



The Dante Key

Shiny pavement, reflecting neon light. A classic image of the city at night.

The rain was chilly and sharp. It melted Flora's features, made her look like she was oozing away from herself. A lot of the other girls looked away, but I went closer. I wanted to see what was different about her body in death.

She lay on the floor as though she was trying to climb it. Her upraised leg showed a ladder in the knee of her stocking. Her lipstick had bled down the side of her face. Apart from that she looked perfect. I let the police herd me away down the alley with the other dancers.

'Which of you girls found the body?'

I didn't offer myself up to the detective who was asking, I was shunned into his gaze.

'What made you go out there just then?'

I waved my lighter at him in response.

'Filthy habit,' he murmured and I shrugged. His stained fingertips showed me he shared it with me. A waft of peppermint breath slid over me as he took my arm.

'Did you see who did it?' he asked, as soon as we were out of earshot.

I tried not to notice the forensic people stepping into white paper suits and setting up their circus tent in the street. It was as if they were dressing up to play with her. Suddenly my knees went and the detective caught me.

I hadn't even seen Flora at first. I 'd lit my cigarette. I remember relishing the red Dog Star I sucked into being in the darkness. Then I took a step backwards and stumbled.

'She had been inside only moments before.'

The world swayed in front of my eyes.

'Hey, come on, let's sit in my car. We need to get you off your feet.'

I didn't reply. Too many men get the wrong idea about dancers. Especially my sort. An innocent remark is all too easy to misinterpret when you're wearing red sequinned heels and a skirt that skims your bikini line.

I accepted a lit cigarette. I didn't think twice about the fact that it had just been in his mouth. His car was small, compact. Smelled clean inside. Not very detective-like.

'Alternator went on mine,' he said, interpreting my look. 'Had to borrow the wife's.'

I nodded. A wife. Good. That was a bit of information I appreciated getting up front. Not that it always made any difference.

'You're going to have to come with me now. To keep you safe.'

I didn't have the best history with Flora. Any number of the other girls would tell him that. John. He told me his name like we had just met under normal circumstances. I'm John, by the way. John Richards. The other copper was busy

getting details from the theatre staff and the other girls. He would hitch a lift back in a squad car.

I quite relished the first few moments alone with John by the way. It seemed almost normal. I was just getting a lift from a new acquaintance. I could forget all about the soft warmth and stillness of Flora beneath me on the pavement. Her last breath in the air so near to where I had been. The last beat of her heart beneath the sequins. How long would it be before she grew cold?

The first sob shocked us both. I felt him turn to me as he pulled in to the side of the road. It was dark. No street lights. For a moment I was lost. I shivered uncontrollably and the tears choked up in my throat, trapped and painful. His fingers were un-callused, gentle on my arm.

‘You might as well tell me the truth,’ he said and his voice was full of emotion. Sadness? Regret? Disappointment. ‘It’s either here or at the station.’

I closed my eyes. And I told him about the key.

Keys are power. Whoever holds the key owns the right to something. Whether it’s an object you have hidden away somewhere, or a property you want to keep private, you only give keys away to people you trust. Benjamin Dante trusted me. He had given me the key to his riverside apartment six months before.

Oh don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing funny going on between me and the theatre manager. I really wasn’t his type. Or his gender, if you catch my drift. But Dante trusted me. He knew I loved dogs and he liked the way I got along with his Borzoi, Max.

I used to get up around noon, walk the dog and if I was feeling generous, I’d leave a little something in the fridge for Dante to heat up later. He was wasting

away to nothing, working all night and spending the days travelling around, doing God knows what, when he should have been sleeping.

He had become brittle and secretive over the past few months. The meals I had left were going rancid in the fridge and the dog was becoming snappy and unco-operative. Hungry, most likely. I sometimes wondered if Dante was coming home at all.

Then last month, I had gone over there early, unable to sleep and wanting a bit of company. Even a half starved Borzoi with a temper was more fun than an empty flat in the rain.

I called to Max as I always did, but he didn't come to meet me at the door. As I crossed the unusually messy living room, taking in the scattered clothes and empty wine glasses on the table, Flora came tumbling out of a bedroom. She was naked, her hands in her hair, yawning.

A voice called to her as she saw me. She pulled the bedroom door shut before I could get a closer look at who it might have been.

'What the hell are you doing here?' she asked me and I threw back that I could ask her the same question.

Her hands were still on the doorknob behind her back. 'Get out of here. This is nothing to do with you.'

I left, of course. I obviously didn't know my girl as well as I thought.

That was the last I saw of Flora, until... well, we all know the rest of that particular story.

'Is that it?'

John's eyes were earnest. He half turned towards me, his arm resting on the steering wheel. We could have been discussing anything. The weather, the latest headlines.

'What more do you want?' I asked with the beginning of a smile.

He looked at his hands.

'I want to know how you did it. And I want to know how you knew who was in the room with her that day. I saw your face.'

I looked out of the car window, but all I could see was my own reflection. I closed my eyes. Couldn't take the contrast of the image I had of myself in my head and the one that stared balefully back at me. Inside I'm Judy Garland. By this time of night the stubble's beginning to show and the age lines are pressing through the make up.

'She had a bad heart,' I admitted. 'I didn't mean to finish the old bitch off. She just stumbled and that was that.'

'And Ben Dante? How does he fit into the picture?'

I leaned back against the headrest and accepted a last cigarette.

'He'd been lying to me all along. Strung me along. Let me walk his dog and fill his fridge while he was off looking for new talent for the show. He was shutting down the act. Flora knew that. She was finding herself alternative employment. She had been using the spare key for months, apparently. Entertaining men with special hankering, if you know what I mean.'

'Oh, I know exactly what you mean, Rosie.'

I closed my eyes. I had been waiting for this moment since I had first seen the two detectives walking up that blasted alley towards me in the darkness.

Of course I had recognised his voice. I had heard it every night in my head for a month. Ever since I had stumbled across them together in Dante's apartment. My Flora and a fat balding copper called Dave Benson.

'So what now?' I asked. 'Are you planning to silence me?'

He slid the key into the ignition and gave me an odd sideways glance.

'Now we go back to the station and you write me a statement detailing everything you've just told me. I'm sure my superiors will be very interested to know what Dave's been up to during shifts when he was meant to be out doing his job.'

I couldn't look at him. Didn't quite believe what I was hearing. Coppers didn't put themselves out to help people like me.

'Nothing will come back on you, don't worry. That guy's a dead weight. He's also my brother-in-law. But I've been patient, I knew I'd find a way to get rid of him one day... Now you've given me the ideal solution.'

I flicked my cigarette butt out of the open car window and watched the red spark arc across the darkness and disappear.

'Can I go home and change first?' I asked, pulling off my auburn curls and scratching my shaved head. 'My feet are killing me in these bloody heels.'

Stifling a smile, John slid his car into gear and the headlights tunnelled into the night. I relaxed back into the wife's little car and felt my heart finally begin to slow down. The rain was stopping too.

Pity, the streets looked pretty when they were shiny. Now it was all going to be dull and dry again. No more neon. No more sequins. No more dead weight, for either of us.