

SPIKE TRAP

Hell in High Heels
(Excerpt)

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prologue

Manning started the surveillance system and switched to the bathroom view. The image filled his screen, panning and zooming in response to his practiced touch on the joystick. His free hand moved discreetly down behind his desk, towards his groin.

The girl was there, right on schedule, the shower already running. The display was so sharp that Manning could see the individual drops that splashed and condensed on the clear plastic shower screen, could make out the rivulets that ran down to the acrylic base.

He wasn't interested in details like that, though.

Emma pulled off her sneakers and stepped out of her jeans. It was a shame she always wore jeans, Manning thought, because she had fantastic legs: long, slender and shapely.

He zoomed in for a close-up of her ankles. They looked so dainty, so exquisitely feminine that he longed to press his thumb into the fragile and inviting hollows that straddled the delicate joint.

One day, perhaps. For now, he simply pressed harder against his cock, listening to the sound of running water and his own breathing, which was coming in short, heavy wheezes.

He pulled the view back just as Emma shucked her tee shirt over her head. There was no bra underneath, just the creamy perfection of her breasts, displayed like two handfuls of goddess-flesh to his voyeuristic gaze.

A little more than two handfuls if anything, he thought with a smirk. Not too much more, though. Just how he liked them, in fact.

Manning tracked the girl as she crossed the room, treating himself to a close-up of her nipples and their dark encircling areolae. He imagined how it would feel to roll these delicate buds between thumb and forefinger, imagined how Emma's skin

would taste, and how she'd yelp and wriggle as he flicked her nipples with his tongue, or clamped his teeth over those delightfully defenseless nubbins of female flesh.

He could almost hear the way she'd squeal as she tried to writhe away.

"She's a pretty one, isn't she?"

Manning jerked his hand guiltily away from his groin and turned to face his visitor. "I wish you'd knock, Martelsen."

"Why bother? It's hardly a secret, for any of us."

"Even so, a manager needs some privacy in his office..."

"So I can see." Martelsen leaned over to peer at Manning's screen. Emma was in the cubicle now; all that could be seen were her discarded sneakers and clothes. "Such a shame she doesn't dress more ... elegantly," he said. "I honestly think you might do something about that, old man."

"Really? Do you think she's ready?"

"Yes. We've been observing her for weeks now, and I've been going over her latest psych profiles. It's time we took her in hand."

"Then I'll see what I can do."

Martelsen gestured at the screen and then at the camera controls. "This could be a bit steamier, couldn't it?"

"No problem," Manning said, and both men leaned forward as he switched the view to the inside of the shower cubicle, and to Emma's wet, naked body.

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“I didn’t know Manning had any interviews planned for today.”

Emma was peeping around the edge of her partition, watching as her manager ushered a smartly dressed blonde into his office. Manning’s height and fawning bulk obscured the visitor’s face, but Emma knew from her boss’s body language—which was embarrassingly intimate, even at this distance—that the interviewee had to be both young and attractive.

Charlie poked his head out of his cubicle across the corridor and studied the new arrival’s back as she disappeared into the project manager’s office.

“Manning mentioned he’d be seeing someone this afternoon, about the senior design position,” he said.

“He can’t be. He as good as promised that job to me, when he wanted me to stay late for all those emergency testing shifts.”

“You know Manning,” Charlie said. “He’ll say or do anything to get what he wants. That doesn’t mean he keeps his bargains.”

“Doesn’t he think I’m up to the job?”

“Of course he does. You’re the second best software engineer in the team, after me.” He winked at her. “You’re more presentable than the rest of us, too. But ... take a look at her.”

Emma looked through the glass panel that screened the manager’s office, and watched as the visitor settled herself into the chair opposite Manning’s desk. The interviewee wore a navy blue skirt, cut well above the knee—barely long enough to be businesslike, easily short enough to show how good her legs were. The subtly patterned stockings underlined that fact too, as did the high heels, which came within a millimeter of being trashy.

Emma still couldn't see the visitor's face, which was hidden behind the project plan that Manning kept taped to the office window so that no one would be able to see his workstation screen. It didn't matter; Emma was sure the girl would be pretty, because Manning was the sort of man who only interviewed women that he found attractive. That was something she hadn't realized at first. When Manning hired Emma, she'd assumed that it was because of her education and solid work experience, rather than the skirt she'd worn on the assessment day.

It had soon become clear that Manning was looking for more than qualifications. Much more. At first, Emma had been shocked by the man's veiled hints about her career path and the importance of working closely with management, but she soon developed an air of pretended innocence—and of carefully misunderstanding his suggestions.

She turned back to Charlie. "He's a real slimeball. He gave me one of those jokey come-ons again this morning. I wish he'd just come out with it, so I could nail him for harassment."

"He's way too cunning for that," Charlie said.

"You're not wrong. Everything he says can be taken two ways—a dirty way, and a funny way. Complaining would be more trouble than it's worth."

Charlie grinned at her. "I'm just glad he's not gay, you know?"

"Yeah, like anyone would go for you." She smiled back at him to let him know she was only teasing; the truth was that Charlie was good looking and really nice, and Emma was sure that any number of girls would jump at the chance of going out with him, if he'd only ask.

She knew she would, but he always treated her as no more than a good friend. It was hardly surprising when you thought about it: Emma was innocent and demure, not the sort of girl that got propositioned by streetwise guys like Charlie. Her heritage—which included an upbringing that, although tempered by the influence of a European mother, was still dominated by the expectations and culture of a traditionally minded Chinese

father—made her a little more reserved than most of her peers.

In that way, at least, the visitor seemed completely different from her. Emma was quite certain of that, from the way the woman kept leaning forward in her chair, and from the way her stocking-clad, stiletto-spiked legs kept crossing and uncrossing.

Afterwards, Manning showed the new woman around the office, introducing her to the team members.

“Charlie Borkowski, Emma Long, this is Jennifer Caldwell. She’ll be joining us in the design department on Monday.”

His eyes flicked towards Emma without betraying a hint of embarrassment about the promised promotion. She refused to meet his gaze, concentrating on Caldwell instead.

The image of prettiness that she’d held in her mind during the interview fell short of reality.

Jennifer Caldwell was both elegant and beautiful. Her eyes were green, and a cascade of golden hair tumbled in rich curls about her shoulders. Her business suit reflected stylish formality tempered by an edge of daring sexiness. Emma glanced down at her own tee shirt, jeans and sneakers, which amounted to a uniform of sorts for code cutters such as Charlie and herself.

She couldn’t help feeling a little awkward when she compared herself to the new arrival.

Not that she’d ever be able to wear such clothes and shoes to the office; Emma knew she’d look and feel ridiculous in a revealing skirt and high heels. All the other programmers would think she’d lost her mind, too, though that probably wouldn’t stop their eyes bugging out of their heads and their tongues hitting the floor—which was happening right now, as the guys ogled Jennifer Caldwell’s stiletto shoes and stocking-clad legs.

Watching the woman, a small and diffident part of Emma wished she had the opportunity to look more feminine herself, at least occasionally. A dress-up Friday once a month, perhaps. That might be a good idea.

But at least the ubiquitous tech uniform she wore wasn’t all stiff and starched. She glanced at Caldwell again, checking for signs of discomfort or fatigue, but there was no hint that the

business suit was overly restrictive or the heels too precarious. The woman just stood there smiling at her new colleagues, full of poise and self-evident charm.

At last, Manning steered his guest towards the exit. As he left, he glanced into Emma's cubicle.

"Come to my office afterwards, would you?" he asked.

After her appointment, Jennifer Caldwell paused in the corridor outside Manning's area, wishing she could just leave, but fearing to hurry away too quickly in case one of the Partners wanted her.

She knew from experience that she'd pay dearly if she disappointed them.

Sure enough, Martelsen poked his head out of a doorway further along the corridor, and beckoned to her.

"How delightful to see you," he said. "You'll join me for a moment, won't you?"

Jennifer's heart sank. Of all the Partners, Martelsen was the most demanding—the one who had taken the greatest part in her training, and who most delighted in tormenting her. She wished it had been Manning who'd accosted her; at least the blustering, lustful fool could be manipulated.

Martelsen was a completely different proposition. The best she could hope for with Martelsen was to appease him.

Jennifer nodded and smiled brightly, straightened her skirt, and sauntered towards his office, swaying in her high heels.

"It's been too long," Martelsen said when she entered. "I've missed seeing you."

Jennifer recognized her cue instantly. "Would you like to see me now, Mr. Martelsen?"

"I believe I would."

Even before he'd finished speaking, she was shrugging her jacket off and dropping it on the floor of his office. She knew that taking the time to hang it up would earn her a black mark—physically as well as metaphorically, because Martelsen wouldn't be above signing her flesh with a whip. The important thing was to strip for him, quickly and elegantly, without any

hint of rebellion or willfulness.

The thought crossed her mind that someone might come into the office at any moment—Martelsen hadn't bothered to lock the door. She quickly pushed that thought aside to concentrate on what she was doing: physical modesty was a habit he'd broken her of, a long time before.

She watched him discreetly, just as she'd been trained, alert for any signs that she might be displeasing him. His eyes followed her fingers as they flew to the buttons of her blouse, and he licked his thin lips as she twitched the garment open. He nodded his approval and she let it fall away completely, exposing the lacy black bra that enhanced rather than concealed the generous curves of her breasts.

"The skirt too," he said.

Jennifer loosened the waistband and let the skirt fall to the floor. Now she was down to her bra and panties and stockings, and the matching garter belt, embroidered with delicate flowers. She'd chosen the ensemble carefully, half-expecting that Martelsen would want to see her. Not that she had much choice; the list of underclothes that the Partners had approved for her was short, select, and far more expensive than she could really afford.

It was just one more way in which they controlled her, and humiliated her, and used her.

Martelsen leaned back and let his gaze roam over the girl's body, enjoying the contrast of black lace against creamy flesh, the delightful pressure of pubic mound against silk panties, and the way the garter straps cut so tautly across the flawless territory of her thighs.

She was as beautiful as ever, and exquisitely obedient. He remembered a time when things had been different: the long training process that had started with determined resistance and fiery threats, and proceeded to tearful pleading and grudging compliance. That was all over now, stripped away like the girl's

business suit, leaving nothing but naked submission. He'd trained her well. He almost regretted that she was ready to be sold, but it would be a few weeks yet before she was shipped to her new owner.

There was still time to enjoy her.

"Come here, and kneel."

She walked across the room, superbly confident in the heels: another lesson well taught. When she was kneeling at the side of his chair, he reached forward and tilted her chin towards him. She parted her lips slightly, and he ran a finger over them. Her tongue flicked out obediently, moist and inviting, exactly as he'd taught her.

Martelsen reached behind the girl's back, groping for the fastening of her bra. She leaned forward slightly, offering better access, and his fingers found the hook they sought and undid it with a swift pinching motion. The bra went slack, allowing the girl's cleavage to separate and her breasts to relax into their natural form.

Relaxed or no, they were still beautiful to Martelsen. He became aware that his cock wasn't relaxed, not at all. His arousal was growing by the second. He leaned forward to enjoy her scent—he'd selected her perfume himself, chosen it to complement the girl's unique natural fragrance. As he breathed her in, the hairs on the back of his neck tingled and stood up, as if in sympathy with his cock.

Her bra straps were slack against the bare skin of her shoulders. She looked up at him mutely and he nodded his permission for her to remove the garment. A moment later it was next to her on the floor, with her heavy breasts fully released from its constraint.

He brushed his fingers over the dark point of an exposed nipple and felt it harden gratifyingly at his touch. Sometimes, Martelsen wondered if that was really a sign of the girl's arousal, or if it was simply another aspect of her training: a trick learned to please whatever Partner happened to be enjoying her, and no consequence of her own desire.

If he was honest, he didn't really care how she managed it. Martelsen could be harsh with his girls, but he didn't mind if they found some pleasure in the uses he made of them.

He also didn't care if they found nothing but humiliation and distress. The only important thing for Martelsen was that his females should respond prettily, and obey.

His free hand reached down and eased its way inside her panty elastic, exploring the warm girl-flesh that nestled there under its fragrant covering of well-remembered curls. She shifted slightly, parting her thighs, offering better access. He quested further, seeking the opening between her labia.

The girl was wet.

Martelsen grinned. Again, he didn't really care if she was truly hot for him, or simply well trained and eager to please. The important thing about her response wasn't its origin, but the fact that it reminded him how powerful he was, and how much of a man.

Jennifer looked up at Martelsen's face, hoping he'd take what he wanted quickly and let her go.

It wasn't that the situation was completely unwelcome to her. Things were more complicated than that. Over the months, Martelsen and the others had wrought deep changes in her, and now there was something inside her that craved humiliation, reveled in carelessly harsh treatment like this.

Jennifer craved respect and recognition as a woman, too, but that wasn't something that a man like Martelsen would ever provide.

She stiffened as he reached for a pair of scissors from his desk. He'd never truly injured her in the past, unless you counted the flat of his hand on her bottom, or the whip he sometimes liked to use, but she was still unsure of how far he might go.

Perhaps her fear was part of what kept her so obedient, though the Partners had other ways of ensuring loyalty, too.

Martelsen slipped the opened scissors inside the waistband of her panties, just where the material gathered at her hip. She

shivered at the cold touch of the blade, and winced at the snipping sound of scissors slicing through silk, trying not to resent the cost of this ruined scrap of designer lingerie—and the rules that meant she'd have to replace it out of her own meager resources.

Controlling—and draining—her finances was simply another way they maintained their hold over her.

Now he was cutting through the other side of the panties, so that they fell away and fluttered slowly to the floor between her knees.

“There. That’s better, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“Good. Over the desk with you, then.”

Instantly she rose to her feet and bent over, her naked breasts kissing his jumbled paperwork and pens. He stood too, and she heard the whisper of his belt being undone.

Please don’t beat me, she thought, and then almost sagged with relief when she heard the rustle of his trousers being unfastened, the sound of his zipper coming down.

Jennifer closed her eyes, wondering how he’d choose to use her. There was no telling, with Martelsen. Part of her hoped he’d use her pussy and not her asshole, pleaded silently that he wouldn’t subject her to the pain and humiliation of buggery.

Another part of her didn’t care what he did, as long as he took pleasure from her and then let her go.

Martelsen watched the girl lower herself over his desk, admiring the elegant curve of her spine as she thrust the smoothly rounded flesh of her ass towards him and opened her legs.

He remembered her buttocks very well: the way they used to writhe and redden whenever he took his belt to them, how they shuddered and squirmed as he plunged his cock into the tight ring of muscle they sheltered. For a moment, he considered re-visiting those experiences for old time’s sake, but in the end, it

was the delicious sight of her *mons veneris*, standing proud and inviting between the taut curves of her parted thighs, that attracted him most.

Working quickly, he unfastened his belt and opened his trousers, before guiding his cock between her legs and against her pussy. He could smell her wetness. The girl stiffened at his touch, and a moan escaped her lips as he slid between the lips of her sex. Inside her, it was hot and wet and tight. He held still for a few seconds and then started to move, easing his prick in and out of her, grinning as she twisted sideways to accommodate the hand that he sent groping for her breast.

He grabbed her hair with his other hand, because he wanted to pull her head back. He wanted to see her face while he fucked her, and he wanted to have access to her mouth. The girl twisted around even more, as if she sensed his desire and was doing her best to comply. Her expression was caught somewhere between pain and pleasure, as if he was hurting her just enough for her to enjoy it. He jerked her head round harder, and her face rewarded him with an unmistakable flicker of anguish. He'd have liked to keep going, but the sight of her distress pushed him over the edge so that he came with a great gasp, emptying himself deep inside her and leaving his juices there to mingle with her own.

When he was finished, he wiped himself off on her shredded panties before throwing them back onto the floor with the rest of her clothes.

Jennifer remained where she was for a moment, but she knew she couldn't afford to linger once Martelsen had finished with her.

She straightened up and went back to the other side of the desk. Her bra and her soiled, ruined panties were on the floor, as were the rest of her clothes, but she knew better than to get dressed without Martelsen's permission, so she just stood there, naked except for the stockings and the spike heels.

Martelsen glanced at Jennifer, then pressed a button on his desk. "I'd like you to meet someone before you leave us."

A few minutes later, another man arrived. His sharp suit and

eager features immediately told Jennifer that he was an Associate Partner, an ambitious youngster who was being groomed for promotion. The fact that he didn't show so much as a flicker of surprise at the presence of a naked girl in his superior's office simply confirmed her suspicions. Her heart sank. She'd been given to boys such as this before.

"Gerard," said Martelsen. "This is, er, Jenny. What do you think of her?"

"She seems perfectly delightful, sir."

"You're looking for someone to accompany you to the firm's next shindig, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you can take this one, if you like. She's presentable, and knows how to behave, though you might not think so from the way she's dressed at the moment. And you can fuck her brains out afterwards, of course. You have a double room booked, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. Shall we say five hundred dollars, then?"

"That's very generous of you, sir. Thank you." Gerard took his wallet out and counted out a sheaf of crisp bills that he slid across the desk to Martelsen.

"Good," Martelsen said as he pocketed the cash. "Why don't you ask her to dinner tonight and then take her for a spin? A complimentary trial, if you like."

"That would be fantastic, sir."

"What do you say, my dear?"

"I'd be pleased to accompany Mr. Gerard."

"Of course you would." He glanced at Jennifer's backside and thighs, then at Gerard. "No one's bothered to whip her for a while, by the looks of her. Best to keep these girls marked, I always say. Take care of it, would you?"

"It will be my pleasure."

Martelsen turned back to Jennifer. "There. Something for you to look forward to. You'll have a spare set of your door keys ready for my associate, in case he wants to extend his

relationship with you?"

"Of course, sir," Jennifer said, looking at Gerard and wondering what he meant to do with her.

Emma spent several minutes in Manning's office waiting for him to stop ignoring her. He seemed to be going through Jennifer Caldwell's interview papers, scribbling notes in the margins and making ticks in the boxes.

Caldwell herself had left immediately after her interview, of course. She was probably on her way to the parking lot by now. Or waiting for a taxi, perhaps, since driving in those stiletto spikes would be difficult—and probably unsafe, too.

Emma looked down at her own denim-clad legs, remembering how she'd spied on Caldwell through the glass panel. She wondered how her sneakers and jeans would look from her cubicle, or Charlie's.

At last, Manning interrupted her reverie.

"I suppose you're wondering why I felt the need to bring an outsider in, when we discussed the possibility of you moving in to this role."

"Well, you led me to understand that the job was mine, as part of the agreement that we made about—"

He cut her off. "I did consider you, just as I promised, but I'm afraid you're not ready for such a responsible position. Not yet. Perhaps when you've had a few more years of experience."

"Does Ms. Caldwell have more experience than me, then?"

"Essentially, yes. In any case, we felt she'd be a better fit for the vacancy. It's a customer facing role, you see."

"But I get on fine with the customers—"

"Which is exactly why I gave such serious consideration to offering you the job, before I was forced to decide that you aren't ready. You must have noticed how ... well-presented Jenny was."

"So you're saying that I need to dress more smartly, if I want to be promoted?"

"You need to understand that it's a management position,

Emma. There are corporate standards to maintain, you know. I sometimes wonder if you own a single skirt, or anything at all except for sneakers and jeans and tee shirts. After all, if you choose to keep your best qualities hidden away like that..."

He broke off into laughter, letting her know that his comment was nothing but a well-intentioned joke, a piece of fatherly advice on how to prepare for the next stage in her career.

"I'm not sure I understand," Emma said.

"Let's just say that you could do much worse than to adopt Jenny as a role model, if you want to get on. As a mentor, if you like. You must have noticed how well turned out she was, and how charming. Yes, I think you could profit by studying how she handles herself. There will, after all, be other suitable positions coming up."

"I see. Then I'll bear it in mind."

"Good. And don't worry. I know that nice things can be expensive. I take these considerations into account when I allocate the annual bonuses, you know."

Charlie Borkowski's eyes followed Emma as she walked to Manning's office and sat down.

She was the most beautiful girl he'd ever known.

For the thousandth time, Charlie wished he had the balls to invite her to more than an after-work drink with the guys, but he knew she wouldn't give him a second glance. Not the way he wanted, not romantically. Being friends and hanging out was the best he could ever hope for with a girl like Emma.

He glanced through the glass into Manning's office. Emma's denim-covered legs were visible through the glass, just as Jennifer Caldwell's more provocatively clad ones had been. He watched the way the cotton draped itself over Emma's shins and calves, enjoying the way the graceful curves were subtly revealed. For a moment, he mentally transposed the two women's clothes, trying to imagine how Emma would look in stocking tops and a sexy pair of shoes. A sight like that would

almost make his life complete, he thought—not that he was ever likely to see it, worse luck. Emma was an engineer through and through, and she always dressed like one of the guys.

Just thinking about her was starting to get him aroused. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair and rearranged his boxer shorts, reflecting that maybe it was just as well that she always wore sneakers and jeans.

Emma found a new email blinking on her screen when she got back to her desk. Her heart sank as she read it, and she swore softly.

Charlie scooted his chair across the walkway and into the entrance of her cubicle.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. “Did Manning have a go at you?”

“Sort of. But that’s not it.”

“What, then?”

“Martelsen just emailed me. It seems Code Audit checked out some of my program files, and they found a few problems.”

“Really? I haven’t noticed any accesses to my work. It’s strange that they’d pick on you, when you’re the only one who bothers following coding standards at all.”

Emma pulled up a listing of her work modules and scanned the access times. “Everything of mine’s been checked out in the last week, even things I haven’t touched for months. Are they allowed to do that?”

“I’m afraid so. Part of the new Quality Checks, making sure everything we do is problem-free and clean as a whistle. As if they can evaluate our work by running spot checks on the way we spell the firm’s name in the copyright notices.”

She glanced back at the email, took in its peremptory tone again. “I think this is more serious than that.”

Charlie put on his comforting face. He could be sweet, sometimes. “You probably just put a comma in the wrong place or something,” he said. “What are they going to do about it?”

"I'll find out first thing tomorrow morning. I'm supposed to see Martelsen. I guess I need to figure out what I'm supposed to have done wrong, so I can explain it to him."

"You've been called up in front of old Martelsen himself? Woo."

"Well at least it's a chance for me to put my side of the case. It's not as if I write bad code," Emma said, pretending a confidence she didn't feel.

"Rather you than me, babe," said Charlie.

Emma left work that evening feeling frustrated, dejected, and worried.

At twenty-four, she fit into the age group of her immediate colleagues perfectly. The Quality Manager was old enough to be her father, and then some. The prospect of being called to his office—and of being called on to defend her work against an unknown accusation—was intimidating.

Charlie smiled at her as she put on her coat. "Don't worry. It'll be all right."

He wasn't much older than Emma, but he still teased her. He always came through when she needed support, though, and she couldn't help admiring how he handled himself. Charlie would never have submitted so meekly to being passed over—not that he'd have believed in the promised promotion in the first place. He was far too savvy to fall for a cheap trick like that.

If only I was as switched on as Charlie Borkowski and as well groomed as Jennifer Caldwell, she thought. Then I'd have no problems getting where I want to be in this firm.

She didn't say any of those things, of course. She just flashed Charlie a diffident smile, shouldered her daypack, and headed for the elevators.

On the way home, Emma noticed a new boutique, just past the bar where she sometimes went with Charlie and the others

after work. From the hand-lettered shop sign to the Victorian-looking bull's-eye windowpanes, the place dripped with antiquity that was so artfully contrived she would have believed it real, if she didn't pass this way often enough to know the shop could be no more than a few days old.

The sign said "The Magic Toy Box", and the light inside seemed warmer and more intimate than usual, as if it had nothing to do with electricity—unlike the tingling sensation that ran down Emma's spine when she saw the window display.

Behind the thick, distorting glass, nestled on velvet and scattered with dried rose petals that looked almost unbelievably real, was a collection of high fashion, high-heeled footwear to die for.

Or to kill with, she thought with a smile, considering the origins of the word "stiletto" and the exquisite sharpness of the heel spikes.

As she pushed the door open and listened to the jangling shop bell, Emma wondered whether she really wanted a pair of shoes like that to help her career, because of the way Jennifer Caldwell had looked, or if it was simply to cheer herself up.

The welcoming light she'd seen through the window came from candles—real ones, not fake filament bulbs. They gave the place an air of mystery and romance that was accentuated by the scent of fine leather and a hint of something more aromatic—fresh pipe tobacco, perhaps? with fragrant undertones of coffee and chocolate and cognac?—that lodged in the back of her mind as if tickling some half-forgotten memory.

The assistant who emerged from the back of the shop wore an immaculate woolen suit over a crisp white shirt, finished off with a red silk cravat and shoes that sparkled in the candlelight like twin black jewels. He approached Emma with a welcoming smile.

"May I help you, Madam?"

His accent seemed vaguely foreign. European, perhaps.

Suddenly Emma felt positively slovenly in her sneakers and jeans, not to mention embarrassed about her interest in the window display, but it was too late to back out now.

“Er, I was just looking at the shoes you have in the window...”

The man beamed. “Of course.” He indicated a deep leather armchair. “If Madam would care to take a seat, I will fetch something suitable...” he glanced at her feet “...in size six, if I am not mistaken?”

“Yes,” Emma said, slightly shocked that he’d been able to tell just by looking. She sat down—glad of her jeans, because the cool leather would surely have raised goosebumps on her thighs if she’d been wearing a skirt—and started to unlace her sneakers. The man bustled around the shelves, collecting an armful of boxes before he returned to kneel at her feet.

“This style would suit Madam very well,” he said as he presented the first pair of shoes. They were made of black leather, matte but with the sheen of perfect newness. The heels were ridiculously high: five inches, according to the label on the box.

The price was ridiculously high, too, enough to make Emma flinch and think guiltily of the outstanding balance on her credit card.

He slipped them onto her feet, and she found herself instantly transformed into a fairytale princess.

“Very flattering,” said the assistant. “Is Madam used to wearing such shoes?”

“Um, no.”

“Then it would be best not to attempt to walk in them, until Madam has had some practice. Perhaps we shall put them aside, and start with something a little more modest.”

He slipped them off and put them back in their box, before selecting another pair that looked almost identical, except that according to the label they only had four-inch heels.

Looking at the length of the stiletto spikes, Emma felt that was more than enough.

“Perfect,” said the assistant. “But perhaps Madam would like to try some different fashions?”

Emma was already in love with the shoes she’d tried, and she couldn’t help wondering how the man had chosen so well. Even so, she spent some time with him, going through the other pairs and actually walking up and down in some of the lower ones, wondering how anyone managed such things without constantly toppling over or having them slip off.

In the end, she returned to the original shoes.

“Both of these are wonderful,” she said, “but I can only afford one pair. I suppose I’d better take the lower ones; I’ll never cope with the others.”

The assistant nodded gravely.

“Madam is precisely the sort of young lady that we should like to be seen wearing our footwear,” he said. “Also, Madam is the final customer on our first day of business. I believe I can offer Madam a special price on both pairs.”

“A special price?” asked Emma, feeling bewildered.

“Indeed. I hope that Madam will take no offence when I say how perfectly she is matched to these shoes, and how exquisite they look on her feet, which is of course the sole reason for making such things.”

His face stayed impassive, and Emma couldn’t tell if he was even conscious of his weak pun.

“Even so,” she said, “I can’t accept special treatment.”

“I mean no disrespect, Madam, but these two pairs were made by the same master craftsman, and they go together like, how do you say, sisters. It would be wrong to separate them. It would go against the art of the thing.”

“I see. Well, how much for both pairs?”

“Five hundred dollars, Madam.”

“But the price on the label was more than that, wasn’t it?”

“They are on sale, Madam. A special offer to our new customers, if you will.”

“I see.” She handed over her credit card, and waited while he processed the transaction and placed her purchases in a paper

bag that looked suitably expensive and chic.

“I hope you find much satisfaction in your new shoes, Madam, and I look forward to seeing more of you in the future,” said the assistant.

She left the shop and walked home, feeling faintly bemused, and wondering if she'd taken her first high-heeled step towards a more successful future.

2

By the time she got home, Emma was already wondering about the wisdom of her purchases.

The shoes were completely different from the sexy-but-sensible heels that Caldwell had worn. They were seduction, pure and simple, utterly unsuitable for a professional woman.

Unless by professional you meant...

Emma shied away from that thought. The hookers she saw on street corners didn't wear shoes like these anyway. Their heels were trashy, strappy things made with plastic platforms and gaudy trimmings, not from fine-grained, hand-stitched leather.

She comforted herself with the thought that the shoes would be useful for practicing, so she'd be able to manage whatever she eventually bought for the office, while keeping these for special occasions.

Like a date, if she ever got one.

That only left one problem: Charlie and the others. They'd laugh her out of her cubicle if she turned up looking like some wannabe marketing girl.

Or would they? They were guys after all, and it had almost been embarrassing, the way their eyes had been glued to Jennifer Caldwell's legs.

Emma sat on her couch and pulled her sneakers and socks off, before selecting one pair of heels—the lower ones—and slipping them on. Then she stood up and wobbled towards the wall mirror, planning to prop it up on the floor so she could admire the shoes.

As she reached for the mirror, something snagged her left big toe. A loose thread, she thought, though no thread had any right to feel so sharp or so hard.