

The Destruction of a Goddess

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Bodies never lie

-- Martha Graham

* * * *

Vi sat in the back row of the Performing Arts Center, her clipboard on the seat beside her. She wasn't taking notes. There was no point. Everything was wrong. She shook her head, wishing she had never agreed to this job.

The piano was out of tune, and the accompanist was massacring "L'Chiam," one of the best-loved numbers in Fiddler on the Roof. No one was singing -- this was a dance rehearsal -- but someone should have been, at least to cover up the noise.

On stage, four grown men were attempting the low kicks of a kazatski dance. Their hands were on the ground for balance while they kicked outwardly with their feet. The move was harder than it looked; it took great strength and coordination.

The dancers were in their forties, and two had never danced before. They were surrounded by a group of men of varying ages (none of whom could dance) and the show's star, Guy Stephens. He was thin and trim -- which he should not have been for the role of Tevye -- and he could probably do the Russian folk dance the men were attempting. But Tevye was an observer in this scene, not a participant.

Vi rubbed her nose with her thumb and forefinger. Another headache was coming on. She had twelve weeks to whip these men into shape. Twelve weeks to do the impossible.

If only the Jetty Street Theater Company hadn't chosen Fiddler as its spring musical. If only the company had had enough common sense to bring in a few professional dancers, besides her. If only, if only.

She had tried to explain to the company's creative director that any musical with Jerome Robbins choreography would be impossible for a repertory company to do well. He cited example after example of companies doing Robbins' shows, from West Side Story to Fiddler.

But she knew better. She'd seen some of those performances and the dance was also adequate at best, excruciating at worst.

Robbins copyrighted his choreography, and the shows which featured his work on Broadway also insisted that the local rep company use the same choreography. It made performing works like Fiddler difficult at the local level, and impossible when the dancers were middle-aged men who'd never high-kicked before.

"Miss Hodel?" The male voice was nearly hidden by the pounding chords of the piano.

She looked sideways. A man stood in the darkness near the doorway. He wore a rumpled raincoat and he was tall. His face was in shadow.

"Can it wait?" she asked. "This is a rehearsal."

He glanced at the stage just as one of the so-called Russian dancers fell flat on his back. "How long do I

have to wait?" he asked. "I'm still a young man."

She suppressed a smile. "I suppose I can give them five."

Then she stood and clapped her hands. The dancers stopped immediately, but the accompanist didn't hear. Guy had to reach down from his pretend barstool and tap her on the shoulder to get her to stop playing.

"Get some water, do some stretches," Vi said. "When I come back in about ten minutes, we're going to go through this step by step."

The men groaned. The dancer on the floor continued to lay there, and Vi wondered if he had hurt himself. Well, if he had, someone would tell her.

Dance wasn't supposed to be easy, after all. Some said it was impossible. It certainly was the most difficult athletic endeavor human beings could attempt. These men weren't starting with the muscle-stretching exercises of first-year ballet. They were starting with Jerome Robbins stage work, designed for the best dancers on Broadway.

The \$500 per week she was charging the Rep -- an amount she'd originally agonized over, knowing how poor the company was -- was beginning to look more and more like an honorarium than payment for her services.

"How can I help you?" she said to the man in the shadows.

"Is there some place private?" he asked.

She wasn't about to go anywhere private with a man she didn't know. "What's this about?"

He stepped into the row. His face was angular, his skin a burnished gold that no tanning company could ever achieve. His dark gray eyes were so heavily fringed that Vi bet every woman he met was envious of them.

"My name is Zack Tate," he said. "I'm with the Portland Police Department. I was told that you're the person to talk with about dance."

Vi let out a small laugh. "There are hundreds of people to talk to in Portland. Did you just need an excuse for a vacation at the coast?"

"I wish," he said. "Can we talk?"

She sighed. "Let me see your identification, Officer Tate, and then -- "

"Detective."

"Detective Tate. Then we'll go to the office, such as it is."

He flipped open a wallet that held his badge and another piece of identification which she didn't bother to look at it. She did, however, study the badge. She'd been in enough theatrical productions to know what a fake badge looked like. A real one was heavier, with the city's logo on it, and a number engraved at the bottom.

"All right," she said, and made her way to the aisle. Her knee ached. She had been sitting too long. She left her clipboard behind her, marking her spot.

Tate stepped into the aisle. When she reached him, he extended a hand as if he wanted to help her. So he was observant. Most people didn't notice her limp right away.

She ignored the hand, and used the back of a nearby seat to help her keep her balance on the inclined floor. Tate shoved his hands in the pocket of his raincoat and kept pace with her. He was even taller than she had initially thought, but he bent his body into a kind of S, as if his height embarrassed him.

When they reached the carpeted lobby outside the theater, she repeated, "What's this about?"

"Paloma Kitani."

Vi rolled her eyes as she led him past the potted ferns to the tiny office. "What did she do now?"

"Hadn't you heard? She was murdered, Ms. Hodel."

Vi stopped. Somehow her hand had come up and covered her mouth. She didn't remember making the movement. That was odd in and of itself -- she usually remembered every movement she made.

"What happened?" she asked through her fingers.

He nodded toward the office. "Let's sit down."

Tate led the way inside. She was almost surprised when he took the seat in front of the presswood desk. She took the seat behind it, feeling as if her entire world had spun out of control.

Paloma Kitani had been a major force in her life. For years, Vi had worked at Paloma's side. Then she and Paloma had what Paloma called "a major falling out," and from that moment on Paloma became someone Vi pushed against, even though they had almost no contact any longer.

"Murdered." Vi shook her head. "How?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Tate said.

"So you came to me because you suspect me?" Her voice was shaking. Her voice hadn't shaken in years.

"No." He spoke slowly, calmly, as if he'd had this discussion a thousand times with a thousand different people. "I came here because I was told you're an expert on dance, and on Ms. Kitani's company in particular."

Vi shook her head. "I don't know anything about Kitani Studios."

"That's not what people told me."

"I haven't lived in Portland in five years, Detective. I worked with Paloma at a different dance company."

"That's not technically true, is it, Ms. Hodel?"

She frowned at him, not understanding. "It's true."

"I thought Kitani Studios used to be Littlefield Dance Company."

Vi sighed. "That's a matter of debate."

"Oh?" He settled in his chair as if he were willing to listen to the entire tedious argument. "In what way?"

"So I'm not a suspect," Vi said.

"No, you're not," Tate said, folding his hands across his stomach. "Why are you asking now?"

"How did you rule me out?" Vi asked.

"Actually, the creative director of this place did. He laughed when I called this afternoon, said you hadn't been to Portland in months, and that you were definitely here on Monday night, brow-beating the dancers." Tate smiled slightly. "I think those were his exact words."

She had been here, trying to get the entire cast to handle the traditional dances of the wedding ceremony. For the cast members, most of whom had never seen a traditional Jewish wedding let alone understood one, every detail seemed suspect. She wasn't going to have any hair left when this production was over.

"Ms. Hodel?"

She nodded. "I was. I'll probably be here every night for the next fifty years trying to get this right. I'm just glad they didn't decide to put on *A Chorus Line*."

"You could change the dances."

"No, I can't," she said, unwilling to explain her predicament. "So what happened to Paloma in Monday night?"

"She was killed." His smile was long gone. "You can ask as many questions as you like, Ms. Hodel, but when you're done, I'm still going to ask you about Littlefield Dance Company."

Vi closed her eyes. Even the name of the company was painful. Nothing erased the feelings she had from those days. Time did not make this wound go away.

"Arista Littlefield," Vi said as she opened her eyes, "was considered one of the greatest dancers of her generation, but she was an even better choreographer. She felt stifled in New York City, so she came west. She didn't like the dance scene in San Francisco. LA was too focused on the movies, and she couldn't take the rain in Seattle, so she settled in Portland."

Tate nodded. He could have gotten this from any book on Arista. Still, he didn't stop Vi from speaking or from telling him what he already knew.

His silence made her even more uncomfortable.

"She started the company, luring principle dancers from some of the better touring companies. Eventually, she formed a school as a wing of the company and cultivated her own dancers. I was her first star."

Vi's voice caught. She cleared her throat. Twenty years old, the world was ahead of her. People who thought of dance as an art always forgot its physical side. Most artists got better as they got older. Dancers fell apart.

"Paloma," she said, forcing herself to go on, "never soloed. She never made it out of the troupe. She wasn't good enough. She only had two years on stage, and then Arista pulled her, which caused problems."

Tate looked surprised. "Really?"

Vi nodded. "It's not in the histories for two reasons. The old histories don't carry it because Paloma was one of a hundred dancers who didn't make the grade. The new ones don't mention it because they were authorized by Paloma."

He frowned. "So how did she become the central figure in Portland's dance scene?"

Vi wished the room were bigger so that she could stand up and pace, maybe look out a window as she talked to him. She didn't want him to see her face, to see all the emotions that still lurked there, so many years later.

"Paloma became Arista's lover."

He let out a small whistle.

"Even then," Vi said, "Arista never let her do more than work with the students. Arista knew Paloma had no talent."

"Yet she left her dance company to her."

Vi shook her head. "She made Paloma the beneficiary of her estate. Take a look at the will. I was supposed to be the creative director of the dance company."

"So why aren't you?" He was leaning forward now, clearly intrigued.

"Oh, I was," she said. "For the three months it remained open. That was how long it took to settle Arista's estate. Then Paloma opted to close the company. That caused quite a fuss. You can find it all in the Oregonian. The paper was very upset."

"And you?"

Vi shrugged, pretending at a calmness she didn't feel. "I was too."

"So why didn't you sue?"

"On what grounds?" Vi had spent money on a battery of attorneys. She knew this part of the law upside down and backwards. "Paloma had control of the estate. She could do what she felt was best for it. And like most dance companies, Littlefield ran in the red. Not badly in the red, but enough that she could justify closing it."

"But she says the company is exactly the same."

"Well, technically, it can't be," Vi said. "Because if it is, I'm creative director for life."

He was shaking his head. "Paloma used the Littlefield techniques. She was the only one who performed Arista Littlefield's dances, right?"

Vi looked down at her hands, thick and callused from years of bar work, knuckles enlarged from overuse. How to explain the world of dance to someone who didn't practice it? "She owns the copyrights to all the choreography, yes."

"But?"

"But that's not how dance works."

"How does it work, Ms. Hodel?"

She gave him a small smile. "Come watch, Detective. I'll show you."

* * * *

Maybe she had thought she could chase him away by making him suffer through rehearsal. Maybe she thought she wouldn't have to talk about Arista any more.

But it didn't work. Tate stayed to the very end. He sat in the first row and watched as she forced her poor middle-aged wanna-be dancers twist their bodies into positions they'd never tried before.

She had minor victories -- two of the men managed to cross their arms and high kick at the same time -- but mostly, she failed. No matter how hard she tried to teach them the maneuvers, the men didn't understand.

It wasn't their fault. The dances were too difficult for them. And she knew, no matter how hard she tried, she wouldn't be able to make her dancers look good.

So she'd have to figure out a way to play the scene for laughs. She mentally apologized to the ghost of Jerome Robbins who, if he were watching, was probably appalled at the way his dances were being abused. But she had no choice.

When rehearsal finished, and the would-be dancers collected their things, Tate remained in his seat.

"You want me to stay, Vi?" Guy Stephens asked with real concern.

Vi shook her head. "I'll be all right."

Stephens raised his eyebrows, but didn't argue. He gave Tate a long, warning look. His reaction made Vi feel warm toward him, even though she knew he had done that primarily because he was an actor who had no idea he was facing a cop.

After they left, and all but the houselights were off, Tate said, "What was I supposed to learn? That dance is hard? I think I could have figured that out on my own."

Vi sat next to him. Her knee hurt and she was very tired. She'd executed the moves she'd wanted the men to do. The dance in this part of *Fiddler* was energetic and lively, celebrating life. She hadn't felt like celebrating life, but the dance had demanded it.

She always did what her art demanded of her.

"Dance," she said, "is a performance art."

Tate nodded, his eyes hooded. For the first time, she felt his impatience.

"But dance, unlike music, has only started to codify what its routines. Choreography which has been written down so that someone else can learn it without seeing it performed is less than a hundred years old. Even then, it's not done well."

"Obviously."

"No, you misunderstand," she said. "These men are doing the best they can, and they'll learn the steps. But even if they were the best male dancers on Broadway, they wouldn't do the show correctly."

Tate frowned.

"Choreography lives in the body. The only way to learn a method is through mentoring. Right now, only I and three other dancers know the Littlefield dances. Not just the choreography, but the moves, the grace, the emotion that Arista put into her work. I could make a dancer with talent do one of Arista's dances in Arista's style. Paloma can't -- couldn't."

God, Vi hated the change. She still wasn't used to it. Paloma, dead, and this cop not telling her how.

"Why not?"

"You saw the movements up there. The detail I concentrated on."

"I thought you were going to break that poor man's arms. He can't support his weight on those and kick."

"I know," she said. "But let's say he could. Should he do it fast or slow? Should the movement be big or small? Should he keep one foot on the ground while the other kicks up or should they both be in the air? All of those are personal choices. I can get the answer by watching the filmed version of *_Fiddler_* but it doesn't matter here. Here all I have to do is make sure the guy doesn't fall flat on his back."

"Again."

"Again," she said.

"So you're telling me that when Paloma threw you out, she destroyed the very thing she was entrusted to keep."

"Yes," Vi said.

"The other three dancers who knew it...?"

"Didn't stay either. She ran them off."

"I don't understand. Why would she do that?"

"The school," Vi said. "That's where the company made its money. Paloma realized that she could avoid touring, perform in Portland only, and keep expenses down. She also claimed to be Arista's protege, and even though we all deny that, she says it's just sour grapes. She's destroyed most of the records of her dancing days."

Tate put his hands behind his head and looked at the darkened stage.

"With that kind of pedigree, she can -- could -- bring in students to this prestigious school, the only place that supposedly teaches the Littlefield method, and then charge them a lot of money. For the first time, the company is making a profit."

"That's a good thing, right?"

Vi's smile was small. "For Paloma, maybe. For dance, it means that no one else can perform Arista's work. I'm barred from it. So are the others. And Paloma won't -- wouldn't -- license any of Arista's signature dances to another company. So Arista is fast becoming a footnote when ten years ago, she was one of the most important people in modern dance."

"I'm sure that made folks angry," Tate said.

"Yes," she said. "The other three were as furious as I was. We talked about every option we could. But Susannah had gotten work dancing in San Francisco and had to leave. Catherine and Trina had to find work as well. They were all lucky. They could still dance."

She sighed. Tate watched her closely.

"We weren't the only ones who were angry," she said, realizing she sounded defensive, but unable to

think of a different way to give him the information he needed. "I can point to a hundred different articles, from the New Yorker to The San Francisco Chronicle that prove you right. But there's nothing anyone can do. Paloma is in charge of the estate."

"Was," Tate said. "Who is now?"

Vi frowned. "I have no idea. There was some predecease condition that made everything go to the company, but the company's gone. I suppose everything goes to Paloma's heirs, if she has any."

"Does she?"

Vi shrugged. "I never heard her mention family. Once she inherited from Arista, she kept her own sexual preferences quiet. In Portland, no self-respecting parent would knowingly send a student to a school with a gay teacher."

"So no lovers?"

"None that I know of, but I moved here."

He hadn't taken his gaze off the stage. "Why here? Why not New York or San Francisco or Denver, some place with a good modern dance company?"

Vi felt her face flush. The anger, which was always near the surface when she talked about this, made her clench her fists. "I was forbidden to use Littlefield techniques."

"So?"

This time, she wasn't trapped in the small office. This time, she could stand as the emotion took her, and she did. "Except for a few years in ballet school, I was trained by Arista. Everything I know, I learned from her. Anything I taught could be considered the Littlefield method."

"How would anyone know?"

"You mean, if I taught in Chicago, how would Paloma know what methods I was using?"

"Yes."

"I never got a chance to find out. Every time I applied for a job, Paloma told them my history and that she wouldn't let anyone teach the method outside of her studio. Which led to questions about why wasn't I teaching there."

"And why weren't you?"

"I told you."

"What did she say?"

"She said that I had run the company into the red, that I knew nothing of the real method, and that I was all hype and no talent."

"Surely they knew she was wrong."

"There was a company in Boston that wanted me. She told them she'd sue them if they hired me."

"Because?"

"Because she knew I'd teach the Littlefield method. They got the message and they spread the word. No one offered me work."

"So you came to the coast?"

"I had a house here. I inherited it from my parents. I could live almost for free. I had some money saved. I survived."

"But you can't do what you want," Tate said.

Vi walked to the edge of the stage, and ran her hand along the lip. She had never performed on a stage this small. If she were dancing here, she'd feel restricted, unable to float across the stage in her usual leaps and bounds.

Or what had been her usual leaps and bounds, back in the days when she was so lithe, so supple, she sometimes felt as if she could fly.

"I have a studio here," she said. "It's small, but it works. I teach dance, and I help at the schools."

"I thought you said you couldn't teach."

"Not at a major company. But here -- well, Paloma didn't care about here. No one does."

Somehow she said that without bitterness. Maybe she was growing, changing. Maybe she had put more behind her than she had thought.

"It must have been difficult to make the transition."

She bowed her head. "Dancers always know the transition is coming. So few find work doing anything related to dance. I'm lucky in some ways."

"Do you really believe that?"

She nodded. She did believe it. She had just thought such a small life would never be hers. Somehow she had always imagined that she would be as grand as Arista, making her mark upon the world, even though she had never been a good choreographer -- she didn't have the imagination.

"So," he said, "this is why they told me to come to you."

"What is?" she asked.

"This history of the company. All that you keep in your mind."

Vi shook her head. "Others know this."

"But you know the dances."

"Yes." She continued to trace the lip. The wood was soft under her fingers. "Are you going to tell me how she died?"

"Tomorrow," he said. "I'd like to meet with you tomorrow, and I'll give you the details then."

"I'd like to know now."

"No, you don't," he said. "Right now, even knowing that she died, you'll be able to sleep tonight."

"But I won't if I learn how?"

"Most people don't handle death well," he said.

"I'm not most people."

"I'm beginning to realize that." He was silent for a long time, and she understood that he wasn't going to say any more, no matter how much she pushed him. He was staying close-mouthed about Paloma's death for a reason, and Vi wasn't sure she wanted to know what that reason was.

Tate's chair squeaked. She recognized the sound. He was standing up. He came up beside her, so close that she could smell his aftershave -- faint and spicy.

"You danced tonight," he said.

"No," she said. "I taught tonight."

He shook his head. He was staring at the stage as if the performers were still there. As she gazed up at him, she saw his eyes move -- following the imaginary dance across the set.

"You danced," he said. "You can barely walk, yet you did the entire routine up there. Didn't it hurt?"

She smiled at him. "You haven't been around dance very long, have you?"

"No," he said. "Why?"

"Because it always hurts, detective." She pushed away from the stage. "No matter what you do, it always hurts."

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The drive home seemed to take longer than usual. Hers was the only car on the road, and as she drove, she watched the ocean. The night had a luminescence, and she could see the waves, dark against the somewhat lighter sky.

This part of the coast was made up of small towns, all linked by a single ribbon of highway. The theater was in one town, and Vi lived in the next if, indeed, a community of 200 people constituted a town.

Her home stood on Stony Point, a headland that jutted into the ocean and, with Rocky Point to the south, framed the harbor. On stormy nights, the wind was strongest there -- with nothing to block the wind's power for thousands of miles.

She parked her Taurus in the single car garage, then made her way inside. The house had originally been a beach cottage, designed for the occasional weekend visit.

But when her parents had died -- back in the days when she'd been the principal dancer at Littlefield, and Littlefield had been the hot company on the West Coast -- she had remodeled the house.

It was still small. The downstairs was one large room. A countertop and a row of cabinets divided the kitchen from the dining room, and a staircase divided the dining room from the living room. The west, south, and north walls were mostly windows, thick double panes that did not rattle too badly in the wind.

The only bedroom was upstairs. Initially there had been two bedrooms -- a large one and a tiny one with no closet, the one she had used growing up. She had made gotten rid of the small bedroom, making it part of the master bath, and added a balcony off the western wall, so that she could sit outside at night

and stare at the stars.

She loved it here. If she hadn't, she might have fought harder for her position in the world. But she had a refuge, a place to hide, and somehow that was more important to her than fighting Paloma and her lies.

Paloma, who was dead. Murdered.

Even with all their differences, Vi never thought anyone would murder Paloma. But now that the detective had told her about it, the death made perfect sense. If Paloma was going to die young, she was going to die at someone else's hand.

Vi went to the entry in the back of the house and dug through her box of recycled newspapers. She hadn't been reading the *Oregonian* lately, although she'd subscribed. She'd stayed in bed long on mornings after rehearsal, nursing her knee. Despite her brave statement to Tate, the pain she'd been feeling was bothering her. It seemed to be growing worse, and she didn't want to think about what that meant.

She carried the papers from the last two weeks to the sofa. Then she turned on the gas fireplace, poured herself a glass of wine, and started the search.

The article was on the front page of the Metro section, about ten days before.

FAMOUS DANCER MURDERED

Paloma Kitani found in studio

Vi read the article, and the follow-ups that ran for the rest of the week. Somehow, seeing the words in hard cold print made Paloma's death real.

Hard to believe a woman that vibrant, that strong, could be gone.

Vi almost felt as if she were toppling forward, as if she'd been pushing against Paloma for her entire adult life, and now that wall, that immovable wall that had been Paloma, was gone.

Vi could go back to work at a real studio. She didn't need to worry that Paloma would sue her or attack her or try to destroy her.

In so many ways, Vi had her life back. Her old life.

She shook off the thought. Paloma was dead. The last thing Vi should be considering was herself.

She learned little from the articles. They were as vague as Tate had been about the method of death. Apparently it had been unique, and the police were withholding it.

The articles did say that Paloma had been in the studio alone. The last people to see Paloma alive had been her students. Apparently she had had a late night class. The parents had picked up the students, said their good-byes to Paloma, and no one saw her after that.

Until one of the principal dancers had arrived to teach the early morning dance class. She had unlocked the building and found Paloma's body.

The newspaper said the dancer had been so distraught that she had to be sedated.

Vi set the paper down. She stared into the gas flame, burning steady and even in the small fireplace. What happened when a woman like Paloma left the world? Did the world become a better place? Or

would all the nasty things that Paloma had done live past her?

Paloma hadn't been a bad woman, not initially. Shy, frightened, beautiful in that wispy way so many ballerinas had. Wispy, even though their slender frame actually had great strength.

When she had become Arista's lover, she had been so insecure that she used to welcome Arista's verbal battering. Once Vi had found Paloma alone in the studio, sitting beneath the bar, her back to the mirrors, sobbing.

I'll never be good enough, she had said.

Vi hadn't had a response to that. She had known that Paloma was right. There was an element to dance, one that people rarely spoke of. Dance was a craft which could be learned. But to be truly great required physical talent, a talent that lived within the body and had to be nurtured.

Paloma was good enough to be a company dancer, but she did not have the ability to go beyond that, no matter how hard she tried. It was clear in all the missed steps, the flawed leaps, the slow way that she learned.

Arista had loved her for her imperfections. Surrounded by talent and egos, Arista had seen Paloma as an unusual element, not realizing the potential for destruction being sown in that young, idealistic girl.

Sometimes Vi thought the company had crushed Paloma long before Arista died. Paloma's soul had been destroyed, and in the end, she had no choice but to seek revenge.

And now this.

Vi picked up the newspapers and took them back to her recycling bin. Her life was different now because of Arista. Because of Paloma.

And no amount of wishing could change that.

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Detective Tate arrived at the house promptly at ten. He brought a baker's box filled with donuts. They were still warm, and their scent made Vi's stomach rumble. She hadn't allowed herself donuts since she started to dance seriously.

She had made coffee and she had fresh fruit that she was going to offer him, but it felt churlish to reject the donuts. She took a plain one, felt the greasy coating beneath her fingers, and set it on a small plate. She handed another plate to Tate, who took it with an expression of bemusement.

He poured himself some coffee, added cream but no sugar, and carried the cup into the dining area. He stood at the windows for a long time, looking at the ocean.

"You have a beautiful home," he said. Vi thought she heard a touch of envy in his voice.

"Thank you."

"I'd expected to see pictures of dancers, photographs, memories. There's none of that. At least down here."

And none upstairs either. Her memories were packed in boxes and hidden in the attic space above the garage, probably mildewing in the salty air.

"I like the house the way it is," she said.

He nodded, sipped his coffee, and stared at the waves. They were large, frothy, demanding. A storm was brewing out at sea.

She ate her donut, almost self-consciously. She had so trained herself that anything filled with fat, sugar and starch was bad for her that an indulgence felt like a sin.

One was more than enough. Tate didn't eat any. She felt bad that the donuts were going to waste.

"You said you had more to talk with me about," she said after a while.

"I wanted to wait until you'd eaten." He turned around, then sat down at the dining room table, facing the ocean, as if he couldn't get enough of it. "I double-checked what you told me last night."

"I expected you would."

"I had trouble believing you would accept a small life here on the coast."

She nodded. A lot of her friends hadn't believed it either.

"Then I saw this house and view. It's making more sense this morning."

She sat in the captain's chair at the head of the table. She put her feet on a nearby bench and leaned back, cradling her cup. Sitting like that, she could see the ocean as well, and the bank of clouds that were forming on the horizon.

"I thought you said I wasn't a suspect."

He glanced at her. "You should have been. You lost the most, it seemed to me. But you were here that night, seen by dozens of people. It's a two-hour trip to Portland, and even by the coroner's most liberal estimates, Ms. Kitani was already dead by the time you left rehearsal."

"How did she die?" Vi asked.

"That's what I want your help on," he said.

She raised her eyebrows.

"You'll see when I show you the photos."

"Photos? Of her body?"

He nodded, then got up and walked out to his car. When he came back, he was carrying a manila envelope.

"These are difficult," he said, "but I need someone who specializes in dance to see them. I showed them to the head of the Portland Ballet, but she said that someone who knew Arista Littlefield's work would be best suited to discuss them."

He set the envelope down. Vi looked at it, a light rectangle against her dark oak table.

"What happened?" Vi asked, not touching the envelope.

"Someone surprised her," he said. "The office was a mess -- not the kind a thief leaves, but one that suggests a fight. A chair was knocked over, all of the stuff on top of the desk had been swept to the

floor, but not touched. Almost as if someone had done it in a fit of anger."

Paloma had been prone to those kinds of angry outbursts.

"She died in there?"

"No." He kept his gaze on Vi as he spoke. She felt uncomfortable, as if he were weighing her reactions. "She died in the theater. She'd been hung."

Vi swallowed. The studio's theater was as familiar to her as the back of her hand. The stage was a traditional proscenium arch because Arista believed that dance should have room to breathe. She had hated theater in the round, performance in the center of a crowd of people. Arista preferred the illusion that dance could give against a formal backdrop.

Her work always tended toward classical, even as it was dubbed modern.

Above stage were a series of catwalks so that the technicians could reach the lights. The catwalks were built strong -- Arista had been in a theater where the catwalks had collapsed under the weight of a worker, killing him and maiming a dancer who had been on stage at the time.

"Where?" Vi asked. In addition to the catwalks, there were the poles that held the lights, and then the beams that ran along the ceiling above the seats. Or someone could have taken her up to the booth in the back and hung her out the window. The windows opened back there, another trick of Arista's.

"We're not sure," he said. "Whoever killed her watched her die, then cut her down and posed her."

Vi shuddered. She didn't want to think about how long it took Paloma to die by hanging -- or what it was like to watch that. Someone had to really hate her to do that.

He placed two fingers on the envelope and slid it across the table. Then he opened the flap and pulled out large glossy photographs, keeping the backs to Vi.

"We think the parent of a student did this or had it done," he said as he stacked the photographs. "You've been following the case, right?"

"No," she said. Apparently she had let go of the studio more than she had thought. Or maybe she was just hiding from it.

"Mmm," he said, still clutching the photographs. "Last fall, Ms. Kitani turned down a female student, saying she needed to lose 35 pounds before joining the dance troupe. The parents were suing, saying that their daughter's weight was within the normal range, and that Ms. Kitani's requirement would cause undue harm."

"But they wanted the daughter in Paloma's school."

He nodded. "Claiming it was the only way she could learn modern dance in Portland."

Vi's leg cramped. She stood and stretched until the cramp lessened.

Tate watched. "What happened to your leg?"

"What happens to many athletes," she said. "I blew my knee at a performance, and it hasn't been the same since. It ended my career as a dancer."

"But you can still dance."

"Not well," she said and sat down. "How can the parents sue? Portland doesn't have that discrimination law that San Francisco has."

She was referring to the case in San Francisco in which a girl had been turned down for an exclusive ballet company because she had the wrong body type. San Francisco had a city ordinance which prohibited discrimination based on appearance.

"It's a civil case," he said. "They can do anything. They said it destroyed their daughter's belief in herself."

Vi was silent. Much as she hated people trying to force themselves into endeavors in for which they were not qualified, she empathized with the girl. Paloma wasn't known for her tact. She might have done something, said something, that had indeed been destructive to the girl's self esteem.

Vi had solid self-esteem and she'd suffered under Paloma's verbal attacks.

"Why would the parents kill her if they're suing her?" Vi asked.

He shrugged. "I've never found murder to be particularly rational."

Then he gave her the pile.

There must have been twenty photographs in the stack. They were done in color. Paloma's face was black with blood, the rope still around her neck. Her eyes bulged and her tongue, also black, stuck out.

Vi let the photographs drop, her stomach turning. To her own surprise, she blinked back tears.

She had no idea how someone could do such a thing. Especially how someone could sit and watch a person strangle to death, the face changing color, the tongue extending, the eyes growing too large for their sockets. She couldn't imagine what the noise was like, or how it felt to be so close to someone struggling for their very existence.

"What do you think?" he asked after a moment.

She shook her head. She hadn't even noticed the position of the body. Just the face -- the once-beautiful face -- ruined forever by a hideous and prolonged death.

With a hand that was steadier than it should have been, she picked the photographs up again and forced herself to look at them.

Paloma sat in a lotus position, the bottoms of her feet together, her hands in front of her, palms together. Someone had tied the hands into that position, the arms bent at the elbow. Paloma's back was straight, her body shoved against an overturned chair to achieve the right effect.

Vi had never felt her body turn cold before, not like this. It was as if her blood had been replaced with ice.

"It wasn't a student," she said.

Tate looked at her.

"It was one of us."

* * * *

The music, by a Chinese composer, had come first, lyrical and fragile. It had sounded, to Vi, like

someone had finally managed to capture the wind.

Arista had loved it, had thought it different enough to capture a story she'd been trying to tell her entire life, the story of a goddess who had overreached herself. A more powerful god, threatened by the goddess, was trying to destroy her.

Arista had been working the choreography in the months before her death. She kept coming back to the image of a woman sitting in a lotus position, like many of the Chinese drawings that graced her office. Arista wanted the woman to be motionless and yet to rise on a cloud of smoke toward the sky.

She couldn't figure out how to achieve that vision. She knew she could cheat and use effects, the way someone on a play would, but she didn't want to. She wanted to use dance, somehow.

First, she started with dancers lifting the motionless woman toward the sky, but that was too clunky. So she placed the woman on a gauze sheet and tried lifting that. But the sheet wouldn't hold the woman's weight.

She was thinking of using scarves to hide the dancers when she got ill. Her body, too thin and tortured by years of physical abuse, did not have the stamina to survive the illness. After a few weeks, Arista died.

In her last days, she'd still been trying to figure out how to put the image on stage.

Only the creative team had worked on the new piece with Arista. Not even Paloma had known about it. Arista hadn't liked too many hands in her work. A few of the dancers had tried the routine, but they hadn't known its meaning.

The dancer, the serene dancer, was supposed to represent a sacrifice to the hostile god as an attempt to save the goddess.

A person would have had to know the meaning to bend Paloma into that position. Because only a member of the creative team understood what that was saying.

Paloma had to be sacrificed to save Arista. Arista, who had already gone to another plane. Arista, who had become the goddess who was being destroyed.

* * * *

It didn't take the police long to figure out which of the three had committed the crime. Only one had been in Portland that day. She hadn't even tried to cover her trail.

Susanna Weeks had been the youngest member of the creative team. She had idolized Arista and had even tried to finish the piece in the weeks after Arista's death. When Paloma had disbanded the company, Susanna had gone to the others, demanding that they take Paloma to court.

It had been Vi who had talked her out of it. Vi, who believed that the best thing they could all do was move on.

That was before Paloma systematically destroyed Vi's career.

Susanna had survived, though. She could still dance. One of the best modern dance companies in San Francisco picked her up. She danced for them as a principal, learning the new techniques, but not really adopting them. Her greatest desire was to finish Arista's last piece, and Paloma wouldn't let her do it.

No one knew exactly what set Susanna off. Tate had a theory. The story of the lawsuit against Kitani

Dance Studios hit the San Francisco papers the Sunday before the murder. The article had focused on the young dancer, and her reaction to Paloma.

“She ruined my life,” the little girl said.

She ruined a lot of lives, Vi knew, and it didn't look like the damage was done.

* * * *

Susanna plead guilty to second degree murder, with a chance for parole in 25 years. The authorities had everything -- from a plane ticket to Portland that morning to fingerprints on the statue she'd used to knock Paloma senseless.

At first, the defense wanted to take the case to trial, believing Susanna too small to lift Paloma and hang her from the catwalk. But Tate, after having seen Vi, knew that dancers were strong. He found video of Susanna lifting dancers twice her size, and that helped the prosecution's case.

Vi went to the allocution, listened to Susanna recount the crime. Susan looked frail, so beautiful in her tailored suit, certainly not strong enough -- not crazy enough -- to hang a woman and watch her die.

Tate sat one row back, hands folded in front of him as if he were clasping them together to prevent himself from strangling her.

Susanna's voice was flat as she recounted all her grievances against Paloma, how much she had hated her, what Paloma had to Arista's memory. It wasn't the newspaper article that set Susanna off. It was one final phone call in which Paloma told her that she was going to finish the dance herself -- a dance she had never seen performed, a concept she'd never really understood, and a production she couldn't begin to undertake.

From that moment on, Susanna stewed, until she finally couldn't take it any more. Then she'd flown to Portland and ended everything.

Vi's hands were in the pockets of her suit, pulling it down. Her entire body was tense. She'd never heard anyone recount a crime before, and she hadn't expected to hear such an emotionless tone. Wasn't murder a crime of passion? And if it wasn't, shouldn't it be?

When Susanna was done, and the judge had gavelled her sentence down, the guards handcuffed her to take her away to a place where there was no dance. As she turned around, she saw Vi and her face lit up.

"I saved it, Vi," she said. "I saved it."

Vi's mouth fell open. She didn't respond. She couldn't -- not before they led Susanna away.

People were moving all around Vi, conversation building. But Vi couldn't bring herself to stand. She could barely breathe.

Someone sat down beside her, and a warm hand covered hers. She looked up and saw Tate studying her.

"You didn't tell her," he said.

"She'll find out soon enough," Vi said. And think it Vi's failure that the company wouldn't reopen. Think that it was Vi who was now betraying Arista's memory, when Vi had nothing to do with it.

"I'll make sure someone tells her that Kitani died without a will," he said.

"I'm not sure you want to do that," Vi said.

He frowned. "Why not?"

"It might upset her more."

"Why?"

"The copyrights," Vi said. "They're part of the estate. Paloma had no family. God knows what'll happen to them."

"Won't they be put up for sale?" Tate asked.

"Maybe," Vi said. "Or maybe they'll just be forgotten -- or bought by someone who can afford them, someone who understands them less than I understand Jerome Robbins."

"You understand him well enough to teach him."

"To beginners," she said, and stood. Her knee threatened to buckle beneath her, as it often did when she'd been sitting too long.

"I'll buy you coffee," Tate said.

Vi shook her head. She wanted to be done with all of this, to forget it, to pretend it had never happened. She wanted to bury the emotions that had been overwhelming her the last few weeks, the anger -- not at Paloma, but at Susanna.

If only Susanna had done this before the will was settled, before the transfer of assets had been made. If only she had done it right after Arista died, then the Littlefield Dance Company would still exist. Vi would still be creative director, and Arista's work -- a lifetime of work -- wouldn't have been destroyed.

But the gods were cruel, especially the gods of dance. And they were unforgiving. Arista had known that. In her sketch of the piece, the sacrifice had been rejected.

The goddess had been destroyed.

"You sure?" Tate asked.

It took Vi a moment to understand what he meant. "Yeah," she said. "I have a long drive, and then rehearsal tonight."

"Have they learned how to dance yet?" he asked.

She gave him a small smile. "They're not falling down any more."

"That's a start," he said.

"In this case," she said, "that's all I can ask for."

"It's all we can ever ask for," he said.

She almost argued with him. And then she remembered. Dance was impossible. Only a few managed to conquer it, and never for life. Only for a moment.

And it was those moments that had to last a lifetime. That was what Susanna had ignored, what Paloma had never learned, and what Vi would never, ever forget.

-- END --