

Putting the Damage On

by Marshall Moore

My wardrobe needed a facelift. The modern businesswoman, no matter what circles (of hell) she moves in, needs to cultivate a clean, attractive image. Last year's darker tones felt stale; the time had come to find something I could wear with confidence, something to attract every eye in a crowded room.

During my monthly meeting with my suppliers, I watched the new girl, Holly. I found her refreshing, almost angelic. Apart from her name, I only knew what I could see: she painted her fingernails blue; she liked her coffee black; she appeared to be in her mid-twenties. Her platinum hair kept falling in front of her eyes when she looked down to take notes. She had the luminous sort of complexion most women paint on with cosmetics but never really attain. Any idiot could see all that. I wanted more.

Learn everything, I ordered one of my assistants, later. *Where she lives, what she eats for dinner... even her blood type.*

He bowed and murmured *Yes, ma'am* before hurrying out of my office.

The next day, an e-mail arrived from her CEO, based in Los Angeles: *We knew you'd enjoy that one. She'll be back next month. Thanks again for your continued business, and going forward we hope to continue working with you.*

Ah, the subtle art of negotiation.

I purchase flesh. My factory meets one of the underworld's most valuable needs: food. Ghosts get hungry; the dead have to eat. Holly's employer dealt in capture, transport, and logistics. If she could stomach her job, we'd be a fine match.

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My assistant's inquiries told me nothing the CEO's e-mail hadn't implied. Holly lived alone in a Santa Monica studio apartment. No close relatives, only a few friends. Blood type O positive, diet mostly organic, exercise regimen quite regular. A perfect specimen, as her boss must have known.

I asked Holly to join me for a coffee after the next meeting. Given how much of her company's budget comes out of my bank accounts, she could hardly say no.

My Thursday head belonged to a former Miss Brazil named Rita. After two years, Rita was showing her age: neck ragged at the edges, skin losing its luster. My Friday head, an onyx-haired Korean model once known as Songmee, would last another year, but I couldn't delay finding replacements for the other days of the week. It pained me to relinquish objects of such beauty — I have been quite attached to them — but time and biology are among the few forces more powerful than I am. Entropy doesn't run in reverse.

I drugged Holly's coffee, but not to excess: she needed to be awake for the procedure. She didn't scream much when I showed her the saw and the scalpels. Although she struggled, I kept her from damaging the nerves and the blood vessels. I was relatively gentle. It's so important to keep the neural pathways fresh.

I'm feeling pretty these days.

Blonde becomes me.

