

Streetwalker

By K. E. Ward

Chapter One

It was a frigid night in Cincinnati. The sky was black and clear, and the stars overhead shone brightly and serenely above the massive skyline of the city. Downtown was ablaze with lights and activity, its roads congested with all sorts of traffic, including commuters, taxicab drivers, city dwellers, tourists, and truck drivers. The sounds of honking horns and squealing tires wafted from the epicenter of the city as planes flew overhead, filling the atmosphere with the dull roars of engines. The trees were covered in frost, for the cold had settled earlier than usual this year, and the streets, slick with patches of black ice, were beginning to break apart under the pressure of the changing temperatures. Cincinnati was as beautiful as it could be that night, stark and clear against the backdrop of a dark sky, its tall buildings standing proudly and majestically over a buzzing district.

Maggie "Star" Faulkner hovered at the street corner, batting her eyelashes, and rubbed her arms with her fingers, trying to get back some circulation. It was so

cold that she felt as though she had been doused head to toe in ice water. Clad only in a pair of nylons, spiked heels, a miniskirt, and a blue sweater, she was not wearing near enough to keep herself warm. She had been working this corner for over an hour, and still not even one customer. Her friend, Darlene, was standing across the avenue at the intersection kitty corner to hers.

A tear escaped from her eye. Something in the glue for her false eyelashes was giving her a reaction, so she gingerly plucked them from her eyes, creating a few more tears in the process. *If someone doesn't come soon, she thought, I'm getting out of here. Back to home sweet hotel.*

A Chevy convertible slowly approached. Maggie, feeling a lilt in her heart, blew him a kiss. He stopped for a moment, as though seriously considering whether or not to make a date, but to Maggie's dismay, he took one long look, changed his mind, and raced off, disappearing fast into a cloud of exhaust fumes.

Once he had left, she squinted her eyes and looked across the intersection. Darlene was over there, looking just as bored as she was, nervously adjusting the straps of her bra and biting her fingernails. Maggie marveled at how this had been the slowest night for the both of them in

several months, then wondered where all their clientele had gone to. But before she could think twice, a slick black car pulled up to the sidewalk where Darlene stood, its driver saying a few words out the window. Maggie looked around for a few moments to see if anyone was coming her way, then looked back to see the man in the black sedan motioning for Darlene to come into the car. She could not see his face, only the glint of a golden cufflink through the window and the forearm of a tweed sleeve.

Darlene waved to her as she sank into the car. Maggie waved back, mouthing "Good luck", with her lips. *Well, at least Darlene's going to get some money tonight*, she thought, sighing in fatigue and boredom.

After a few more minutes she decided to give up for the night and began walking in the direction of her hotel. The gusts of wind in between the buildings were especially chill, and Maggie shivered, hugging her arms tightly against her body. She passed a bar, hearing rowdy laughter and the clinking of glasses, and thought to herself, *Why not?* She could definitely go for a hot toddy on a chilly night like this.

Hustle and bustle greeted her as she opened the front door. The bar was jam-packed and lively, and Maggie had to squeeze her way through to get to the counter. "I'll have

a hot toddy," she told the bartender, slinking down onto a stool.

Several moments passed as she looked around the crowded room and wondered if she would spot someone that she knew. The Juke Box was playing "Karma Chameleon" by the Culture Club as several male customers crowded around the television set to watch a game.

The bartender came back with her drink, she thanked him, then nursed the warm beverage in her hands.

About an hour and two hot toddies later, a man entered the bar. He seemed to be looking for someone, his eyes focused and searching. He was of medium build, broad shoulders, and pepper-gray hair. A strong jawline gave way to angular cheeks, a strikingly sharp nose, and a lustrous pair of lips. His warm, brown eyes roved over the room, resting lightly on the empty seat beside Maggie, then looking up into the bartender's face. He approached, swaggering a little bit, then rested his elbow on the table next to her, cradling his cheek in his hand.

"I'll have a vodka martini." His voice, though masculine, was quiet and gentle. Maggie was struck by him right away. Wearing a black dress shirt and slacks, he had a casual cool that denoted higher class. Though she had grown up in a well-to-do family, she ran away from home at

an early age to become a prostitute and would not ever have the occasion to mingle with a sort like this.

The man smiled at her as she glanced his way. "Are you new around here?"

Maggie smiled shyly and said, "No, I've been living here for most of my life. But thank you for asking."

"No, I mean, are you new to the bar? I haven't seen you around."

"Oh," she laughed, horribly embarrassed. "Yeah, I've never been in here before. I thought I'd stop in to get a warm drink. As you can see, I'm not really dressed appropriately for the weather."

He eyed her. "My name is Garrett. Garrett Dannow." He extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you," she said, while shaking his hand. "I'm Margaret Faulkner, but my friends call me Maggie."

He held her hand lightly but firmly, gently enclosing her fingers with both of his hands. He looked at her with a gentleness that startled her, his two sable-brown eyes searching into her face imploringly and definitively. Maggie could see the strong build of his arms and the muscles flexing as he released her hand.

"Are you going to stay around for a while? I could buy you another drink," he offered.

She hadn't planned on staying much longer, but she was intrigued and impressed by the man. Instead, she reached for a napkin by the bar and scanned him with her eyes for a pen. "No, but I'd love it if you give me a call some time," she said forwardly. "Do you have a pen? I can give you my number."

Obligingly he reached into his breast pocket and fished out a sleek-looking black fountain pen. She met eyes with him while taking it, then scribbled down her number and handed it to him. "It was really nice meeting you," she said.

"Likewise," he answered.

Scrambling for her purse, she grabbed for her purse and paid the bartender. She could see outside that it was already beginning to snow, and as each person going in and out opened the door, they brought with them a gust of snowy wind. She charged into the cold outside air, her arms folded underneath her breasts. Her heels clicking against the sidewalk, she began to make her way home.

What a handsome man, she thought. It would have been her last guess to meet a man while working the streets. Hadn't he noticed the way that she was dressed? Images of his seductive smile flashed across her mind, and she was at once suspicious. Should she have tried to ask him if he

wanted a date? She couldn't fully understand why she hadn't spoken with him about the subject, although she knew that she had been attracted to the man.

She didn't really want to go home. Nothing was waiting there for her but a grimy apartment and a cat who got far too much attention as it was. It had been the cheapest place she could find, and what had most attracted her about the place was the fact that the landlord didn't ask many questions. So long as she paid her rent every month on time, the Asian-American in his mid-forties was more than happy. Tim liked her, but mostly stayed out of her business, and for that she was utterly grateful.

She walked for a couple of more blocks, noticed the discomfort in her feet, and slipped off her high heels. It was darker than it had been earlier in the evening, and though the street lamps on the side of the road illuminated her path, there were large stretches of dark shadows further away from the pavement. Never having been one of those people to fear for her safety on a night like tonight, Maggie wasn't nervous, just a little concerned. She looked in all directions around her, seeing an occasional pedestrian or homeless man.

A manhole beside the road was billowing clouds of white steam, capturing the light rays of headlights rushing

past. She carefully skirted around it, feeling the tingle of warm moisture as she scurried past it.

It had been two years and seven months since she had seen her mother. For all she knew, her daughter was lying out in a ditch somewhere dead. Now nineteen, Maggie was beginning to have thoughts about showing her face. She had never intended to live out the cliché of a troubled teen, running away from home and then deciding that the best way to start making money was to prostitute. She had met enough women along the way to tell her to stay away from a pimp, and so she did just that, and did her business alongside some other women who had wanted to do the very same thing.

Right before she had left the house of her childhood, with nothing on her back but a green army bag, things had gotten especially worse. Her mother had recently remarried a big scumbag, as she called him, who was into drinking and scaring the girls into believing he just might molest them. Maggie left before she could ever have known if he would have or not. Steven owned a gun and shot tin cans in the backyard as a frequent hobby, and more often than not he would be drunk while doing it. One time he had swiveled the gun onto Maggie, and gasping, she dropped everything that was in her arms before he finally put the gun away.

Maggie warned her mother many times to stay away from the guy, and to get a divorce, but instead of listening to her daughter, she immediately put up an icy wall, and a clash of wills ensued. Maggie and her mother would scream at each other in the evenings, when Steven was away at the bar or club. Maggie pleaded with her, over and over again, to listen to what Steven had done to them and to leave him. Her little sister, Dawn, only nine, was too young yet to really understand what was going on, but she listened to their fights from the stairwell, jabbing at fresh tears with her fists.

When she had left town, on that memorable black-skied night, the first thing she thought of to do was take a bus into Cincinnati from their rural home just south of Pittsfield. She had slept underneath a park bench that night, and though frightened, she felt happy and at peace in her heart to be away from the fights with her mom. She slept in odd places all throughout that first week. Pretty soon, though, she met a couple of prostitutes and she asked them how they got their start. She felt it was better to have a little money and sell your body than it was to have nothing at all and have to sleep out in the park at night, begging for food during the day.

It was difficult the first few times that she had given her body to men. Not only had she been a virgin, but she had also never had any experience kissing a boy until she started prostituting. The sudden loss of innocence hit her hard, and she was traumatized from the very beginning.

Soon she was earning enough money to rent an apartment, and she found a run-down studio on a fourth floor in a greasy neighborhood. She loved that little apartment, as grungy as it was, and decorated it with some inexpensive bedding and draperies. It might have been a little bit of a dump, but she loved it because it was her first place. Because it was her first place without her mom. She met Darlene, now her closest friend, who had been prostituting for five years. Darlene had told her about how she had had a pimp when she first started out, but the man was an aggressive, abusive man. Eventually he was put in jail on drug charges, and Darlene walked around a free woman.

There wasn't the usual feeling of dirtiness when she first started the job, just shock. Maggie could mentally understand the destructiveness of what she was doing, could physically see the damage to her own body, yet when she thought about it, she wouldn't turn around and go back home for anything. She had already built up a huge wall around

herself, protecting her from everything and anything, and she had become somewhat accustomed to the lifestyle. Besides feeling worlds older than at the start of her journey, there was a cunning sassiness about her that she began to notice as she became more experienced selling her body.

The tall, luminous shape of her building came up in the distance to her right. By that time the snow had slowed and then stopped, leaving only a few dustings here and there on the ground. Maggie put her shoes back on, fearing slimy patches of mud in the shadows where she would walk.

As she approached the gate there was a sudden cold emptiness in the air, as though someone had just whipped right by her, vanishing from plain sight. Maggie could hear moan-like squeals from other gate doors as the wind whipped at her ears, cold biting at the bare flesh of her hands. Her building was seventeen stories high, scary-looking in an area where there were not as many tall buildings.

Maggie thought she heard someone running away when a sickening fear twisted at the base of her gut. Trembling, she turned the corner, only to be faced with a horrific sight:

When she screamed the noise was not very audible to her own ears, as some kind of nervous static was ringing in her ears, ominous of some sort of faint. But she did not fall down, instead she lost full control of her lungs, screaming again and again.

A man walked out from the building's shadow only to begin caressing her arm. "Maggie? What is it?"

Maggie was shocked to see the face of Garrett Dannow, the handsome gentleman that she had met that evening. With a trembling finger she brought it upwards and pointed to the scene of her horror.

Dangling from a loose cord tied to a lower portion of one of the apartments' fire escape, and obviously lifeless, hung the disfigured form of her best and only friend in Cincinnati: Darlene Potter.

Garrett tried to hold her as she shook and screamed. Quickly dialing emergency numbers while holding her, he brought the phone up to his ear and briefly explained what had happened. "Shhh..." he said, after finishing up the call. "They're on their way. Don't worry."

Chapter Two

Police, fire trucks and paramedics sped to the scene in record time, even though Maggie knew it was too late. Tears were slipping down her face as she watched them hoist Darlene down from the fire escape using a ladder from one of their fire trucks. Her head looked like a lifeless mop as they carefully removed it from the makeshift noose made out of a cord.

She cried into Garrett's jacket, wanting to see Darlene as she was taken off, but she quickly looked away, unable to handle the river of emotions gushing through her. The cold wind whipped and howled at her ears, making a mockery of her scanty outfit. She hadn't known from where or how Garrett had appeared, but she was grateful that a man she had instantly trusted was there by her side.

More tears slipped down her face as she said lowly, "She was all I had. No family. No other friends. It was just me and my friend Darlene."

A police officer then approached her and nodded his head in a short hello. "Ma'am," he said. "I'm Officer Langley. I'd like to ask you a few questions if you would give me a bit of your time."

Still stunned, and feeling most of her energy drained from her body, Maggie shook her head loosely in silent agreement to do what the officer said. She tightened the arms folded around her waist and then decided to say something. "Anything you want," she said hoarsely. "Just let's get this over with. I'm sure you'll want a statement."

Langley nodded and there was concern eminent in his focused eyes. "Did you know this woman?" he asked first, obviously noticing the tears on her face and worn, jaded expression.

Garrett touched her arm and said, "If you want I'll wait for you."

Maggie felt relief overwhelm her, and gratefully said, "That's so kind of you. Would you please? I know I've only just met you..."

"It's no problem at all," he said, peering into the face of the officer who looked like he was beginning to get impatient. "Will it be long, sir?"

"No," he said, "But I would also like a statement for you. Were you present when the body was discovered?"

"No," he said. "I heard Maggie scream and I came running. It turned out that it was the same woman that I had met moments earlier at Schackley's down the street."

Honestly I had no intention of following her, but apparently we were headed in the same direction, because when I heard her scream I just went running, and I hadn't far to go."

"I knew her," Maggie burst in, realizing that she hadn't answered Langley's first question. He looked up at her words. "She was a friend of mine. When I saw her dangling from the fire escape I instantly knew it was her. I recognized her clothing." Not sure how much she should explain and what she should reveal about her prostitution, Maggie shifted uncomfortably, looking from Garrett to the officer. Not wanting to reveal it to either man, Maggie considered her options. She realized that her desire to get justice for her friend far outweighed any risk of legal entanglements, but still not wanting Garrett to know, she turned to him and said, "Do you mind if I speak privately with the officer? I won't be long. There are some things that I would like to discuss with him alone."

Garrett nodded understandingly, backing away from the two and ducking away to speak to another police officer. Langley was a quiet, thin man appearing to be in his late forties, with pepper-gray streaks protruding at the temples of his dark, amber-brown hair. His eyes were kind but focused, perhaps even a little bit skeptical. She measured

him quickly as a man that would probably not indict her for prostitution, but on the other hand she couldn't be sure how reasonable a person he was. "If I am going to reveal something pertinent to the case, something that might put me in a little bit of trouble, is there any way that you can guarantee that I won't get into trouble?" she said directly, eyeing his reaction.

"That depends," he said, "on what we're talking about." He looked her up and down and she could imagine that he knew what she was about to tell him.

"I'm a prostitute," Maggie said blankly, holding her hands out to her side as though in faith that she was doing the right thing. "Darlene was as well. About an hour and a half ago I was standing across the street from her and we were both hustling for customers. Around seven-thirty I noticed her get into a sleek black convertible with its top up. I never saw the driver but I assumed she was getting into the car with a would-be customer. When I found her hanging from our building over an hour later, there was no one around. Sir, am I going to be charged with anything?"

"That one of your customers?" he asked, nodding in the direction of Garrett, who was standing close to the curb smoking a cigarette.

Maggie shook her head vehemently no. "What he said. We just met each other in the bar. There was nothing salacious about it."

Then he seemed to consider things over in his mind. Maggie noticed the wedding band on his ring finger and could imagine that he was a little preoccupied with thoughts about his family. "I'm not going to charge you with anything," he said, "but I would certainly like it if you could give a statement down at the station, and I would like to ask the same of your gentleman friend. Tell me," he said, lowering his voice a little, "since you say you just met this man a little while ago, did you begin to suspect him of anything? Were you suspicious at all about his character? That's not a long time for having known someone, and then he mysteriously shows up at the scene of a crime to comfort you. A little bit convenient if you ask me, and quite a distance away from the place where you met. Is there any reason you might suspect he followed you?"

She hadn't thought about that. Certainly she didn't think that he had. Quickly accepting it as a coincidence, she shook her head again. "I don't think so," she said. "I trusted him as soon as I met him. He had offered to buy me a drink, but I was running late and I gave him my telephone number instead. I may not know him very well,

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