too difficult given the man's good looks – Jane walked right up to the slightly tipsy playboy and laid a hand on his knee.

"Pardon me, but you're Joseph Farber, aren't you?" Jane could already sense that the effort of minimizing her American accent was going to make her tongue ache.

Joseph hid his surprise well, but not entirely. Glancing from Jane's hand, to her face and then lingering for a few moments as he clearly tried to remember if they had met before, he chose his words carefully. "That would depend upon who's looking for him," he replied cautiously, his English schooling apparent in his voice. Jane momentarily marveled at his fluent accent and envied it.

"Don't worry," Jane reassured him, *pushing* slightly. "I don't mean you any harm. Far from it." She warmed up the smile another notch. "My name's Amy Lewis. I think our fathers know each other." *Not an unlikely connection.*

"They might..." Joseph replied, relaxing slightly under Jane's influence.

"Your father showed me your picture, once, during a business trip to my dad's chip plant in California. Seeing you here, I thought I just *had* to say hello." Jane winced at her heavy-handed attempt at flirting. *It's not like I get much practice*, she realized.

"Did you, now?" Clearly Joseph had had enough to drink to overlook any clumsiness on Jane's part, and she still hadn't moved that hand.

Jane nodded. "A terrible likeness," she grinned, moving a little closer. "You're much better in the flesh."

"...and how." Joseph muttered, although Jane wasn't entirely sure if she was meant to hear that over the hubbub of the crowd. "Buy you a drink?" he suggested brightly, realizing his own glass was empty.

"Love one. I wonder if they've got Ketel vodka here," she mused. The opportunity to lean over the bar and peruse the arrayed bottles gave her another opportunity to close the distance between the two of them.

From that point, matters unfolded predictably, which greatly reassured Jane. Joseph continued to alternate drinks with increasingly flirtatious banter, whilst Jane sipped carefully at her vodka. She knew her supernatural stamina would protect her from the worst effects of alcohol, but she didn't want any unpleasant surprises. Meanwhile, she *encouraged*, Joseph as best she could, with a breathless response or lingering touch at the proper times.

By 2AM, even though the party was in full swing, Joseph made it clear that he wanted to leave – as if the fact that he had been proprietarily resting his hand on Jane's derriere for the past half-hour didn't make that clear enough.

Jane quelled a sudden moment of panic as she realized zero-hour was upon her. *Put up or shut up, Jane*. Fortunately, Farber's mind was too occupied with lascivious notions to notice any cold feet on Jane's part. Adding a slight wobble to her walk – her sudden attack of nerves rendered *that* bit of verisimilitude effortless – Jane led Farber towards the elevators that would lead to the hotel's basement garage.

Jane liked those elevators – old fashioned, cast iron monstrosities – and not just for their retro feel. According to her research, those elevators would take nearly two minutes to reach the basement, which kept with the managers' belief that anyone with enough money to stay at the Mecenate could

afford to take their time coming and going. And at this time of the morning, it was unlikely that Jane and Farber would be interrupted during their trip. Jane needed those two minutes.

Jane's careful stoking of her companion's libido paid off as she had hoped. The elevator doors had barely closed behind them before Joseph caught her in a slightly clumsy embrace. *A shame, this*, Jane thought regretfully as she tightened her grasp upon Farber, *it might have been fun otherwise...*

Joseph's eager fumbling suddenly became frantic as she introduced him to her own, unique, kiss. Within seconds, the startled playboy realized he was being choked – by Jane's tongue, and he struggled desperately for freedom. Jane, meanwhile, was desperately hoping that the poison she secreted would have a further paralyzing effect on Farber's respiratory system. Given that she was applying it almost directly to Farber's bronchial tubes, she believed it wouldn't hinder her task, even if it didn't help. Farber continued to struggle and *bite* – Jane had to resist the urge to stamp on Farber's instep at that – but he couldn't escape the grasp of a woman who could easily pick up a truck with one hand.

By the time the elevator arrived at its destination, Farber was dead and Jane had already assumed her next guise – that of Joseph Farber himself. She had quickly gone through his pockets to retrieve his keys and billfold, and she did her best not to look at the cyanotic body on the floor as she wandered into the underground garage.

*I don't know why Charlie wanted it to be so high profile*, Jane thought as she found Farber's car by beeping the alarm on his keychain. *Then again, I didn't need to know why he asked me to do something he could probably have done himself. Probably has something to do with Farber Senior consistently selling arms to Jordan. My god, he drives a jeep?*

Jane had found Farber's car and it was, indeed, an American-made Jeep. Looking closer, she noticed it had bulletproof glass and suspension that suggested armor plating beneath the paint but, still, it wasn't quite what she expected from a member of the idle riche. *Takes all kinds, I suppose*, she thought as she climbed in. She was trying very hard *not* to think about what had just happened – her first cold-blooded murder for money.

Instead, she thought of her last conversation with Charlie. She liked him. They had gone through the FBI Academy together, although Charlie had been recruited to Mossad with a speed that only surprised those that didn't know Charlie's parents lived in Tel Aviv. Running out of money and places to stay, Jane had tracked him down two weeks ago, hoping for at least a sofa to sleep on, if nothing else. Instead, she had spilled her guts – Charlie had that enviable ability to encourage anyone to open up to him. Charlie, to her surprise, had offered her a job - a well-paying job, which she had just completed.

*And Charlie said if I could stomach the idea of more work like this, he'd put me in touch with someone over at Janissaries. Some guy called Smith.* She thought for a moment. *I may as well try. I'm running out of options and what's the worst that could happen?*

Musing upon the future and trying hard to forget the immediate past, Jane drove on through the streets of Rome.