

Excerpt from Duplicity

Chapter 26 – Members Lounge -2009

‘You don’t look like the type to hang about on the corners of King’s Cross,’ Celeste comments, sniffing the air and looking down at the young woman. She glances furtively at her nephew, Florian, who merely nods and introduces Sophia to his aunt.

A waitress ushers the trio to a table for Victorian high tea in the gardens park cafe. Moments later a waiter delivers a large pot of English breakfast tea, three porcelain plates, cutlery and a fine china tea service, carefully placing it on their linen covered table. He disappears, quickly returning with an elaborate looking three-tier cake stand loaded with delicious savouries, cream covered chocolate slices, and sweet miniature petit fours.

Celeste’s well-worn face belies her age. Slim and in her mid-fifties with fast-moving, beady eyes darting around the room from face to face before she sits down. Her short, bleached hair is on-trend with the trimmed edges obscuring her drooping earlobes. Heavy fresh-water pearl and gold stud earrings drag her ears down against her cheeks.

Surprisingly, she wears minimal make-up and takes care to dress in designer label clothing which screams upper middle-class. You’d never know she was a madam. Sophia notes how this woman could merge seamlessly into any crowd without drawing attention, until she opens her mouth. Her face is animated, and she continually smiles at Sophia, who worries Celeste sees her as a future source of income. Sophia immediately plays along, encouraging the older woman to reveal as much as possible.

‘Florian delivered a brilliant job at the Green House. I wanted the interior to look like an old Southern American plantation mansion, tall palms, pineapple lights and crystal chandeliers. You know the kind of thing.’ Celeste smiles warmly, holding Sophia’s gaze, scrutinising the young woman. ‘He knows his stuff, does our Florian,’ she continues disarmingly. ‘A brilliant interior designer. He told me you were thinking of working for him. What’s changed your mind?’

Sophia glances across at her friend, who is about to laugh, so she quickly looks back at Celeste, waiting expectantly.

‘I’m not sure yet,’ Sophia says. ‘I’m hoping to find out what’s involved. My family’s a spot of trouble, so money has now become a priority.’

This seems to satisfy Celeste for the moment. She is the youngest of eight siblings, the *runt of the litter*, she often jokes. Born of Irish Catholic immigrants, Celeste's street-wise, pragmatic approach to religion and compromising moral fortitude doesn't prevent her from hiring twenty-eight women who work twenty-four hours a day across three rostered shifts.

'I built the call-girl business up from nothing, and I make damn sure they're all well looked after,' she states proudly. 'I started out working Kings Cross with the other poor losers and drug addicts thirty years ago. Finally, I saved enough cash, with the help of a silent investor, to buy the Green House and look at me now!' she laughs. 'Girls like yourself are coming to me all the time looking for regular work and a secure income.'

Florian's right, Sophia thinks, his aunt is brash and outspoken, but she finds Celeste likeable with a down-to-earth, direct approach. He's already explained how Celeste's name means *heaven sent*, but she was definitely the ugliest in the family who regarded her lifestyle as one foot in hell and the other sliding down a slippery slope. Her appearance is no drawback, and over the years Celeste has endured every cosmetic intervention known to the free world, transforming from an ugly duckling into a celestial swan with an appetite for men of biblical proportions.

With a bulldog obsession, Celeste tirelessly focuses on the success of her business. 'It's a calling,' she explains with reverence, 'which provides me with a very comfortable lifestyle. Thank you very much.' She grins and leans across the table. 'Listen darl, let's get real here. Where the hell would we be without men?'

'No worse off.' Sophia chuckles. 'I have one question, so I can get my head around the rates and payments. Can you please explain how it all works? It must be tricky at times?'

This query pleases Celeste no end. She's confident Sophia will be a great little earner once she's learned the ropes. Discussing rosters, business targets and expectations along with pulling in pre-qualified clients is the kind of business talk Sophia relates to.

'No one likes talking about money,' explains the Green House madam. 'The first thing we serve customers is an elegant menu of expensive drinks, from imported champagne at over eighteen hundred dollars a bottle to wines and whisky of all kinds and qualities, just like the service my girls offer.'

Florian lets out a low whistle. 'I'm so glad I'm not straight,' he chuckles. Both he and Sophia are dumbstruck at the cost of alcohol, but Celeste responds quickly, dissuading them of any assumptions on that front.

'Champagne costs a lot.' She grins deviously. 'But it also includes the full service, if you get my drift?'

‘Oh,’ Sophia says, surprised by this revelation. ‘Is this for the whole night?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ Celeste replies. ‘I don’t want my staff sleeping on the job. It’s work, hard bloody graft and clients pay for the service. It can take somewhere between ten minutes and two hours depending on the John.’

She observes the confusion on the two young faces across the table. So naive, it’s like leading a lamb to slaughter. ‘Look, it’s dead simple. The champagne costs eighty bucks, the balance is the fee for the girl for an hour, and if it’s longer, they pay another hour’s fee whether they use up all that time or not. This is the fee for my top girls of course, and there’s only about eight of them. The others work a John over in ten minutes and he pays his three hundred bucks and walks. It’s like a production line, you could be stuffing beans in tins at a canning factory. The girls call the open lounge *the snake-pit*, for obvious reasons, it has a high turn-around, and they make a good living.

‘I offer this two-tier service, and of course, other specialities, for a bigger fee for those who can afford it. I’m able to capture the best part of the market.’ Celeste pauses, sipping tea, and glances from one astounded face to the other. ‘You’ve gotta cater for everyone love, you know, or you’ll be out of business before you’ve got their pants down.’