

It's past two in the morning by the time I get back to our apartment block. The stairwell stinks of urine and stale cigarette smoke as I drag my aching body up three flights. Despite the hour, the building has a malignant energy—drunken screaming, doors slamming, running feet clattering along the halls above. My hands are warm from my leather gloves, but they still shake as I fumble through the thick metal locks barricading us from our neighbors.

I creep inside, hoping that Frank is asleep.

I slip off my thin overcoat, and my blouse is wet through. For the first time I notice it's torn, ripped down almost to my waist. My breasts, protected only by sheer lace, feel exposed and vulnerable. I remove the Glock from my holster. It still smells of burnt gunpowder

It's snowing outside, and it's freezing in the hallway. Frank's jacket is lying on the floor, and I pick it up and wrap it around my shoulders. It smells like him. I remember how I used to love his smell. The sweat, the heat. That earthy aroma, like freshly turned soil. Now his jacket smells nothing like that. Just the rank odor of desperation.

In the sitting room, Frank has passed out on the sagging couch. He is snoring, his soft white belly pouting from beneath a soiled tee shirt. A blanket has slipped to the floor. For a second I consider covering him, but don't.

I tried to make a home for us here. I used to spend weekends trawling second-hand stores picking up furniture, ornaments, and even a few paintings. But tonight the apartment has never looked so wretched and bleak. Peeling linoleum floors, water stained ceilings and ragged, threadbare curtains.

On the wall hangs a huge Pollack print I picked up for three dollars at a pawn shop. The chaotic jumble of abstract color that used to captivate me now seems to have morphed into a writhing tangle of despair.