

**THE FIXER:**  
**THE NAKED MAN**

A Katerina Mills Novella

By

Jill Amy Rosenblatt

**CHAPTER 1**

## CHAPTER 1

“Katrina, I need help.”

Katerina stumbled out of bed, her cell phone slipping from her hand.

“Damn it,” she muttered. Fumbling for the lamp, she snapped it on, blinking several times against the harsh light. She heard the low tone of the man’s voice, now coming from under the bed. Even from a distance he sounded frightened and hysterical.

“Katrina? Katrina?”

Bending over the side of the bed, her long chestnut hair cascading onto the floor, she groped for her phone. She grabbed it, bringing it to her ear.

“This is *Katerina*. Who is this?”

“Katr—, it’s Joe Lessing. I’m a friend of Phil’s. You remember me, right?”

Kat worked to match the voice to a face. After a moment, the film of sleep dropped away. Medium height. Built like a boxer. Strong jaw. Black hair with a widow’s peak.

“Yes, Mr. Lessing. How can I help you?”

She listened to Joe Lessing's labored breathing at the other end of the phone; he sounded like he had just come in from a brisk jog. The clock radio read twelve-thirty. It was a little late for a run around the reservoir.

“I can’t find Phil. Do you know where he is?”

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“He’s not answering his cell phone.”

“Mr. Lessing, I don’t work for Mr. Castle anymore. Maybe his current assistant can help you—”

“Shit! Shit!” Lessing's voice rose. "SHIT!"

“Mr. Lessing—”

“Listen, Katri—Katerina—I need some help. Be a good girl and come over here and I’ll make it worth your while. Okay?”

Katerina answered with silence. She had met Joe Lessing maybe three times when she worked for Philip. He never struck her as a crazed, rapist murderer...until now. Not a good idea, she thought. *Whatever this is, I don't need it.*

“Look, this is on the level. I’m in some shit here and I need a little help. It’s worth a thousand dollars.”

*That I do need. Desperately.* “Okay...twenty minutes.”

“Make it ten. It’s a matter of life or death.”

“Which is it?”

“I’m not sure.” He gave his address and hung up.

Kat considered his comment and then threw on a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, and laced into a pair of ankle boots. She twisted her mass of hair into a sloppy braid. Stuffing some cash, ID, cellphone, and her trusty pepper spray in her pockets, she rushed out into the brisk New York City night. Against her better judgment, she took the subway. But, if there should be a police investigation, a cabbie, overeager to cooperate, would be a liability. In one of his many moments of ego and hubris, Philip had bragged about his golden rule of “fixing” people’s problems: get in, get out, get gone. Don’t linger. See everything but never be seen.

Keeping alert for drunkards, creepers, and other assorted predators lying in wait, she kept one hand in her pocket, her finger on the button of the palm-sized can of pepper spray.

She found Lessing's building. She glanced up, the bite of the chilly October night air making her give a quick, involuntary shiver. She pushed the call box button.

“Who is it?” Lessing sounded apprehensive.

*Who do you think it is?* “Katerina.”

The buzzer rang. Kat slipped inside.

She found the apartment door ajar. She inched inside. A colorful Persian rug covered most of the foyer. Examining the bright pattern of red, blue, and black and finding no sign of blood, she relaxed. She took tentative steps inside, scanning the living room. Everything was neat and in order.

“Mr. Lessing?” she said.

“In here,” he called from the end of the hallway.

Kat hesitated. Move ahead or turn back? She crept down the narrow space lined with modern art consisting of colorful paint splatters. The door was open.

Kat peered inside and saw Joe Lessing, a man in his forties, his overdeveloped muscular build now turning fleshy and soft. He was naked, pacing, and breathing hard. His flaccid penis, dangling like an oversized rotini, bobbed and swayed with every step.

Katerina froze. *Oh shit.*

He turned to look at Kat; she saw the panic in his dark eyes.

“Thank God you're here,” he said, turning to the bed. It was a massive four poster with a distressed wooden chest squatting at its foot. A Queen Anne style night stand on each side held a Tiffany lamp. But it was the unconscious, naked blonde woman lying on top of the rumpled covers that grabbed Kat's attention.

“I called someone. She said she would try to get here but I can't wait anymore.” He pointed at the bed. “Can you help me, please.”

Kat didn't know what to say to him. When he had come to Philip's office he was always calm and relaxed...and fully dressed. He liked perching on the edge of her desk and talking about his motorcycle, his house in the Hamptons, and his wife.

*His wife.*

“What happened?” she asked.

“I don't know,” he said in a shaky voice. “I don't know but I have to do something. *We* have to do something.”

He returned to mindless pacing and the penis began dancing again. Kat moved to the bed. The woman had bottle blond hair, a too perfect nose, but her breasts were real, her waist a size zero. Kat leaned over and touched her cheek. Warm.

"I'm fucked, aren't I?" he asked, wiping sweat off his brow. "Am I fucked?"

“She has a pulse,” Kat said.

“Thank Christ,” Lessing said.

“Have you tried waking her?”

“Of course I did! Nothing works!”

"What happened?"

Joe scratched his head like he was trying to work out a difficult math problem. “We were going at it and it was good—shit, it was great—and then she collapsed. Look, we have to get her the hell out of here.”

“When is your wife due, Mr. Lessing?”

Joe gave a short, guilty laugh. “She’s taking a night flight from LAX. She’ll be here soon.”

"What's soon?"

Lessing's eyes met hers. "Less than two hours."

*Shit.*

“Your —friend needs medical care.”

“I can’t take her to the hospital. No one can know about this. Her husband would very upset.”

*And your wife.* “I understand.”

“Please, you work for Phil—or you worked for him—whatever. You *know* people. You can work this out for me, right? You have to make this—” he said, pointing in the general direction of the bed, “go away.”

Kat mentally tried to construct what Philip, the attorney who considered his oath a suggestion rather than a requirement, would do.

“Just a minute,” she said, and pulled out her cell phone. She listened to the ringing on the other end of the line. Finally, there was a click.

“Yeah,” the voice said. A chorus of coughing and gurgling noises followed.

Kat waited for him to finish. “Doc, it’s Kat,” she said when it was quiet. “I need a favor.”

“I don’t get out of bed for less than a thousand,” the raspy voice said, followed by a deep drawing sound for air.

She held the phone away from her ear. “It’s going to cost a thousand.”

“For both of you?”

“No.”

“Will he take Travelers Checques?”

“No.”

“Will you take Travelers Checques?”

"No."

“They’re American Express,” Lessing said.

“I don’t care.”

Lessing resumed shuffling. Kat averted her eyes so that the penis was dancing in her peripheral vision. *A miniature Slinky*. She was tired of looking at it.

“Mr. Lessing?”

“Yeah?”

“Put your pants on...please.”

He looked down at himself and then swiped his pants up off the floor.

Kat got back on the phone. “You need to get out of bed.”

“If this needs a cleaner, it’s your problem.”

Kat glanced over at the unconscious woman. “I don’t think so.” She recited the address and hung up. *Good God, I hope not*.

\*\*\*

Doc was known only as that—Doc. He was a licensed physician, or at least that’s what Philip always said. He had a black goody bag with the usual items you found in a child’s toy doctor set only they were real: a stethoscope, a thermometer, and bottles of brightly colored pills.

Just under six feet, his frame seemed to struggle under the burden of his bulging stomach. His sagging face, the trophy of a dissipated existence, his silver streaked hair and heavy, jowled cheeks made him look more like a veteran porn producer than a doctor.

Only Doc’s heavy breathing broke the silence of the bedroom. One knee sunk into the mattress as he arched over the naked, unconscious woman, performing an examination.

Kat and Joe hovered on the other side of the bed, watching.

Doc pressed on the woman’s abdomen and ran his fingers in a piano playing motion across the undulating planes of her body, lingering over her breasts.

“Is that necessary?” Kat said.

“A doctor’s hands are sexless,” Doc wheezed.

“Bullshit,” she muttered.

Doc gave a grunt as he pushed his considerable girth off the bed, leaving a deep indent in the mattress. Picking up the woman's purse from the night table, he flicked it open and rooted in the contents.

“So?” Joe said.

“Narcolepsy,” Doc said.

“Bullshit,” Kat and Joe said in unison.

Doc tossed the tiny flame-red clutch on the bed and placed his stethoscope in his bag. He turned to Joe. “A thousand dollars.”

“For that kind of money, aren’t you gonna wake her up?” Joe asked.

“Can’t. She’ll come around on her own.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do with her until then?”

“Wait.”

“For how long?”

Doc gathered his bag. “Not long. A thousand dollars.”

Joe sputtered in objection.

“Mr. Lessing,” Katerina said, “you need to give Doc his money...Mr. Lessing—”

Kat waited for Joe to focus on her. “You need to give Doc his money,” Kat said, her voice strong. “I will find a way to get your friend home. Do we know where her husband is?”

Lessing seemed to have trouble focusing.

“Mr. Lessing—where is her husband?”

“He’s in Jersey. He’s driving back tonight. He could be home already. This was supposed to be a quickie.”

Kat nodded. “The money,” she said. She had no doubt that amount and much more was somewhere in the apartment. When Joe left the bedroom, Kat considered the unconscious woman in the bed. *How the hell am I going to get this woman home?*

She turned to Doc. “You sure about this?”

Doc opened the clutch and pulled out a medical bracelet with an ID tag.

Kat’s face flushed. *Shit! I screwed up.*

Doc tossed her the bracelet and she snapped it out of the air with an easy catch. “You’re still young, Miss Kitty. You got a lot to learn.”

Kat rubbed the bracelet between her fingers.

“She’ll be okay. Most of these cycles are short. She’ll have a sense of memory loss. Maybe that’s good. She’ll forget she was in bed with a schmuck.”

“Doc—”

“I don’t like him.”

Lessing came back into the bedroom with a wad of cash. His lips moved as he counted out the bills. He made two separate piles and handed one to Kat and the other to Doc.

“Okay, so,” he said. “What now?”

The call box buzzer sounded.

Kat, Joe, and Doc turned toward the door.

\*\*\*

Joe Lessing wore blue jeans, a white t-shirt, and a sheepish, cockeyed grin as he opened the apartment door for his wife, Constance, a slender brunette of medium height. She had a hard, unforgiving face and lips that had a generous application of too red lipstick.

“What took you so long?” she snapped.

“Sorry, babe,” he said, taking her briefcase. “I fell asleep on the couch.”

She grunted at his excuse and brushed past him.

“We need to move out of this place. There’s always a bunch of weirdos wandering around.”

“Like who?” he asked, vaguely realizing that he usually didn’t pay this much attention to her.

Mrs. Lessing let loose a string of complaints as she wandered through the apartment. Joe watched her out of the corner of his eye hoping she wouldn’t pick tonight as the night to change her usual habit of tossing her jacket over the chair. She was standing by the closet door.

•••

Kat had one arm wrapped around the waist of the unconscious woman, her other arm across her chest for support. The woman’s dress was half on. Kat was sure she would suffocate in the airless closet, trying not to breathe in the acrid odor of the wife’s hideous floral perfume. She



listened to Mrs. Lessing's robust bitching while straining against the growing dead weight pulling at her arms.

"...then the elevator doors open and this huge fat guy comes waddling out. He's wearing this sickening aftershave, really disgusting. He stunk up the whole elevator."

The blonde stirred, pulling in a deep breath.

"He looked like a pedophile or a pornographer...and he had this wheeze..."

The blonde raised her head, still drowsy. Kat clamped one hand over the woman's mouth. The blonde's eyes flew open as she tensed into fight mode.

"The wife is home," Kat whispered in her ear.

The blonde froze.

Motionless, they listened to Constance Lessing's voice trail down the hall along with her stiletto heels clicking against the hardwood floor.

"Why the hell do you have the window open? It's forty fucking degrees outside. I wondered why the hell it was so damn cold in here."

Kat and the blonde slid out of the closet, shoes and boots in hand. Treading on the balls of their feet, they raced to the front door and slipped out, hustling down the hallway to the stairwell. Kat cast a last glance back at the apartment door as it closed without a sound.

...

The limo was waiting at the end of the block. A driver, six foot four with skin the color of almonds, leaned against the car. He had an amused look on his face as if someone had just whispered a joke in his ear.

He flipped the back passenger door open and the blonde jumped in.

Katerina handed him a wad of bills which he tucked in his pocket without counting.

"Thanks for the favor, Luther. The lady will tell you where to go."

"No problem, Miss Katerina. Anything for you," he said. With the smirk firmly in place, Luther walked to the driver's side and slid in behind the wheel; he eased the limo away from the curb.

The gentle whirring noise of the electric window rolling down made Kat look back. The blonde's face peeked out. She mouthed the words "thank you" as the limo pulled into traffic.

Kat dropped her boots to the ground, slipped into them, and kneeled to tie the laces. A pair of tawny, slim legs, feet tucked into Louboutin leopard print stilettos stopped in front of her. Kat straightened up and found herself face to face with an impossibly attractive woman a few years older than herself. A shimmering black wraparound dress accentuated her curves; blond, straight, shoulder length hair fluttered in the light breeze.

“I take it you were Plan B,” she said.

“Yes,” Kat answered.

“It’s taken care of,” she said. It wasn't a question.

“Yes,” Kat said.

The woman gave Kat the once over from head to toe. “I'm Lisa. You can tell me all about it over a cup of coffee. If I like what you have to say, I have an opportunity that may interest you.”

"What kind of opportunity?"

"One where you make a lot of money, doing what you did tonight."

Kat hesitated, and then nodded.