

CHAPTER ONE

Scandalous

(Two chapter sample from *Killer Pose* published by Action Girl Books, UK. Copyright © 2025, Andy Phillips.)

Monique Garneau had a task to complete. That was all she focused on while riding her sleek navy-painted motorcycle along the dual carriageway.

The setting sun was low in the evening sky, but her helmet visor negated the hazardous orange glare. For a professional racer with years of experience, driving at seventy miles per hour was no problem. Monique swerved between lanes to overtake traffic. The other vehicles were only a mundane distraction. Best to save her mental energy for the private meeting to come.

As she approached York's outer ring road, her target came into view. The modern skyscraper sign was visible over a mile away. Thirteen shiny metallic blue letters

contrasted with black, six-sided background spokes. Every character line was straight, either along the edge of a hex, or between a corner and its central point. Spotlights shone inward from supporting frames, illuminating the angular company logo.

HEXAGON SPORTS.

Tonight, you get what's coming to you, Wilson.

Her unvoiced threat reduced the monotony of the long ride, if only slightly. A dark-coloured minivan sped by, but the middle-aged driver didn't give so much as a sideways glance. The guy may have done had he seen Monique's face, but underneath her all-black leather outfit and thick boots, she could have been anyone.

A five foot ten biker with her brunette hair tucked inside her helmet would be easy to mistake for a man. But that suited her. She wasn't interested in attracting the attention of random motorists.

Monique continued her course without slowing. She was almost at Poppleton Business Park. The houses and small offices of the quaint Yorkshire village were tiny compared to the twenty-three-story tower that dominated the Hexagon Sports complex. The disappearing dusk sun cast a faint orange tint over the fence-enclosed grounds. Beyond the front gate and security station, nearly every parking space was vacant.

The uniformed guard working the evening shift was a curly-haired blonde in her late twenties. What was she called? Janice? Josie? Monique had spoken to her a few times, but the name didn't matter. She was only a minor player, unimportant in the grand scheme of things.

Monique unbuttoned her leather jacket and presented her Hexagon employee badge. The guard hesitated to open the gate.

"You know the procedure, Miss Garneau. No entry without visual ID."

Her tired recital of the company rule book suggested she was already bored.

"You've a long night ahead," Monique said. "So I won't give you any trouble. Best do what the big man wants."

She raised her helmet visor and angled her face towards the guard station spot lamp. It was hard keeping her tone pleasant when referring to Wilson, but discretion was essential.

After the woman let her through, Monique drove into the parking lot. She chose a space near the building and shut off her motorcycle engine. Except for ambient sounds – fluttering birds and the whirr of security cameras – it was eerily quiet on this Friday April evening.

One camera was stationary, with Monique's bike in the centre of its view. She didn't need to see surveillance footage to verify that, and her parking spot was a deliberate choice. Brad – Hexagon's gatekeeper – would be on duty at reception, so why waste the opportunity to hone her seduction skills?

Monique began her speed strip routine by unbuttoning her jacket top, then lowered the zipper to expose her sleeveless, short-skirted black dress and silver necklace. It took about a minute to slip off the leggings, readjust the clip-on stockings underneath, and neatly fold the biker leathers.

She swapped her practical boots for the high heels she had stored in a lockable box behind the seat. There was also a leather ladies' purse, which Monique collected and slung over her shoulder. She tossed her long hair back, completing the transformation from faceless motorcyclist to attractive sports model.

Monique placed the helmet beside the bike and strode

towards the building. The double plexiglass entrance doors slid open, and she entered the lobby.

Her heels clacked on the smooth floor tiles. Inevitably, they were hexagonal, but so was almost every feature in the enormous hall. Crystal light fittings, partitioned seating booths, posters of sporting legends – objects without six sides were the exception. The dividing wall behind the glossy reception desk bucked the trend, but the stainless steel logo did not. The scaled-down version of the exterior signage even replicated the spoked frames.

Silver plastic mannequins of famous clients were dressed in licensed company sportswear, notably an American baseball star and a four-time women's singles Wimbledon champion. They were shiny but soulless creations. Every object in the welcome area existed to promote the Hexagon brand.

The rough-faced, balding man at reception was fixated on the woman who had just arrived. Brad's dirty thoughts were obvious from his creepily thin smile. Such blatant misogyny would unnerve most young females, but Monique prided herself on being a person in control.

She casually stroked her hair and walked to the front desk. As expected, it was Brad who flinched first.

"Evening, Moni—" He caught his tongue and started over. "Miss Garneau."

Nearly every talent agent Monique had worked with complemented her athletic physique. Her outfit didn't conceal the muscular arms, nor did the transparent stockings hide her powerful thighs, but male observers were usually interested in other features. Tonight was all about tits and ass – to use that derogatory phrase – and Monique's tight dress only enhanced her sex appeal. Spiral gold patterns stood out from the black cloth material around the curves that mattered.

Brad's eyes shifted sideways. An awkward pause followed while he wiped sweat off his forehead. Monique said nothing as she leant across the desk. Her breasts were right under the guard's face, temptingly close, but he wouldn't dare touch them.

"You know, Brad. This could be considered sexual harassment."

His reaction was priceless: a horrified grimace, hands tapping nervously, drooling lips. Give him a few more seconds, and he would break down and beg for mercy.

"How naughty of me," Monique said. "Someone in a position of power taking advantage of a vulnerable employee."

She glanced down at Brad's crotch, where a noticeable bulge had formed in the zipped trousers. He squirmed in his cushioned seat, at a loss how to respond.

"One day I'll try out that big dick." Monique ran her tongue along her lower lip. "And see how it compares to all the rest. Unfortunately, I've made other plans this evening. Money talks, I'm afraid. Far more profit in screwing the boss."

She checked the security monitors behind Brad's desk: nine small screens split between three slanted control panels. And there was the director, pacing impatiently about his office.

"Inform Mister Wilson his eight o'clock has arrived."

Monique circled around the divider slab. Ever alert, she heard the dejected guard comment under his breath.

"Lucky bastard."

She had her back to Brad, so he wouldn't have seen her triumphant smile. The dim-witted guy was so easy to manipulate that it bordered on insulting, but this seductress was just getting warmed up.

There were four lifts behind reception, so Monique only had to wait briefly after tapping the call pad. She stepped inside and selected the topmost floor from the zigzag chain of hexagonal buttons. There was a security camera in the stainless steel box, and two more along the plush upper level corridor. Brad was doubtless monitoring her steady progress.

Nobody was in the waiting area. The executive secretary's curved desk was unmanned, and the computer screens dark. To save energy – and money – most ceiling lights were switched off. Monique walked past the glass tables and company brochures without a glance, and through the unlocked tube-handled oak doors ahead.

If the foyer was about Hexagon Sports, the director's office was decorated to promote the man in charge. Seven gold-framed pictures and informative plaques chronicled Wade Wilson's life story. Photographs spanned decades from his education overseas at Harvard, through middle management years, to his current position as managing director. Some shots had him posing with politicians, including a former Prime Minister, and another with wealthy celebrities. The album took up an entire wall, a vanity project where only one person mattered.

The floor-to-ceiling windows at the far end were as black as the night sky. Antique brass lamps were dimmed, leaving Wilson shrouded in gloom. The director stood beside the mahogany desk, talking excitedly on his mobile phone. His oily skin reflected what little light fell, and Monique could smell his body moisturiser from twenty metres away.

"I don't care about the deadline!" he protested.

The reply was inaudible, but the one-sided conversation was easy to interpret.

"So move it. Why do you think I hired your sorry ass?

... The start of the season isn't until next month. That should be all the time you need to negotiate."

While he continued his rant, Monique studied the environment. The office furniture was high end: a rectangular shaped conference table to match the desk, hardback chairs with velvet cushion seats, a giant television screen, and glass cabinets full of corporate award trophies. The ceiling fan was purely for show, since the ventilation system was more than adequate.

Monique walked round the table, ignoring the picture wall and her boss' tracking gaze. She stopped by a well-stocked refreshment bar and poured brandy from a decanter.

Two glasses were on a polished silver tray. Getting his model drunk could be a plan to make her compliant, but she could handle her liquor. Monique downed her beverage in a single gulp and refilled the glass without looking.

"I'm late for another meeting," Wilson said. "So we'll have to pick this up later. But I expect a report, and a better one than you just gave me."

He ended the call and turned his full attention to his visitor. Wilson's clothes were expensive: tailored maroon suit, plain silk tie, monogrammed cuff links.

Monique kept a neutral expression. The contract negotiation had started, and neither party wished to show weakness.

"Miss Garneau. Dressed to impress."

"And are you? Impressed?"

"A new contract is an opportunity. This could be a lucrative arrangement for both of us. How lucrative depends on what you can offer the company. What you can offer me."

The blatant innuendo wasn't lost on Monique. She

slipped off her purse, dropped it beside the tray, and opened the fastener.

"Thought you'd appreciate my skills by now."

She took out a lipstick tube and applied ruby red gloss until her mouth felt sticky. The finishing touch, but also a distraction. Wilson was captivated by her parted lips, so he didn't notice her switch on the digital recording device. Its lens pointed through a tiny hole in the purse, cleverly concealed as part of the pattern.

Wilson picked up a remote control from the desk, aimed at a camera above the entrance, and deactivated it with a button press. Monique couldn't resist smirking at his illusion of privacy. A careless visual tell, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I'm a very talented rider," she boasted. "That's why you signed me."

"Much more competition now." Wilson moved closer. "Two million is a lot of money. Are you still worth the investment?"

"What do you think?"

She discreetly closed the purse, took her glass, and walked to the window. His blatant demand for sex was unsubtle, but she made him wait. The more difficult the catch, the more appetising it became.

Liquid sloshed as Wilson poured himself a drink. Monique sensed his eyes were glued to her ass. The bait was ready to be hooked.

The model sipped her brandy as she looked down on Wilson's sports empire. Structures extended from the central tower, notably an Olympic size swimming pool with an enormous glass roof. Hexagonal windows and steel frames created a hive-like pattern. The panes were so immaculately clean that classical-style white marble

columns and turquoise blue water were unobscured.

Another extension housed an open-air tennis court, and a third an athletic track. Those weren't visible from the front side, but Monique had used the complex facilities enough to know the layout.

The view from the director's office was spectacular. At night, the dual carriageway to York resembled an airport runway. Rural homes were pinpricks of light in dark fields. The village station and railway lines looked like a model train set from this height.

Wilson's reflection appeared in the window. He groped Monique's behind. A tight, firm grip that dispensed with small talk.

The predatory man moved his hands up her back and pulled the dress shoulder loops aside. Monique let her frock fall away and slipped out of her high heels. Now half-naked, she tugged free with ease and spun sharply around.

"Yesterday, three of our partners were adamant they wouldn't sign new deals," Wilson said. "What did you do to change their mind?"

"I can be very persuasive."

"What's your strategy?"

Monique stepped back to the conference table and sat with her legs spread wide.

"First, I get myself into a strong negotiating position. Next, I add a sweetener."

She unclipped her bra, finished her brandy, and slid both objects along the polished wood. By the time they stopped moving, Wilson had forced himself between Monique's stockinged thighs.

"Then I complete the deal," she said.

Wilson gave into temptation and caressed her breasts. She turned to smile at the hidden camera. Some people

would pay six figures for this sex video, but Monique wasn't doing this for money. Power was far more satisfying, and right now, she was in charge.

She reached under the table and flipped the switch that activated the ceiling fan. Her hair fluttered in the current of cool air. She undid the stocking straps, enticing Wilson to pull them off and expose her thighs. She exhaled, hard enough for the device's audio receiver to pick up. This was all an act, but it needed to be convincing.

Wilson removed his belt, then his trousers. He was about to take off his underwear when Monique grabbed his wrist. A vice-tight hold that resisted all attempts to break away.

She smiled and reached into her panties. Her mark's struggles ceased as she produced an unused condom she had taped inside.

"I came here expecting you to go in hard," Monique said. "So you'd better not disappoint me."

* * *

Wade Wilson ticked off Monique Garneau's name in his appointment book. Hers was the last listed under today's date, and a definite high note to finish on. He closed his diary, deposited it in his desk drawer next to the fountain pen, and leant back in his leather chair.

The contract negotiation couldn't have gone better. As expected, the girl had used her sex appeal as a weapon. That had given her a temporary illusion of power, a bold streak of misplaced confidence, yet Monique was like any other employee. Money influenced career choices. Offer enough, and she would choose Hexagon over the competition. For all her passion and physical strength, the model had conceded

to Wilson's demands.

Beauty alone was worth an extra hundred thousand on the deal, small change compared to millions in potential sales revenue. But Monique's real value was her profession. Female motorcyclists weren't usually head turning attractive, so filling that niche in the sportswear market was a crucial advantage.

Wilson polished off his brandy, savouring every heart warming drop as he relived the encounter. The sexy model's powerful thighs had been crushingly tight around his waist, giving a sense of achievement to each penetrating thrust. Those firm, natural breasts were a pleasure to lick. An hour later, he still recalled how her sweat tasted.

Most women would call him a monster, but should he feel guilty? Monique knew how the meeting would play out and even arrived prepared. But ultimately, victory was his. Another leading model had signed a three-year extension.

A familiar ring tone interrupted Wilson's thoughts. He was alone in his office, listening to the *Top Gun* theme. The director sat up sharply when he read the caller ID: *Monique*.

"Have you seen the news?" she asked before he gave the customary introduction.

Not the opening Wilson expected. Somewhat hesitantly, he pressed a button on his remote. The giant TV screen – opposite the wall with the pictures – came on.

A high-resolution image showed him groping Monique's naked body, sensitive parts censored by blurry squares. He froze upon reading the caption.

BREAKING: HEXAGON SPORTS SEX SCANDAL

"...still a developing story," the newscaster narrated. "Despite no official word from the company, a reliable source has confirmed this footage is genuine. Wade Wilson, one of the UK's most influential businessmen, is shown

sexually molesting a model..."

Wilson stabbed the mute button. He watched the report unfold, unable to stop trembling as more explicit snapshots appeared.

"You insolent bitch," he said through clenched teeth.

"Careful with the language," Monique warned him. "You never know what's being recorded."

"How much do you want?"

"Money? You're hoping to outbid the press? Too late for that."

Wilson stood up and gazed through the window. No activity outside, but how long before reporters showed up at the front gate?

"You think you can use people, replace them whenever you like."

There was venom in her voice. A merciless rant that Wilson wanted desperately to shut off. But he needed to know why she'd betrayed him.

"Directors can be replaced too," Monique said. "When shareholders lose faith in them. Scandals are bad for business, and nobody likes dirty old men. How long before the board decides you're expendable?"

"Someone put you up to this. Who was it? Harris? Cole? Now you're acting like the victim. You wanted to..."

"Screw you? Yes, I did enjoy that. But not all your women are so appreciative. They would rather you kept your dick zipped away."

Wilson's legs trembled. Were other models involved in this?

"I don't know... what..."

"Do you think they'll keep quiet?" interrupted Monique.

He was considering how to respond when something dropped over his head. A noose tightened around his neck,

cutting off his air supply. He clutched at the rope. The discarded phone landed face down on the floor.

"How many people did you use during your career?" Monique asked, oblivious to his plight. "Were they nothing more than stepping stones?"

The attacker pulled on the cord. Wilson's flailing feet scuffed the carpet beneath him, then lifted off the ground. The bitter caller carried on talking, her voice muffled. Couldn't she hear the struggle? His strangled gasps?

"How does it feel to be the victim?"

The commentary was so unnerving in context it could be the killer taunting him. Were they working together?

Wilson swung back and forth, suspended in mid-air. He momentarily glimpsed a black-clad figure, gloved hands clutching the rope. Something metallic screeched above him.

The fan.

A terrifying picture formed in his head. Tomorrow morning, they would discover his dead body hung from the ceiling. The assumption would surely be suicide, and everyone would believe it.

Wilson clawed at the noose, then grabbed the cord above. His legs knocked over the leather chair below, depriving him of a foothold. He tried to swing over to the conference table, but his feet slipped on the smooth edge.

He spun around to get a better view of the mystery attacker. The intruder was tall, face hidden behind a black plastic mask. Wire gauze covered the nose and mouth, leaving only the eyes visible. Narrow slits, skin and brows coated in dark makeup. Their gender, age, and ethnicity were all unknown.

A tripod-mounted cellphone was on the table, its light and camera switched on. The assailant was recording this?

The tense rope creaked, and Wilson's gasps were

becoming fainter. He kicked out, but his shoes bounced off protective rubber pads. The killer had shielded their body and limbs.

“Do you even remember them? All those you stabbed in the back?”

Monique’s ongoing rant triggered a disjointed set of flashbacks. Wilson saw fearful executives, corporate rivals, and reluctant models. He had made many enemies throughout his illustrious career, and any of them could be the person under that mask.

“What about that swimmer?” Monique asked. “The model you abused and threw on the scrap heap. It ended in suicide. Do you remember?”

Wilson recalled a blonde, teary-eyed woman sat at the conference table – a hazy event from long ago. Who was she?

He drew a blank, and his willpower was fading fast like the light. Even if Monique heard his strangled cries, she only wanted to lecture him. Reporters were after his blood. The camera was still switched off. Brad – too low paid to work harder than necessary – wouldn’t check the offices until morning. Nobody was coming to help.

As darkness clouded Wilson’s vision, reality sunk in. His career would end in disgrace, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

CHAPTER TWO

Setting a Trap

Dan Turner had almost finished his round. Four further patrols of the sports centre remained, but it always felt good to complete the first hourly check.

Campus security wasn't the most glamorous job, but the monthly salary made it bearable. University was an expensive commitment considering tuition and maintenance fees, and student loans were a massive financial burden. Dan was sure he'd been up against prejudice when applying to Oxford. Working class, black, and a comprehensive school education was a triple whammy. Juvenile offences and former gang affiliations were grounds for automatic rejection, but those records had been officially sealed, and while he couldn't prove any bias, he would always be suspicious.

Studying at York wasn't all bad, but did the contractor have to purchase such crappy uniforms? The dull grey shirt

itched Dan's forearms, the pants were tight, and his equipment limited to a bundle of keys and an electric torch.

Something hummed nearby, breaking the silence.

"Anyone there?" Dan yelled. Then he realised it was just the air conditioning starting up.

With the recent attacks, student safety should be the number one priority, but the sports facility was always short staffed outside term time. Most members who hadn't gone home for Easter would be out partying, and public training sessions were during the day.

That made patrolling the beige-painted corridors and deserted gyms a lonely task. Most checks were uneventful, so anything odd – no matter how trivial it seemed – was cause for concern. The neon strip lamps were glaringly bright, and every section reeked of cleaning fluid. At least there was no danger of falling asleep.

Dan was short of breath when he returned to the office. He really needed to lose some weight.

"Where were you?" his friend asked.

"Making my round. You know, the job I'm supposed to be doing. Can't see Lyle Norton listed on the roster." Dan tapped the wall-hooked clipboard to make his point. "Some people have to work, and don't have time to watch their girlfriends on TV."

Lyle was a handsome, thick-necked blond wearing a casual shirt, jeans, and brand trainers. Slouched in the swivel chair by the monitors, he looked totally out of place. He had the build and stamina for guard duty, but no incentive. With some rich City of London banker for a dad, money wasn't an issue. Dan was a cockney native himself, just from a different social circle.

"I miss anything?" he asked. "Besides the gymnastics?"

With the system rejigged, every screen showed the

practice hall where Cassie was doing her nightly workout. Surveillance footage covered multiple angles, including two wide panoramic shots and various close-ups of equipment.

Dan was no gymnastics buff, but he recognised the vault. The talented young lady pulled off a twist and landed gracefully on the mat with barely a stumble. Judges would probably award high marks, except this athlete was alone and vulnerable. And Lyle still hadn't answered the question.

"So I haven't missed anything. Great. Another no show. It ever occur to you this stalker might exist in your girl's head? And what she's doing is really dangerous. I told you that, right?"

"Every night for the past week."

Lyle hooked up an external monitor that wasn't part of the usual system and connected a portable modem. An image appeared on the screen. Dan saw wooden lockers, shower cubicles, and ghastly pink porcelain tiles.

"You put a camera in the women's changing room!?"

An obvious statement, but he couldn't think what else to say. Was it getting hotter in here, or merely his imagination? He needed some fresh air, so he switched on the desk fan. Except nothing happened. The blade wheel remained still inside its wire cage. Yet another broken item to add to the growing list.

"Jeez! Do you get the trouble we'll be in if they find out? Does your girl even know we're watching her in there?"

"It was her idea," Lyle replied. "And a good one. We need to keep Cassie in sight. Which means no blind spots. If this creep makes a move, it's going to be somewhere private."

"That's the important word here. Private. We're breaching about a dozen ethics violations. This is lawsuit

territory. You realise that?"

"The camera's not there during the day."

"Great," Dan said. "And if some other girl decides to use the gym at nighttime?"

"Then we'll delete the footage. No harm done. And you're one to talk about ethics. How many laws have you broken?"

"None that involved assaulting women."

He regretted choosing the student project on inner city gangs, and sharing first-hand experiences with his peers. Now Lyle had ammunition every time he fancied a dig. He was so wrapped up in Cassie's scheme he couldn't foresee any problems, and it was hopeless attempting to dissuade him.

Dan walked to the crooked table and pulled the newspaper from under the wobbly leg. *The York Gazette* was a student union publication, but an external story had dominated this week's headlines. The latest banner was *HEXAGON SPORTS FALLOUT CONTINUES*, and page three featured an article about the ongoing criminal investigation.

"The Wade Wilson files," Dan said. "They even have a catchy name for them now. So Cassie sees this Garneau woman as an inspiration? She's a fucking blackmailer, pun intended. A professional who knew what she was doing. And what's our setup? Strictly amateur."

Lyle was doing the whole concentrate and not respond thing again. Cassie had moved onto the large blue mat to perform tumbling exercises. Still no sign of any trouble.

Dan dropped the folded newspaper in the bottom drawer of the battered filing cabinet. He kicked the compartment closed, and the analogue clock on top wobbled. His outburst achieved little, but made him feel better.

"Remind me why I agreed to this shit again."

"Three rapes on campus in the past year. No arrests. Ring any bells? Imagine if we catch this bastard and break the story."

In principle, it was difficult to argue with the goal, but Dan couldn't shake his apprehension. The two-man (plus one woman) band were out of their depth. That electric torch wouldn't be much use if some guy pulled a knife. A hypothetical situation to Cassie and Lyle, but not to a childhood survivor of assaults and muggings.

"Better do another round," Dan said. "In case I see something that gets me in trouble. Cassie's on board with this peepshow? That's kinda creepy. You should talk to her, make sure she understands how serious this is. Those pretty moves won't help if our campus stalker makes an appearance."

Lyle turned away from the monitors. Was that a genuinely concerned expression? Maybe Dan hadn't been wasting his breath after all.

* * *

A crescendo of high-pitched notes marked the climax of the dance theme. Loudspeakers broadcast deafening music around the indoor sports hall. The accompanying drumbeats quickened in tempo as Cassie Simms started the final phase of her gymnastics routine.

Still in perfect synchronisation, she double-cartwheeled across the floor mat, coming dangerously close to the marked boundary. This composition was higher in difficulty than her previous attempts – almost international level – but Cassie had yet to falter. She finished with a handstand, which she held for eight seconds, then flipped

into an upright stance with her arms spread out wide.

The music ended right on cue. It would have been a crowd-pleasing finale, except there was no audience to see it. Cassie thought of the United States colleges with vast arenas, giant scoreboards, and spectator seats. For British athletes, it was normally the floor space, equipment and little else.

“Just listen to that applause.”

Bitter irony now, but one day, she'd do this for real in front of thousands. Awed onlookers would chant her name, drape their champion in the Union Jack, and cheer as she ascended the podium to receive Olympic gold.

Who was she kidding? Cassie was probably the best female gymnast at York University. If she was lucky, she *might* get noticed by national talent scouts. But the top Americans and Chinese were world class, in a different league altogether. These solo evening sessions had an ulterior purpose: drawing out the campus rapist. The trap was set, but he hadn't taken the bait.

You're doing good. Smile for the camera.

And she did, knowing at least one guy was keeping a close eye on her performance. Lyle had been supportive of the sting operation, even if Dan had done everything possible to discourage him. But the team joker would insist *The York Gazette* credit him if the plan worked.

Cassie checked her reflection in the portable tall mirror. A five foot three teenager with chestnut eyes glared back, unimpressive in stature but slim thanks to her diet. Her light brown, bun-tied hair was damp with sweat. The unremarkable red leotard had none of the glittery whirls or fancy design seen at televised events. A bitter reminder she was a long way from achieving her goal.

Enough moaning, Cassie. There were two pieces of

apparatus left. The beam was her strongest piece, so better to conclude with that and tackle the dreaded uneven bars first. She walked round the steel frame and wire supports, pausing to put on her hand grips.

“You won’t beat me this time.”

If talking to herself made her more competitive, who cared if she sounded stupid? Cassie needed the confidence boost. Only one attempt this week had ended without a fall, and that was the lowest difficulty sequence.

Nobody was on the sidelines to offer encouragement, but Cassie still had her secret weapon. She went to her laptop and played the edited footage of the Paris 2024 Olympic individual final, a snippet featuring the eventual bronze medallist. While gold was the ultimate dream, a podium finish was the first aim.

A fifteen second black screen buffer preceded the movie itself, ample time for Cassie to assume a ready position. Then came the countdown beeps she added to the soundtrack. At the third tone, she jumped onto the springboard and launched herself into the air.

The high fiberglass bar sank under her weight as she began with a straightforward mount, leading into a glide kip. After a swing to gain momentum, she rotated back, split her legs apart, and brought them together to complete the handstand. There was no audio commentary for the simple first element any elite gymnast would be expected to master.

Cassie swung round and released when she reached the highest point, launching herself backward. She cleared the bar but only just grabbed it on her way down.

“Starts with a huge Nabieva,” the Olympics announcer said. “Straight into the Bhardwaj.”

The complexity was ramping up and Cassie, still

recovering from her mistake, already lagged. She spun forward towards the low pole and performed a mid-air twist. After a near-perfect connection that shocked even herself, she maintained her focus to complete a second kip handstand.

“Back up to the high bar with the Van Leeuwen.”

Now well out of sync with her video guide, the trailing gymnast let gravity bring her round and elevated her legs. When she had swung up into an upside down position, she released and twisted to face the other way.

For a fleeting moment, Cassie glimpsed a shadowy figure behind a viewing window. Loss of concentration proved costly, and she completely mistimed the high bar grab. She landed flat on her back, fortunate that the exercise mat cushioned her fall.

“...so perhaps a misconnection.”

That was an understatement. Spotlights and girders danced around where they should be, and it took Cassie a few seconds to shake off the dizziness. Once her vision returned to normal, she checked the entry points to the hall, but saw nothing unusual.

“Huge Jaeger,” the clip commentator said. “Connects this time into the Pak. Back up with the Maloney and straight into the Geinger. Wrapping up those. Tense there. Full turn. Just the dismount to go.”

Cassie stood up and paused the recording. Applause stopped and the Olympic gymnast froze, arms out in celebration after she had finished her routine with only minor errors.

Had Lyle been watching? He wouldn't have heard the commentary in the security room since the camera feeds were video only. The constant references by the announcer to former gymnasts and their signature moves would have

been unintelligible to him, but he would know Cassie had messed up.

No sign of the shadow. Perhaps she wanted a stalker to be there as an excuse for her failure. Ultimately, she hadn't been good enough.

Cassie must have stood silent in regret for a full minute before she removed her hand grips and snapped the laptop closed. Time to stop feeling sorry and redeem herself. The balance beam awaited her, the last test of agility and composure for this evening.

She forwent the music, chalked her hands and heels, and mounted the raised platform with a scissor jump. From a sitting position, she moved into a poised stance and began her acrobatic sequence. The beam was sixteen feet long and only four inches wide. Each move required precision and concentration.

On her favourite apparatus, Cassie grew in confidence with each element. She successfully executed a front walkover, a back somersault, a rotation on one foot, and consecutive split leaps. A minor stumble threatened to ruin those, but she soon regained her balance.

The penultimate move was a handstand with legs angled horizontal and parallel to the beam. Pressure built on Cassie's tired arms, but she held steady for five seconds. She was about to rotate her body upright and end with a backflip dismount when she spotted him behind the window.

A man dressed in a sports jacket and baseball cap. His clothes were dark, but that was probably the lack of illumination. The intruder was too distant to discern any facial features, but appeared to be wearing a mask of some kind. And he was looking straight at her.

Cassie instinctively screamed and dropped to the mat.

The awkward, ungraceful landing made her grunt. Her left ankle felt sore, though the injury didn't seem serious. The man had disappeared during her tumble, but the threat remained.

"You picked the wrong girl to mess with!"

She yelled the challenge out loud, mainly to calm her nerves. Cassie walked quickly to the exit and waved to attract attention. Lyle had better be watching this.

The corridor back to the changing rooms seemed twice as long as usual. The boxed-in, narrow passageway was well lit, but had almost no potential escape routes. Fire doors led to a dark, deserted campus where she would be easy prey. Most offices were locked or vacant, and the risk of getting trapped in a dead end room was too great. The overt cameras in the public areas weren't transmitting, but hopefully, they would deter the attacker.

Cassie had discussed her plan with Lyle many times, but that was all theory. Should she have done a practical run through? And what if the rapist did something unexpected?

A loud clang resonated around the corridor. Did a door just slam? The noise originated close by. Cassie quickened her pace, glancing over her shoulder to check the man wasn't following. Her sore ankle made every left step uncomfortable. The polished floor felt icy beneath her bare feet, and the chilly sensation crept up through her body. She might as well be naked, since her thin leotard afforded no protection.

The blast of warmth from the electric heaters was invigorating. Cassie had reached the presumed safety of the women's locker room. Air fresheners gave off a pleasant aroma of summery flowers, an artificial scent that did nothing to ease the tension. The layout was a veritable maze with tight spaces everywhere. Between the rows of steel

storage units and wooden benches, there were plenty of spots to get cornered.

"I'm ready for you, creep."

A blatant lie, but Cassie needed to prepare herself mentally. She unzipped her leotard and removed the key lanyard from around her neck. That exposed her upper back, but bare skin was what that pervert wanted. A naked teenage girl in a steamy shower would be irresistible – and in plain view of the hidden camera.

Cassie opened her locker and reached for the towel. He was there in the mirror. The stocking-masked man was right behind her.

"I've been watching you."

She froze, rooted in fear. A sharp, cold metal object probed her back. A knife? She couldn't see it in the reflection.

This wasn't the plan! The sicko was supposed to watch her undress, then attack her. The assault was happening off camera, and Lyle would be blind to it.

"All those late night practices." His speech was slow and wheezy, piling on the creepiness. "You got great form, Cassie. Really like the way you split those legs of yours."

He knows my name. How long had this psycho been watching her? His heavy hand clamped her thigh, squeezing so hard she buckled under the pressure. The knife point dug deeper into her back.

"Will you split them for me?"

The sting operation was supposed to trap the stalker, but Cassie had somehow ended up his prisoner. Glancing down, she saw leather-gloved fingers press the leotard over her groin. Beads of sweat trickled down her cheek. Her instinct was to wipe them away, but she didn't dare move.

"Turn around so I can get a better look at you."

Cassie hesitated, then obeyed. The man released his grip

as she spun round.

The attacker was a few inches taller, his chin about level with her sight line. A brown stocking distorted his entire face except for roughly cut holes over the eyes and lips, but the white male was likely middle-aged. His sports jacket had university branding, but was weatherbeaten, a relic from the last century. Despite the shadow cast by his baseball cap, it was obviously black hair tucked under his ears.

He raised a razor sharp switchblade. Its metal end was short, about four or five inches, but still lethal. Cassie retreated, bumping into the lockers. Hers was directly behind, left open from earlier. She recalled the items she brought to the gym. Maybe there was something useful.

"You take a wrong turn?" she asked. "This is the girl's room."

Her jokey comment didn't fit the mood, but the attacker seemed put off by her brave outburst. Cassie reached back, searching between her rucksack and the towel.

The deodorant spray. She eased the lid off and placed her finger on the nozzle.

"My star student is a girl," the masked man said. "Show me what you can do, and I'll improve your technique."

He touched her breasts, leaving himself exposed. Cassie kned the rapist in the groin, putting so much weight into the attack he actually yelled in pain. Before the fury-eyed lunatic could react, she thrust the aerosol in his face and sprayed.

"You goddamn bitch!"

The stunned attacker rubbed his eyes, dislodging the baseball cap from his head. He snarled in rage and lunged forward with the knife.

Cassie just about dodged aside. Seeing an opportunity,

she slammed the locker door in the guy's chest. And a second time, a powerful blow that knocked him back.

"Lyle!" she yelled. "Get your stupid ass in here now!"

The long corridor was a potential death trap, so she ducked towards the showers instead. Hopefully, her boyfriend had spotted her on the video feed, because the masked man had recovered and she was out of deodorant spray. Cassie threw the empty aerosol can, but he simply swatted it aside.

"You'll wish you hadn't done that, little girl."

He advanced toward the shower cubicles, knife held tight. Cassie's back was literally against the tiled wall. She had nowhere left to run. And then Lyle was there, heroically racing to her rescue.

"Get the hell away from her!"

The rapist spun around and brandished his blade, giving Lyle pause. The two men stared each other down, neither wanting to give ground.

Cassie looked about frantically. She threw open the nearest glass cubicle door, pulled the tubed shower nozzle from its holder, and turned the cold tap on full.

Doused in water, the attacker was thrown off balance. Lyle kicked away the switchblade, which skittered out of sight. He grappled with the masked man, struggling to hold him.

"Run for it!"

That had been Cassie's first instinct, but this was the moment they had planned for. Time to expose this bastard. She grabbed the stocking and pulled it from the maniac's head.

Lyle paused, seeming to recognise the attacker. That gave the unmasked black-haired man an advantage, enough to land a fierce punch to the jaw that knocked her gallant

boyfriend out cold.

The psycho closed in. Now Cassie had a clearer view, the stubble-faced thug did look familiar, but even if she positively identified her assailant, solicitors would question a witness account. Had the video feed captured his face? This was all pointless otherwise. She glanced sideways at the ventilation grille where they concealed the spy camera.

The rapist followed her gaze. He gave Cassie a hateful stare, then grabbed the lens and pulled. The attached electric cable came out of the vent with it, glass cracking in his clenched fist.

"You were recording me this whole time!? I'll kill you!"

The man stooped to retrieve his knife, giving his victim the chance to sprint for the exit. She ignored her aching ankle and didn't dare look back as heavy footsteps thumped behind her. She split jumped over a bench to avoid the spilled water. Trainers squeaked as her pursuer skidded on wet tiles.

Cassie darted out into the corridor, ready to collapse from exertion, but she pressed on, fuelled by adrenaline. Her shadow on the wall was joined by a second. Her mild injury was enough to slow her running speed, and the attacker was within meters of catching up when Dan turned a corner ahead. Lyle, back on his feet, emerged from the changing room.

With numbers stacked against him, their quarry gave up the chase and made his getaway through a fire exit. Cassie cautiously opened the door to peek outside, but the man had fled into the night.

"Are you okay?" Dan asked her.

"What took you so long?"

"Wait until the guy attacks me. Be sure to get his face on camera. That was the plan, right? The one you insisted we

follow?"

Those *had* been her instructions, but he must have known something was wrong. She looked to Lyle for support, but her boyfriend didn't back her up. Instead, he tapped his chin, then paused with one finger pointed at the ceiling.

"Earl Bennett."

How was Cassie supposed to respond to an unfamiliar name?

"Former star of the university rugby team?" Dan said. "Their old coach? He's the rapist? He played for England, for Christ's sake. Holy shit. You weren't kidding about this being a story."

Then she remembered a picture of the guy holding a trophy. In a publicly displayed yearbook, right here in York Sports Centre.

"Tell me we got the footage."

Dan nodded weakly in reply.

"*You* got it," Lyle said, zipping up her leotard. "But promise me you'll never do anything like this again."

"It worked, didn't it?"

"He's still out there, Cassie. And he knows about the camera. You made yourself a target."

"Good thing I have you to protect me, then."

She smiled, but Lyle looked away in disgust.

"Think your boyfriend's saying you almost got yourself killed," Dan said.

"We exposed a rapist. Probably saved an innocent girl from being assaulted. I call that a fantastic result. Why are we arguing? Don't we have the story of the year to run?"

Sirens wailed as an unseen emergency vehicle approached the campus.

"After we talk to the police," Dan said. "I called them

from the office. You *are* the victim of a violent crime. Or did you forget that?"