

Prince & The Pumps

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with apologies to Sara Paretsky with hope she won't sue me for using her character of V.I.

Warshawski

a UFO - VI Warshawski story

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CHICAGO, U.S.A.

"I'm not going to any charity ball. I have every right to stay here and be miserable, and that's what I'm going to do," I declared. My enthusiastic golden retriever, Peppy, had jumped up on me without warning, shattering still another of my mother's precious Venetian goblets, bringing my total to four. I had just returned from a case which hadn't gone smoothly. The scum I'd hoped to put in jail had been freed by a technicality. Peppy had been so glad to see me she'd caused my disaster. I had to admit I was feeling sorry for myself.

"You will do no such thing. You will go to this ball, Victoria. It benefits battered women, and you know that is an issue close to your heart. I have a conference to go to in New York, and I already have the ticket but cannot attend. Besides, how many times have I come to you when you are shot or beaten or unconscious from your work and made sure you are all right? Yet you say you cannot or will not do this small favor for me?"

I raised my eyes skyward. I knew my close friend Dr. Charlotte Herschel, affectionately called Lotty by her friends, was in an imperial mood. No amount of cajoling would persuade her to change her mind.

"I haven't got any frilly ball gown to wear to this thing, Lotty."

"You have plenty of clothes that will do just fine, Victoria. I know what your mother's glasses mean to you, but she would not want you to be miserable over losing one. Now you go and prepare. At least I will not have to worry the way I do when you are working on a case, that you will be hurt or God forbid it, killed. When I come back I will expect to hear how you danced all night with some handsome gentleman. Who knows, Victoria, perhaps you will fall in love." Lotty joked.

I made a sound in reply that was better suited to a little girl of four than a woman detective of forty. Even so, I gave Lotty a hug, and I dragged Peppy to Mr. Contreras. The retired machinist was delighted to see me, and waved me in for a pastry my hips did not need, and a cup of coffee the rest of me did. He listened compassionately to my story about the shattered goblet.

"I know, doll. A golden retriever and delicate Venetian glass don't mix."

When I showed him the ticket for the upcoming charity event, his face lit up.

"Boy, that's something I'd like to see. It was on TV last night, a lot of big shots are going to be there. It'll be a blast!"

"Fine," I said, between bites of his lemon danish. "I'll get Sal to lend you one of her silver numbers, get you a wig and you can go in my place." Sal was a long time friend of mine, the owner of a saloon called the Golden Glow. Mr. Contreras was undoubtedly a full foot shorter

than Sal, who stood nearly six feet tall. Even if he had suddenly decided to emulate RuPaul, no gown of Sal's could possibly fit him.

Mr. Contreras thought my poor joke funny, and offered me another danish. With enormous self control I declined the offer, and with great satisfaction I left him, Peppy, and her trouble on four paws offspring, Mitch. I went to my apartment, gravely swept up what was left of Gabriella's goblet, and having done that, settled into a scented tub of hot bubbles.

I tried to put the prospect of the dreaded charity affair on Saturday out of my mind with a ordinary tumbler of Black Label whisky. Some belle of the ball I'd be. I reminded myself it was all for charity. I took another satisfying swig of the whisky, since charity begins at home.

* * *

SOUTHERN ENGLAND

"Absolutely not, Alec. I understand the responsibilities of my cover as a film executive require that I show my face up on the studio lot every now and then. Those responsibilities don't require me to jet halfway across the globe to attend some foolish society event," Cmdr. Edward Straker snapped. Listening to him, Colonel Alec Freeman realized that with his long time friend in this state of mind, the scheme Freeman had in mind would be harder to pull off. When Straker, arms full of reports, thumbed the door control to open, Freeman knew he had to play hard, fast, and dirty.

"General Henderson," Freeman said. Straker gave him a look that would bend iron. He hit the switch a second time and the door slid shut again. Straker slammed the reports down on the desk, looking like it was Freeman he would have preferred to slam around.

"What about Henderson?" Every word Straker uttered went up in pitch. Freeman reminded himself that Ed's bark was usually worst than his bite. Usually.

"You know Henderson. If you do anything that the Commission might frown upon, he'll jump on it like a dog on a bone. Film executives have egos wider than the Thames. If you don't show up at this gala event, people might ask questions. You're putting the secrecy of SHADO in jeopardy. If Straker-Harlington Studios isn't represented -"

"Fine. You go. Or Foster. This kind of thing is more suited to Foster," Straker said.

"Passing the buck isn't going to work this time, Ed. Besides, you need a break. Between myself and Foster, we'll handle your workload." Alec pointed at the pile of folders sitting on his boss' desk. Straker had been standing. Now he dropped into his chair with a look of disgust. He hit the button on his console that connected him with his secretary Miss Ealand.

"Miss Ealand book me on a flight to. . ."

"Sir, Colonel Freeman informed me you might be going. You have a reservation on the Concorde from London to O' Hare International leaving at ten. If that's not convenient for you. . ."

"Maybe you should ask Colonel Freeman. He appears to be running the show. Have my car out front in ten minutes, Miss Ealand."

"This is an opportunity for you to rest and relax. Oh, and Ed, don't forget to pack your tuxedo. It is a fancy black-tie affair, you know." Alec grinned.

Straker scooped up the pile of folders and dropped them into Freeman's lap without a trace of expression. However, Alec had the distinct feeling Straker would have liked to cut Alec's life expectancy by half. Right then, Alec reflected, he would have better odds of surviving an alien attack than Straker's silent wrath, should the commander act upon it.

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Hours later, Ed Straker looked moodily out at the gray mist surrounding Heathrow as the

Concorde lifted its nose and rose off the ground. He refused the of food the steward offered, and swallowed down a sleeping tablet with a glass of vegetable juice. His fingers drummed unhappily on his armrest. For him, the prospect of setting foot in an American city again was an unwanted one. His mood did not change as the tablet did its job and he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

* * *

Thousands of miles away, two days later:

"At least my Bruno Magli's will be familiar," I said aloud, unwrapping the red leather shoes that to me were more precious than jewels. I would wear them tonight with the diamond drops my mother, Gabriella, had left me. Sal had borrowed the gown from a friend who had several more like it in her walk-in closet. It would have taken several months to earn enough from my business to pay for it. Sal's friend didn't seem concerned that a stranger would wear her beaded creation, or so Sal had assured me. I, on the other hand, feared I would drop mustard from a wiener and spoil the fairy-tale like gown. Or spill whatever food Lotty's two hundred dollar ticket would buy me. I struggled into pantyhose, reflecting that they were still another way men dominated women. However, my Magli pumps were a different matter. The recent O.J. Simpson trial had given the Italian shoe maker label notoriety, but in deference to my mother I rarely wore anything else upon my ungainly feet, and had done so long before the Simpson incident. I slipped my shoes on, struggled with a black bra which promised to give me cleavage that would stop a speeding train, and with reluctance wriggled my poor body into the gown.

Not bad, a trace of powder and lipstick and I might even snag a rich husband. Not that I was interested in that, thank you very much. If Lotty thought some rich moron was going to sweep me out of my Maglis and into a life of luxury, she was very much mistaken. I knew the idea of my marrying again and having little versions of Victoria Iphigenias to run around appealed to Lotty, but the thought itself was enough to give me nausea. I wondered whether or not to bring my Smith & Wesson, or were you supposed to check your gun with your fur coat at this prestigious affair? Instead I put the prized ticket and the content of my purse into a velvet clutch Lotty had once given me as a birthday present. The queen of the ball was ready to meet her court. I was singing one of the more familiar arias from La Boheme as I went downstairs. Mr. Contreras had securely locked up an unhappy golden retriever and her equally unhappy son to prevent dog hair from adorning my gown. He gave an appreciative whistle, and I could hear the dogs barking in his apartment, no doubt wishing they could go for a run in the cold Chicago air.

"You make all those big shots look real lame, doll. You look terrific. If I was younger, I'd never let those other guys even look at you. Just wait until you get there. You'll turn all the gals green with envy."

"I'll settle for inspiring them to write nice big fat checks to assist the battered women's shelter this whole thing is supposed to benefit." I gave Mr. Contreras a final wave and disappeared into my car.

* * *

Ed Straker unhappily pulled up the collar of his trenchcoat, flinching against the snow. So much for his decision to walk the two miles to the Chicago Hilton and Towers. The event would take place there. Stuck in the honeymoon suite at the Lincoln Park-Sheffield, because he couldn't get anything closer, he vowed never again. December in England had gotten off to a healthy start, but since he spent most of his time running the studio or running SHADO, or in the shelter of his car, he didn't have much exposure to it. Still, in either case, duty left him little

time for fresh air, freezing or not, so he'd left his hired car behind him to get the benefit of exercise. It was with relief he reached the hotel and checked his coat in the lobby along with everyone else glad to escape the weather.

A harried looking woman took his ticket. The entire place was filled with the chatter of elegantly bedecked ladies and gentlemen, along with the smacking of lips over the buffet and the clinking of glasses. However, most men were gathering to one side of the room, and the women to another. At one point Straker found himself having to choose a pair of shoes out of a huge box. Because of the noise, he couldn't hear clearly why he was asked to do such a strange thing. He grabbed the closest pair, red open toed high heels. Shoes tucked underneath an arm, Straker asked for chilled club soda.

"Great party, isn't it?" the bartender remarked.

"I wouldn't know, I only just arrived here. What is this business with the shoes?" Ed practically had to shout to be understood.

The bartender chuckled, but before he could give an explanation, Straker's pager vibrated. He excused himself and went out into the relative quiet of the corridor in search of privacy. The number that scrolled across the tiny LED screen of his pager brought a customary frown to his lips. He collected his coat, and searched for a phone. - With a pair of red leather pumps under his arm.

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I resolved to kill whoever had come up with the ridiculous idea of letting the eligible men pick a pair of the eligible ladies' shoes at random. The men were then supposed to find the damsel that the shoes belonged to, and dance with her.

When they had first announced the game, I had almost believed it an clever way to meet someone. After all, the male guest list included a lot of well known names in politics, the arts, film, science and what-have-you. Cuddling up with some big shots sure wouldn't hurt my business. I certainly wasn't what you would call a shy wallflower. I was more of the man-eating plant type, right out of the little shop of horrors. In retrospect, it was probably the result of drinking far too much wine to wash down the interesting tidbits they claimed was food. Oh, certainly it was rolled, chopped, diced, and arranged prettily on the trays. It was just that even Sherlock himself wouldn't have detected it with a magnifying glass. I would have traded in my gown for a semi-decent portion of pasta at that point. Wine didn't go very well on an empty stomach. Even expensive vintages. Yes, no doubt my blood alcohol level was responsible for the sudden fit of insanity that had inspired me to throw my beloved red leather Bruno Maglis in with all the other shoes. Now I was standing alone like an idiot in my hosiery, realizing that some society wacko had indulged his fetish for women's shoes by making off with my pumps. Now I was trying to explain that, no, I was not Dr. Charlotte Herschel, chief perinatologist at Beth Israel, but I was V.I. Warshawski, one angry private detective. Okay, I was a gumshoe without shoes.

The terribly upset hostess who was trying to calm me down was making an effort to understand what had happened. I finally got a copy of the guest list from her and turned around to see Murray Ryerson grinning from ear to ear. He'd heard it all.

"Why if it isn't the intrepid girl private eye. How'd you get in here, Warshawski? Sneak in through the servants' entrance?"

"With all the scoops I send your way, you might try putting your adolescent humor aside and help me track down the pervert who made off with my shoes," I retorted.

"Your wish is my command, Cinderella. Besides, I have a great thirst to see justice done.

Whoever this guy is, he should be locked up with no chance at parole. No, make that the chair."

"Tell me again how you got your job at the Herald-Star. Oh, now I remember, the boss paid you not to sleep with his daughter." Ryerson was the crime reporter with that newspaper. Our paths had crossed more than once, even leading to having his shoes underneath my bed on occasion. However we were probably far too much alike to have anything but a personal and professional friendship. I was glad to have him in my corner, as he had already trailed away from me and collared the bartender for the event. Murray peeled off a couple of tens from the wad in his wallet, and the bartender appreciatively stuck them in his shirt pocket, already chock full of the tips he'd earned.

"Sure, I poured an club soda for the guy. He came in late, couldn't figure out what was going on. Before I could explain, he went off with what must have been your shoes. Funny, too. I didn't figure him for a wacko."

"What else can you tell me about him? Can you describe him?" I asked urgently.

"Yeah. About my height, white hair, blue eyes, middle to late forties, slim build. Hard to hear him with all that racket, but I got the impression he might be a newscaster or something. He had that type of a voice. Could be an actor. Distinguished looking guy, anyway."

"Bless you. Come on, Ryerson, I've got a bunch of phone calls to make."

"You'll have to make them alone. I want to get this story in so that it will make the morning edition. That's the easiest way to force this character out in the open. Everybody that attended this thing is going to want to check out the publicity on it. Somebody's bound to recognize this weirdo. Catch you later, Warshawski."

It wasn't until Murray left that I remembered I was still standing there in my wilted gown, barefoot. Undaunted, I padded over to the hostess, who gave me the impression she wasn't overjoyed at seeing me again. I hated to ruin her evening, but I wanted to narrow down the list of possibilities with her.

Eager to get rid of me, she gave me the number of the director of Guardian Project, the charity which funded women's shelters.

She also went through the list with me, but none of the names of the men that had attended alone matched up with the description I'd been given, and she didn't recognize all of them. There were a number of companies that were supposed to send representatives, but only the company name was listed. There were also three or four no shows.

I went back to my apartment, changed, threw on my pea coat, and drove to my office to make the calls I needed. My answering service gave me my messages, nothing that couldn't wait, and certainly nothing from the strange fellow who pilfered my pumps. Maybe I needed the Feds to put together a psychological profile on this guy. I grinned. The FBI wasn't too fond of me, our paths had crossed enough to know there was no love lost in that relationship. I picked up the phone, and started dialing.

* * *

"**Alec, you tell** that director that you have full authority over the film, and I have personally chosen you to represent me in my absence. If he continues to make noise about his contract, sack him," Ed Straker snapped.

"That's what I figured, but eight weeks into the film and all, I thought I better check with you."

"Come on, Alec, the real reason you're spending Harlington-Straker money to make a long distance call from England to the States is that you wanted to find out what I'm up to

here." There was some amusement in Straker's voice.

"Don't worry, Ed, I paid for the call myself." Freeman chuckled. "The wire service said there was some kind of theft that took place at the function, but it was too early for any details. You didn't make off with the china, did you?"

"Very amusing, Alec. Your call gave me an excuse to leave, no, no, believe me, I'm glad to go. I'll be returning on the first plane-"

"Ed, you better stick your head out the window. Weather conditions in Chicago have grounded all the planes at O'Hare."

"Nonsense. I'll get on a military flight out if I need to."

"You won't get far. Look, relax and enjoy the scenery. The snowfall is supposed to lighten up by Tuesday, you can leave then."

"Damn I don't like being stuck here. How's that other business going?"

"Just the usual activity. Foster and I are on top of everything. Now get to bed, Mr. Straker, I wouldn't want you to lose your beauty sleep or miss your free breakfast because you overslept."

Straker shook his head at the phone as it clicked. He had to admit he was tired. He undressed quickly, changed into pajamas and a robe, cleaned his teeth and fell into bed. The shoes were on the couch where he had absent-mindedly tossed them once he had reached his hotel.

Straker rose at five the next morning, more than a little red-eyed from the change in his sleeping patterns. By the time he had showered, and shaved, he felt restored. He went for his breakfast and a newspaper. He bit into a piece of buttered toast and turned the pages of the Herald-Star without real interest. His toast fell buttered side down onto the paper. Straker stared at the short article his eyes had fallen upon.

THE GAME'S AFOOT?

Murray Ryerson, crime reporter

The dance and dinner recently given by the Guardian Project may have raise money to help several women's shelters in Illinois but it cost Chicago private investigator V.I. Warshawski a pair of red leather pumps. The perpetrator was described as being 40ish, white haired blue eyed and having what was thought might be a trained voice. Miss Warshawski was attending the event as a favor to a friend and might have been just a pleasant evening has turned into a personal case for the resourceful Miss Warshawski. The private eye had parted with her pumps along with all the other eligible ladies attending. The eligible men then were directed to choose a pair of shoes find the lady they belonged to, and thus have her as his date for the rest of the evening. At least that was the plan. Maybe Miss Warshawski's prince grew a little too attached to her precious slippers but whatever happened, it would be shoe decent if he returned her footwear. He had them when he was seen leaving early. As Sherlock Holmes might say: the game's a foot. With V.I. Warshawski on the case, I have the feeling she'll crack it open before long. In the meantime, lock up your shoes, ladies. The criminal is still at large.

Straker pressed the bridge of his nose, he'd developed a headache. Yes, the shoes were right where he'd left them. How could he have been so stupid? When he had received Alec's call, he had mistakenly believed it had concerned SHADO, and any other subject held zero significance for him. Now Alec would read this, and Straker would never hear the end of it, he was sure. Well, there was only one thing to do. He considered asking the front desk to get this Warshawski person, but then he thought it would be safer to look up the number himself.

There wasn't a lot of Warshawskis in the directory, and he was able to reach her office right away. Her service connected him with her private number when he identified himself as someone who could give her information about the burglary of her shoes.

* * *

When the phone rang, it woke me long before my clock went off.

"Look I don't know who you are, but buddy, I still have an hour and a half to sleep. This better be good."

"This is private investigator V.I. Warshawski?" a man asked.

"Well it sure ain't the Chicago chamber of commerce."

"Miss Warshawski, my name is Straker. I need to meet with you this afternoon if you don't have anything scheduled. I have your shoes with me. If you'd give me a chance to explain."

"Tell me, Mr. Straker, do you do this kind of thing often?" I scrambled for the list the Guardian Project hostess had given me. Sure enough, included in the list of companies was Harlington-Straker Studios. And Straker had pronounced scheduled 'shed-yulled' although he sounded American to me.

"Do you have a time you can meet with me?" he replied, choosing to ignore my comment.

"How does twelve sound?"

"Fine. Can you meet me at Marshall Field's at that time?"

"What do you need there? More shoes?"

"Actually my flight has been grounded, and I only brought clothes for a weekend, so I need additional clothes to wear until I can go home."

"Fine, just make sure you bring my shoes. How will I know it's you?"

"I'll find you, because that description of me fits half of your population. See you soon, Miss Warshawski."

I frowned, because I needed to type up some reports for a client after my usual Sunday morning run with Peppy. That wouldn't leave me all that much time to get ready for my encounter with this Straker. I told myself it would be worth it to get my shoes back. Besides, he actually pronounced Warshawski correctly.

* * *

In the end Peppy had to settle for an abbreviated run, and made her displeasure known with several barks. I managed to get two miles in, which hopefully took care of the lemon danish, got back to my place, dropped off Peppy, put up with Mr. Contreras' curiosity about Straker, (" you watch yourself with a creep that steals shoes, doll, wouldn't be surprised if his face shows up on America's most wanted ") and finally showered and dressed in navy blue wool slacks, boots and a white sweater with several gold chains and a pair of hoops in my ears. I added lipstick and a touch of mascara, pulled on a faux fur coat, and grabbed my bag with my Smith & Wesson in it.

I managed to drop by my office, got the reports typed up, and mailed them.

By this time I was starved, it was eleven-forty and I was determined to have something more than the reheated coffee I'd choked down after I'd gotten Straker's call. Such was the exciting life of a private eye.

* * *

I managed to elude several red lights on my way to Marshall Fields, parked, and went up to the entrance.

"Miss Warshawski? Ah, I thought so. Nice to meet you, I'm Ed Straker. Here, I've got

your shoes for you, plus a small gift to make up for the inconvenience I've caused. If you have no objection, I thought we could eat at a restaurant here, and I'll explain what happened."

All during the short walk to the restaurant, I found myself sneaking brief looks at his profile as I went along. He was dressed in a cream suit that looked new, but wasn't exactly suited for snow. He looked like the Ralph Lauren type. He gave me the impression that a wrinkle wouldn't dare mar his appearance, while I guessed that by now I looked like an unmade bed.

"Yours is a remarkable profession, Miss Warshawski. I suppose you've come across both polarities of human character in the course of your duties."

"First, call me V.I. and second, could you say that in English?"

"Good and evil in humanity is what I was trying to get across. What does V.I. stand for?"

"Victoria Iphigenia," I heard myself say, to my horror. I had female friends in several so-called male professions, feminists almost to a fault. But one or two of them melted unexpectedly into a small puddle when confronted by a really spectacular looking male, like this Straker fellow. The same thing happened with some of my male companions in reverse. I was appalled to find myself falling into that pattern. Usually I'd hand over a kidney before I'd tell anyone the name my mother Gabriella inflicted on her helpless daughter because of her love of opera. I frowned and awaited Straker's response, telling myself I'd keep up my guard this time.

"Iphigenia, very pretty, but I can understand your not wanting to use it professionally."

"Are you for real?" I wanted to know.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Never mind. We're here," I told him, satisfied that I'd broken through that cool exterior of his if only for a moment.

We came to the restaurant, we had run right into the lunch crowd. Straker didn't seem ruffled by the long wait, and when we did get a table, he studied the menu for some time.

"Since you chose this place, I'll leave the choices up to you, and only stipulate a pot of strong coffee."

"You like to take risks don't you? The cheeseburgers and fries are great here." He looked at me for a long moment, and smiled for the first time. Straker nodded at the waiter, and when the waiter had jotted down our orders Straker reached into the Field shopping bag he'd been toting and came out with a smaller bag. Inside were my beloved Magli's, and with them two other boxes, one containing an identical white pair, and one containing a blue pair, both my size.

"Buying women's shoes is a first for me. Look, I wasn't very happy about leaving home to come to that charity function. Normally I'd just send them a check and be over with it. But an associate of mine insisted I show my face here as executive of the studio. So I came, was late because I hadn't counted on the weather, received a urgent call and left with those shoes of yours without thinking. My associate made it sound like it was some kind of emergency. Turns out he just insists I have a holiday, whether I want to or not. I suppose I do need some time off. I don't remember jet lag being this severe the last time I left England."

"So you're British? Oh, thanks for the shoes. By the way, are we talking about an art studio, a photography-"

"Motion pictures. I'm from Boston. I moved to England when my job dictated it. Incidentally, Miss Warshawski, I hope you're not planning to charge me with burglary. I'd hate to spend my first day in Chicago stuck in a jail cell." Straker said. I laughed.

"Nope, I think giving me a closet full of Bruno Maglis gets you off the hook. How did you manage to get them this time of year?"

"The shop assistant was kind enough to find what they had left over from their Spring-Summer collection. I got a considerable discount, by the way."

"Even at a discount it would cost me several paychecks to get one new pair, forget about two."

"My pleasure, V.I."

"Look, you can call me Vic or Victoria if I can call you Ed or Edward," I told him.

"Ed. And I prefer Victoria. Here comes lunch."

Straker bit into his hamburger cautiously, while I inspected him with enjoyment. I noted there was no wedding band on the appropriate finger, but that didn't mean anything. He wore a large watch on his left wrist, but no other jewelry.

"You have the looks of an actor, did you start out that way?"

"No, I've never been in front of a camera, I just stumbled into my profession. It may sound glamorous but it isn't, believe me. I sit behind a desk and push papers most of the time. Not exciting at all."

Was it just my imagination or was there a trace of a smile when he added that last part? I told myself he didn't get that body from sitting behind a desk. I told him so, and he smiled.

"Some of it I owe to DNA, the rest is walking, playing golf, working out with friends at a club when I have time."

"Ever get exercise chasing kids around?" Real pain clouded his expression.

"I'm divorced. My son died shortly after being hit by a car. An accident. I'd rather not discuss it, Victoria. How about you?"

"I was married to a lawyer shortly after I passed the bar and served as a public defender. It didn't work out, so we parted without too much grief. He remarried someone who fits better in the country clubs he needs to belong to. I don't go in for social climbing."

"You don't seem that type to me. So why the Italian shoes?"

"My late Italian mama would haunt me if I ever wore anything but Bruno Maglis when I get really dressed up. For the same reason I did my office work on an old Olivetti typewriter until I finally got an IBM clone PC."

"There's a writer working for us who wrote everything on an ancient word processor. It took time before I could convince her to update it. She said it would hurt her creativity. When that didn't happen, she gave in. She's bright, she just has strange ideas."

"Once people get used to something, it's tough to change."

"Warshawski isn't exactly an Italian name," he said.

"My dad was a Polish cop," I explained, putting ketchup on my heap of fries.

"Victoria, if you aren't busy with a case right now, maybe you could show me around Chicago. I'm stuck here until the weather is clear enough for my flight home." He looked at a french fry as if it were the enemy.

"It won't kill you, I promise."

He chuckled. "I'll hold you to that promise. Will you show me around?"

"I'd enjoy that."

"Perhaps you know some good Italian restaurants. Italian happens to be my favorite cuisine." Ed smiled.

"Restaurants? *I Tre Merli* is heaven. But if you play your cards right, I may just cook an authentic Italian dinner for you at my place."

"Great. When can you be free?"

"Right now. First, I need to introduce you to someone. If I don't, he'll never forgive me."

Ed nodded, and we finished lunch, then I drove him (he said he wasn't used to driving on the right in his hired car) around the Loop, wondering if he was enjoying my company as much as I did his. We got back to my place later than we planned on, but he didn't mind.

Before we reached Mr. Contreras' door, I heard Peppy and Mitch barking in unison. "Mr. Contreras, it's me."

"Doll! I was worried about you, with that creep that stole your shoes. . ." he caught a glimpse of Straker behind me, and opened the door an inch too wide. Peppy came dashing out, knocking Ed against the wall. Mitch ran in circles around us. Peppy barked and growled at Ed, and Ed looked at me uneasily.

"Down, Peppy! You too, Mitch! Mr. Contreras, this is Ed Straker, who accidentally took my shoes. Ed, Mr. Contreras. Ed is the head of Straker-Harlington Studios in England."

"Yeah? Well, if you don't say! Pleased to meet you Mr. Straker. The two of you go shopping or something?"

"I'll explain later. Can I use the phone? I want to reach Murray before he causes more trouble." I could see Ed brushing off dog hair as he accepted a seat on my neighbor's sofa.

"Sure, doll, sure, anything that's mine is yours. Want coffee? I just made a fresh pot," he offered, closing his door.

"Please." Ed kept his eyes on the two golden retrievers I shared with Mr. Contreras. "Nice dogs, are they yours, Victoria?"

"We sort of share them." I noticed my neighbor's look when Ed intimately used my first name. The two of them exchanged conversation as I tracked down Murray.

"So you found this Straker guy. What was the deal with the shoes?" Murray asked. I'd luckily caught him at his desk. I explained everything, but he still seemed dubious. I noticed that Ed's large blue eyes were clouding over as he listened to my neighbor's war stories. I hadn't been paying enough attention to figure out how they'd gone from dogs to the dogs of war. "Watch yourself with this guy, don't let his limey accent get to you." Murray was joking.

"Not that it's any of your business, but he's from Boston. Now good night, Ryerson." I hung up.

"More coffee?" Mr. Contreras offered.

"Uh, thanks but I have to go over some paperwork with Mr. Straker concerning the shoes," I lied, and Ed gave me a grateful look. He had been scratching Peppy's head, and in return, she had been thumping out an equally grateful rhythm with her tail. I must admit I was wishing I could trade places with her. We said our goodbyes, and escaped both neighbor and golden retrievers. I led Ed to my place, and he gave me a look I wasn't sure I understood.

"All right, I'm not the world's best housekeeper. Make yourself comfortable, you're about to have the best Italian meal of your life."

Ed smiled, removed his coat, and set down the bags. He spotted my piano, and traced a pattern in the dust that covered it. "Do you play?"

"Sure. My mother wanted me to follow in her steps and sing opera. My voice isn't anywhere as good as hers was, but I enjoy singing. You?"

"Not a note." However he lifted the cover over the keys, and drew his fingers swiftly across the ivories. "You'll have to sing for me some time, Victoria." He shut the cover and wandered around, opening this and that, looking at my books and sheet music. He came briefly into my kitchen to taste the sauce, nodded, and went away nibbling a piece of cheese. I was

just putting pasta into boiling water when the phone rang. I instructed Ed to make sure it didn't boil over, and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Victoria, it is good to hear your voice. I hope I have not disturbed you too much?"

"Lotty!"

"I read about what happened in the paper. You must tell me all about it. This conference I am attending is putting me to sleep." Lotty sighed. I told her everything that had happened, and she chuckled. "So you did find your gentleman. He is very good looking, this Straker of yours?"

"You can judge for yourself when you get back." I talked with Lotty for quite a while until I realized Ed was waiting. Lotty understood, and hung up. I rushed into the kitchen to find Ed calmly grating cheese onto two heaping plates of pasta, and I smiled.

"Do I need a reservation for this place?"

"Well, with business so slow, I suppose not," he replied reluctantly.

I picked up a dish towel and threw it at him, and he chuckled. We lingered over dinner, and I had to remind myself I wasn't the type to melt into a puddle of goo the way some so-called independent women did when involved with a really handsome man. He kept studying me, and yet it was difficult to tell what was on his mind. The both of us finally went into my living room, I with a glass of Black Label, he with more coffee. I'd decided by now his blood must be composed of at least 70% caffeine, judging by his love of the stuff. He helped himself to liberal amounts of cream and sugar.

"I've decided I'm taking you back with me to England. I need to eat like that at least once a week."

"What am I supposed to do about my investigation business?"

"I'm sure no one would miss you. You'll think of something."

We were seated only a few inches away from each other on my far from pristine sofa. I reached over and hit him on the thigh, and he flinched. I put my emptied glass down, wondering what it was I was doing wrong. He still seemed to be holding back, even though from the time we'd spent in the restaurant he'd been appraising me. Well. I was one work of art that wouldn't just hang helplessly on the wall. I took his cup and set it aside. My fingers slid over his. However, at that point I might have gotten more of a response from Peppy. I couldn't take it anymore, and I pulled him to me, ruffled his baby-fine platinum hair. I wanted to do a little private investigation. Very private.

"Victoria. . ." he murmured, and drew closer, his eyes searching mine solemnly.

I kissed him in anticipation, and his expression darkened.

"Don't worry, I promise not to tell your mother." That drew a smile from him. He stroked my cheek.

"I'll hold you to that promise."

Still I sensed indecision in him.

"Ed, is something wrong?"

"God, no. It's just that it's been a long time."

"Don't let that worry you. It's just like learning to ride a bicycle, once you . . ."

He silenced me with a sweet, lingering kiss. Our activity as opera began sublimely, building to a crescendo, until it ended *ala adagio con amore* - slowly and leisurely with tenderness. Or to think again in terms of my continuing a private investigation, Ed's was the most rewarding body of evidence I ever examined. When we were through, we repeated the

process, in case we'd missed any details. When we concluded, I put my head upon his chest, and his hand rested firmly in my hair, to prevent any impulse I might have to escape. I told him to choose between the opera and the investigation similes and he laughed freely.

"I would have to go with the investigation, Victoria, I don't know that much about opera. I can't imagine us as star-crossed lovers on stage, drawn together because of bad weather. But then I leave imagination to that writer I told you about."

"Just how well do you know that writer you told me about?"

"Oh very, very well, she's a bright woman, she just has some strange ideas . . ." Ed replied in a suggestive manner. I lifted a hand to slap him and he caught it, and we began a playful struggle. Soon we mutually decided there were better things to do than struggle, and we were proceeding with the possibilities of that discovery when my phone rang. I grabbed a robe and threw it on. Ed gave a long sigh.

"Damn, damn, damn!" I whined, and unhappily headed for my phone. "What?" I snapped.

"My, my, my, Nancy Drew doesn't seem happy to hear from me."

"Murray Ryerson, if this isn't absolutely important, I swear on my mother's grave I'll hunt you down, skin you, and burn what's left of you to a crisp. So make it snappy."

"Just in case you decided to snuggle up with your studio sweetie, I thought you better know some things about him. He's had a very intriguing past."

"If he's a Columbian drug lord, I don't want to know about it." I was interested in spite of myself. It was too late to have second thoughts, but I waited for whatever Murray had to say. I had been burnt before, and I knew very well this Straker character had gotten to me. I was still hurting from breaking up with my black lover, Conrad Rawlings. My job had ended our affair, I had gotten Conrad shot, and he'd pulled away from me. How Ed and I would wind up was something I didn't want to look too closely at. Murray went on. I could have stopped him but I guess the professional in me wouldn't allow it.

"The guy was a colonel in Air Force intelligence until the Rolls Royce he and a British defense minister were in ran off the road. Straker was thrown from the car, he barely made it out of there before the Rolls blew the minister to kingdom come. You could get blood from a rock easier than you could get details about the accident. If it was an accident. A couple of months after that, your friend Straker was making movies. It was all in the British newspapers. I found it on microfiche when I keyed in Straker's name."

"That doesn't involve me, but I guess you meant well, Ryerson. If there isn't anything else, I'll say good night."

I sat for some time, finishing my whiskey. Ed finally came in, a towel wrapped around his waist. "Bad news?"

"Just Murray Ryerson, the reporter who put that item about you and I in the Herald-Star. He did some digging into your past." I attempted to sound indifferent, but I saw his expression become cold.

"Whose idea was that?" he said bitterly. "Yours?"

"Ryerson is an investigative reporter. That's how he makes his living. I'm not so paranoid that I probe into the private lives of my lovers." I didn't mean to be harsh, but he glared at me. His tone of voice irritated me, as if I'd done some awful thing. I met his stare with equal measure until I saw an expression of pain cross his features and disappear so rapidly I wasn't even sure it had really been there.

"I seem to repeat the same mistake over and over again. Maybe I should try that particular brand of paranoia. Tell me, what did your friend tell you?" Ed asked.

"He said you were an Air Force colonel, in intelligence, and that you'd nearly lost your life in an car crash that killed a defense minister. Look, Ed, I don't care about that. You don't have to come down so hard on me."

"I don't appreciate people nosing around in my private life, Miss Warshawski. You don't remain the same person after coming so close to dying. So I got into the business of motion pictures. I think it's best I go now, before you dig up some other dirt on me."

He turned and disappeared into the bedroom, slamming the door. "Damn it," I shouted. "How was I supposed to know it would bother you? You aren't being fair, Straker!" Silence. "You aren't being fair!" More silence. Ten minutes later, he came out of the bedroom, fully dressed, expressionless. He picked up his coat and pulled it on. I went to him but he ignored me.

"Damn it, Ed, tonight was good for both of us. Sit down and let's talk about it!" He made no sign of hearing me, only picked up his bag, and went out, closing the door behind him.

I picked up my tumbler and threw it across the room, and it shattered into pieces when it hit the door. I had myself a healthy cry, and wished fervently that I could talk to Lotty, who had supported me through many a crisis. I remembered Mr. Contreras, but I was too proud to let him see me this way. I couldn't even have Peppy for comfort, for that would mean waking Mr. Contreras up, and it was nearly 1 o'clock in the morning. Snow had blocked out what view I had from my window. Suddenly I remembered. Ed! That stubborn idiot had come to my apartment building in my car, meaning he would have to walk for blocks to get a phone and call a cab. And in that coat, more fashionable than practical, he might freeze before he knew what was happening. Without hesitation, I grabbed my clothes and purse and left my apartment.

I must have driven for hours before I found a phone booth and dropped coin after coin into its slot, calling hotel after hotel, asking for Ed Straker. Why hadn't I asked him where he was staying? I was worried I might have to call the hospitals.

"Ed Straker? Well, Miss, we had an Edward Straker registered here, but he settled his bill and checked out about ten minutes ago."

"I'm his lawyer, V.I. Warshawski, and I desperately need to reach him. Did he say where he was going?" I had been lucky with the bed and breakfast I'd tried. Most personnel had refused to confirm or deny the possibility of Ed being registered with them. Some refused to talk altogether. I used my old identity to convince the desk clerk, as claiming to be with the police force was taking too much of a chance. And I certainly didn't want to involve Bobby Mallory, who had shared the South Side of Chicago beat with my late dad, and remained on the force. He found my endangering myself as I would pursue a case hard to swallow.

"No, he just got in a car and he left in a hurry."

"Please, don't let anyone rent the room until I get there."

I didn't bother to wait for an answer, I just drove as fast as I could to get there. The snow made driving tricky and I hoped Straker had enough sense to be careful. At least he'd been all right when he'd left.

* * *

"**Ring Colonel Freeman** for me, will you?" Straker said over the scrambled, secured line of the military jet. The flight home would not be as smooth, nor would it be non-stop, but at least he was already miles from Chicago. Physical distance. It was a different struggle to get Victoria out of his mind.

---'tonight was good for both of us' - How true that was. How foolhardy it was to be

intimate with a private investigator. He made no excuses for himself. He could have sent the shoes back with a polite explanation, and laid low until he could get a flight out. Hindsight was 20-20, the saying went. He knew that he had a problem. She was not the kind of person who would let everything go if two operatives came and warned her off. And the newspaper fellow - God! When would he ever learn not to let his guard down simply because someone was charming, intelligent, attractive? Damn. He would wait until the whole thing blew over. His cover as studio executive was solid.

Yes, that was the direction to go in. Wait things out.

"Ed? Are you there, did you hear me?"

"Alec? Sorry, I didn't catch what you said. Look - I may have a problem."

"We've got a problem of our own here. Somebody broke into personnel files here at the studio, damaged props, and several negatives. It had to be an insider, someone with access to most areas of the studio. Maybe even that fellow we discussed earlier. I took your advice, and sacked him. He was demanding more money even though his contract with us was solid."

"Good, he seems a logical suspect. How's UFO activity?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Look, Ed, you should have stayed. You certainly didn't pick the safest time to fly."

"These people are professionals, Alec. I'm safe in their hands. I have other problems to consider now. I'll be at the studio as soon as I can. Was anyone injured in the break in?"

"The guard who logs vehicles in and out has a concussion. Miss Ealand was hurt, not severely. More shaken up than anything else. Her assailant was masked, security's on it now."

"Good, as soon as I get in, I'll drop by my flat to change and then I'll be there as soon as possible. Straker out."

* * *

Alec knew Ed well enough to know when something was deeply troubling him. Getting Straker to admit it was a different matter.

"Alec, take a look at this. Chicago newspaper, the Herald-Star. That theft we were interested in. Does the description remind you of someone?" Paul Foster asked, amused.

"Come off it, that could be anyone." Freeman retorted after skimming the Ryerson article. "Who is this Warshawski person anyway? Throw this thing in the dustbin, and locate that director fellow, Mills. He's our prime suspect in the break in. Come on, man."

Alec reflected he had been a little harsh with Foster, and it was more than reasonable to take a few minutes, laugh, be at ease. Right now, he knew another concern was making him cross with Foster. He was desperately concerned about Ed. The whole scheme concerning the Chicago ball was to give Ed sometime away to relax and ease his tensions. Making it seem a matter of security that the Commander show up personally was the only way Straker would give in. Alec had thought it a success, and even Ed had hinted he knew the real reason for the trip. Something had not only gone wrong, but Ed actually sounded worse. Flying in inclement weather, hardly listening, none of that was typical of Ed. Well, as soon as this burglary thing is tidied up, I'll have a firm talk with him, Alec told himself. Ed's plane was due to land soon.

* * *

"**Oh Lotty**, what is it with me? How stupid can I be? I never should have listened to Murray. Ed might still be here now if I kept my big mouth shut." I told her.

"Liebchen, give him time. Surely if you were so impressed with him, he will come to his senses and not shut you out. In his business, with his background, I do not find it so strange that he wishes his life to be private. He has shut one door and opened another, and who would

want to be reminded of such an accident? Victoria, one can read about your cases in the newspapers often, but you would not want someone, a stranger, prying into your personal affairs, nein? You say too, that he lost a child in an accident. Do you not see? Here, help yourself to wine. You need something to restore you. Things could be much, much worst." Lotty assured me. She had returned early, and I'd been relieved to see her.

"Worst? How?"

"You could have been forced to attend a boring conference in New York with colleagues too full of themselves. If I have survived, so can you." Lotty laughed and I laughed with her.

"Oh Lotty, you and Peppy and Mitch were what I needed. You can't blame me totally, he just went crazy when I told him. I didn't even have the chance to get to know him, so how was I to know he was touchy about his past? He acted like he had something to hide. What was I supposed to do? I don't even know if he left Chicago. All the scheduled flights direct to Heathrow and Gatwick are still grounded. And Gatwick is the closest airport to his studio."

"Victoria, you have only to call Straker-Harlington Studios and tell them what you said before. That you are this Straker's American lawyer-they would say counsel or barrister, and you need to speak to him immediately."

"Of course, I can't even think straight."

"This man, he has affected you that deeply?"

I didn't want to answer for I would most certainly incriminate myself. Could I possibly be serious about a man whom I hardly knew, and had slept with only once? I didn't answer my own question, and grabbed my phone.

* * *

It was good to finally step free of the taxi, and walk up the driveway to his flat. He only needed a few minutes to shower and change, then get back to what should have remained his sole concern, SHADO. As the driver pulled away, Ed reflected that his bronze SHADO car had never looked so good. A second look showed that someone had completely demolished the tires. No easy feat, for everything about the car was practically indestructible. No doubt if someone had tried to steal it, such an attempt would have set off the alarms. Straker frowned, it was one crisis after---

"I've been waiting for you. I know your type! I spent weeks and weeks doing that bloody film for you and I ask for one change and what happens?"

Ed recognized the voice of Lloyd Mills, the director who had been increasingly unreliable, and who had given Alec problems. Mills had a nasty-looking, oversize gun in his hand. Ed's pistol was where it always was, in its shoulder holster. The alarm had to have gone off when he had smashed the tyres. Time, he had to play for time.

"You broke into the personnel files?" Ed said.

"Right. You bet I bloody well did, that Freeman fellow tries to tell me you're on holiday. Sacks me, he does. Always use yes men to do your dirty work for you, do you, Straker?"

No sign of a SHADO team. Got to get to cover, can't stay wide open like this. Got to find cover, then I have a chance of stopping him.

"I asked you a question!"

"You were trying to get at my file, with my private address on it." Ed said, forcing himself to stay calm. Suppose he fires, how do I stop him then?

"Seems I did, didn't I? Found you all right. Doesn't look like you'll be going anywhere in that fancy car of yours. Looks like--"

"Now you listen to me," Straker snapped. "When you destroyed the tires it set off internal

alarms. It's only a matter of time before security comes here, and the police." How long had it been since Mills had slashed the tires? Where were they? Had the alarm even gone off? No good, can't depend on them. Need to get to cover and fire off a shot at him. No reasoning with him. I may have to kill him before he kills me.

Mills laughed. "Think that scares me off, Straker? I haven't got anything to lose. I've lost one job too many, nobody will take me now."

Almighty God, if I get out of this, I'm going to find out who hired this madman. Ed saw Mills' gun waver. Only one chance. An absurd thought came into Straker's mind. Should have gone in for more shrubbery as cover. How many feet to the back of the flat? Three, four, five feet? How much time to make a move, three, four seconds? All right, Straker. Don't make yourself an easy target. Keep your vital organs out of his line of sight.

"Nobody will take me now, so it doesn't matter - so I'm taking you with . . ."

Straker dropped, hand reaching for his pistol. Two seconds, then several shots. Mills fell. Cars screeched up, slamming of doors. Terrible pain. Heat. Shouldn't be hot, shouldn't burn this way in the middle of winter. Must have been hit by return fire, Ed slowly realized.

"For God's sake, get an ambulance!" a voice shouted. Alec. Alec would put it right. Get more shrubbery. Ed thought.

"Take it easy, Ed, hang on, we'll get you to hospital in no time."

"Burns, God, it burns." Ed tried to see Alec, but everything was getting dim. He felt Alec gingerly lay him all the way down but he moaned when Alec helped press Ed's hand upon his hemorrhaging wounds.

"Alec . . ."

"Quiet, damn you. Hang on, Ed." Alec said roughly.

"Tell---tell Victoria - sorry - " Ed whispered, then he gave himself up to the darkness.

* * *

Days later, when the people at Ed's studio still had told me nothing, and I had run up phone bills I hardly believed, I turned to Mr. Contreras. We were sharing dinner. I didn't have much of an appetite. We had left Peppy and Mitch downstairs.

"Same thing, huh, doll. The runaround? Guess there isn't much difference whether you're in England or Chicago, the runaround's the same. Look, it's not my business, me and the dogs and Dr. Lotty, we're all here for you. You know we'll stand by you whatever happens. But, if you ask me, which I know you don't, this guy ain't worth the pain you're going through."

"I'm okay, I just scared him off. I'm sure he has things in his past he wouldn't want anybody to know. I was a fool to tell him what Murray found out. It's time I got back to work."

I jumped when the phone rang.

"V.I. it's Murray. Look, I got called this morning. Guy with a definite English accent asks me if the V in V.I. Warshawski stands for Victoria. I told him to call you himself, get it from the horse's mouth, so to speak. He hung up. I thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks Murray, I owe you one."

"One? I demand a recount, call you later. I'm staying on this thing." He hung up, and I remained edgy.

"Victoria, your clients - "

The phone rang, and I was grateful for the intrusion, because now it was Lotty's turn to lecture me. If I was going to screw up my life as well as my business, that was my choice. I knew they were worried because I'd let two jobs go to another investigator, while I tried to find Ed. I dived for the phone but Mr. Contreras beat me to it.

"Yeah, yeah, she's here. Doll, it's for you, English guy."

"Hello, who is this?"

"Miss Warshawski, my name is Freeman, I'm an associate of Mr. Straker's. You've been making a lot of inquiries about Mr. Straker."

"I want to speak to him, look, we got off to a bad start, I didn't tell my friend Murray Ryerson to go sticking his nose in Ed's past. Please tell Ed I . . ."

"Ed, Mr. Straker, was seriously wounded. It may help him to hear your voice."

"What happened to him, oh God, his plane went down, didn't it, he was so determined to leave Chicago. They cleared most flights yesterday, why couldn't he have waited like he planned?"

"He made it here safely, but he was shot several times by - look - I wondered if you'd come to England, to the hospital where he is being cared for. I've arranged everything, you needn't worry about a passport, it's all been cleared for you. A plane is waiting for you at O' Hare. Will you come? I have someone waiting to pick you up and bring you there."

"Yes, I'll throw some stuff into a bag and . . ."

"Everything you'll need for the flight will be provided for you. I'll see you soon."

Despite Lotty's and Mr. Contreras' fearful protests about my going off with the stranger who came for me, I cheerily got into his car. I can't say that the drive to the airport was a pleasure, for my numerous attempts to engage the driver in conversation didn't pan out. I suddenly got the feeling that this was just the kind of situation where people got picked up by strangers and were never seen again. Maybe the whole thing was a ruse, and Straker had decided I was such a thorn in his side that he'd hired goons to drop Murray and me in the Chicago River. Oh, sure, V.I. They'll probably knock off Lotty and Mr. Contreras too. As well as Peppy and Mitch. It was all a conspiracy.

Except whoever this Mr. Freeman was who had called me, and had probably called Ryerson as well, had sounded very upset about Ed. If he'd gone through all the trouble of setting up this trip for me, then maybe what he hadn't told me was that he didn't expect Ed to make it. I brushed away tears from my eyes, knowing from experience the damage bullets made to a human body. Plus my mind went back to the memory of Ed reintroducing himself to an American cheeseburger and fries like a little kid, loving every bite.

By the time we arrived at the airfield, the sight of the Concorde and the roar of its engines in my ears made me realize this was all very real, and I stepped up the stairs they wheeled up to the giant bird.

* * *

"**Well, you've really** done it, Alec. Are you going to tell Straker what you've spent to bring that woman here?" Foster asked. Alec's face was on the video link in Straker's office. Freeman had remained with Ed in hospital, hoping for some sign of recovery.

"If he lives," Alec said bitterly. "Look, I want to get back to him. If he wakes up I want to be there."

"Right."

* * *

I was excited as I stepped from the Concorde, and the silent, anonymous person who met me and swept me away. I was in England! Here was Princess Di. Here was the Tower of London. Here was reportedly bad food and a class system. I wondered if they had any lady investigators, then remembered 'Prime Suspect' on PBS. Now that was someone I'd like to meet! Or, more accurately, the women Tennyson been based on. I scolded myself,

remembering Ed might be fighting for his life. It wasn't long before we pulled up into the parking lot of a hospital called Mayland. I was led to reception, where a bear of a man, face rugged, pockmarked and strong, stood waiting for me. He seemed solemn.

"Miss. . . look, do you mind awfully if I call you V.I.? I don't want to be rude and mispronounce your name. By the way, welcome to England. My name is Alec Freeman." he said with a broad accent.

"For God's sake, how is Ed?"

"I think it best you see for yourself." He motioned for me to follow him, and I trotted behind, keeping up with him. At least he hadn't said Ed had died. I remembered English reserve. Ed might be pushing up daisies in some quaint little graveyard, and this Freeman guy would be - well, English about it. I shuddered. No, Ed was here, and that meant life, and where there was life there was hope, and I . . .

"Victoria." His voice was weak, he looked pale, but it was really, positively, a live Ed Straker.

"God, they told me you'd been shot, I didn't know if you'd be all right."

Freeman started out the door.

"Thanks, Alec." Ed said. He motioned with a hand done up with an I.V. line for me to sit beside him. I sat on his bed. "I meant take a chair."

"Are you in much pain?" I said, not giving an inch. He seemed to appreciate that.

"Not much. They removed four bullets, and I came out of it a day ago. I lost a lot of blood, so much of it was shock. I'm on the mend. About your friend, in my business you get a lot of publicity, and most of it is bad press. Part of the job, I suppose, but I'd be grateful if you told him to drop any investigation into my past. I guess I was sharp with you, but I let a woman into my life before. A reporter. She was using me to make a name for herself. I found out just in time. Can you understand that?"

"Give me a phone, and I'll tell Murray to kill it." I assured him. "Anything. I just want you to be okay. I acted like a jerk too. I should have told him to mind his business, honestly." I held Ed's hand, the one free of tubes and needles, searching his face for any sign of pain. He brought his other slowly up to draw me near, and kissed me.

"You should get to the hotel suite Alec's arranged for you now, get some rest and then a car is available to take you around London. Remember to dine at La Bussola, authentic Italian bistro. Go on now."

I kissed Ed and found Freeman outside. I saw London, but I never saw Ed again. Returning home was hard. I will always remember London--

* * *

Ed was sad from the necessary breakup with V.I. and still was in hospital. Having chewed out Alec with a slight grin, Ed personally paid the bills having to do with Victoria Warshawski. SHADO was the best medicine, but he wasn't well enough to work yet. His pen tapped out an unhappy rhythm on the crossword book Alec had sent and he was glad when his door opened. A woman with long, dark hair came in. She had a mole over one eyebrow, irises in a vase, and a smile.

"You're looking better, Mr. Straker. Here, for you."

"Nice. What brings you here again?"

"The script isn't going well. I can't think of a way to get it started. I thought you could help."

"Why not have your hero meet a beautiful private investigator on a trip to oh, say -

Chicago," Ed began.

"Hold it, let me write this down . ." She was scrambling for a pad and pen. "Okay, he meets her in Chicago . ."

"And he winds up stealing her shoes by accident?" Ed wryly suggested.

"Mr. Straker, you claim not to have a good imagination. But I'm really impressed!" she exclaimed.

Edward Straker laughed.

FIN

Now that's the story's over, go see the film