

The Viper's Lair

by Katrina Erasmus

*** **Anastasia:** *Female impersonator in inner city Sydney. 22y.o., 5'8", 61kg blonde, male anatomy. \$200 dinner date, \$400 hotel meet, cash. Top.* ***

The picture showed a blonde woman in black lingerie, sitting on the cream-coloured sheets of a hotel double. It was clearly taken on a phone, and the poor quality of the shot combined with the swish of blond hair over her right eye was enough to obscure her presumably masculine features. Her left knee was drawn up to just underneath her chin, revealing a fishnetted inner thigh.

Sully's fingers hovered over the keyboard. He had seen men like this tumbling out of Oxford St bars, but he'd always kept his head down and hastened his step. Surprised at the breath catching in his throat, he typed out what he hoped was an appropriate message.

BigJohn3: hello miss Anastasia. you are beautiful. hotel meet this Saturday?

Sully arrived at the hotel in a grey T-shirt and sweatpants. Heavy workers' boots. He avoided the eyes of the concierge. Thankfully, there was little traffic through the lobby at this time of night. Nevertheless, he was painfully aware of the sound of his breath, his odour, the space he took up in the corner opposite the staircase. The longer he waited, the stronger was his inclination to make a run for Central Station, but his boots were stuck fast to the linoleum floor.

When a figure appeared, barefoot, at the top of the staircase, there was no question that it was her. She was thin, unusually tall, with heavy makeup. A silk nightgown hung from pale shoulders, razor-sharp collar bones exposed. His stomach turned as his heart leapt.

He followed her to the hotel room. Once inside, Anastasia stalked to the balcony to light a cigarette. When she looked at him, questioning, he shook his head.

"I quit." he mumbled. Anastasia shrugged. The cigarette smoke hung in the air between them, blurring Anastasia's features the same way that her camera had. He stood awkwardly by the door, unsure of himself, before taking off his boots.

"Do you, um, do this often?"

Anastasia's look was enough to know that it had been a stupid question. He didn't know what he was supposed to do now that he had got here, so he stood dumbly in his sweatpants while Anastasia finished her cigarette. Eventually, she snuffed it out on the hotel dresser and turned to look at him. Suddenly, he had the sense that her attention was entirely his. She took a step towards him, eyes like a viper's, and knitted her fingers behind his clammy neck. They were cooler than marble, and Sully's skin shivered in response.

It was not long before he was bent over on the sheets, sweaty and grunting, with Anastasia behind him. In the mirror, he glimpsed the ribbon-strap of her chemise slip off her shoulder and over her tricep, revealing a flat, hairless chest. He bent his head as his heartbeat quickened.

Sully grabbed the cash from his wallet and pressed it into Anastasia's palm. His hand lingered there for a moment, before he curled his fingers over Anastasia's sharp knuckles. She opened her palm and entwined his fingers with her own.

Sully looked up to face her, and for the first time that night, he met her gaze directly. Her eyes were ice blue, and they held his stare as firmly as he held her hand. Her makeup had rubbed away somewhat after their time together. Sully raised a hand to her face, arced his thumb over a plucked eyebrow. Anastasia did not blink.

He swallowed nervously before clearing his throat.

"I, um... I really enjoyed our time together, Anastasia. You're captivating." His voice faltered. "Really, I would... I would take you to dinner. I would introduce you to my friends..." he dropped his gaze, "if you were a real woman."

Their hands were still interlocked. Anastasia's grip tightened on his, and the cash crinkled between their hands. Her expression was unreadable.

"If you were a real man, you would do that anyway." She pressed his fingers against the hinge of his knuckles until they snapped.