In the introduction, I established that there are generally conceived to be two cycles of neo-noir production, the first occurring from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the second commencing in the early 1980s. This period was not only marked by the widespread return of the dark lady on screen, it also coincided with the emergence of postfeminism; as such, the fatale figure of this period directly prefigures postmillennial representations of the character that are the main focus of this book. Chapter 1 determined that the spider woman of classic noir is the product of anxieties over felt masculine impotence and the disintegration of patriarchal order, especially in relation to defined gender boundaries and traditional conventions associated with romance and marriage. In this chapter, I examine how these fears flow through to neo-noir and the ways in which the 1980s and 1990s fatale acts as a medium for emergent popular cultural discourses.

By the 1980s, Motion Picture Production Codes had long been dispensed with in favour of a ratings system and second-wave feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s had established legislative changes relating to the rights of women, including greater economic and social equality, access to education, and sexual autonomy. But it was also a period where postfeminist rhetoric had started to filter into mainstream popular culture. The pre-millennial femme fatale is very much a product of this climate. Abolishment of code strictures meant themes that could only be implied in the classic era could now be indulged with gusto, and lack of imperative to punish crime gave rise to a fresh set of narrative options. But at the same time the

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S. Lindop, Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema
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new spider woman functions as a conduit for emergent discourses that serve to undermine the gains of feminism. Like neo-noir itself, the character emerges as a postmodern amalgam of old and new, filmmakers revering archetypal traits that make the deadly woman so appealing, while indulging in a multiplicity of new and enticing plot devices and twists that bring the fatale in line with the liberated woman of the time. What emerges is a highly diversified figure, who is decidedly more noxious, calculating and seductive than ever before. This chapter unpacks these complexities, tracking some of the more distinctive shifts in the characterisation of the femme fatale of this era. In doing so, I investigate how dominant postfeminist discourse becomes integrated into the various themes and genre conventions of noir, attaching its own agenda to them, and the way this operates to destabilise the gains of feminism. As part of this analysis, I explore the rape-revenge narrative, which, although historically belonging to the horror genre is increasingly prominent in neo-noir.

Let’s talk about sex

The first thing that stands out about so many pre-millennial neo-noirs centring on deadly women is the assortment of conspicuously salacious titles, offering the promise of erotic intrigue, as well as introducing the distinct possibility that female sexuality has become an all-encompassing obsession. Attention grabbing appellations such as Body Heat, Body of Evidence, Body of Influence (Gregory Dark, 1993), The Last Seduction, Night Eyes (Jag Mundhra, 1990), Night Rhythms (Gregory Dark, 1992), Wild Things, and Showgirls (Paul Verhoeven, 1995) leave little scope to imagine anything other than a cinematic journey into a universe filled with carnal pleasures. Indeed, freed from the confines of strict Production Codes that forbade nudity and overt displays of sexuality, neo-noirs of this era have, for the main, morphed into la neo-noir erotic, combining the basic elements of classic noir convention and imagery with the codes and conventions of soft-core pornography. These films thrive on explicit sex scenes that are overwhelmingly shot in soft-focus with low-key lighting from a single source (often a fireplace or candles) that casts bold oblique shadows across characters forms, partially enveloping certain features such as faces (denoting duplicity), while accentuating others – breasts seem to be a favourite. The camera is either positioned