

“ONE MILLION, TWO HUNDRED FIFTY thousand dollars.” The lightly accented voice confirmed that the sum had been transferred into her account today. Victoria Clifford thanked him and clicked her phone shut. For just a moment, she let herself enjoy the sweep of elation. Damn, it felt good. A net worth of nearly US\$10 million. And all on her own power.

She grabbed her Louis Vuitton and headed out the door. The little toe on her left foot throbbed with each step, like an ice pick chipping away, sending a shooting spasm straight to her temple. Those alligator pumps—she was going to have them stretched. Maybe she should go back and change. No, they were perfect with her new ivory dress; it would be a crime not to wear them. Anyway, there wasn’t time to change. She shifted the pain to the part of her brain that didn’t feel it and walked down the driveway, heels clicking happily, like everything was fine.

The smooth leather seat of her convertible was warm from the sun. She tilted the rear-view mirror for a quick check. Not bad at all. True, she wasn’t mistaken for a model anymore, but that was okay. *Better have wits if you don’t have beauty*, her father used to say. Victoria prided herself on having both. Image was everything. Even in the bright morning glare, hers was pretty impeccable. Genes, some would say ... she’s got great genes. Some of it was genes, sure, but most of it was just damn hard work and discipline.

Her cool, jade eyes skimmed over her face in the mirror, in particular examining her nose for any evidence of this morning’s celebratory sniff. Satisfied, she put her sunglasses on, started the car and headed for the Sausalito office of Barnaby Wells Realty.

Could it get any better than this? Top-producing real estate agent in Marin County, California, for three years running, plus a side job that earned her millions. Of course, it wasn’t technically a job.

She pulled onto Napa Street toward the office, replaying this morning’s phone call again in her head. Nothing beat the thrill of a secret life—unless it was having two or three. Better than sex or coke. And just as addictive.

The office was crazy busy, even for a Monday. This year would surely go down as one of the biggest boom years ever in San Francisco Bay Area real estate history. At eight in the morning the reception lounge already bulged with waiting clients. The main office area was like a trading floor ... phones ringing, staff rushing, voices loud over the din.

Josh jumped up to meet her. She couldn’t help but smile; those boyish Italian types always got to her. “New client wants to talk with you about a listing on Sunset in Tiburon. Those go for around five or six mil, don’t they? Here’s the contact info.” He spoke in a rapid clip and grinned as he handed her the paper.

She scanned the sheet, taking in the basic details about the property and its owners, then saw the small yellow Post-it at the bottom. *Can’t wait to see you tomorrow nite*, it said. She looked up to see him slide a wink at her.

“Got to go!” As he dashed past her, she caught a trace of his cologne and a warm wave shot through her. To think some women settled for just one man.

She turned back to the spec sheet. The owners were Charles and Maribeth Simmons. She called the number and made arrangements with Maribeth to see the house the next day. Then Victoria fell into the routine of returning calls and researching listings. A few hours later, she caught sight of her watch and was shocked to see that it was almost one. Her weekly appointment—the one she never missed—was in twenty minutes.

She grabbed her things and made for the door. “I’m off for a few hours,” she told the receptionist. “Not sure if I’ll be back today. I’ll have my cell in case anyone needs to reach me.”

It took only a few minutes to pick up lunch. She carried the low-fat, blueberry-yogurt smoothie outside, sipping in the thick sweetness slowly, rolling it over her tongue, savoring every drop. Next door was Phyllis’ Burgers. The smell of grilling meat went straight to her salivary glands. Now that was what she really wanted ... a burger ... charred on the outside, a little oozy on the inside ... tart, melted cheddar topping it off. No lettuce, no tomatoes, no mustard, no ketchup, nothing to fetter the exquisite taste. Just a chunky, luscious burger, cheese spilling over the sides and a toasted bun—no, not a bun, a toasted sourdough baguette, yes, a sourdough baguette. Maybe just today to celebrate the deposit. After all, she deserved it. Over a million dollars, for God’s sake. Come on—if not today, then when? The thought played in her head, messing with it.

No fucking way. Don’t give in. Breathe in through your mouth—stop smelling it! One small slip and you’ll be a size 16 again—your seams splitting with blubber and self-disgust. *Fatso, get your butt out here and help me with the lawn. It’ll help work off some of that flab*, she heard her father say.

She speeded up and passed Phyllis’. No, the smoothie would do just fine, thank you. She caught a glimpse of her figure in a storefront window. It was worth it. No one would ever guess that she used to be a fat kid. She had to be careful, though—more than careful. Vigilant. Watch every morsel. Otherwise she’d be right back there—a blob. *You fat shit, there’s no fucking way you’re having that burger*.

She arrived at Tatiana’s sipping the last of her smoothie.

“Hey, gorgeous, how are you doing?” Tim, the receptionist, kissed her on both cheeks. “You are looking fabulous. New boyfriend? Come on, you can tell me.”

“No. Still single. Don’t you have anyone for me, Timmy?”

“Honey, I hang out with the wrong crowd for that, but you don’t need any help—you’re not fooling me!” He led her into the private room reserved for facials. “Can I get you a glass of wine?”

“Some Sauvignon Blanc would be heavenly, thanks! Just half a glass, though. I’m gaining weight.”

“What? You are not! I see those skinny little ribs sticking out!”

“No, really, Timmy. I’m up a half-pound since yesterday and I’ve hardly eaten anything!”

“Listen, the only part of you that’s heavy is that plus-sized inner critic. Now you just get comfy. I’ll be right back with the wine.”

He closed the door and Victoria kicked off her shoes. Her aching toe, now raw with a blister, nestled into the lush carpet, savoring the sweet pleasure of release. She got undressed, wrapped the white terry towel around her chest and pulled her hair into a ponytail. She was just letting her muscles sink into the soft reclining chair when Tatiana bustled in.

“Victoria, darling, so good to see you. You look marvelous, as usual,” Tatiana said in her thick, Ukrainian accent.

Tim brought in the glass of wine and set it down next to her. “See you later, hon.” He closed the door gently behind him.

“Now you just relax and we make you even more beautiful.” Tatiana reached for the first of the creams to be applied to her face.

Victoria took a long, smooth sip of wine and lay back in the chair. She let the piped-in harp music float into her mind, unwinding it—turning it off high alert—just for now. She let her nerves succumb to Tatiana’s supple, sturdy hands as she smoothed and stroked her face and neck. She felt herself falling into a trance. Over a million deposited today and maybe the prospect of another million or two in three or four months. Her thoughts turned to the Simmons house. It sounded promising. There was something about it. It was too soon to tell, of course, but she just had a hunch. And her hunches were usually right.

She wasn’t actually psychic, like her Aunt Vera, but every now and then she had a definite sense of what was to come. It wasn’t really a feeling, but more like a sensation ... like she was perceiving the world in another frequency. It had happened when she saw Maribeth Simmons’ name, as though she had known it all along. Like it was already part of her life, or her history. When she got these flashes, the future and present blended together into one unit of time, so that it was difficult to tell which events had already happened and which were yet to come.

If, indeed, Maribeth was to be next, Victoria couldn’t wait to get started. It meant she would get to see Theo soon. Her heart gave a little skip. They would pull it off again, just as they had when they were kids. The stakes were much bigger now, and the risks way higher, and the thrill—the thrill was in a whole different sphere.

Unlike their scams as kids, though, this was not one they could do all on their own. At least so far, they hadn’t figured out how. There was one part only their Aunt Vera could play. The perfect crime. Five times now without a hitch. And entirely her own creation. A delicious smile formed under the moisturizing cream. She started to replay each of the cons in her head. Soon she was dozing, each breath a delicate sigh.

There was a gentle tapping on her shoulder. “Darling, it is finished,” Tatiana whispered.

Victoria forced herself out of her reverie. It took her a moment to collect the words to thank Tatiana. Fighting grogginess and a sense of stupor, she managed to get dressed and reapply her makeup, then made her way to the reception desk.

“Wow! Ravishing!” Tim gave her the once-over. “Honey, if I wasn’t such a queen, I’d pounce on you in a minute.” He grinned. “Need any products today?”

“Thanks! Yeah, actually, I do. A three-ounce jar of the rejuvenator.”

“Here it is. With the facial, that will be \$200,” he said.

She looked around quickly to make sure no one was close by, then handed him her credit card and three hundred-dollar bills. “Here you go.”

He pocketed the cash and processed the credit payment, keeping up the breezy banter without breaking stride. “Thanks, honey. Now you take care and have some fun. You work too hard!” He kissed her on both cheeks.

Back in her car, she reached into her purse for the cream. In the jar were two neatly folded bindles of cocaine. Good for a couple of weeks.

Yes, there was nothing like a few good secrets to keep life interesting, and the more the better. She thought about all the little secrets she had going, then turned her attention to the big one.