

# Hard way to earn a living

## *Escort finds herself in peril*

### *Suspended Sentences*

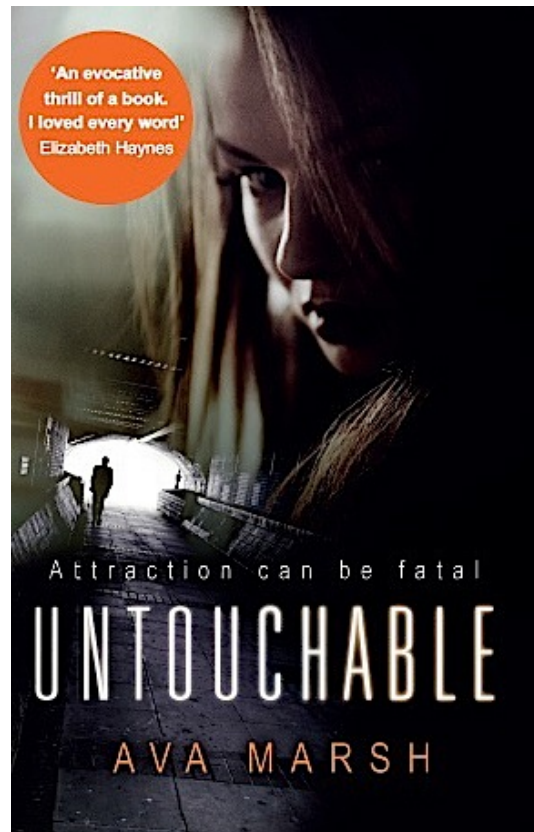
by Jim Napier

Even in the cosmopolitan world of London, Grace Thomas is a rarity: a professional escort who goes by the name of Stella, she moves in some of the highest circles, charging premium rates to a select group of clients. Paradoxically (or perhaps not) during her off-hours she volunteers at a rape crisis centre, working the phones to help victims of sexual assault.

During a tryst in an hotel room, a client who identifies himself as Paul Franklin receives a phone call. When Grace goes into an adjoining room to give his privacy she overhears him call himself Alex. Nothing unusual there. But she finds two passports and, more disturbingly, a hand-gun. Who, she wonders, carries a gun in public these days? Spies? Security forces? Undercover cops? When Alex emerges, their liaison is postponed: he has to catch a plane.

It isn't long before Grace gets a call from a friend in the business. Elisa is more of a courtesan than an escort, offering exotic services and

charging clients commensurately. She's organizing a birthday party for a middle-aged man and some friends, and they want several girls



there. Grace agrees, and a few nights later she's joined by another girl, Janine, as they welcome four men into a swank apartment on Canary Wharf. Soon they are joined by four men, among them 'Paul Franklin', who turns out to be

Alex. An evening of uninhibited sex stretches into the early morning, until one of the men, Harry, notices a news item on the TV in the background. He punches the air, unable to contain his excitement. Then boasts that he and his friends are golden – untouchable, in fact. When Elisa asks what he means he invokes the old cliché: ‘We could tell you, darling, but then we’d have to kill you.’

Two weeks pass and Grace’s life seems normal when she receives an email from Kristen, Elisa’s flatmate and partner. Elisa – real name Amanda Mansfield – has gone missing, and Kristen is concerned. Three days later Elisa is found dead in a Bayswater hotel room. Grace is stunned; although they all know the business has its risks, Elisa had always been careful. She meets with Kristen to discuss the case, which the police are treating as suspicious, and note several anomalies in events leading up to her death. Why, for instance, did she die fully three days after she disappeared, and why did she check into the hotel, only the last day of her life, using her own credit card? And why were all of her condoms unused, although she’d had sex?

Back in her flat Grace recognizes a face on the TV. Set against the House of Commons, one of the men at the party is being

interviewed by the press. When Kristen calls to say her flat has been burgled, Grace’s concern grows. Although there was no sign of a forced entry, the rooms have been trashed. It seems clear that the burglars wanted to send a message: we know what we are doing, and we can get to you whenever we want.

Grace goes to the police, but without anything conclusive to go on, they can only tell her to be careful. It seems she must look after herself. When Alex turns up he has the same advice for her, and makes her a lucrative offer: leave London for anywhere and he’ll pay for her expenses. It seems that Harry’s boast at the party – that he and his friends are untouchable – might just be true. But her friend has been murdered, and Grace cannot sit by and do nothing.

An erotic thriller, *Untouchable* will not appeal to everyone; at the very least it will take you out of your comfort zone. As might be expected, it contains its share of graphic sex. But these scenes are handled intelligently, and always in furtherance of the story line. The tension is sustained, and builds as Grace works her way through a labyrinth of deception and intrigue to save her own life while trying to achieve some form of justice in the wake of her friend’s death. Marsh has provided readers not only with

a sensitive and insightful look at the complex and dangerous world of sex workers, but also at the corrosive effects of power and

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greed. *Untouchable* is a strong beginning for the talented debut author.

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