

the Butcher Shop

Neil Austin

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FOR TONY PETTI
*Your love of words
lives on in all of us.*

Contents

1	Tuesday	7
2	Wednesday	33
3	Thursday	39
4	Friday	45
5	Saturday	89
6	Sunday	143
7	Monday	163

Chapter 1

Tuesday

the Fall of Knight
Chapter 1

The face that leered at Sam in the mirror was a twisted mockery of his own. Sterile, clinical words printed on the paper in his hand filled his chest with a cold dread – the blood tests came back positive for cancer, but cancer was the least of Sam’s worries; one of these tests also confirmed that the blood smeared across his face was not the result of a nose bleed, as he had feared and then hoped, but something infinitely worse: the blood was not his own.

Afternoon

I wake up to the sound of a nightstick tapping on my window.

“Frank, damn it; leave me alone.”

But of course the tapping doesn’t stop, so now I’m pissed. When you live in your car, you learn the value of a good night’s sleep. Frank is seriously dipping into the karmic debt I owe him. When I pull Henry down off my face, though, I can see why he’s putting on the ‘serious police officer’ act.

“Bacon and eggs for breakfast; how thoughtful.”

“You can’t sleep here, Claire. You know that.”

Which is so much bullshit, of course. The lease on my apartment is still in my name; I’m letting David live there until he finds some place else. Break-ups suck, but they are so much worse when you find out the guy you were dating is completely incapable of surviving on his own. You might think I’m kidding about this, but after I threw David out, the police called me from Safeway. The poor bastard had holed himself up in the toilet paper aisle with a jar of peanut butter and a box of plastic spoons. Apparently he’d managed to build a toilet paper igloo before the cops showed up.

It was actually Frank who brought David back home, and left him in my custody with little more than a warning. It’s Frank who’s been watching my back ever since. This is why I’m not going to give him too much shit about showing off for his new partner. Not too much shit, anyway.

“She’s better looking than your last partner, Frank. You plan it that way? Just keep killing off your partners until they give you one worth looking at?”

“Joe’s quite happy in Florida, Claire. You going to move this heap, or is Sandy here going to get some practice writing tickets?”

Sandy is short, Hispanic, has a hint of a mustache, but it kind of works for her.

“Pleasure to meet you, Sandy.”

I stick my hand out through the half-open window; it’s upside down, but that’s not a good excuse to ignore the gesture. Sandy

goes ahead and leaves me hanging, though, so I decide right there that she's not getting an invite. It's good for business to keep a few cops in the loop, but on the other hand, when I have a choice, I prefer to be the only bitch in the room.

"Alright, Frank, I'm moving. You might want to crank the A/C; it would be a pity if your princess melted."

Frank tries to hide his smile, but the way Sandy twists her mustache, I know he lost that battle. Dwight turns over on the third try, which is pretty good, considering we're about a thousand miles over-due for an oil change.

It's Tuesday; time to go shopping.

I love warehouse club liquor stores. Where else can you ask about the price of a gallon of vodka without getting handed an AA pamphlet?

"Didn't expect to see you again for at least another three days. Is business that good, Claire?"

Walt. He's much too smart to be a register biscuit, but I think he actually enjoys it. Something about fluorescent lights and a name-tag gets him out of bed in the morning, I guess.

"Dog, I wish. Some jack-ass decided to go crowd surfing; ended up right in the middle of the bar."

"You shoulda lit him on fire."

"Thought about it. DFD ain't too happy with us right now."

"They can't still be pissed about that?"

'That' was the last time we let Shoppers crash after last call. Scott had found an abandoned office building; looked like someone had been using it to print some sad little reactionary rag because the presses were still there, but the dust was thick enough that it looked like a sure thing. What Scott failed to mention was that he didn't bother to ask around at all, so we weren't even slightly prepared when the Denver Fire Department started chopping down the doors, and nearly crushed a tangle of kids sleeping off hangovers. Training, they said. I think firemen just like to bust shit up. These days, I do the scouting, and Scott does security.

Walter's staring at me like he doesn't know the meaning of rhetorical, so I give him a little shrug.

"They'll get over it. Say, did you get my Krupnikas?"

"You know I can't do special orders, Honey."

"What the hell good are you, then?"

The way he's smiling I know he's got a crate in the back, and he's going to eyeball-wrestle me before he admits to it. I am the Queen of Staring Contests, though, and he goes down in flames before I even bat an eyelash.

"Alright, alright. I'll bring it tonight. Same spot?"

"Yeah, but probably the last time this week. The air is starting to feel a bit stale, you know?"

"You got another location picked out?"

"It's a coin flip, this time. Bring the band tonight, and I'll even pay you for the crate."

"Generous. We'll be there."

So I pay for my booze with the L&L Meats and Poultry Amex I carry around – that's a private joke right there – and it comes out to \$843.27, even with Walt's employee discount. Business is slow enough that he doesn't even make a show of it when he offers to wheel one of the carts out, then helps me load up Dwight's trunk.

"I love this car, Claire. When are you going to sell it to me?"

Walt closes the trunk. The way he runs his hands across it is pornographic; the man has a serious car-fetish. I can't help laughing, but I'm not sure what's funnier; the look on his face, or the mental image I've just had of Walt dry-humping my Mustang.

"No way, buddy; I'm not going to feed your sickness. Go get yourself a nice Subaru and settle down."

"Five grand, right now – cash."

"Do you even have that much?"

He gets a little shifty-eyed on me.

"I can get it. For this car? I can get it."

So I laugh again.

"See you tonight, Walt. Looks like you've got customers."

A customer, anyway – but the little old lady in the beehive, pushing her wheelie-walker, looks quite serious about her desire to get hammered, judging by the way she has that wad of cash gripped in her wrinkly, bird-like claw.

I grab a handful of Skittles from the forty-one ounce bag next to the driver's seat, and slip behind the wheel. Stuffing my face with rainbow-flavored crack, I clutch tenderly into reverse, then pop it into first, spinning the rear wheels just to piss off Walt. He wants Dwight badly, and he knows that I know that he already thinks he owns this car. What he doesn't know is that I'm probably going to sell it to him the moment torturing him stops being this much fun.

Yes, I know I'm evil, and no, you don't know the half of it. Pretzels! Damn it! I'm going to look like a complete spaz strolling back into Costco now, but that, my friend, is why Dog invented knit caps. I keep three in the glove box, and I don't think Walt's seen the green one, so I swap it for Henry, who is really too dignified for skulking. A fedora deserves respect, but does little to hide pink hair.

They put kids' toys in the back of department stores because they know that parents are slaves to their devil-spawn, and that the little ankle-biters will drag them through all the expensive adult-crap they want to buy anyway. After the gimme-gimmes, mom and pop might just need exactly the sort of consolation only a \$100 pair of pumps or a socket-wrench set can provide. Warehouse clubs turn this idea around backward. Mom and Dad swing in for a quart of strawberries and a bottle of chocolate syrup, and walk out with a plasma TV.

Why the strategy switch, you might ask? Because they know, Mr. 'Pops an artery shouting at the nineteen inch tube when the Broncos score,' that you'll be thinking about that sixty inch flat screen TV the whole time you're pretending to listen to her talk about those fat chicks on The View, and maybe, just maybe, you'll hate your life enough at the end of the trip to drop two grand.

Me? I am immune to these tricks. I am no slave to such corporate treachery, and that is exactly what I tell the cashier proudly as I hand over my Lal-Map Amex to pay for forty pounds of Swedish Fish, ten cartons of menthols, three barrels of generic cheese-puffs, four pairs

of jeans, and a quart of cherries. Dog, I love cherries.

“You forgot your pretzels.”

“Damn it, Walt, are you stalking me now?”

He flashes his badge at the cashier, like he thinks he’s a cop instead of a box-humper. I want the discount though, so I keep my mouth shut. The cashier, an ambivalently-sexed bovine creature, snaps its gum lazily, and does whatever it takes to make a few bucks vanish from the total.

“Thanks! I can find my own way out.”

The cashier snaps his, or her, gum again and shrugs. For some reason Walt decides to follow me out to the parking lot again. I have a bad feeling about this, a sort of cold-sour lump that settles sullenly in the pit of my stomach and sits there, rocking back and forth mumbling to itself.

“Don’t you have industrial strength brain-numbing agents to vend, my Good Man?”

“Lunch break. We’re good.”

He’s going to be difficult. I love Walt, but when I drive, I like to be alone. It’s kind of like shitting or beating off; a second body right there kind of ruins the experience, you know?

“I’m serious, Walt. I have things to do.”

“I do things.”

“GIRL things.”

“Pillow fights and toenail painting?”

Walt can be charming, but I’m not really in the mood at the moment. Judging by the way he’s already belted himself in I’m not going to get rid of him easily, so what the hell?

“Yeah, exactly. But if you want to come along, you have to let us do your hair.”

“Really?”

“You’re such an idiot, Walt. I need to check my mail, restock my bar, and then I’m going swimming. You’re going to help me with the bottles, deal?”

“Where are we going swimming?”

“I, Walt, I. I don’t know yet.”

Traffic isn't as bad as it'll get in a few hours, but Dwight is riding a little heavy, so I take my time, pissing off a few of the mid-afternoon road-warriors. There are not a lot of cars out that would give me any competition if I were riding empty, but there's no way I'm going to break bottles trying to prove something. Besides, I'm enjoying the drive now that Walt's shut up; this is just perfect weather for a spin with the top down.

It's too bad when my pervert-bear appears. The run upstairs will only take a minute, but parking is another thing all together.

"Wanna be useful, Walt?"

"Sure. What can I do you for?"

"You sound like an ass when you say that. Just watch the car."

"Really?"

He's a little too excited, but I figure he won't say no, even after I hop the curb and park under the bear's ass. Walt slides into the driver's seat after I get out. It makes me a bit nervous when he starts to finger the leather.

"Is this factory original?"

"Doubt it. I'll only be a minute – try not to get arrested while I'm away, okay?"

"Sure, sure."

But he's already under the console, ogling the wires and fuses, or whatever car guts Ford wedged down there. Car freaks amuse me; I couldn't tell you the displacement or the torque or whatever under Dwight's hood, but I know how it feels when the universe just melts away and I become part of the car, when Dwight's wheels become my fingers. . . I don't know; I mix drinks, not metaphors. The thing is, I like to drive; I don't care how it works as long as it does.

Big Blue Bear spent most of his cubhood staring into the Colorado Convention Center, before Harold Rothschild (rich, but no relation to the Really Really Rich Rothschilds) bought him for a couple million, and moved the bear down the street to his office building. Probably would never have happened if someone hadn't crashed a stolen bus into the bear's shins one night. The upshot to all of this is that I now have a forty-foot blue bear peering into my

office around the clock. If I were an accountant, I probably would have slit my wrists by now. As a bartender with a ninety-nine year lease on an obscenely large office, won against my favorite panties in a single hand of poker, I have a ridiculous ursine confidant. Big Blue knows all of my secrets; unlike people, bears don't drag your reputation through the mud when you piss them off. Maybe they'll maul you, but who hasn't been mauled once or twice, really?

"Good afternoon, Claire. Your mail is on the desk, and there's more flowers."

"Orchids again, Lucy?"

Lucy just shrugs, which means my secret admirer still hasn't felt brave enough to identify himself. Or herself, I suppose. It's a little unsettling; my mystery florist spends a lot of money on blue orchids, which I didn't even know existed before the first one showed up by courier six months ago. We thought at first that they were dyed, but it turns out that this species is naturally blue and it only grows wild in a small corner of the rain forest on Moloka'i. They're very expensive flowers, and this is the seventh, which rules out the majority of my stalkers.

"Maybe it's Mister R. himself?"

"I doubt I'm even on the Big Man's radar, Lucy."

"He did buy you the bear, you know?"

Which is completely ridiculous. I've only met the man once, and I doubt he'd throw a huge object d'Art at me after losing five-thousand odd square feet of premium office space.

"If anything, Big Blue is out there to keep an eye on us; keep us from trashing the joint?"

"I see what you mean."

Everything looks basically the same as when I left it; more flowers now, but Lucy does a great job keeping them watered. My mail is arranged in neat, easily ignorable stacks, probably alphabetized, if not categorized. As far as I'm concerned, though, anything I do with those piles is only going to make my office messier, so why ruin a good thing?

I absolutely love my 'executive washroom.' It's all marble and

steel, and everything looks like it was made by hand, by someone who knew what they were doing, and enjoyed doing it. Sometimes, when dark clouds gather over the mountains, I cheat on Dwight, and curl up on the heated tile floor for a few hours of the best sleep I've found anywhere. The forecast is clear for tonight, though, and I have a lot to do between then and now. No time for a nap, I'm afraid.

It might be a little selfish to take a shower and brush my teeth with Walt waiting on the curb, but fuck him; the stink of cheap cigarettes has soaked into my skin, and lines my mouth like a bitter film. I want a few minutes of clean today.

It has been a constant struggle to keep decent soap here. I get tubs of exquisite buttery, French-milled soap from the girl who sings vocals for Walt's band. I give her free rum, she gives me soap, nobody asks questions – I've even given up on trying to figure out what to call her; it seems like she changes her name every other week. Anyway, the cleaning service here insists on replacing my soap with these horrible little green bars that smell like moldy grass and leave my skin dry. I'm thinking about replacing the locks, or putting in some bear traps. Something subtle but effective. For now, though, I'm keeping a week's worth in a Ziploc bag taped to the underside of the sink.

The most recent batch was milk and mint, which sounds weird, but it turns a shower into a sexual experience in the way certain shampoos promise but never deliver. I tried to tell Walt about the singular pleasure of milk and mint bath soap, but I ended up listening to a ridiculous rant about how he'll only drink 5% milk, and yes, he's aware that whole milk is only three-percent milk fat, but the dairy he buys his milk from 'enriches' their milk with extra fat. I think he stores the excess between his ears, but if you ever get a chance to hear him play his guitar, you'll know why I'm willing to forgive him this sort of stupidity.

So the soap here is lousy, but these towels are exactly the towels God would keep in his linen closet, if that smarmy bastard hadn't stopped existing when I was seven. I don't know if the custodial service replaces them on a regular basis, or if they're just made out

of some sort of genetically modified super-cotton, but they're always thick and fluffy and intimately absorbent, like a giant, accepting hug. Exactly the sort of thing the girl in the mirror needs, judging from the look of her; all skin and bones, barely anything you'd call tits these days.

I'm only just getting my appetite back. Nothing will kill the joy in a bloody steak and a topping-raped potato quite as quickly as the idea that your death, which you've spent a great deal of time and energy not thinking about, is suddenly something you might have to pencil in between 'get hair done' and 'interview new dj.' Fortunately, the tests came back 'benign,' but I've only had a week to process that, and it still seems surreal. I would have thought it would have come as a relief, like 'yay! I'm not going to die!' but as fucked up as it sounds, I'm actually a bit disappointed. Everything, every stupid little moment, every smile, every flowery weed, even the petty little insults people throw around – everything means something when you think there's a good chance that it's the last time you'll experience it. And it's not something you can fake, either; now that I'll probably grow old enough to complain about the way the weather makes my knees stiff, or whatever else old people will complain about in fifty years, nothing has that precious feel to it anymore.

Do I need a crisis to feel alive?

From the other room my solitude is interrupted by obnoxious electronic braying. Can't a girl floss her teeth without the phone ringing, just once? Screw it, I say; that's why Dog invented voice-mail. Probably just Walt calling to bitch about the wait, like he didn't beg me to come along. I never promised him an adventure, so he can keep on waiting until I'm ready.

After I'm done flossing, I remember to re-hide my soap; even though I get it for free, or close enough, it's still nothing I can get regularly, so every ounce is precious. I'm a little worried about this hoarding instinct; it's kind of a genetic thing. My grandmother could never throw away newspapers; the day she died the EMTs complained about how they had to squeeze through single-file to get to her bedroom, and ended up sliding her out of the house through a

bedroom window instead of trying to carry her out of Post Canyon. Everyone except Mom and I thought they were exaggerating.

Mom collects boyfriends and empty liquor bottles, but at least she has the decency to stack them in her garage. The bottles, I mean. Not sure what happens to the boyfriends when she's done with them; rumor has it she eats them whole.

Outside, Walt's got the hood up, and he's poking around in my car's guts. If he looked up at this window, I think he'd see something far more interesting, but with Walt it's hard to tell – car engine, or naked woman? Probably the car; there's something not quite right about that man. Anyway. I pull on a fresh pair of slacks from the closet and one of my favorite linen shirts, just a little bit disappointed that I've left my suspenders behind the bar on Ossage Street. I just don't feel dressed without The Uniform, but after the fiasco last night...

Okay; I'm just not going to be able to leave without checking the voicemail, because that'll be the only thing I think about all night. What if it's something important? What if I've won a million dollars? What if the man of my dreams wants to sweep me away to the French Riviera for dinner and dancing?

But no; it's David. He called me on my phone, in my apartment, to tell me that he's withdrawing money from my bank account to pay for 'stuff.' Which means the useless shit has forged my name on one of the blank checks he stole from me while we were still together. This will not do at all.

Good thing I've still got the number on speed dial.

“...leave a message.”

“You little bastard! I told you last time I'd kill you if you did it again. You'd better get my money back, or kiss your hairless ass good bye!”

Slamming the phone down is stupid, because it's my phone I've just cracked, but it feels good. Slumping into the huge leather chair behind the enormous mahogany desk I feel a little bit like President of the World. This really is way too much office, considering I mostly just use it for the bathroom. Not that I'm complaining! Do I need

a salt-water fish tank filled with tiny jellyfish? Probably not. Do I need a fully stocked kitchen with a walk-in freezer? Probably not. Do I need a Mac Pro with ... 8GB of RAM? Well, a girl can never have enough RAM...

Logging into Facebook happens automatically, as if my fingers are addicted to pointless electronic narcissism. Not wanting to get sucked into the world of surrogate friendships, I settle on changing my status to 'is going to kill her ex' and log off. I do feel better, thank you for asking. But that's more than enough for today. I really, really, really don't care what any of the 26 emails waiting for me say. To work! To Ossage street! Booze and Beats!

Walt is still waiting for me, although that's probably overstating my importance in this scene.

"Why in Hell are you under my car, Walt?"

He mumbles something about universal joints or something. I meant it as a subtle invitation to get the fuck out from under my car, but he's playing dumb. I've noticed that boys, even fiftyish, married-with-two-teenage-girls-and-a-mortgage boys, have an uncanny ability to shut off the rest of the world when they've found something to be obsessed about. Walt's obsession is classic American steel.

"I'm leaving in thirty whether you move or not. I've run over uglier things, Walt. I am not kidding."

He groans like an eight-year old at bedtime, but hauls his filthy, grease-covered self out and up nonetheless.

"Time for us to go skinny-dipping, Shoeless-Joe?"

Shit. Good thing I keep a spare pair of Chucks under the bar. I do not like wearing shoes, but going barefoot anywhere alcohol is served is an invitation to tetanus – working in such a condition changes that invitation into a virtual guarantee.

"We are going to the Shop. After that, I'm cutting you loose. Go spend the evening with your fam, right?"

"You're a wet blanket, Claire."

"I know."

Walt embarrasses himself trying a Dukes of Hazard entrance, and then slams the door when he gives up. Watching him hurt himself

is one of my favorite spectator sports, but the meter-maid hauling ass up the sidewalk is enough incentive to save my bout of maniacal laughter until later. Spinning the rear wheels kicks up a satisfying cloud of smoke, and then I'm watching Brunhilde shake her meaty fist at me in my rear view mirror.

A couple of turns later and we're on I-25. Walt loves every moment of it, maybe a little too much. I ease back to sixty-five, but even so we've hit the Highlands before too long. Off the highway, forty feels sedate, laid back, elderly. The current location of the Shop is unmistakable in its blandness; nothing but primer grey paint and lots of it. Walt sighs when I back into the space next to the cargo van and pull the parking brake.

"I will give you my car for this one; even Steven."

He drives an Accord; his offer isn't even worth the time it would take to shoot down.

"Bottles, slave."

"Yes, mistress."

His laugh sounds just a little bitter, but he duly waits for me to pop the trunk and hand him one of the twelve-bottle boxes. I grab a second, and head toward the back door. Inside, the floor is littered with cigarette butts and empty beer bottles, which is odd, because it was spotless when I left last night. Or this morning, I suppose – being nocturnal throws everything off like that.

"Dog-damn it Scott! We agreed no off-hours!"

Someone, or something, grunts from the front of the Shop, and then a noisy clatter is followed by the unmistakable sound of a six-pack hitting the floor. Cans, at least, but the hiss suggests that there's still going to be a mess to clean up.

"Sorry, Claire, Love. Just a few mates from the day. You understand."

He sounds stoned, and the girl who stumbles past, bleary-eyed, in a table-sheet toga, reeks of pot. He's going to get us shut down doing this, and I am not going back to waiting somebody else's tables. No way.

“Hey, Walt – be a dear and stack the boxes...hereish? Seems I’ve got some finger wagging to do.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“...and cut that shit. I’m not in the mood anymore.”

Scott’s obviously just buttoned up in a hurry, because he hit all the wrong holes, and the Marlboro he’s smoking casually doesn’t fool me for a second. A hairy-knuckled hand reaches out of the pile of meat on the floor, grabs a fistful of pretzels from an overturned barrel, and sinks back in. Loud, wet chewing commences a moment later.

When I kick the barrel it bounces off someone’s head, but a dull ‘heywatzit’ is my only reward. Cheap plastic packaging takes all the fun out of slapstick.

“So, uh, I found a bridge what might work, Love. Fancy that?”

“Are you trying to get us shut down?”

He just shrugs. It’s a maddeningly noncommittal gesture, and at the moment I feel like punching him in that huge beak of his just to get a more appropriate reaction. Someone around here has to be an adult, though. A chill runs up my leg and down my spine when I feel a set of fingers creep around my toes, heading toward my ankle.

“Orgy’s over. Get out, or you’re going to find yourself in a dumpster, Mr. Fingers.”

I step on the frisky hand, not too hard, but not gently, to emphasize my point. A muffled screech filters out through the tangle of limbs. Not quite the scream I was hoping for, but I’ll take it. Scott tries to make a gesture, slowly, deliberately even, but despite his flailing it never quite comes together. I guess it’s supposed to be a combination of indignation and protest, but if it looks like anything, I will have to say ‘wounded duck in estrus.’

“You’re embarrassing me now, Claire. There’s plenty of time before we open; no worries.”

“Fine. But don’t do this again, okay? We don’t need any more trouble.”

He pops me a cock-eyed salute, and it’s all I can do to keep from shoving him into the pile. I have to get out of here, or I’m going

to do something stupid, and as much as I need a little catharsis, it'll be better all around if I just walk away. Walt's still unloading Dwight, though, so a long drive into the mountains is out. Nothing like driving too fast on roads too close to the edge to relax a girl. Or maybe that's just this girl?

"WALT!"

"What?"

He sounds indignant, with an armful of boxes and bottles. It's almost enough to make me change my mind, but I'm not about to wait for him to stop dicking around.

"I'm going to make one of your dreams come true, so don't piss me off."

"French Lace?"

"I said, don't piss me off."

He dodges when I throw the car keys at him, but not fast enough. It's fun to watch him cycle through confusion, anger, indignation, and surprise before settling on elation. He's like a little boy who's just been given a PlayStation for Christmas, and he wastes no time dumping his burden roughly on a bare patch of table. My heart skips a beat when the box wobbles, but fortunately for Walt, only a barrel of pretzels falls.

"Are you serious? You're giving me your car?"

"Only for a couple of hours. I need to find a pool and clear my head. Don't make me regret this, okay?"

"Sure, sure. Have fun Clairing your head. Take your time."

Staring at the keys like that, I can almost see the bright lights of Vegas or Atlantic City in Walt's eyes. I hope I'm not making a mistake here – he's madly in love with the car, which should make him more protective of it, but people in love do weird things.

"Use the alarm, Walt. And top off the tank before you bring it back. What time are you bringing it back?"

"... swimming."

"Nine o'Clock, Walt. I'll kick your ass if I have to sleep in the van tonight."

"Swimming."

He says it like the word will make me vanish instantly, leaving him to whatever perverse car-love he has been planning since the day I met him. When he licks his lips, I decide I've seen enough of that.

The weather is absolutely gorgeous now; despite tonight's forecast, heavy black clouds over the Front Range promise to put an end to the horrific dry spell we've been suffering through for the past month. If it rains hard enough, I might try to convince the guys to rope off a portion of the parking lot tonight; I love dancing in the rain.

Traffic is a little bit thin for this time of day, but I never have trouble hitching a ride, and now is no different. The BMW looks a bit old, probably mid-nineties, but at least the driver seems to be older than his car. He has kind eyes; brown with little flecks of gold, and crow's feet, so he's probably not used to faking smiles. Safe enough, in broad daylight, and besides, I know how to hurt a man if it comes down to it.

"Need a ride?"

I bite my tongue and nod instead. The inside of the Beemer is impeccably clean, like he cares about his car, or at the very least he wants people to think that he does. I can understand that; it's tempting to try to do little things like that to make people like me, but that is a slippery slope, and it's not one that I'm interested in skiing again. Anyone who judges you by the number of crushed Slurpee cups in the back of your car would probably be quite boring to talk to.

"So where can I take you?"

"The 'burbs, if it's not too much trouble. I'm going swimming."

"Those clouds look ominous. I hope your friends have an indoor pool."

"Wet is wet. And I haven't found my swimming pool yet – that's part of the adventure."

He glances at me with an odd look on his face. Most people, when they find out that I disagree with their concept of 'property,' will look either concerned or critical. Mr. Beemer, on the other hand, just seems impressed, which leads me to believe that he'd be

an interesting person to get to know, if that wouldn't be breaking one of my rules; never exchange names, numbers, life stories or fluids when hitching. I took this deviant behavior class in college, and then signed up for lessons at a dojo after about a week of crime scene photos and interrogation transcripts. By the end of the semester I'd found someone who had an unregistered revolver and a hunger for cash. Now I keep Betty under the driver's seat of my car.

This of course, does me absolutely no good at all right now. It's a good thing that Mr. Beemer looks completely harmless; He's probably the sort who gets a rush clipping tags off mattresses. Owns a terrier. Irons his own shirts. Absolutely nothing to be afraid of. Eyes, throat, groin.

"There are some fairly nice pools not too far from here, if you don't mind gated communities."

"I suppose you're going to tell me that one of them is yours, and I'm welcome to use it?"

His laugh is disarming, convincing. The smile he wears is a little bit sad, exactly the sort of smile people put on just before they start in on a three-shot tale of woe.

"It was in a former life. I kept the boat, she kept the house. I don't know how she'd feel about you using the pool, but the idea of it would brighten my day."

I'm always looking for ways to spread joy, so I jump on this opportunity. Mr. Beemer switches lanes, his hands working now like they've done this a thousand times, which is probably true. The house his hands drive us to would be difficult to photograph properly without a wide-angle lens. Makes me wonder how big the 'boat' is.

"Two - Zero - Seven - Nine. That's what the code was before I left, and I doubt she's found enough wits to change it. That should be all you'll need to deactivate the security system. Towels are in the pool house. Have fun."

And just like that, Mr. Beemer is gone. His code still works, and once I'm sure it's not just a long-delay alarm, I turn around to take in the foyer. A room like this should be filled with men in tails and tops, with corseted women hanging off their elbows. The woodwork

in this room alone probably leveled an acre of prime forest, from the polished floor to the intricately carved ceiling. My toes tell me that this is the real deal, too, not just linoleum tile patterned like everywhere else I've ever been. The hardwood flooring only reaches as far as the kitchen, where slate tile stretches the rest of the way to the horizon.

Despite the rumble in my stomach, I resist the urge to raid the brushed-steel walk-in, and head toward the back of the house where I can see the feeble light, filtered through the gathering clouds, flickering as it reflects off the surface of the pool that is still out of view. The slate is cool, and a little bit rough under my toes, but it's nothing compared to the sandstone walkway winding away from the French doors.

I've seen plenty of palm trees in my life, most of them in SoCal or Vegas, but it always freaks me out just a little bit to find them here in Colorado – a bit like stumbling on a mountain in Kansas. Which is funny, because mountains in Kansas are just tall enough to stumble over. I have a friend who's half way through the fourteeners. He hired a Sherpa to climb Mount Sunflower, and sent me a picture of the two of them in oxygen masks, planting a flag next to the picnic table. Funny stuff; I keep it behind my sun visor.

How many bottles of Fiji water did it take to fill this pool, I wonder? It was obviously designed to be a miniature lagoon, complete with a sandy, palm-treed island toward the middle, but the water is much too clean – the effect is less South Pacific and more Disneyland. It does look perfect for laps, though, so I don't waste any time, just drop kit and dive in.

The shock is at once terrifying and comfortable; I love the disorientation, the crushing grip of the water on my chest and the piercing cold, everywhere all at once. For a moment, up and down are meaningless; I keep my eyes shut, just savoring the fire in my lungs, and the sound of my own heart beating. I imagine it's a lot like being back in the womb, except with a lot less of my mother's friends popping in uninvited.

I wonder where Mom is these days?

There is much less chlorine in the pool than I'm used to; Mr. or Mrs. Beemer must have installed some sort of fancy organic filter – something that would have cost a mint would not be out of place behind this mountainous house. I lock my eyes on one tile at the far end of the pool and kick toward it, imagining that I am a porpoise; streamlined and designed by millions of years of evolution to do nothing but swim, and swim well.

The grout between the tiles is gritty, and feels like it would come loose if I were to dig into it with a fingernail, but I plant my toes there instead, and push hard, breaking the surface just long enough to suck in a wet breath before I dig in with cupped palms and plow on back toward the other end.

Meditation doesn't work for me; between the breathing and the mantras I tend to fall asleep before I find enlightenment, but swimming is a good substitute. When you can contract your universe to encompass only your next breath of air and your next stroke, everything falls into perfect harmony, at least as long as you keep at it. Today, I desperately need twenty or thirty minutes of non-thinking.

“Claire.”

Frank is such a killjoy. The porpoise dives, twisting her body deeper and deeper through the cool, placid water, until she feels the rough tiles at the bottom of the lagoon rub against her belly. With one powerful flip of her tail, she launches upward, blowing a stream of water toward the intruder in hope of frightening him off.

“I'm trying to swim here. What the fuck do you want?”

“Eventually they're going to stop letting me take these calls, Claire.”

“ADAM SIX – CODE ELEVEN?”

“Affirmative, Dispatch; Code Eleven.”

He's making a big deal out of talking into his shoulder-mic, but I know he's only doing it to avoid looking directly at me. Frank fancies himself a gentleman, and he actually manages to do it well, so I don't bust his ass about it. Just to prove my point, he's brought me a towel, and he keeps it between his eyes and anything a man might be interested in looking at. If you've met his Nancy, though,

you might get an idea why those eyes don't need to wander. Hell, if I didn't like Frank as much as I do, I'd hit on his wife.

"Why the hell do you always have to put the hat on first, Claire?"

"It's the uniform, Frank. You know how it is. Say – how'd you find me?"

"Complainant reports a WFA trespassing, indecent exposure. . . last seen wearing a black suit and hat,' Who else would that be?"

"Fair enough. What time is it?"

"Almost Five."

Shit. If Scott hasn't thrown out his fuck-buddies yet, there's barely enough time to put everything together before we open.

"Hey Frank – would you mind giving me a lift?"

"No problem, hold on – Dispatch; unable to locate party. Taking a code seven."

"COPY CODE SEVEN, ADAM SIX. DON'T FORGET TO WASH UP."

I love cop-talk; it's like the bullshit way kids talk at renaissance faires – it sounds fake, but it actually means something if you know what you're talking about. I may be biased, though; Frank is sort of like a big brother to me, since I don't have any of my own. A couple of half-brothers, maybe, but they don't count. Mom couldn't have cranked out kids faster if she'd worked for Henry Ford, but that doesn't mean I have to think of them as family.

When we get back to the squad car, Sandy is in the passenger's seat, rapidly thumbing something into her cell. After a moment, her eyes bounce up, register mild contempt, and return to the chunky phone. I'm glad to see that I've made another friend on the force.

"She rides in the back."

"A pleasure to see you again, too, Sandy. I should tell you, though, if you don't stop smiling so much, they're probably going step up the urine tests."

She actually smiles at this, but on her, the expression has all the warmth of a glacier.

"Lemme cuff her, Frank. I promise not to leave any visible bruises."

Frank rolls his eyes, and pops the rear door open for me. The back seat is roomy, and fairly clean, except for some new stains on the upholstery that I know better than to ask about. Someone carved a decent portrait of Porky Pig into the window back here, and I always have to laugh when I see it; if I squint a little bit, it's a perfect caricature of Frank.

"So where to, Claire? Want to grab a bite to eat before work?"

"Not hungry, Frank. Would you mind dropping me off at the Ossuary?"

He folds himself into the driver's seat, then cranks his head around to look me in the eye. I've seen this look before, and I know exactly what he's going to say.

"You're lookin' a little thin, kid. Let me buy you a steak, a sandwich, something."

"I'm fine, Frank. Really."

"Are you sure? It wouldn't be any trouble."

Sandy groans theatrically.

"The giraffe says she's fine, Frank. Can we get this circus on the road already?"

He ignores her, but puts the car into gear and pulls away from the curb anyway. Frank has this amazing ability to deal with other people's shit. I hear people throw around the phrase 'like water off a duck's back' more often than I see ducks get rained on, but in Frank's case, it really seems to be true. He shrugs off the worst insults like they have no effect on him at all. Sometimes I wish I could be more like that, but it's just too fun to get pissed off and let the idiots around town know how I feel about them.

Denver flashes by in a brown and grey blur; I don't even pay attention when I'm not behind the wheel. This is a great city, lots of interesting things to see and do downtown, but only if you're walking. From the back of a police cruiser, it's painfully boring. Fortunately, the trip from the 'Burbs doesn't take all that long.

"Claire! Wake up. We're here."

"What do you have against sleep, Frank?"

“Not a thing, Kid. Take the night off; I’ll buy you a steak, and have Nancy pull out the hide-a-bed. I’ll even make the girls watch Spongebob in the back. Don’t say no.”

“Sorry. That sounds lovely, but I can’t tonight. Maybe Thursday?”

“Movin’ Shop?”

“In the morning, anyway.”

“Good – forgot to tell you; the neighbors have been complaining. If you’re here tomorrow night, I don’t think I’ll be able to keep Sandy from kicking the doors down.”

“Fuck you, Frank.”

Frank shows Sandy his hurt face, and I can’t help but laugh because it just doesn’t fit at all and he knows it. After I slam the door I tap my forehead with two fingers; he salutes back, then the Impala rolls off. Traffic is light, but the parking situation is a nightmare, which is another reason why I’m glad we’ll be moving on again after tonight. People will wait in line for hours to get into a hot club, but make them walk a block and you’ll be hearing about it all night. I cross the street, the blacktop still roasting-hot where the shadows haven’t reached, and glance up the street. Almost hidden behind a pickup truck is a brown and white ’67 Austin-Healey. It’s a sweet car, and the fact that it’s here means Lang is back from his book tour.

Yes, that one: Houston Lang, author of ‘the Fall of Knight.’ Book sales were initially rather disappointing, which meant that I had to endure a great deal of moping and bitching about everything from the weather to the cost of gas, but after Paramount picked up the rights he sold a mountain of books, and I hardly ever see him anymore. Lang is the ‘L’ of ‘L&L Meats and Poultry,’ but don’t ask him about the second ‘L’ unless you want to see a man go from zero to drunk in under fifteen seconds.

Unsurprisingly, I find him at the bar, nursing a Southern Comfort on the rocks. What does surprise me is that the ‘Shop is spotless. It’s never this clean, even when I clean it myself.

“You do this, Lang?”

He shakes his head, chasing his lips with his glass. The other hand dips into his shirt pocket, and comes back out with a new Amex card.

“New name, new plastic.”

L&STC Meats and Poultry. I’m not sure how I feel about that – I mean, the ‘Shop was my idea, originally, so it’s only fair that I get credit – HA! – but on the other hand, I don’t want to be the next person to push Lang deeper into that bottle of his. The thing with Lefty nearly pickled him, and I still get nervous anytime he’s near an open flame.

“Lassy-Map?”

“Works for me.”

“Does this mean...?”

“Time to move on, Winny. Sometimes you just have to toss that last spadeful on the past.”

“Good for you, Lang. I can’t wait to see the flick – September what now?”

“October tenth. Issues in post-production, but nothing particularly interesting. So what about you?”

“No movies in the pipe for me, Lang.”

“No, I mean; you look a long way better than dead. Good news?”

“S’pose. Doctors say it’s benign.”

“That’s great!”

I grab his glass and pour the last mouthful between my lips, but regret it instantly. Spitting whiskey out is bad business, and decidedly unladylike (as if I care) but I know where this road leads, and I don’t want to go back there. Ever.

“Gross?”

“No. Just tempted to visit the Lotus-eaters. Benign is not great; no tumor is ever great.”

“Sorry, Winny. Did I ever tell you I’ve got three testicles?”

“Are you trying to drive me to drink?”

He dumps my backwash into one of the coffee cans we keep out for messes. If he’s worried about cooties, it doesn’t make sense to use the same glass with a dozen clean ones within reach. But that’s

exactly what he does. When I give him a quizzical look I think he misinterprets it, because he puts on his happy-happy-I've-just-been-given-an-invitation-to-rant look.

"It's actually a fluid-filled cyst –"

"I'm going to have to stop you right there, Sparky. Rule number seven; bartenders don't handle nuts."

"... because you never know who's hand has been in the bowl. I remember."

"Say, have you seen Walt?"

"Have you seen Walt?"

"Don't be an ass, Lang. I loaned him my car –"

"Which would explain the big shit-eating grin he was wearing when I saw him cruisin' 'round with the top down."

Outside, the sky has opened up, as if Dog has decided to have a go at drowning the fifty-two eighty, just to spite the meteorologists. I hope that Walt can figure out how to get Dwight's top back up; you've got to do this twist and pull at one point to clear a kink in the mechanism. It's exactly the sort of detail I always forget to mention when I loan people my shit.

"I'll kill him if I have to sleep on wet seats tonight."

"You'd feel terrible if he died now, you know?"

"I'll feel worse if I have to try to dry my upholstery with a blow dryer – it always ends up smelling like hot, wet dog."

Lang looks at me in a way I can only describe as 'sideways.'

"You know I'm not going to let you do that. You're always welcome to the spare bed."

"I couldn't..."

"It's no trouble, and I'm sure Lisa won't mind the company."

This is something else you need to know about Lang – Lisa is his wife, but Lang is not married. He calls it 'method writing,' an immersion into his characters' lives that borders on – hell, why dance around the fact? Lang is nuts, but it helps him write his horror novels. When he's not on tour, Lang lives Sam Dey's life – photographer, family man, nexus for supernatural disaster. It's all very

schlocky, and not at all my kind of thing, but there's a certain something about Lang's books that transcend his pulp-thriller ambitions. I haven't actually read one yet, but he talks about them enough that I don't even have to fake it.

Of course, I could be biased. Lang is a very good friend, and I would do just about anything for him. Anything within reason; he has a way of turning relationships into Greek Tragedies, so even if I was looking to throw myself head-first into another train-wreck, it wouldn't be with Lang. He pulled me out of my bottle a couple of years ago, quite by accident, really, but I think I would only push him further into his. There's a good chance Lang is an alcoholic, or well on his way to becoming one, but one thing I know for a fact is that you can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved, and even if they want help, they have to do the heavy lifting themselves.

Does it make me a hypocrite, I wonder? I'm an alcoholic, but I serve drinks on a nightly basis. Maybe it's a test of will, like I'm thumbing my nose at the universe. I have the distinct feeling that tonight is seriously going to test my resolve. No sex, no booze – thank Dog for cigarettes!

Chapter 2

Wednesday

the Fall of Knight
Chapter 2

Sam opened the door as far as the security chain would allow.

“Are you Samuel Dey?”

“Most days. What can I do for you, Officer?”

The way he was standing there, with one hand on his hip, not-so-subtly above his sidearm, Sam could tell that this particular cop wasn't in the mood for jokes. His partner, who was easily thirty pounds heavier, and all of it muscle, made the first look like Groucho Marx. It was probably a safe bet that neither would laugh about the bloody knife he'd found in his bathroom a few minutes ago.

Morning

I wake up to the sound of a nightstick tapping on my window.

“Dog-gammit, Frank, leave me alone.”

But of course the tapping doesn't stop, so now I'm pissed. When you live in your car, you learn the value of a good night's sleep. And when you're forced to sleep on a soggy car seat that smells like a schnauzer's ass because your friend is too stupid to figure out how the rag-top works, every moment of sleep is precious. I am in no mood to deal with Frank's 'Good Cop' routine this morning.

“Don't make this harder than it needs to be, Claire.”

That gets my attention. It takes me a moment to untangle my suspenders, and pull Henry off my face, but as soon as I do, I can tell by the way that Frank's standing there, with one hand resting awkwardly on the butt of his gun, that something has happened. His eyes tell me it's bad.

“Frank, what's going on?”

“David's dead, Claire.”

“That's not funny.”

“I'm not joking, Claire.”

It's freaking me out a bit, the way he keeps ending sentences with my name like that; like he's trying to be friendly or reassuring, but he knows it's not working. The sun is blazing down on my apartment above, and any trace of the pregnant clouds that choked the sky last night is gone. If my head wasn't throbbing, I would think about how much I love rain, the way it smells, the way it washes everything clean, if only for just a little while. But my head is throbbing, I have a pinch in my neck that makes thinking painful, and my mouth tastes thick and dry.

David is dead?

“H-how?”

“Multiple gunshot wounds at close range. Where's your pistol, Claire?”

“Betty?”

“Yeah.”

I slip a hand under the seat, feeling between the coils, but there's nothing there except rotting foam. Frank tenses a bit when I bring my hand back out, empty.

"I need you to slowly open the door, and step out of the vehicle, Claire."

"What the fuck, Frank? You don't think-?"

"You have the right..."

"Oh, shit, oh shit..."

He actually recites the whole Miranda poem, like this is some sort of terrible TV drama. Somebody killed David. They shot him, and now he's dead. It doesn't make any sense at all. I just talked to him six hours ago – we fought, sure, but I never actually wanted him dead.

"Oh, god! Frank... who?"

"It looks like you, Claire. Your apartment, your gun; what the fuck happened, Kid?"

"I didn't – You believe me, right?"

His lips say yes, but the handcuffs say not really. The way he avoids making eye contact with me when he guides me into the back of his car is a bit ambiguous, but the leer Sandy wears is not. I want to kick the screen that separates us, but I know from experience that it's rougher than it looks, and I am *sin zapatos*. Porky Pig is no help. Frank slips into the driver's seat, reverses out of the spot behind Dwight, then squeezes past another patrol car and a big white van that says "CORONER" on the side. My head spins forebodingly, and my stomach bangs on the ceiling with a broom handle.

"The Bus to Bannock Street."

Sandy says it casually, like she's reading a posted schedule. I've decided now that I really hate this woman, and sometime, when I don't have both hands tied behind my back, I'll show her exactly how much.

"Are the cuffs really necessary, Frank?"

"Claire, you're lucky I was able to talk them into letting me take this dispatch. Do you know how deep this shit goes?"

"I didn't kill anybody."

David, you dumb-shit – what did you get yourself into? What did you really need my money for?

Why did I choose last night to start drinking again? And what the hell DID I drink? Hangovers never used to feel like this. . .

“Doesn’t matter, Kid. You’ve got half the precinct looking the other way from your little social club, and now there’s a big fucking spotlight shining down on the whole thing. It’ll be a miracle if the Big Broad doesn’t put me on administrative leave soon as I walk in the door, just so she can act like she’s doing something about it.”

“Frank, I never –”

“Like I said; it doesn’t matter, Kid. She’s the chief, it’s her job, and she’d be wrong if she doesn’t do it. Just try not to make it worse.”

“How –?”

“Don’t try to be clever. They ask you questions, tell them what you know. We’re all still your friends, Claire, nobody expects you to lie. Just don’t make things worse.”

“Don’t mention the secret handshake, you mean?”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Claire. Don’t get cute; you say something like that, and the dickheads in IA will be up our asses for months. You might consider getting a lawyer, too.”

“Yeah, fuck that.”

I want to cross my arms and sink back into the seat, but the cuffs make both slices of that sandwich impossible to swallow. Instead, I settle for draping myself awkwardly across the seat and clicking the door handle with my toes. The way Sandy’s hair twitches, just above her ear, I can tell that she’s easily annoyed by noise, so I do it faster.

“I’m going to shoot her, Frank.”

“You don’t have the balls.”

Frank laughs when Sandy tries to twist herself around in her seat, and cracks her elbow on the laptop I didn’t notice yesterday. Must be new. It makes me think of pillows and blankets and sleep.

“Girls, play nice. We don’t need any more corpses today.”

I've never noticed how comfortable this seat is; I know for a fact that the benches in the cooler are not. Maybe just a few minutes . . .

Chapter 3

Thursday

the Fall of Knight
Chapter 3

Behind the door darkness fled to the corners and lurked like a trapped animal. Sam reached in along the wall, his fingers splayed wide, searching for the switch that would bring light. An ancient bulb, coated in greasy dust, cast a wan, yellow light into the claustrophobic space. The walls were papered from floor to ceiling with photographs of oddly familiar men. Sam stepped inside to get a better look, and then felt ice water flood his veins.

They were all dead now.

Morning

I don't remember waking up. I've been sitting here, watching the same brick bob and swim like a condom in a tide pool forever, and suddenly I am the brick, and now, somehow, I've found the seatless steel toilet just in time to blow chunks all over the wall behind it. I gotta start chewing better, looks like. Good to know.

This must be alcohol poisoning. It's probably not the flu, considering my circumstances, but this weird twitching jive my arms are doing won't convince anyone here that I'm not on some sort of drug. Take the other girl in the holding cell with me – crystal meth? Crack, maybe? Whatever it is, her street pharmacist has not been doing her any favors. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, and try to control the shaking, but it seems that's going to be a losing battle.

“Claire Saint Claire?”

“What?”

“You're free to go.”

I wasn't expecting that, but what the clerk meant to say, it seems, is that I'm free to go once I sign and initial a mountain of forms, and promise not to leave town. Where would I go? David emptied out my savings account before he got himself killed, and as much fun as it is to sleep in my car, I don't want to put myself in that situation when I move to Seattle. Besides which, it looks like Dwight has been impounded.

“Can I get my car back?”

The clerk behind the cage pushes an envelope filled with my personal effects through a slot, and shakes his head sadly.

“It's evidence in an ongoing investigation, Ma'Am. You'll have to wait until that case is closed.”

“How long do you think that'll take?”

“Could be weeks, could be years.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do until then?”

“Try the bus?”

It's really hard to sleep on a city bus. I guess the apartment is

empty, now – but I’m sure they’ve got it taped off, maybe a chalk-outline somewhere in there. My head hurts something fierce.

“Thanks for nothing, Jack.”

“Bruce.”

“Don’t care. Have a good one.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Outside, I’m a little disappointed to see that the rain has stopped, but thrilled to be seeing daylight this soon. There was a moment back there when I thought I was going to have to learn to play the harmonica, or fashion decorative handles for shivs. Make myself useful, right? At least I wouldn’t have to worry about ending up with some guard’s kid – thanks again, Mom.

There are at least a dozen cruisers parked here, but Frank’s is not one of them. I wonder if that means he’s out on patrol, or if the Chief gave him that mandatory vacation after all. Come to think of it, I’ve never seen Frank out of his uniform – I wonder what ‘Civilian Frank’ would be like. Could he cope with the world without the authority of his badge and gun? I’ll have to remember to look him up later and check in.

After an unbroken string of Crown Victorias, the Aero 8 America is as out of place as the Batmobile would be at a Shriner’s convention. The man in the bow-tie looks as if he might fit in pretty well, however.

“Mr. R., it’s always a pleasure to see you. What’s the occasion?”

He uncrosses his arms, and holds his hands open, palms down in front of his chest, and wriggles his fingers.

“I came to pull some strings for your benefit, young lady.”

“You bailed me out?”

Mr. Rothschild crosses his arms again, and leans against his car, all kinds of gorgeous in metallic black and blood-red leather. Walter would shit himself, I think.

“I told them that you couldn’t have been involved.”

“How would you know?”

“I told the police you were with me last night.”

“I don’t remember that.”

His laugh is mirthless, but not unkind. It's also a bit fatherly, and I'm not sure how I feel about that. Not much room to feel anything other than sick right now.

"I'd be surprised if you remember much of anything after last night."

"That bad?"

He shrugs. Somehow, I don't feel reassured. In fact, I have a growing feeling that something a little more complicated than murder happened last night. Is this paranoia? I remember hangovers, and really bad hangovers, but this seems different, and much worse than that.

"So what did we – I do last night?"

"Before or after you broke your late boyfriend's nose and threatened to kill him in front of a hundred witnesses?"

"Oh shit. Did I?"

If Mr. R. answers, I don't hear him, seeing as how I'm a bit preoccupied painting the sidewalk the color of jail gruel I don't remember eating. He waits politely, unfazed, until I'm done, before he asks his own questions.

"Do you take recreational drugs, Claire?"

I shake my head, and regret it, because it sets the world whirling again. My stomach has to be empty now, but there's still plenty of dry to be heaved. When the spasms subside, Mr. R. takes my hand and guides me to the passenger seat of his car. The leather is warm and soft, like it's still attached to a cow. I don't want to think about that too much.

"Drugs, Claire?"

"No – I have a, what you might call an 'Addictive personality.' I usually don't drink, either."

He must have walked around to the other side of the car while I was talking, because I hear another door shut, and then the engine turns over. It sounds like feeding time at the zoo.

"I like your car, Harry."

"You drank last night."

"Ex Ten You Ate In Sir Come Stanzas."

I'm giggling, but I don't really know why, which only makes me laugh harder.

"Claire. Claire!"

"What?"

"Stay with me."

Not going anywhere, except maybe asleep; just five more minutes, Mommy.

Chapter 4

Friday

the Fall of Knight
Chapter 4

Two separate images of the alley, one in stark blue and another in hellish red, were burned into Sam's eyes as the police cars screamed past and away. He slumped against the dumpster, and allowed himself to breathe for a moment.

The gun was still clamped in his right hand. Repulsed by it, as if it were a living thing with tentacles and too many eyes, he flung it into the open lid of the dumpster. A moment later, he thought better of it, and tried to scramble over the lip of the filthy steel box. Sam still wasn't sure who Dexter was, but he was fairly certain he would never find out from the inside of a prison cell.

Afternoon

It's rare that you see carved-beam wood ceilings these days, and I don't recognize this one. I don't like waking up in strange rooms. Reminds me of being a kid, and I hate that. Been there, done that, burned the bridge and kicked the ashes into the river. Done. I'm convinced that no one gets a normal childhood, but most people grow up with scars that are largely figurative.

"Miss Saint Claire?"

A familiar voice in an unfamiliar room. My eyes roll easily to that side, which is nice, because I was expecting them to be lubricated with sand and glass. It's Mr. Beemer, wearing an expensive suit and a cheap tie.

"The very same. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name yesterday..?"

"Three days ago, actually. And I should apologize to you, Miss Saint Claire –"

"Please, just Claire."

"Claire Saint Claire? That's an interesting name."

I smile, feeling rows of extra teeth waiting to roll into place should one of them break off. Mr. Beemer has already earned a place in my 'Good Guy' list, but I don't like the way he inflected the word 'interesting' just now. Kind of like the way people say 'queer' when they want you to think 'odd' but they actually mean 'faggot.' On the other hand, the fact that I've just thought that many words in quotes probably means I'm overthinking this a bit. I think. Gawd, whatever.

"Thanks, I picked it out myself. So what is your name?"

"Of course, so sorry. Isaac Hayes, at your service."

"Shut yo' mouth!"

Mr. Beemer-Hayes' jaw drops slightly, so I grab his hand before things get awkward. I don't think he got my joke, and I suspect he may not be aware that he shared his name with somebody famous until just recently. Someone else clears her throat on the opposite side of the bed.

"Rohypnol."

“Is that your name?”

Long, shiny black hair, eyebrows sculpted into twin arches of perpetual surprise, and a pair of fake, but tastefully so, breasts hidden artfully by a conservative suit-jacket. I hate her instantly. She extends a hand toward me, but pulls it back a moment later when she figures out that I’m not going to take it.

“No, it’s Doctor Merche Benson.”

“Your parents named you Doctor?”

“No, they named me Mercedes.”

Laughing doesn’t hurt nearly as much as I had feared; in fact, considering the way ‘Doctor‘ Mercedes Benson’s eyebrow is twitching, it feels damned good. I resist the urge to cut it short, since this is the best I’ve felt in -

“What day is it?”

“Friday.”

What the fuck?

“It was Wednesday the last time I checked.”

She shrugs, which creases her shoulder pads down the middle. Apparently her tits were more expensive than the suit.

“Like I said; Rohypnol, probably another tranquilizer or two in there. You should be dead.”

“I should be in Seattle; life is funny like that. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, right?”

“Sometimes,“

Hayes stops one word into his sentence to light a cigar off a thick match; it looks like an expensive cigar, maybe Cuban, probably Dominican, and he’s smart enough not to ruin it by sucking butane through it. It’s definitely a ritual, the way he shields the flame with his cupped hand, even indoors; the way he rotates the cigar a fraction between each puff, pulling the flame inward in a bright flare; the way he shakes the match horizontally, then tucks it tenderly away in a thin metal case drawn from, and just as quickly returned to, a hidden jacket pocket.

“Sometimes, what doesn’t kill us, just keeps trying, Claire. Do you have some place to stay until the police determine who killed

your boyfriend?"

"I'm kind of digging the wood-work here. . . ."

Benson laughs; it's a sound like a bullfrog with croup.

"That's not going to happen."

"What Merche means, of course, is that Mr. Rothschild has placed himself in a . . . delicate situation. Your continued presence in his home would only exacerbate this difficulty."

"Do you always talk like that?"

Hayes blows blue smoke out of his nostrils while he considers the question. Unless he's thinking about his dry-cleaning or the weather – his eyes give away very little.

"Like what?"

"Like a lawyer?"

His laugh is deep and hearty and warm – but maybe I'm biased?

"My dear girl; I am a lawyer. As a point of fact, I am Mr. Rothschild's lawyer, which is why I am sitting here, in his bedroom, entertaining an unexpected guest while he is downtown, answering terribly insulting questions, no doubt."

"If you're his lawyer, shouldn't you be there with him?"

This laugh is growing on me, even if it happens to be at my expense. Hayes might even have an opportunity to change my opinion of his profession, if he doesn't screw it up. I hope he doesn't screw it up.

"I'm not that kind of lawyer, Claire."

"What other kind of lawyer are you, Isaac?"

Benson clears her throat, but I ignore her.

"Mergers and acquisitions. Contract law. That sort of thing. I'm a trifle surprised Harold hasn't mentioned me."

"We're not that close."

More mirthful croaking; cackling, even – but I think that's mixing metaphors?

"I find that hard to believe."

"How's that, Mercedes?"

"You're in his bed, wearing his pajamas. He lied to the police to get you out of jail, and he's left you one of his favorite cars."

“What are you suggesting, exactly?”

“You are extremely irritating, and inconvenient, but I don’t think you’re stupid, Ms. Saint Claire.”

“You know, as long as I’m a suspect for one murder, another won’t be that much more trouble.”

Benson goes pale; or as pale as she can get beneath her canned-tan, and the thin smile she’s been wearing for the past couple of minutes sags momentarily.

“Claire, dear, I would be careful about whom you threaten. Your situation is more dangerous than you might have considered.”

Hayes blows a pair of smoke rings that drift upward, stretching and thinning before they finally break apart near the ceiling. He’s not looking at me, but then again, he doesn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular.

“What sort of danger?”

“Have you considered the events leading up to your arrest?”

“I’ve been doing my taxes the past couple of days; not much room in there for thinking.”

“Indeed. Assuming that you did not kill your boyfriend, you have to realize that someone else did; someone who managed to get into your apartment without forcing the lock, someone who borrowed the gun you keep hidden in your car and used it precisely to end another human life. What does all this tell you?”

“That I was framed?”

“That you are in grave danger.”

“Grave danger? You sound like a Sherlock Holmes villain.”

“That would be a good metaphor to embrace, Claire —”

“Simile.”

I was an English major before I dropped out; sue me. Hayes ignores my interruption, anyway, which I find simultaneously admirable and irritating.

“It would be in your best interest to figure out who profited from your David’s death, and if you would be similarly profitable.”

“Do you think it was about money?”

The bullfrog laughs again.

“It’s always about money, dear. What else is there?”

I really don’t like her, and I’m starting to feel dirty just being in the same room with Benson. To be honest with you, I’m not completely comfortable with where this conversation is going in general.

“Maybe this is something I should leave to the police?”

“Claire – the police were convinced you killed David until Harold intervened, and as soon as his story falls apart, you will be their primary suspect once again. You need to find compelling evidence that points away from yourself, and soon.”

“I’m sure my friends –”

“No, Claire – you simply cannot afford to trust anyone at present. Whomever is responsible knows a great deal about you, and that means David’s killer is someone quite close to you. I’m afraid you must assume that everyone is potentially a killer.”

Benson stands up, and clears her throat; she likes to be the center of attention, it seems.

“Isaac, we have an appointment to keep.”

Hayes glances at his watch – a subtle Rolex – and sighs.

“Life does go on, Claire. Take care of yourself, and remember what I’ve said.”

Without another word, they both leave, but I don’t hear door close, and if they drove, I don’t hear a car pull away. How big is this house? I’m tempted to pull the sheets over my head, but I know I’m not going to be able to sleep after that conversation; the spectre of a world populated by false friends and murderers has killed any possibility of sleep now. Is that ironic? Or just a bad pun?

Silk sheets, silk pajamas, and someone – I don’t even want to speculate who – has put me in silk panties; it’s funny that worm shit feels so luxurious, but it does, and in different circumstances I would just kick back and enjoy all of this. I would love to catch up with all the soaps on Telemundo I’ve missed the past couple of years, but Hayes is completely right: someone out there has decided to take a massive shit on my life, and I’m the one who’s going to clean it up. When cleaning up the world, start close to home.

The bathroom is amazing; it's like the designer threw away all of your preconceptions of what a bathroom should be. Ordinarily this revisionist urge just results in pretentious, functionally useless conversation pieces, but Rothschild's money bought him a meso-american latrine paradise. I take a quick shower in a shrine devoted to Chaac, then pee on a toilet shaped like a mini chacmool. Too much fun.

Back in the bedroom I realize that the Meso-American theme isn't confined to the bathroom. Although the stone-work is much more subtle here, stepping out of the bedroom is like stepping into a jungle filled with gorgeous temples – no, no like about it: that's exactly what this is. I wouldn't be surprised to find that they were transported from Mexico and reconstructed stone by stone here, in Rothschild's – house? Mansion? Secret lair? The glass-dome sky is high enough that I'd be tempted to believe that he lives in a Mayan city, now in a rare quiet moment between festivals.

And I'm hungry, which is a bit surprising, but I suppose I haven't had a bite to eat in a couple of days. The kitchen makes a few concessions in the eternal war between form and function – I know for a fact that the Maya never had walk-in freezers quite this big.

Collect a couple slices of bread, a rasher or two of bacon, half a beefsteak tomato and a lettuce leaf, apply heat in various forms, and I've got a perfectly portable breakfast while I wander around the rest of the house. As the rumbling in my stomach settles down, my conversation with Hayes and Benson starts to make a sick sort of sense: how well do I really know the people I think of as friends? Do I tease Walt too much? Does Lang think I'm taking advantage of him? Do I make too much trouble for Frank? Am I too hard on Scott?

Are any of them capable of murder? Lang is nuts, Frank takes the big brother thing a little too seriously, Scott spends more time stoned than asleep, and Walt – really wants my car? None of that adds up to putting a bullet in David, but one thing I've learned is that people have a way of surprising you. Before I left home, one of Mom's boyfriends put on beer-goggles six bottles thick, and figured

he didn't even have to bother with 'please', so I introduced his crotch to my knee. He introduced my uterus to the butterfly knife he carried everywhere, and the day after he got off on a technicality. While I was still eating Jell-o with every meal and flipping channels with a remote bigger than the TV hanging from the ceiling, Mom went right back to him.

I learned two things that year – one; it hurts more than anything when the people you love betray you, and two; scar tissue is better birth control than an IUD, and cheaper, too – at least when you only consider your out-of-pocket expenses. Maybe that's what I liked about David; poor thing couldn't have scared a baby if you gave him a running start. David was a good kid, even if he was a useless pussy, and he certainly didn't deserve to die like that. I owe it to him to figure out who killed him.

And now I'm no longer hungry, so I set the BLT down; I don't know if anything real lives here, but maybe it'll make a good meal for someone with less on her mind.

It would help a great deal if I could remember what happened Tuesday night. Looks like I'm going to have to do the archetypal bartender thing; talk to everyone who might know anything at all, and actually listen to all of it. I usually enjoy listening to the sad little stories people find the courage to tell when they've had a couple of beers, but this is completely different, because I can leave those stories at work, and sleep soundly afterward.

The view from the top of the stairs is stunning; beyond the lush green courtyard is a stepped pyramid that reaches almost all the way to the dome. I feel drawn to it, a yearning crush in my chest that pulls me forward and down, but the sight of traffic in the distance reminds me that I'm not really the last woman on Earth, and if I'm going to do any more exploring, I probably should put something on – some shoes, at least.

Back in the guest room, I find my clothes, which have been dry cleaned and pressed, and I have to wonder where the Mayans go to have their clothes washed, or if they have their own washing machines? It's a terrible joke, sure, but sometimes if you don't laugh

you have to cry, you know? Once again, I am sans shoes, but that's okay, because I like the way the stones and the grass feel.

Why the hell does Rothschild live here? And if he doesn't live here, why bring me here? It seems pretty well isolated, so I suppose if he thinks I'm in danger, it makes a kind of sense, but it's all a bit surreal, and quite ostentatious. Is he trying to impress me with all of this? Or intimidate me – maybe? But why? I am at serious risk of becoming paranoid. Maybe that's not such a bad thing right now, though.

Just as I reach the pyramid I notice the parked cars in the distance. Decisions, decisions – but as much fun as I'm having, maybe I should get on with it. I think I'll visit Lang first; if I can still trust anyone, it's Lang. Don't ask me to explain it, because I'm not sure I can. The man is a semi-serious solipsist, but he insists that I must exist, because he's too dull (he claims) to carry on a conversation with himself for long, and would be permanently bored if I weren't around to talk to. I think it's a game he plays for his own amusement, really; otherwise I'd have to accept the idea that he's delusional at best, or possibly schizophrenic.

Lang is not married, but you wouldn't know it after a brief conversation with the man. When he began writing 'the Fall of Knight' a couple of years ago, he invented a wife and daughter, just like his protagonist, and rearranged his life to accommodate this new family. It's all part of his method writing philosophy, although it'd be very hard to get him to admit that he's doing this with Lisa and Mathilde. If you ask me, I think it's part superstition – like he thinks his books will fail unless he lives a small portion of each one until he sends the final revision off to his publisher – but mostly, I think it's loneliness. You can see it in his eyes, even when he's at a party, surrounded by friends – the man lives in a world of his own, and not necessarily as a matter of choice. But he's made me an honorary citizen of Planet Lang, and he's never asked for anything in return.

But I could be wrong. He could be ape-shit fucking nuts – he could be wallpapering his studio apartment with pictures of me, weaving baskets out of stolen bits of my hair, or whatever it is so

ciopaths do when they're not busy killing your ex-boyfriends and planting evidence implicating you.

Naaaaaaaaaaaah. Lang's not the violent type at all, but I'm sure he's been playing with the idea since Wednesday, trying to decide what Dexter would have done, and maybe if we put our heads together, we can figure out who's got it in for me. Lang writes Stephen-Kingesque horror/thrillers, and that imagination has to be useful now, I would think.

The far end of the dome is filled with some of the most expensive cars I've ever been this close to. Walt's head would absolutely explode right now; there's a '58 Testa Rossa, a Bugatti Veyron, and a whole bunch of cars I don't even recognize. The Aero 8 is probably the least expensive car here. I'm almost insulted, but then I notice that the Morgan has keys in the ignition and a note clipped behind the middle wiper blade.

Miss St.Claire,

The police absolutely refuse to release your Mustang from impound, but I hope you will accept this one as a gift; a humble substitute. Please take care of yourself. Trust no-one.

Your humble servant,

Harold Rothschild

Red Shield Publishing

As soon as I turn the key, though, I remember that Benson described this car as Rothschild's favorite, and I instantly understand why. Sitting this far back, it feels like the car is ninety-percent engine, and she feels fast even though I'm still waiting for the garage door to roll completely out of the way. Then I'm out on the driveway, heading for the open road, and I know that sex is something people do when they can't afford to buy this car.

Holy shit! This isn't a car so much as a street-legal rocket. It's a pity she's so fast, actually, because all too soon I find myself outside

the Barbie-doll house where Lang rents an attic room. His studio has its own entrance, so I don't have to bother the Amish-Mormon-or-Whatever family that lives downstairs. Doesn't stop their little boy from blowing wet kisses against the window when I climb past, though. I consider licking him right back, but the glass looks like it hasn't been washed in a couple of years. When poke at his lips with my fingertips, his eyes go wide, and he vanishes.

The door is chained and dead-bolted, as always. I shimmy open the window screen, and step inside. Lang doesn't even blink; this is one of our favorite in-jokes, so there's got to be something quite fascinating in the pile of books he's poring over on the floor. Fascinating to Lang doesn't always mesh with the way normal people use the word, though. I grab a chair, spin it around, and pop a squat, bracing myself for the inevitable breathless nerd-rant.

"Kaph-Zainism."

"Doesn't ring a bell, Lang. Did you kill David?"

He looks up at me, his eyebrows pushed up and together – sympathy – then blinks twice – denial. Good enough for me. A Rubik's Cube spins through the air toward me, and lands neatly in my palm. Twist, spin, rotate – done in six moves. Pretty close to my personal best, actually.

"What's Kaph-Zainism?"

I toss the cube back at him, and he almost catches it. Watching him scramble across the pile of dusty hardcovers to retrieve it is almost too much, but I manage to stifle my giggle, because I know he'll pout for ten minutes if I laugh when he's in 'serious scholar' mode. From the window sill, Agamemnon yawns, flashing a mouthful of wicked teeth, before curling back up into his pool of sunlight.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out, actually. The cube is a Zainist metaphor: twenty seven cubes together form another cube, the smallest cube you can build around a hidden cube inside. Now, if you count across then down, it turns out the middle cube is number fourteen. Fourteen is two times seven – two, seven; twenty-seven."

Yawn.

"Amazing. What does it mean?"

“Not a damned thing, Winny. Or everything. I’m working on it.”

“Anybody ever tell you you don’t make a whole lot of sense, Lang?”

“All the time.”

He smiles. Lang doesn’t smile often enough, but I’m glad I’m here for this one. Although, that’s not really why I’m here, is it?

“So we both know you didn’t kill David, and I didn’t kill David, but you’re here because you think I know who did?”

“Too much to hope for, Lang, but I was hoping you could ask Dexter how he would have done things.”

“You know Dexter isn’t real, right?”

“Knight or Dey?”

Lang actually blushes, and it’s his joke. Being a public figure has been a major adjustment for him, I think – he’s always been the shy guy who vanishes into the background whenever possible, but recently he’s been on Conan with Keanu, and Oprah gave away copies of *The Fall*.

“I don’t want either to be real, actually. Dexter has started to scare me lately.”

Uh-oh. Here it comes.

“I’ve started cutting myself.”

He rolls up his sleeves to show me the scabby mess his arms have become. By the window, Memnon rolls over and starts purring loudly.

“What the hell, Lang?”

“Dexter likes pain. And I think he’s trying to punish me.”

“But you just said –”

“– I know, Claire; I know he’s not real, but I can’t write him unless he believes he’s real, you know?”

“That’s three different kinds of fucked-up, Sparky.”

Lang rebuttons his sleeves and gives me a wan smile.

“So you want to know what Dexter would do?”

“If you think it would help?”

But now I'm not so sure this is a good idea. Too late, though; Lang relaxes, and his face changes, like he's channeling his multiply-personalities sociopath anti/protagonist. When he smiles, his mouth is filled with teeth and gums. Creepy.

"You're not worth killing, Winter."

Oh hell; I'll just play the game. Some people go running or play violin when they need to think; Lang just checks out of his skull altogether, and lets his demons play. Works when you're writing books, I guess, but this is a little bit Twilight-Zone for my tastes – still; If you want inside Lang's head, you have to be willing to share.

"Good afternoon, Dexter. Did you kill David?"

Lang laughs an uncharacteristically cruel bark.

"If I was going to kill that little shit, I would have done it years ago. How'd he die?"

"Gunshot – my gun."

"Looks like you probably did it, child. Did you have a motive?"

He's being an asshole, intentionally, but it still pisses me off.

"I didn't kill him!"

"I don't care about what you did or didn't do, Winter. I am interested in how the bloody mess looks to everyone else. If you were going to kill your useless boyfriend, why would you do it?"

The money.

"He stole from me."

"Pocket change? You didn't have enough cash to buy a latte, decided to off your fuck-buddy instead?"

"Try eighteen grand, smart-ass."

Lang smiles half a smile, but there's still too many teeth there by far.

"How hard was that?"

"How hard was what?"

"Follow the money, Winter."

That's the second time today I've heard that suggestion – maybe there's something to it, after all.

"Can I talk to Lang now?"

"Just one thing first."

He picks up the X-acto knife Lang is using to clip articles, for his next book presumably, and calmly pushes the point through his palm. Lang's right eye twitches, then he screams bloody murder, but just stares at the blue handle quivering in the river of blood pouring down his arm.

"What the hell, Sparky? Are you on drugs or something?"

"Mirtazapine I think. This really hurts."

"Well duh. Do you have any alcohol?"

"I'm not really thirsty."

No smile there – he's serious, and apparently quite confused.

"For your hand, you twat. A first-aid kit, maybe some bandages?"

"On top of the fridge."

And sure enough, the first-aid kit on top of Lang's fridge is filled with cigars and a flask of rum. If I were to ask him – maybe not right now, seeing as how he's currently busy moaning at his hand, but some other time – he would say that the only emergencies he plans for are writer's block and insomnia. He also has a bottle of vodka in the freezer.

"Alright, Lang – we're sacrificing a dishtowel and some of your frozen potato juice to the cause."

"Just get this thing out of me."

"You do have two hands, you know – Seriously, what are you on?"

Step one: distract the injured animal with something delicious, or, failing that – something irritating.

"Citalopram?"

"Never heard of it, Sparky. Sure you don't mean Rohypnol?"

"Sure – that too. Nothing I like better than to drug myself, so I can rape my OH FUCK MY ASS!"

Steps two and three: when the wounded beast is suitably distracted, remove debris from the injury and douse with alcohol.

"I would love to, buddy, but I left the strap-on in my other pants."

"Really?"

"No, not really. Hold still."

I wrap his hand as tightly as I can, then tuck the whole ghetto-band-aid into his armpit.

“Squeeze.”

“Should I get stitches?”

“That’s actually not a bad idea. Mind if I drive?”

The poor creature actually tries to flip me off with his bloody hand, which scores points for nerve, but loses just as many for pure, staggering stupidity. We could argue about it all night, but I find that arguments become much less fun when your opponent falls over and stops breathing. This is a small wound, but Lang is a total drama queen, and prone to fainting at the sight of blood. I saw him turn green over a medium-rare steak, once.

“You got any Ziploc bags, Lang?”

“There are some Safeway bags under sink.”

“That works. We can’t have you bleeding all over the leather.”

After fumbling with the multiplicity of locks and chains, I have to chase a gaggle of kids away from the Morgan, then shove Lang into the passenger seat before they can regroup. Their hooting is lost in the Morgan’s roar, but I watch the little dance they do until I round the next corner and narrowly miss running over a shriveled blue-hair with a fanny pack and a Pomeranian.

Lang is starting to turn paler than usual, and the Wal-Mart bag has found a hole to drip blood, so I push the accelerator down as far as I dare, keeping an eye open for cops and other obstacles. There are a couple of close calls, but we never actually get pulled over, and I even manage to find princess parking in front of the hospital.

“Do you always drive barefoot?”

“Shut up, Sparky. We’re here.”

“Okay – cool. No pickles on mine, please.”

“You are such a drama queen.”

When the doors hiss open the nurse behind the counter is staring at me in a way I’m not entirely comfortable with. It’s like she’s just about to tell a joke, and I’m the punchline.

“Welcome back, Miss Moon.”

It's a verbal slap across the face. Other than Lang, I haven't told anyone about my childhood, and I haven't used that name since I left Mom behind.

"Please don't call me that."

"Why not? It's the name you gave us when your friend checked you in Tuesday night."

I don't get a chance to ask her to describe my 'friend' because Lang chooses that moment to collapse in a heap on the floor. Doctors and staff appear instantly to check his vitals, shine flashlights into his various holes, and whisk him away. By the time the circus is over, Nurse Enigmatic is gone, and I'm left with a choice between issues of *People* from last year, or a scintillating conversation with the guy hugging his knees and singing the *Star Wars* theme to himself. I never realized until this moment just how misogynistic and vulgar that song was.

Oh no! Brad and Jen broke up – I am heartbroken. How can I go on knowing such injustice still lives in the slightly-out-of-date world of lobby magazines? Where the fuck have they taken Lang?

The hand that lands on my shoulder makes me jump; I hate that. Not so much being snuck up on, but the way I can't prepare for it. It's kind of like tickling yourself – no matter how much you practice, you can't change the fact... anyway. The hand is attached to an arm, which seems to be connected to a very sad-looking doctor, in zoo-animal-print scrubs.

"Give it to me straight, doc. Is he dead?"

Star Wars Rockstar stops right in the middle of the chorus to stare at us with his jaw agape, and takes the opportunity to pick at his teeth with a Bic pen. Doctor Zoo-Scrubs shakes his head solemnly.

"Three stitches."

"Sounds terrifying. Is he going to make it?"

"You never checked out, Miss Moon. There's forms we still need you to sign."

It's been a couple of years since I checked into a hospital. I'm about to tell Doctor Zoo-Scrubs that he's off his rocker, but then

Sherlock Holmes starts playing his violin in my head. Time to get a clue, Claire.

“Tuesday night?”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“You were rather incoherent, so I’m not surprised to hear it.”

“Was I drunk?”

“Barely. Drugs seemed much more likely, but your toxicology came back clean.”

“What does that mean?”

Dr. Zoo-Scrubs shifts his weight from one foot to the other and back again.

“It means that whatever you took, it was either very expensive or very rare.”

“Only the finest in designer pharmaceuticals for this girl, Doctor Doolittle.”

“You should be more careful, Miss.”

“Obviously. Was it Rohypnol?”

This makes him pause, like the thought dug its claws in and won’t let go. He seems quite a bit more concerned now.

“So you don’t know what you took?”

“No – not really. I think I drank a lot; fell off the wagon pretty hard, you might say. Felt a bit like that fucker ran me over, too.”

He shakes his head emphatically, or vigorously, at least.

“Your BAC was the first thing we tested when your friend brought you here Tuesday night. I doubt you had more than a single drink that night.”

“But one would be enough – what friend? Do you mean Lang?”

More head-shaking. What exactly happened Tuesday night?

“He was gone by the time I saw you, but the duty nurse says it was Harold Rothchild himself.”

This is an interesting twist; If Mr. R. brought me to the hospital, why didn’t he stay? I’m sure he’s a busy man, but it doesn’t fit my mental image of him. He’s always struck me as the chivalrous type, not the sort to leave a girl in my condition before at least finding

out what was wrong with her. Then again, I guess I barely know the man, and it was his advice to trust no one.

“Can I talk to her?”

“Unfortunately, no. Janice flew out of town Wednesday morning to attend a wedding in Minneapolis, and she won’t be back until Monday evening. You’re welcome to come back then.”

“I’m not sure I have that sort of time. Did he sign me in, show ID, something like that?”

“He left a sizable check to cover your expenses, actually. There’s enough left to pay for a couple of major operations, if you should need them. Janice said Mr. Rothschild seemed eager to leave.”

I can’t imagine why. Hospitals are always such fountains of joy.

“Three stitches, you say?”

Dr. Zoo-Scrubs laughs, and it makes him seem more human.

“He’s signing autographs; it’s quite fortunate for him that his imaginary friend didn’t stab his dominant hand.”

“Oh, I’m sure Lang would have been quite disappointed if he couldn’t scribble his John Hancock again for a few days. Can I see him now?”

“Just as soon as you sign a few pages yourself. Follow me, please.”

Attached to the stack of forms is a photocopy of my old driver’s license, which explains why Dr. Zoo-Scrubs has been calling me Miss Moon. I was born Winter Solstice Moon, after my Mom’s boyfriend at the time, Hunter Moon. Mom always told me he was a flower child, a free spirit, a drummer. Moon was my hope and my salvation, the father I never knew who would swoop back into my life during my darkest hour to rescue me from the constant stream of losers and jerks Mom found after him.

But my darkest hour – up until just now, actually – came and went, and no one rescued me, no one stretched out a hand and pulled me out of my despair. I did that, me, all by myself. And then I changed my name. It’s funny that Winter has returned now that I’ve found myself in trouble again. The question that troubles me is this; is she here to help, or witness? I need to be careful, or I’m going to end up sounding just as nuts as Lang.

Speak of the devil; he reappears with an entourage, wearing blue gauze and a sheepish grin.

“Hey, Winny – did you know I’m famous?”

“Really, Sparky?”

“Seems so. You still have that car?”

“No; I sold it to the King of Canada, who was here with a sprained toe fifteen minutes ago. Can we leave the crazy bullshit here? I’ve got serious business to attend to, and I could really use your help, but not if you’re planning on stabbing yourself again.”

“I’m not *planning* anything, Claire.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

His adoring fans abandon him somewhat less reluctantly than he hoped, judging by the way he pouts when we climb into the Morgan. Lang’s ego should be the furthest thing from my mind as I pull out into traffic, because I’m neck deep in a game of cat and mouse, and I’m desperately hoping that I get to be the cat this round.

“Do you think we could stop somewhere for a bite? I’m starving.”

“Pancakes, Mr. Crazy-man?”

“Mmm. . . sounds perfect. IHOP?”

“Village Idiot is closer, and I like their coffee more.”

“You know it’s all the same shit in different cups, right?”

“So I like the cups better; what do you care?”

“I’m just saying.”

“Yeah; don’t.”

Usually I’ll order the Denver omelet, because there’s something perverse about it, but today I’m looking forward to a short stack smothered in syrup, with some sausage links and grits on the side. And cranberry juice. And coffee – enough coffee to stop a bull’s heart. There’s a whole chapter they left out of Matthew that’s nothing but Jesus eating pancakes and chugging coffee.

The Idiot is almost empty, except for a gag-inducing cloud of body-odor near the door. I suspect there might be a causal connection here, but nothing is keeping me from my pancakes, dammit.

“Table for two?”

Our hostess looks tired, but I suppose not everyone has the luxury of sleeping for a couple of days straight when things aren't going so well. And it is mid-afternoon, so it's also possible that she's six hours into a ten hour day. I usually look like hell at four a.m., too.

"Table for three, actually. Lang here has multiple personalities, and they get pissy if they have to share a plate."

Lang clears his throat.

"Table for four, please."

He says this with a straight face. Janet Trainee seems concerned, so I cut the game short with a little wave.

"Don't mind us; a table for two, somewhere near an open window, preferably. And coffee – bring us lots of coffee. We have lots to discuss, and caffeine is a must."

"Follow me."

They always say that. In my experience, you're more likely to have to tell someone when it's time to leave. Bars are different animals, though. When you wedge a typical American into typical booth seating, and pack them full of typical American diner food, things have a way of working themselves out naturally.

The windows don't open, of course, but the smell of hot armpit is gone at least. Lang's eyes are wide, and his jaw is just slightly slack. There's a moment when I think he's looking at me like that, but then I realize I'm sitting between yet another car freak and the parking lot.

"It's a gorgeous car."

"True, that. Drives like a dog-damn rocket on rails, too."

"Do you know how much an Aero 8 America costs?"

"Why are all the men in my life obsessed with cars?"

He blinks a couple of times, tearing his focus away from the window, and finally manages to lock those emerald-green eyes of his on mine.

"Guys spend a lot of time thinking about things they can't have. It's how we're built."

"So what you're saying is that you write books about people with exciting lives because you're a friendless loser with nothing better to

do with your time?”

“What, sure – yeah. Black is a nice color, but I would have picked green.”

And just like that, he’s looking through me again. I’m going to have our waiter pull the shades or something. The sight and aroma of hot coffee does the trick, though; Lang’s drained half his cup before ‘Tina – Trainee’ has had a chance to produce menus we don’t need.

“A double stack of whole wheat cakes, with a side of sausage links and grits, and a glass of cranberry juice for me, and he’ll order the chicken-fried steak and eggs, over easy, buttermilk pancakes and rye toast.”

“Why do you assume that’s what I want today?”

“It’s what you always order, Lang. People don’t change unless they have to, and you’re no different.”

“Yeah? Just watch me.”

Tina stands with pen and pad at the ready, her face the definition of barely-restrained indifference. Lang flips through the menu one more time.

“Chicken-fried steak, eggs sunny-side up, pancakes and an English muffin, please.”

“Great. I’ll go put your order in.”

She collects our menus and vanishes. I don’t think she’s planning on making a career out of this, or at least, I don’t think she should plan on making this a career. Not that it matters, really. Life is just too short to care about indifferent wait service. David, you stupid animal, what did you get yourself mixed up in?

“So what did David do to get himself killed?”

Lang is looking at me inquisitively, completely unaware that he’s just read my mind. From anyone else it would have been an insensitive way to broach the subject, but Lang gets a pass. Lang is Lang, and I’m not interested in changing him; it would spoil the Langness, the Langerity, the Langitude that makes him worth talking to.

“Not sure, actually. Whatever it was, my savings weren’t enough to buy him his life.”

“Hmm. Maybe your savings were enough to cost him his life, though. Was he doing any drugs?”

“David? When I was living with him I had to mix crushed aspirin into apple sauce. Licking a stamp made him dizzy. Anything more interesting would have killed him.”

Lang cocks an eyebrow at me, and squints the other eye. He probably thinks he looks pensive, but it actually looks like he’s just inhaled a bug.

“Okay, fine. We’ll keep drugs on the table for now, but I doubt that’s it.”

“You don’t have to take drugs to buy them. Especially if you’re an entrepreneur.”

“Okay. But what else could cost eighteen-large?”

“Black market organs? A Korean car? Half a semester at Harvard? A bribe? Blackmail?”

“Blackmail?”

“Sure. Your nerd-boy probably had secrets just like everyone else. Most people will do a lot to keep their dirty laundry private, especially if they can use someone else’s money to do it.”

I reach for my cup at the same moment as Lang, but he drains his coffee before I get the cup to my lips. Lang pours himself another, then looks at me, with that ‘I’ve got a joke for you’ glitter in his eyes.

“I like my coffee the same way I like my women.”

Okay; I’ll bite.

“Hot and black?”

“Cold and bitter.”

“Ouch.”

Lang bounces his eyebrows and takes another sip.

“So motive is up in the air at the moment. How about suspects?”

“Well there’s me, there’s you – you crazy bastard.”

“Why you?”

“Can’t remember what I did that night. It’s not outside the realm of possibility that I killed him myself. Why do you object to me fingering myself, but not you?”

I've never actually seen someone laugh so hard they squirt milk out of their nose, but I can't imagine it feels any better when you do it with coffee. Lang doesn't seem to enjoy the sensation, anyway, not the way he's howling now. I take another sip, and wonder if this is anything more interesting than Folger's. Probably not.

"Are you done yet?"

"Sorry."

"Yeah, no you're not."

"Okay – so you could have killed David because you had access and motive."

"I don't care about the money."

"Doesn't matter. A hundred people saw you have an argument with him Tuesday night, heard you call him all sorts of unpleasant things, then slap him. A few hours later, he winds up dead – say; why are you not in jail right now?"

"A friend of mine bailed me out."

"Your friend must have deep pockets. Last time I check, your bail was set at five hundred thousand dollars, Claire."

"Do you know Harold Rothschild?"

"Red Shield Publishing? Sure, I've wallpapered my bathroom with his rejection letters. You – him?"

I'm not sure what Lang's trying to say here, but it doesn't sound flattering. Rothschild seems like a decent old man, based on the pair of conversations I remember having with him, and his incomprehensible wealth hasn't turned him reptilian like it does to most people, but it also hasn't made him any less old. Not that I have anything against the elderly, I'm just not interested in dating someone I'd have to spoon feed after a few years.

"Rejection letters could be motive for murder."

"What, my aim is so bad I aimed at Rothschild and missed by half a city? You're going to have to do better than that, Winny."

"So why would you have done it?"

"Maybe I'm secretly in love with you."

"That's a poorly kept secret, Lang. Besides, if we were going to start adding secret stalkers to the suspect list, we'd have to add

... oh, Walt, maybe Frank, and probably Rothschild himself.”

“That’s good; five is a nice round number.”

“Five?”

“We still haven’t eliminated ourselves as suspects.”

“You’re so damned difficult.”

“Occupational hazard. Ooh! Pancakes!”

Lang’s fork drifts dangerously close to the fluffy tower that’s just been plunked sullenly in front of me. There is a moment where I think I’ll have to see his fork, and raise him a butter knife, but then Tina drops pancakes and steak in his general vicinity, and detente is restored. Except my grits look suspiciously like a complete absence of grits. Funny, that.

“Tina, love, you forgot my grits.”

“You didn’t order grits.”

The bitch wants to die.

“I don’t want to argue about it, dear. Let’s just pretend I’m ordering them now. Cool?”

“I’ll bring some right out.”

She won’t. She’s going to go tell her buddies in the back about the bitch at table nine, and then they’ll try to cajole each other into pissing in my grits, but ultimately she’ll just bring me a bowl of oatmeal instead as an act of passive-aggressive rebellion. Meanwhile, these pancakes are ambrosia.

“It really boils down to this, Claire; you need to figure out who really capped David before anyone will believe it wasn’t you. And considering you don’t even remember Tuesday night, it’s not going to be easy.”

I swallow a little too soon, and have to fight my gag reflex.

“You’re not allowed to say ‘Capped’ like that, Lang.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. You sound like a douche. Just don’t, okay?”

He sticks his tongue out at me, then forks a square of yolk-dripping steak onto it.

“That’s really attractive; thank you for sharing.”

“My pleasure. So – suspect number three; Walt. Does Walt have a last name?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Why would he kill David?”

“With Walt, I would be inclined to say it was car-related, but David drove a Honda Fit, so I doubt that’s it.”

“But you mentioned him, you must have a reason to suspect him?”

“I loaned him my car; whoever killed David used my gun, and I always keep Betty under my seat.”

“Isn’t that dangerous – a gun sliding around the floor of your car while you’re driving?”

“No – it’s easy to wedge her securely into the seat-springs. If you didn’t know she was there, you’d never find her.”

“Okay; did Walt know any of this?”

“Probably; he knows I have a gun and a car. Two plus two, I guess.”

“So that’s opportunity, at least. Do we have motive?”

Nothing comes to mind, so I use the quiet moment to demolish the tower of pancakes in front of me. About three flapjacks in, a small bowl of thin oatmeal wobbles to a sloppy halt next to my cranberry juice. Tina is seriously pushing the boundaries of the sisterhood.

“I can’t think of a single reason for Walt to kill anyone. He’s happily married, he’s got his music, and a job that allows him to be as surly as he wants. I think he’s obsessed with my car, but it’s in impound now, so if this was some sort of clever –”

“If you’re convicted, they’ll probably auction off your car.”

“I think they only do that for drug-related crimes.”

“The point is, just because we haven’t worked out the why, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. So; next?”

“Frank?”

“Sure. He’s got that big-brother thing going on with you, and he’s a cop, so he’d know how to avoid leaving evidence behind. And he’d know how to shoot that gun of yours.”

“But why would Frank make it look like I did it, if he’s so protective of me?”

One of my favorite literary cliches is ‘A shadow passed over his face,’ because it really makes very little sense if you think about it – what casts the shadow? Tiny, fleeting rainstorms? Intensely furrowed eyebrows? Whatever the cause, it’s happened to Lang just now; odd.

“Sometimes people just disappoint you for their own reasons – who knows why?”

“Lang?”

“Yeah?”

“Stay with me here; I need your brain – you can’t go to the dark place right now, okay?”

He smiles, weakly.

“Sure – sure, Winny. A mystery to solve and all that.”

“Exactly. So where are we at?”

“Okay, right; You’re a suspect because you had motive and opportunity, but our game would be pretty boring if it were that easy, wouldn’t it? I’m suspect because I’m nuts, and madly in love with you.”

He forks a quivering mass of egg into his mouth, just to let that statement hang there out in the open for a few moments longer, I’m sure. If Lang wasn’t such a brilliant complement to my personality, I wouldn’t put up with this sort of shit at all. Instead, I wait for him to finish chewing, swallow, and go on.

“There’s Walt, who’s had plenty of opportunity, but no discernible motive. Frank, strong opportunity, weak motive. You just need to tell me about Rothschild now.”

“I don’t really know him that well; we’ve talked a couple of times.”

“Your office?”

“I won that fair and square.”

“The bear?”

“He’s eccentric.”

“The Morgan?”

“He’s got a ton of cars, mine is unavailable.”

“Bail?”

“He feels responsible?”

Lang drums his fingertips together, looking quite satisfied with himself.

“Responsible, or guilty?”

“It doesn’t make sense, Lang; why go to the trouble of framing someone for a murder, if you’re just going to turn around and bail them out a few hours later?”

“Rope.”

“Rope?”

“To hang yourself with. Look at it this way – if I was writing a mystery novel about all of this –”

“– Dog! You’re not, are you?”

“– my heroine is strong-willed, independent, with short-cropped, prematurely-grey-dyed-pink hair, blue eyes deeper than the Pacific, legs that go on forever –”

“Lang!”

He actually blushes; adorable.

“Right. So my villain is a charming, successful, obscenely wealthy businessman who’s found himself in a difficult situation –”

“– He’s pregnant?”

“– Blackmail! Some punk kid has chanced upon evidence of something damning, maybe proof my villain is having an illicit affair –”

“Rothschild is a widower, Lang. I doubt his wife cares anymore.”

“Really? His Wikipedia page doesn’t mention that.”

We’re all shocked that the internet contains incomplete or inaccurate information, I’m sure.

“Yeah, it’s true. What else have you got?”

“Drugs.”

“Not really. What else?”

“Insider trading, something like that?”

“Better. But again; why post bail? Why not let the heroine rot in jail?”

“He’s missing something that only she can find.”

“Like what?”

“Something the ex-boyfriend gave to her before he died. Something incredibly damning. Only she doesn’t know she has it.”

“Well that’s convenient – but what if she finds out? What if she pieces everything together, finds the critical piece of evidence, and decides to go to the police with it?”

“Somebody else dies – AND! And he makes it look like she did it again. After that, no one will listen to anything she has to say.”

“What about the evidence?”

“It vanishes; money is the universal solvent, you know.”

Lang is excited about the idea of pinning this all on Rothschild, and against my better judgment, his enthusiasm is infectious. Is it possible that Rothschild is dirty? What dark secret would drive a man, who seems to have everything, to kill? And why screw me over afterward? How deep is the shit I’ve found myself in now?

“So what do we do now?”

“We need to reconstruct Tuesday night; talk to witnesses, build a timeline, maybe find you some shoes.”

It’s funny: I completely forgot about that. It’s strange, but I’ve never had anyone pull ‘no-shirt-no-shoes’ on me. Maybe they’re just not looking at my feet?

“You were there that night; what did you see?”

“Spent most of the night chatting up a video store clerk; I doubt she was involved.”

“Involved in a conversation with you? I can’t imagine.”

I should have known better – Lang sticks out his tongue, still covered in a brown and gray slurry of pancakes and meat. So I do what any self-respecting woman-of-dignity would do: I give him a sharp kick to the shins, which is only somewhat less effective for the absence of shoe-leather.

“So we’ll just have to find Scott. Where’s the Shop tonight?”

“I don’t know for sure.”

“How can you not know? You bankrolled the club before it started making money; back when it was a real risk for you.”

“They took a vote, decided we were liabilities.”

“Just like that?”

“Just.”

I knew hiring Scott’s stoner friends was a bad idea. It was just a harmless, mobile party – fun. Now it’s possibly the only way I can get the answers I need to clear my name, and I can’t find it, because I designed it to be impossible to find unless you’re in, and I am decidedly no longer in.

Come to think of it, it’s probably rather fortunate that we hired Scott’s loser friends; the lot of them might be able to hide from a blind quadrapalegic if you gave them a head start. Maybe. I think about that while Lang and I dismantle the remainder of our breakfasts. The pancakes are exactly what I need; light and fluffy, with just a hint of maple syrup and a dusting of sugar. David never did like pancakes – always had to have crustless toast smeared with creamy, never-ever chunky, peanut butter.

And suddenly I’m not hungry any more. Even still, there’s not much left of what was a ridiculously large meal anyway. On any other day I would find a warm corner somewhere, maybe a bookstore or a coffee shop, and steal a few minutes for a nap. Sleep is not always synonymous with rest, but neither is a luxury I can afford at the moment.

“Should we get out of here?”

Lang nods vigorously, while packing the last couple of bites of steak and eggs into his mouth. Fig. To his credit, though, he does pick up the check, and heads toward the front counter to pay. Outside, the newspapers in the big brown box are obsessed with the Creeper’s latest victim, a flight attendant from Aurora. I almost waste a couple of quarters on an issue of the Post when Lang appears.

“I’ll drive.”

“No, you won’t. Besides, I’m not sure where we’re going yet.”

“That one’s easy. Where’s Scott always wanted to set up shop, despite it being a brilliantly stupid idea?”

“The bridge?”

“Goats above, trolls below, Claire.”

“I’m going to need a coat.”

Something on the ground has captured Lang’s attention.

“And some boots. Shall we go shopping?”

“I’m not letting you into the changing room again, okay?”

Night

There must be two hundred, maybe two hundred and fifty people packed in under the Speer Boulevard bridge. It's hard to tell from here, but it looks like the Shop is dispensing booze and questionable music from the back of an extended-length cargo van. The thick, acrid cloud loitering here suggests that Scott has taken the opportunity to diversify in my absence. I resist the urge to push my way through the gyrating, grinding crowd. Throttling Scott in front of this many people won't do a whole lot to prove my innocence. The sea of red, glazed eyes probably wouldn't register or remember if I did it naked on a unicycle, though.

Where the hell are the cops?

"Hey, little sister. I figured you'd still be in the cooler."

"Speak of the devil! What the hell are you doing here, Frank? Under cover?"

Frank takes a swig from his bottle of Coors Light, and chases it with a quick puff of Djarum Black. His taste in beer is shit, but the kreteks are a good choice. My lungs flutter eagerly at the sight. Uncharacteristically, Frank taps one out, spins it up the the back of his knuckles like magic, and tucks the cigarette between my lips. No lecture about cancer or emphysema, just the off-beat samba of a disposable Bic flame. I fill myself with nicotine, and for a moment, one all too brief moment, everything is right with the world again.

"Administrative leave... because of this."

Frank lassos the throbbing crowd with a sweep of his cigarette, and the gesture is all at once inclusive and derisive. He looks out of place, smaller, in civilian clothes. Before I can ask about 'Administrative leave,' though, Lang clears his throat. It sounds like he's dislodged something juicy, and it disturbs me that I understood the subtext of that loogie: Suspect.

"Don't mind my idiot-friend, Frank. I'm glad we bumped into you; We're trying to figure out what happened Tuesday night. I thought maybe you could help?"

He shrugs, and pours more beer into himself.

“No badge, no gun . . . at least, not officially, Claire. If I do anything that looks like work, they’ll never give them back. I could work at your bar as a bouncer, but it doesn’t look like you work your bar anymore.”

Frank sucks the last breath out of his cigarette, then flicks it into the river.

“How do we know you didn’t kill David yourself?”

Tact is a concept Lang has abandoned wholesale, and usually I’m all for brutal honesty, but his timing is shit tonight. Frank ignores the question long enough to light another kretek. I expect him to lay Lang out cold for the question, but he just rocks back on his concrete perch, and seems to vanish inside himself for a moment. When he climbs back out, he’s wearing an odd little half-smile that doesn’t even hint at happiness.

“What do you know about the Creeper murders?”

“You’re the Creeper?”

Oh for two, Lang.

“No, I just help clean up his messes, and hope one of these nights he’ll leave a business card with his home phone number or address. Or at least, that was what I was doing at the beginning this week. Tuesday night, in fact, I was lucky enough to be first-on-the-scene for another poor girl.”

Frank empties his bottle, and sends it spinning over the heads of oblivious dancers. It hits the water with a splash and a gurgle.

“Have you ever seen the insides of a human being, Mr. Lang? The crap you write, that’s nothing compared with finding somebody in a field, with an armful of her own guts, still steaming, and then standing around for the rest of the night while the sick fuck who did it gets further and further away.”

Two more bottles of Coors appear from the depths of a blue and white cooler, and lose their caps with a swift, practiced movement. Frank offers me one, but when I refuse, he passes it to Lang, who seems a bit confused by the bottle.

“It’s beer. You drink it.”

Frank gives a demonstration, draining half his bottle without stopping to breathe.

“To answer your question; no – I didn’t kill David, and yes, I can name two dozen state and city employees who will corroborate my story.”

“Look, I’m sorry if I –”

“Forget it.”

He stands up, wobbles a little, then sits back down.

“You okay there, Frank? Would you like a ride somewhere. Home, maybe?”

“I’m fine – Claire. I’m actually working on something here – Claire.”

“A hangover?”

Frank’s laugh is a caricature of drunken giggles, and I’ve heard enough of the real thing to know this is not.

“So what’s your game?”

“I think he picks up girls at raves, drugs them, then kills them.”

It’s not just the cold fingers of September’s first days that crawl down my spine right now. Frank rubs his nose, then jerks his thumb in a none-too-subtle *go-away* gesture. I can take a hint, but Lang looks oblivious, so I grab his elbow and pull him with me into the dance. Lang doesn’t dance, a fact I’ve learned by watching him try after he’s had a few too many. Right now, though, I don’t care. We need to blend in, and if he continues standing around with his hands in his pockets, someone is going to notice that the awkward-man is, like, totally that guy from the Late Show last week. We don’t need that sort of attention.

“Dance, Lang, dance!”

“I don’t –”

“I don’t care; fake it.”

He continues standing there like an idiot, just doing nothing, so I help out. Lang’s trouble is that he tries to think his way through everything; this probably works with books, but dancing is something you have to feel much lower. I push him into the crowd and grind against him.

“What the hell, Winn?”

“Just go with it.”

“I don’t –”

“Dance, bitch!”

His resistance melts away, and that animal I know he keeps inside wakes up. The animal doesn’t dance well, but he does at least dance enthusiastically, and after another song the sweaty, pulsing herd accepts us as one of its own. It’s weird, being here, instead of in the booth. It feels so naked, but primevally naked, with all the freedom and none of the responsibility. I can see why these people come back, night after night; it just feels good.

But I’m not here to dance, no matter how much I might enjoy it. No matter how much Lang is enjoying it – maybe a little too much, now?

“You’re blending a little too much, Sparky. Do you see anyone out of place?”

“Other than us?”

“Not helpful. We should split up, and try to find Scott.”

“Hard to be any sort of bouncer when you don’t have doors, or walls. Where do you suppose he’d be?”

“I’ll check the vans, you follow the cloud. Meet back at Frank in ten, fifteen?”

“That’s a plan.”

Lang grabs his own collar, and drags himself away into the crowd. It’s corny as hell, but he’s made me smile, so I think I’ll let him live another night.

I REALLY need to stop thinking things like that, or I’m going to get myself into trouble; into MORE trouble. Can it get any worse, though? It’s probably not the last time I’ll think this, I hope, but I wish I could be one of these Shoppers; just regular people who come here to dance, and drink, and flirt, and maybe sneak away for a quickie in the bathrooms. Well, not here, anyway – I can’t imagine anyone sane dropping trou in the portashitters Scott, Jones, and Bob have obviously dragged here from some superfund site. I

mean, damn; half the people here are casually dancing away, while a handful of desperate souls fight to get in and out as fast as possible.

Of the toilets, I mean. I wish the stink was the worst of my worries. I wish I could step in human filth, ruin a pair of designer-knockoff boots, and spend tomorrow bitching about it. I wish I could wake up with a hangover, and wonder if that cute guy with the five'o'Clock shadow is actually going to call me back. I wish the fact that Scott has apparently just plugged his Zune into the big speakers, so he can host another orgy in the back of the cargo van –

“Put your pants on and get out here, you moron.”

It's like a Hieronymous Bosch painting in there, and it's not just the Roofie residue that makes me feel nauseous right now.

“Claire, hey.”

“Don't hey me, Scott. You've got some serious talking to do.”

“That's funny – seems you're the one should be talking, love.”

“I didn't kill anybody.”

“Ain't never said you did, Claire. You sure knocked that boyfriend of yours around right good, though.”

“He's dead.”

“Explains the coppers, that does.”

“What did you tell them?”

Scott shrugs, and starts drawing circles in the dust with his big toe, which seems to have torn a hole in his grungy socks specifically for this purpose. His toenail looks like it's been chewed off recently, but considering the company he keeps, it would be unfair of me to assume he did the chewing.

“They came, I went. There's still the nonexistence of my visa, love. Did you kill him?”

“David?”

“Yeah – kind of liked the little blighter. If he was bothering you, though, I'da killed him myself.”

“Did you notice anything strange Tuesday night, then?”

“Other than you acting like you'd had a noseful? Not really.”

“Think hard, Scott. This is important.”

“There was the guy in the suit – that was odd.”

“What guy?”

“The one wearing the suit, love. I didn’t ask his name.”

“You’re supposed to be the bouncer, Scott. Please tell me you didn’t let him in!”

“He had a guest pass.”

“Guest pass? We don’t do guest passes, Scott.”

“President Franklin and his twin made a convincing argument to the contrary.”

“You’re a moron, Scott.”

“And you’re ruining the mood. In or out, love.”

I’m going to pretend that I wasn’t just invited to join the pink anemone, which even now wriggles a hundred fingers and toes in search of further nourishment. The funk here is unbearable.

“Don’t ruin my business, Scott.”

“Ruin it, love? I’m making it better.”

It’s obvious that this conversation isn’t going anywhere useful. Maybe Frank has had some time to think between beers. I have a hard time believing that no one here noticed anything unusual, especially considering there’s a serial killer on the loose. Don’t you have to reevaluate your entertainment choices when there’s a remote but real possibility that they could buy you an early retirement?

“You look like you’ve been through Hell, Clara. It is Clara, right?”

“Claire, actually. I’m sorry – have we met?”

It’s either the worst pickup line I’ve heard in days, or this stranger, with the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen, and just the right amount of muscle in all the right places; firm, but not obscene – he looks as if strong and gentle are not necessarily incompatible. And those eyes!

“I’m sorry; I’m pretty sure I would remember you if we’d met before?”

He blushes! If he’s potty trained, I might just have to take this one home. Well – If I had a home. I wonder how he would get along with Big Blue? It might make sense to start slowly, in light of current circumstances? A name to go with this beautiful face would be an excellent start.

“Ted.”

“I was just going to ask!”

“We talked for about an hour on Tuesday – you were going to call me, then your boyfriend –”

“– Ex-boyfriend!”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Are you really?”

“No. I don’t like competition. I always feel a little sad to see other men crushed and broken.”

And he smiles. For a moment I forget that I’m standing in an oily cloud, surrounded by sweaty beef, looking for the man who killed David.

“He’s dead.”

Ted blinks twice, and the smile flickers and dies. Without the smile he looks lost, and indescribably alone. Maybe Ted was a latchkey kid, a lost boy. Somebody cared about him, though – he seems so much more intelligent and respectful than most of the losers who hit on me, most nights.

“I really am sorry. That must be why I never heard from you.”

The smile returns, colored with just a hint of sadness, and I have to fight back the urge to tell Ted everything – not just about David, but about my Mom, the father I never knew, the boyfriends I wish I didn’t, my cancer scare. But I am the bartender: I listen, I dispense wisdom. This is a street that has been one-way-only for far too long, and I think re-opening the other lane is going to be a slow, expensive project. I am not especially eager to put up cones and buy donuts by the gross.

“I’ve been busy. I’m sure I wasn’t trying to avoid you. . . .”

“You say that like you really don’t know?”

“I’ve been having a rough week. Say – do you want to get out of here?”

“What do you have in mind?”

Don’t answer that one, Claire.

“Just a walk-and-talk. I need to get away from this noise.”

“I thought you did this for a living, Claire?”

“What I do is art. Scott just pushed a couple of buttons. Not at all the same thing.”

“Do you want to go somewhere and grab a drink, maybe?”

“I don’t drink.”

“But Tuesday night you —”

“That was the first, and last, time in almost three years, my friend. It wasn’t a good night for me.”

“I am so sorry – did I push you off the wagon?”

“I doubt it. Boyfriend, remember?”

“So how are you handling things?”

“I’m alive, I guess.”

Ted doesn’t say anything to that, so we just walk for a while, with the sound of industrial metal fading behind, and nothing but the whisper of the river ahead. I can’t help but think that’s a perfect metaphor for my life at the moment: so much noise before, and then darkness and cold, rushing water carrying everything away.

“So what did we talk about, Tuesday night?”

He blushes again, like he’s been a naughty boy looking for a spank. Now is not the time for this, and yet, I’m not walking away, am I?

“To be completely honest with you, we mostly talked about me.”

I’m a little disappointed, but not at all surprised. Virtually all of the conversations I have at work are about other people – occupational hazard, right? Even still, I was kind of hoping that I’d taken that first horrific leap during the chunk of time that I apparently never have to remember: admit to all of my fears, confess all of my foibles without all of that messy regret and second-guessing. C’est la vie.

“I’m sure it was completely fascinating. The good news is that we get to do it all over again, tabula rasa, so if you said anything you’ve been kicking yourself about, you can just skip that.”

“A do-over?”

“Exactly. So let’s start at the beginning. I’m Claire – Claire St.Claire.”

“I like that – it’s very lyrical. I’m Ted Foster.”

“And what do you do, Ted Foster?”

His eyes drop, then snap back up to mine – it’s a gesture that reminds me of calligraphy. It’s hard to imagine those baby blues ever running out of ink, though.

“Medical School. U-C Denver. I should be finished at the end of this year.”

“And what made you decide to go into medicine, Ted?”

“There’s a lot of people dying out there. I guess I just want to help, you know?”

“That’s very noble. Most people only think about themselves, and don’t really ever stop to look at the world around them.”

“How about you, Claire? How did you end up tending bar at a place like this?”

And here it is: the moment I can choose to be who I’ve been for too long, or the one in which I can choose to grow, if only a little bit. Ted doesn’t seem like the judgmental type, and it would give me an excuse to keep looking into that handsome face. What the hell; you only live once, right?

“I was a waitress.”

“Is that what you wanted to be when you grew up?”

“Do you want to hear this?”

“Of course.”

“Then shut up; it’s a monologue. No bullshit call-and-answer required, okay?”

That might have been a little harsh, but considering I’m standing on the precipice here, I don’t really need a friendly shove.

“I was a waitress – here, there, anywhere. It didn’t really matter, because it didn’t matter, and that was the point. Waiting tables is something you can do in your sleep. Put on a smile, try to remember names, and most of the time people are decent, sometimes even generous. At the end of the day, you go home, you kick off your heels, and fall asleep to Tivo’d Conan O’Brien. If things get weird, you pick another restaurant, do your thing there for a while.”

“No lack of ambition there, Claire.”

He’s either brilliant, or a complete ass – Claire, who is now obsessed with those eyes, that smile, will give him the benefit of the

doubt. And apparently talk about herself in the third person, grateful in this moment that she doesn't share her head with anyone the same way Lang does.

"Don't interrupt, Mickey."

"Sorry, please go on."

"The Helhole."

"That bad?"

"No. And seriously; stop interrupting. The Helhole was a short-lived nightclub on the North End; the tips were always good, and the crowd had good energy – I actually liked most of the regulars."

"Why didn't you stay?"

"Someone, probably shooting up in the bathroom, managed to crack the plumbing, don't ask me how, and flooded the place with three inches of sewage. Health department shut the Hole down instantly. As luck would have it there was a clipboard jockey on the premises at the time. Anyway, that's where all of this got its start."

Ted laughs, an awkward but infectious sound. I wonder what sort of jokes he enjoys?

"In three inches of sewage, you mean?"

"Actually, no. The next night, when the regulars showed up for their nightly dose of dance, they found the lights out and the doors locked. Now, for reasons you probably don't want to hear—"

"You might be surprised. . ."

"— and anyway, reasons that are really none of your business, I was already sleeping most nights in the abandoned retail space across the street, which had been, in one past life or another, a butcher shop."

"So it was your idea to move the party, right?"

"Groupthink, really. But I did suggest that we could borrow some of the equipment from the Hole; it wasn't like anyone was going to miss it for one night, right?"

There's a bench facing the river here, and we both sit down without discussing the idea; a nice little convergence of minds, right here in the middle of Confluence Park. Ted is remarkably easy to talk to, even though he does seem to be intentionally obtuse. I kick a stone into the river, take a deep breath, and continue.

“So I picked the lock –”

“A useful talent, I’m sure.”

– and waded in, wearing three layers of garbage bags on each leg. After the first few trips some of the more adventurous hangers-on followed suit, loading up on anything bottled. It was blatant theft, but after that night, I made back more than enough to replace everything we borrowed. The next night, everyone came back, and again on the third night. That was when the cops broke things up.”

“What did you do?”

“We moved to an empty cold-storage warehouse next, and that lasted three days, which became habit, then custom, then law. It’s supposed to be invitation-only, but as you know, that doesn’t always work out.”

“Because I’m here.”

“Don’t be offended; it’s nothing against you personally – I just seem to be the only person involved, or who used to be involved, who cares about this thing as a business. It doesn’t make me rich, to be completely honest with you, but I’m not in debt any more.”

“What kind of debt?”

“The money kind, Ted.”

“I’m serious.”

“Maybe the next time we talk. I’ve only just met you tonight – a girl can’t give away all of her secrets to just anyone, you know.”

“Maybe next time, then. Will I see you here tomorrow night?”

I shrug, because I really do not know.

“I think I’ve been fired, actually.”

“Fired – why?”

“Apparently having an accused-killer spinning discs is bad for business.”

“There’s far too much discrimination against sociopaths these days. You should sue.”

And he says it with a straight face, which makes it that much funnier. I know the look he’s wearing now, though; it’s the one I call ‘places to go, people to do.’ And I feel a little bit sad, and then guilty for feeling sad about this – a temporary goodbye, perhaps.

“You’re leaving?”

“Papers to be written, exams to be studied for, I’m afraid. But we’ll meet again soon, I promise.”

Ted gives me an adorably-awkward handshake, then buries his hands deep in his jacket pockets to keep them from embarrassing him again. I just want to eat him whole, but then he stands, turns, and walks away into the night. Once again, I am alone with the stars and my thoughts. I really don’t want to think about how it feels to be alone, though. I can’t bear to think about it tonight. Maybe Lang will be good for a distraction?

Chapter 5

Saturday

the Fall of Knight
Chapter 5

“Come home, Sam. I don’t care what you’ve done.”

“Lisa, I can’t . . . I have to find Dexter Knight. I have to finish this.”

Sam dropped the receiver onto the cradle, then picked it back up, and dialed the seven digits from the crumpled sheet in his pocket. He took a deep breath, and held it while the other end rang.

“Metro dispatch. How may I direct your call?”

“My name is Sam Dey. I think someone is going to die.”

Morning

I wake up to the sound of snoring, with a warm body pressed against mine. Slowly, cautiously, I open one eye to survey my surroundings.

Lang's apartment, and I'm in his bed. I'm not sure I like this at all.

Behind me, my bed partner yawns noisily, and stretches, digging into the small of my back with a single razor-sharp claw. Relief washes over me.

"Good morning, Memnon. Where's Lang?"

"Hao-wao!"

Lang's Savannah roommate doesn't elaborate further, but instead begins his morning ablutions. That sounds like exactly what I need; a nice hot shower to wash away the muddy-greasy ganja stink from last night.

And to wash off the stale pizza I've just stepped in. Thanks, Lang. The shades are down, but the light that pours through the cracks whispers 'Morning – why are you awake, Claire?' Memnon pauses his vigorous tonguing, and looks straight into my eyes.

"What?"

"Yao-WEN?"

"It's not polite to answer a question with a question. Don't worry; I'll find your roommate, and I'm sure he'll dig up some breakfast for you."

"Nao-Wen!"

Yes; I am talking to a cat – granted, Memnon is the size of a small collie, but talking to a dog would be even more crazy, I figure. But none of this helps to answer the question of the week – I hate this burning cold that fills my chest. I don't have time to cry! Get a grip on yourself, Claire.

Okay; review. What have we learned? Frank is temporarily unemployed, and not taking it well. He seems to be obsessed with the Creeper, and not nearly as interested in my situation. Why not? What happened to my Big Brother? Does he actually think I'm capable of – No, not Frank.

Scott. He has definitely benefited from my incarceration, but I wouldn't think the 'Bloke' would be able to frame a photograph, and even if he had wanted to get me out of the way, I certainly never told him about Betty, or where I kept her. I cannot rule out the possibility that Lang shared that little nugget one of the many times he got sloppy-drunk at the bar. It wouldn't be the first time he did something stupid under the influence.

Lang. I don't think I have to worry about Lang. Granted, his books have been quite dark lately; all gore and horror and sarcasm, but that's not how he is, really. At least, I don't think so. If I thought Lang was dangerous, would I be here, wearing one of his sweatshirts and a pair of his wool socks and what the fuck happened last night?

No, don't answer that one, Claire. Just take a piss, a shower, brush your teeth, and go find Walter. Preferably before Lang reappears.

"Good morning, Winny. How'd you sleep?"

Shit-fuck-dammit.

"Why the hell are you sleeping in the bathtub, Lang?"

He yawns, stretches, and hugs the ratty quilt-comforter tight to his chest, before a brave fist ventures out to rub the sleep from his eyes.

"The last guy you slept with wound up dead, Kiddo. I'm too gorgeous to die quite yet."

"That's funny. I've got a joke for you – stop me if you've heard it before."

I reach down, grab the 'C' knob and twist until it becomes a 'U', then yank up the stop cock. Lang howls, pulling down the shower curtain as he spills out of the tub onto the warped linoleum.

"What the hell, Claire?"

"I need to take a shower. Get out."

"This is my apartment!"

"And I'm your guest. Get out."

Lang tosses a fluffy pink towel back through the door after he leaves, and then I hear the can opener running. Breakfast time for

the animal – and Agamemnon, presumably. The towel smells clean enough, which is a bit surprising, considering the general state of this apartment. Well, whatever. At least the toilet is passably clean, and the paper isn't the cheap kind you can only buy in bulk. I will have to talk to him about the perfumed-bead-filled roller, too; very feminine, in a grandmotherly sort of way.

His Axe bodywash is overcompensating. I wonder if men buy this stuff because they think women will actually throw themselves on a man who smells vaguely of citrus and sweat? Girls, here's a bit of advice to heed when showering at your man's place: no amount of 'desert minerals' will remove man-ass-ick from a pouf. Take a pass on the pouf! And if your man is a bar-soap guy, you might consider washing your feet or armpits first – wash your face in the sink afterward. Men are filthy, filthy animals.

Case in point: I'm pretty sure that was the door clicking open just now.

"Lang! I will pour soap directly into your eyes if you don't close that door – right now!"

But of course he doesn't, and it's much too quiet out there. I'm not self-absorbed enough to think that I'm the type of girl who would inspire heavy breathing, but this is ridiculous. I just about jump out of my skin when the shower curtain slides back, but nobody's there.

And then Memnon butts me in the leg, nearly knocking me over. The intrusion has kind of sucked the joy out of this shower, and to make things worse, he just sits there, watching intently while I hurriedly rinse off. Even a direct blast from the showerhead, set to 'pulse', does nothing to faze him.

Lang has been polite enough to leave some clothes in a neat pile outside the bathroom door, so I dress and brush with his girlfriend-brush (still in the package). The smell of coffee and toast waft in through the vents – irresistible!

"Your cat is a bigger pervert than you, Lang. Does he try to knock everyone over who uses your shower?"

Lang laughs, and passes me a snoopy mug filled with the steaming tar he calls coffee. It's hot and caffeinated, though, so the viscosity

doesn't concern me nearly as much as it normally would.

"Shower, telephone, powertools – it doesn't matter. It's a Savannah thing: I call him the 'Shoving Leopard.'"

"That's cute. Huff a lot of paint before you thought that one up?"

And then he vanishes into his MIT-Dropout mug the way he does when something's on his mind.

"What's up?"

"I'm writing a book – my muse only speaks to me when it hurts. It's been hurting alot lately."

Somehow I don't think he means his hand, even though he's drinking right-handed now.

"What you need is a distraction."

"Like what?"

"Let's take Memnon for a walk and see how many of the neighborhood children we can terrify."

He just bites his lip and rubs the back of his neck: it's an affection he's borrowed from one of his characters, and it seems to mean that he's fascinated, but conflicted.

"You do know that Aggy isn't, strictly speaking, legal here..."

"Don't be a pussy – it's not like they're going to lock me up for walking a cat."

Memnon, still mostly damp, but at least well groomed, picks that moment to show up with his leash clenched lightly between his teeth. I smile at him, and he squeezes his eyes shut.

"It's two against, Lang. You can't say no now."

"Traitor."

Memnon makes that sinister hiss he does, and drops the leash at Lang's feet. A caricature of defeat, Lang sighs and frowns as he straps the harness around his cat. When he stands back up, though, the look on his face is triumphant – it says 'I have a captive audience!'

"Is it about your book?"

He shakes his head. I'm not going to beg for something he's going to tell me anyway, so I head for the door instead. I'm halfway down the stairs by the time he gets the deadbolt locked. With Memnon's

help he catches up by the sidewalk; the spotted cat has his striped ears locked back in powerwalker mode, and Lang is already out of breath.

“It’s my Dad’s book. Actually.”

“What is?”

“The Codex Oaxaca.”

With Memnon straining at the lead, Lang flashes his green eyes at me, begging for the question. I may as well toss him a bone, right?

“What’s the Codex Oaxaca?”

The grin he puts on threatens to bisect his head.

“So glad you asked. The Codex Oaxaca –”

“You really like saying that, don’t you?”

“It’s a fun word – like working up a good loogie, you know. Terribly inconsiderate to interrupt a monologue, though.”

“My apologies; please continue, good sir.”

“Forgiven. Anyway, the Codex Oaxaca –”

“Bless you.”

“– is poorly named. It’s not really a single document, but a collection of documents found in a storage closet in a library in Mexico City, then moved briefly to Oaxaca –”

“Bless you!”

“– Mexico, in the nineteen-fifties.”

“Wow. Someone found a book in a library. I bet it hit all the papers.”

Lang glares at me in mock-derision.

“It was a music library. And, with the exception of a page of German poetry, none of it qualifies as music.”

“Then what makes this codex so fascinating?”

Lang takes a deep breath, and tries to steer Memnon away from a tree swarming with squirrels.

“It’s eighteen separate documents, written in eleven different languages, some as recent as eighteen-ninety, others dating back to the Xia Dynasty . . . eighteen-hundred BC, and all of them seem to reference the same individual. A Mexican translator refers to him as ‘Kaf

Zayin,' but I think he misunderstood one of the Yiddish documents. The name stuck, anyway."

"The cube thing, right?"

"Exactly! Give me your hand."

"In marriage? I'm not really the marrying kind, Sparky."

Instead of arguing the point, he grabs my left hand, and bends my thumb in to my palm.

"This is one."

"Okay?"

Lang sighs, obviously disappointed that his illustration isn't as blindingly illuminating as he had hoped. Meanwhile, Memnon has followed the squirrels, and is balanced precariously, trying to be as still as possible. I don't think the squirrels are falling for it, though.

"It's binary, Winn. Thumb is one, index two, middle is four, ring is eight, pinky sixteen."

"What's this got to do with anything?"

"Numerology. Let's start with an easy number; three. The number of the Trinity, the number of Earth, the number of the first polygon –"

"Fine, I get it! Three is two plus one, thumb and index finger – okay?"

I touch my thumb and index fingers together, and it clicks.

"Okay; that's cute, but you know it doesn't mean anything, right?"

"Of course not. Neither does the fact that the third letter of the alphabet is 'C', for 'Circle', the shape you're making right there. Now let's try twelve; the number of Jesus' disciples, the number of months in a year, the number of hours on a clock, the number of tribes of Israel, the number of Olympian gods, the number of –"

"Stop. Eight and four – ring and middle finger."

Pressing the tips of these two fingers into the middle of my palm makes the only universally recognized sign from ISL, but I'm still not drinking the Kool-aid.

"I love you?"

“I love you too, Winn. Guess what the twelfth letter of alphabet is?”

“A-B-C . . . L?”

“L for love. Try unlucky number thirteen now.”

Which is simple, I just have to tuck my thumb in, and I get devil horns.

“Dio?”

“Corna – exactly. Thirteen is also the number of people present at the last supper. Interestingly enough, there are supposed to be thirteen Norse gods present at the banquet that precedes Ragnarok.”

“Thirteen is unlucky because it’s associated with Judas, right?”

“And Loki, right. Although I think Judas gets a bad rap. If anyone really betrayed Christ, it was Peter.”

“Peter?”

“Judas’ was a crime against the body; Peter’s was a crime against the soul.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought, considering you’re an atheist, Lang.”

He shrugs, then a squirrel corpse falls out of the tree, followed by a very wild looking housecat. Lang doesn’t even blink, but then again, I suppose you’d get used to this sort of thing after a while.

“Fourteen. The inner cube, the secret at the heart of Kaph-Zainism.”

“Hang ten, dude.”

“Y for Yggdrasil, the World Tree, the living link between Heaven, Earth and Hell.”

Counting letters on my fingers gives me N for fourteen, though, and I tell Lang. Again, he just shrugs. Once Memnon has finished gnawing on his prize, we continue walking up the street. It’s a bright, sunny day already, which is such a pity – is it unrealistic to expect the weather to mirror your mood?

“None of this really helps me, Lang, unless you’re willing to blame a conspiracy that lives entirely within your skull.”

“That’s the great thing about conspiracies, Claire – you’re only crazy if you’re wrong.”

“No, I’m pretty sure you’re still nuts. Speaking of making things up; are you done with my copy of Baudolino yet?”

When Lang rubs his neck like this, I know exactly what he’s going to say. Lang isn’t a huge believer in personal property, at least when it comes to books. It’s not a hypocritical thing, really – in fact, after his first book was published, he bought a case, and ‘released’ them into the wide world; something he found on the internet. Book crossing or something like that. Given the opportunity, he will bore you to death describing the trip ‘round the world one copy has taken.

“About that; I loaned it to . . . someone. I don’t think we’ll ever see it again.”

He seems unnaturally reticent about this. Maybe today isn’t the best day for scab-picking. Change the subject, Claire.

“So it looks like I’m going to be in town for a while longer.”

“David took everything?”

“Mother Hubbard’s Accounts are dry.”

“You could sell the Morgan?”

I shake my head like a martini.

“It’s an amazing car, and I’m going to give it back as soon as the DPD releases Dwight.”

“It sounds like he meant it to be a gift – it’d be rude to give it back.”

I’m tempted, so very tempted to buy into this, but Seattle is something I have to earn for myself. I find that the moment you accept help from someone on the big things in life is the moment you start depending on them – sure, it starts small; a hundred-thousand dollar British sports car here, a condo there, but before you know it you’re no longer independent, and then you’re completely helpless. No thanks.

“I shouldn’t even use the office, now that I think about it. What’s this now?”

A rhetorical question, if I’ve ever asked one. In the time it’s taken the three of us to circle the block, someone has clamped a fresh-looking manila envelope behind the Morgan’s center wiper blade. As we close the distance, it becomes apparent that the text across

the middle of the envelope is my name, written in very deliberate block lettering.

“That’s a bit odd – who knows you’re here, Winn?”

“You and me, and Memnon makes three.”

It’s a tie-string closure, the sort of envelope you’d use for inter-office mail, and exactly the sort that any respectable courier would immediately drop inside of a tamper-proof, self-adhesive pak, so I’m pretty sure that this was hand-delivered by someone in a hurry. That someone was either not terribly concerned about the contents of the envelope because those contents are not important, or, as paranoia whispers, they have not gone far. The street is packed with cars, mostly the sort of generic four-doors you’d buy from a guy who’s ads say he’s crazy, but who’s polished smile adds ‘like a fox.’ There are also a couple of Stupid-User-Vehicles collecting leaves and dust here, but nothing terribly sinister.

There is too much tinted glass for my taste, but no one pretending to take a nap as far as I can see.

“Would you just open it already?”

Uncharacteristically snappish from Lang, but considering that he now has a twenty-odd pound cat balanced on his shoulders, I’ll wait until later to destroy him. The string snaps easily, but Lang grabs the envelope before I can look inside. It was apparently filled with photographs. Very film noir, but I’ve forgotten to wear my heels.

“One Claire Veronica St.Claire spinning vinyl. Carrying a box filled with bottles. Buying corn flakes. Drinking coffee – hey, I know that roguishly good-looking guy with her. . .”

“Give those back, Lang!”

“The very same Claire Veronica St.Claire buying a box of ammo, sleeping on a park bench, swimming in someone’s pool, swimming in someone else’s pool. . .”

“I’ll take those now, thanks.”

My own personal paparazzo has been following me for weeks, it seems. He seems pretty adept with a telephoto lens – when did I get so bony? I know I had lost weight while flirting with immortality, but I haven’t realized until just now quite how much. If I can get

past the intermittent nausea, I'm going to have to buy myself a big steak and a baked potato.

"There's more, Winn."

Lang has found a sheet of generic letterhead covered in the same block print as the envelope; or at least, it seems to be the same print, backwards, filtered through high-rag-content stationery, which is hardly the best way to read a missive from a stalker you didn't know you had.

"Well?"

"I never knew you went by Anne Trope."

"Poetry, Sparky. What the hell does the note say?"

DEAR CLAIRE VERONICA ST.CLAIRE ALIAS WINTER
SOLSTICE MOON ALIAS MISS ANNE TROPE,

I HAVE BEEN EMPLOYED BY A PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL TO
MONITOR AND DOCUMENT YOUR MOVEMENTS; IN LIGHT
OF RECENT EVENTS, I COULD NOT IN GOOD CONSCIENCE
CONTINUE THIS ASSIGNMENT WITHOUT ALERTING YOU
TO WHAT I BELIEVE MAY REPRESENT A THREAT AGAINST
YOUR LIFE.

I INTEND TO TERMINATE THIS ASSIGNMENT SHORTLY,
AFTER WHICH TIME I WILL CONTACT YOU TO ARRANGE
A MEETING WHEN IT IS SAFE TO DO SO.

YOURS,

PHILIP MARLOWE

"Let's go inside and google this Philip Marlowe – it sounds like he's a private investigator, but maybe we can find out if he's legit."

Lang keeps begging for a smack. But then he smiles the way he does when he thinks he's being clever, and I know he's been pulling my leg.

"Who hasn't read Chandler?"

"I was going to hit you."

“That’s what I love about you, Winn; You’re subtle like a punch in the face.”

“A girl has to maintain a certain mystery, you know.”

He just smiles, having vanished into his quiet place. I’d smack him now, because he’d never expect it, but if he didn’t laugh, there would be definite pouting, and I really need him to focus. It doesn’t take long for him to come back, and when he does, he’s wearing his best epiphany face.

“It has to be Rothschild now, doesn’t it?”

“Shit.”

Of course he’s right – partly: somebody has been dropping serious coin to keep an eye on me for a while. I doubt most private investigators give triple-a discounts, so that rules out pretty much everyone I know, except Mr. R. Red Shield has produced quite a few shitty movies, albums, and books lately, but the majority of those have been exactly the sort of shit that your average consumer can’t get enough of . . . and to their credit, Red Shield did take a pass on Lang’s book, so someone there has taste.

“You know, no one else will ever get the joke if you don’t share.”

“Was I laughing?”

“A little bit, yeah.”

“Sorry.”

“Another damned enigma. More coffee?”

“Sure.”

There’s a plastic USPS crate overflowing with envelopes and a couple of small packages waiting next to the stairs, but Lang walks right past it. I don’t remember seeing it on the way out, but where it’s sitting, ignored and despondent, it would be difficult to notice coming down.

“How long have you been ignoring this, Sparky?”

“Ignoring what?”

“Your bloody mail, genius!”

“Not ignoring it; just not dealing with it.”

“Answer the question!”

“Week, maybe.”

And with that, the door clicks shut. Flipping through the envelopes, it looks like a lot of fan mail, which I still have a hard time wrapping my mind around, and quite a few past-dues, which doesn't surprise me at all. Then there's a small, kraft-paper wrapped parcel, about the size and shape of a paperback. It was addressed to Margaux Lagouche, then refused-return-to-sendered. Classy. I carefully tuck that one into the crotch of the crab-apple tree, and heft the rest of the mail up into a standard babyfactory hip-carry. These stairs are dangerous unless you've got at least one hand free for the cracked and splintered rail.

Lang's slouched into the secondhand pink and orange couch, his eyes sort of glazed over, staring vaguely at the the 'Relaxing Sounds of the Amazon' disc playing on his absurdly large wall-monitor. Memnon is stretched across Lang's lap, purring pornographically while his human traces small, rapid circles in the fur on his belly.

"I can see you're busy; don't get up."

I drop the tub of mail onto the coffee table. Memnon twists in two different directions at the same time, ending up with his arms wrapped around Lang's head, and his teeth clamped onto one ear. The moment he realizes he's biting the ear that feeds him, if you will, Memnon begins to lick and groom Lang's head, but I don't think either one of us is fooled. Still, you have to give him points for trying.

"Thanks for that, Winn. I didn't have nearly enough scars across my thighs."

"Only you would own a skittish leopard."

"They're actually serval-domestic hybrids."

"You are such a nerd. Any cartoons on?"

He gives me his best naughty-naughty look as I sink into a free cushion, and cross my feet on his knees. In any other circumstance, I would be preternaturally happy right now, and would be perfectly content to spend the rest of the morning sitting here, scratching Memnon's ears and listening to Lang's most recent obsession. Right now, though, I'm really just putting off the inevitable.

"So where do we go from here?"

“What do you mean?”

Memnon lifts up his head and looks at me, inquisitive, as if he had asked the question, and really, woman, what is taking so long? He yawns to emphasize this point.

“I mean, we’ve done a fairly good job of casting suspicion on everyone I know, we’ve found out that my eccentric benefactor –”

“Me?”

“– my rich, eccentric benefactor has drifted from cutesy-crush to creepy-stalker, and we’ve collected a whole steaming pile of innuendo, but so far we don’t have anything that would convince redneck UFO-abductees of anything.”

“Go to your apartment.”

“What good would that do? I’m sure the police have been over it with a fine-toothed comb already.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got an advantage they don’t.”

He wants me to say ‘What’s that?’ but I’m not going to give him the satisfaction. The staring contest continues until Memnon yawns, flashing thirty wicked counter-points.

“It’s your apartment. You would be able to see if something looks out of place – the police would have no reason to know if furniture was moved or the walls were repainted.”

“Neither would I, Lang. I haven’t been up there in months.”

He turns to look out the window, and I can definitely see why; all of the leaves rustling in the wind are certainly riveting. Lang scratches his nose before he says anything else, but he still avoids looking me in the eye.

“Trust me, Winn, if I know anything about your David, it’s this; he kept that apartment as a shrine to you. If you left a hairbrush, he probably counted and cataloged each hair.”

“Why would anyone do that?”

Lang shakes his head, but his eyes are locked on the TV again.

“Not anyone; David. The man was convinced you were coming back. Maybe he figured if nothing had changed, then nothing would change. See?”

“What the hell is wrong with men?”

“They put mind-altering chemicals in under-roos. Absorbed through the scrotum, goes straight to our brains. Turns us into Neanderthals. Tragic, tragic.”

“Why do I ever expect a serious answer from you?”

“Learning deficiency, would be my guess.”

“It’s a good thing I’ve got a genius like you around, Lang. Where are my keys?”

He smiles his best impression of a piano at me.

“In my other pants.”

Afternoon

The drive across town was just as busy as ever, but when you're driving an eighth of a million dollars worth of British racing tradition, you really don't mind traffic because it gives you an excuse to spend more time behind the wheel. Or at least I don't mind; you're probably one of those goal-oriented type-A types. Either way, I'm here before I know it – which strikes me as a particularly vapid cliché, but I still end up parking around the corner. It is good to know that some things never change.

Paranoia isn't really my thing, but I'm learning. For example, it probably wasn't the smartest move taking the Morgan over here, but the only alternative was Lang's Austin-Healy, which is only slightly more invisible, which is to say; not at all. That should improve once I'm out of the car, and on the street; I'm dressed in Lang's other pants, and his favorite red hoodie. The trick to vanishing is being boring – to blend. So I grab Lang's book, tuck it into my front pocket, and head toward Holy Grounds for a latte.

The barista's name-tag says she's Lynn, but she's wearing it upside down like she grabbed it without looking. Maybe the real Lynn is out there, somewhere, and maybe she knows the difference between a latte and a cappuccino. I pointedly ignore the tip jar, and take my cup of caffeinated froth to a table facing up the street toward my apartment building. With Lang's novel in one hand and my latteccino in the other, I positively meld with the creatively-unemployed crowd here.

If I've learned anything from movies, it's that the absolute worst thing you can do in a situation like this is to bust straight into the scene of the crime, because someone is always following you. The thing to do is to find a nice comfortable chair and people-watch. Eventually, if you keep your eyes open, you'll notice the guy in the Metallica tee who doesn't seem to be doing anything other than window shopping, or the woman in the Chanel pantsuit who's been walking her dog around the block for the last hour. The trick is keeping your eyes open without falling asleep.

“You suck at this game, Claire.”

“Frank. What gave me away?”

“The way you swing your arms when you walk. If you were wearing a spacesuit and a top hat I’d still know it was you.”

“So I guess the stake-out is a bust, then?”

Frank snaps a chair around and sits, his pose grand-master level charades for ‘We have to talk.’ Frank is lousy at charades, though, because he just sits and stares at the table until a fresh cup of coffee and a plate of madelines appears there.

“Thanks Tanja.”

“Don’t mention it, Frank.”

That’s one mystery solved; but I really don’t care why Tanja isn’t wearing her own tag. Much more interesting is the question that strikes me just now – how long do you have to frequent a coffee shop, even as a cop, before they’ll start bringing you coffee and pastries automatically?

“I know exactly what you’re thinking, and I think you should stop thinking it.”

“And what am I thinking?”

He lights a pair of cigarettes, and passes me one. I very much doubt this is what he was referring to, but the nicotine infusion is a welcome relief. I love the way kreteks crackle and pop, and the flavor is amazing. It feels like it’s been forever since my last smoke, and my lungs just lap it up. I just want to enjoy this moment, but Frank has to ruin it – it’s a bad habit of his.

“You’re planning on doing the OJ thing.”

“Screwdrivers?”

Frank blows a cloud of smoke through his lips, and immediately sucks it back in through his nose. He’s been practicing his vice, which leads me to believe that things haven’t been going well at home. That sucks. The way his golden-browns look at me, though, beg me to leave it alone for now.

“Finding the real killer. It’s a bad idea.”

“It’s not like you’re – it’s not like the police are going to do anything about it.”

“Claire. This isn’t a game – you should get the hell out of town, is what you should do.”

“Wouldn’t that make me look guilty?”

Frank drains his cup without coming up for breath, then sets it down delicately, before packing a whole madeleine into his mouth. It doesn’t stop him from talking, though.

“I’d rather think you were guilty than see you dead, little sister.”

“Do you think I’m guilty?”

“Should I?”

“It’s rude to answer a question with a question, Frank.”

“Beg your fucking pardon then.”

He snaps the book out of my hand, and starts flipping rapidly at random through the pages, stopping to read the first few pages. The whistle means he’s about to share an opinion.

“Your friend is pretty fucked up. What his deal with this La Douche broad?”

“Lagouche. They were collaborating on a book, a new-agey historical conspiracy thing. Except just before they started writing it, she took off with all his notes, and published it herself a few months later. Last I heard, she was in Paris screwing a lumberjack.”

“So why the hell did he dedicate this book to her?”

I take a sip of already-cold foam, and think about that one, but it’s hard to tell why Lang does anything. He’s either nuts, or trying to convince the world that he is for his own amusement. I just shrug, and Frank seems to accept that as a valid explanation.

“Are you going to help me break into my own apartment, then?”

“I suppose so. Forensics have turned the place upside down, though, so I’m not sure what you hope to find.”

“I’ll know it when I see it.”

“It’s not like I have anything better to do these days. Let’s do it.”

Frank gulps the dregs of my cappuccino, then wipes off the brown milk mustache with the sleeve of his Broncos sweatshirt. Before I can protest, he flips my hood up over my head, and pulls it tight.

“What the hell?”

“That much bubblegum pink is going to attract attention anywhere, even in Denver. If we’re going to do this, we do it my way, right?”

“Fair enough.”

“Good. Is there a back entrance to your building?”

“There’s the service garage, but it’s usually locked.”

“Deadbolt?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.”

Frank spins his chair around when he gets up, and pushes it back into the table. When he pulls my chair out for me, I’m almost tempted to forgive him for depriving me of caffeine. I would say so, too, except it’d give him a fat head, and beside which, he’s already halfway to the corner. He doesn’t even bother with the crosswalk, just cuts straight across the intersection with barely a glance in either direction.

“Are you suicidal Frank?”

“Maybe a little. Are you coming?”

Seeing as how traffic has snarled to a screaming, honking halt, there’s no reason not to. If this is Frank’s idea of not attracting attention, I can’t wait to see the baby-juggling midget sword-swallowers when he’s feeling neglected. Then, completely out of left field, he pops open the door of a beat-up Toyota, and slides into the driver’s seat.

“Get in.”

“Nice car, Frank. Is the mound of Slurpee cups in the back standard, or did you pay extra for that?”

“It’s my brother’s. Get in.”

So I do. Despite the sticky remains rolling around the floor, and the absolutely reprehensible pina-colada air freshener dangling from the rear view mirror, it’s actually a lot more comfortable inside than out. The engine turns over on the second try, and before I have a chance to glance over my shoulder, Frank’s already in the thick of traffic, headed in entirely the wrong direction.

“Did you forget something?”

Frank changes lanes, triggering a round of horns and single-finger hellos, before making a wreckless left turn on red, followed by a sharp right. We drive aimlessly for a while before he settles into a calmer driving style, and then he answers.

“I’m pretty sure we’re not being followed.”

“You’re pretty sure?”

“Yeah – it’s hard to tell, ‘Cause most of the time, the guys who get paid to follow you, they don’t do it in bright red Ferraris and yellow Lamborghinis. The guys who are really good at this kind of thing drive boring cars, and only follow you for a couple of blocks before someone else in a boring car takes their place. It’s more expensive, but much more effective.”

“Is that why you’re driving this shitbox?”

“Just drop it Claire.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Drop it.”

He’s driving his brother’s car, wearing clothes that are tight where they should be baggy and baggy where they should be tight, and he’s smoking like a chimney. There’s only one possible explanation; Nancy must have thrown him out. Poor bastard has got to know what’s waiting for him when he gets back to Ithaca.

I almost don’t recognize the alley behind my apartment. The last time I was here was when one of David’s friends passed out on my vintage maroon davenport, then shit and pissed himself all over it. I loved that couch, and I guess I never forgave David for the loss. Funny how the things that seem so important never really are, in retrospect.

Astonishingly, in the time it’s taken me to wax nostalgic about some loser’s bowel movements, Frank has already managed to pop the lock, and is impatiently waiting for me to notice. I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised; after all, it was Frank who taught me how to pop a lock in the first place.

He graciously steps aside, and lets me through. Very little inside has changed, although I’m not sure why I would expect anything to be different. The Super has finally replaced the ballast on the

overhead light, so now instead of flickering, it pulses and buzzes. There's still a thin layer of dust around the edges and in the corners where housekeeping can't be bothered to switch brooms.

"Stairs?"

"There's an elevator, Frank."

"Elevators have cameras. We'll take the stairs."

"Follow me, then."

The stairwell is filled with trash; lots of cans and wrappers and bags, but thankfully no condoms or needles. It was never a regular thing, but ugly things happen in cities, and this one doesn't have any special claim to purity. There is a faint odor of sweat and urine here, as if the building has just come back from a jog and hasn't had a chance to shower yet. I've just remembered why I avoided this part of the building when I lived here.

"So what are you hoping to find in there?"

"A clue, maybe. An idea where to go next."

"Closure?"

"Probably."

"You're not going to find it in there. If you're lucky, they've already torn out the carpeting and bleached the walls, but the way these things go, I doubt it."

"I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

"I've seen a dozen of these . . . these. You can't handle it, you just do your best to forget."

Nothing can drag Frank out of his shell once he clams up, so I don't even bother. Instead, I focus on the steps, the regular rhythm, the familiarity of the pitch, the way handrails feel with too many layers of paint. Dirty Stairwell Zen. I should write a book.

Weird little fact I've just discovered; I've never watched Frank climb a flight of stairs before. Turns out he's one of those two at a time people, in too much of a hurry to bother with the odd stairs. Ordinarily I would tease him mercilessly about being a classic type-A personality, but I'm in no particular hurry to drag this out, either. Take a breath, in and out as fast as possible, and then a cigarette afterward.

David would not be flattered that I thought of him just now. There's little danger of offending him anymore, though.

"Do you still have a key?"

Frank has already unrolled his canvas lock-pick set, but I can save him the trouble. The decorative knob in the moulding above the door twists free, and there's a little cavity behind it, where I am pleasantly surprised to find the extra keys I left there before I moved out. I can tell that Frank is disappointed that he won't be able to show off again.

"You know, Claire, that might just explain why there were no signs of forced entry. Did David know about that?"

"It was – no, I never mentioned it."

"That was quite a trusting relationship you had."

"A girl has to keep a few secrets."

"Fair enough."

I was expecting a lot of yellow tape back and forth across the door, but there's only a small sticker across the narrow gap between the door and the jamb. It doesn't want to peel off, but then again, that's probably the point. I'm just about to give up when Frank breaks the seal with his thumbnail.

"What the hell, Frank? Now they'll know we've been here!"

"It's bullshit, Claire. They don't have an officer posted here, which means they don't give a damn, and besides which, there's no way to prove it wasn't some bored kids screwing around. Unless someone calls in a complaint about two people arguing in the hall before we're gone."

"Alright, I get it: hurry up."

A cold, stagnant breath sighs past me when I push open the door. I wouldn't be surprised to see dust devils scatter to the far corners of the room, but the apartment, or as much of it as I can see from here, is immaculate. Pristine. It's like a museum, or a mausoleum. David's actually found plastic covers for everything, including the coffee table. There's an issue of Cosmo open to the very page I was looking at when Frank called to tell me my 'Child' was waiting to be picked up. I don't even read Cosmo; the only reason I had it was

because the P-O screwed up, and now it's become part of David's weird Claire-shrine.

"This is so creepy."

"If you think this is bad, don't go in the bedroom."

"Is that where – where?"

Frank shakes his head, and points at a black stain on the carpet, an amoeba shape right there behind the horrible burlap sofa I bought from the Salvation Army after – blood? Oh, Jesus, David! Did you suffer? Were you afraid, and alone? I guess we're all alone at the end, but it didn't have to be like this. . . who did this to you, David? What did you get yourself into?

"Claire?"

He has very strong hands, the kind of hands that could make a girl feel very safe, or very afraid, but I feel dizzy. It seems like I haven't recovered quite as much as I thought.

"I'm fine, Frank. I think I could use something to drink."

"I'll grab you something from the kitchen. Sit. Don't touch anything."

So I sit, and fold my hands in my lap, but Frank doesn't move, he just stands there with his eyebrows pressed together and scowls at me.

"What?"

"You're going to touch something."

"So?"

"Fingerprints."

"It's my Dog-damned apartment, Franklin. My fingerprints are everywhere."

But he's not buying it. The gloves he tosses into my lap must have been tucked into his back pocket, but the huge, shapeless Broncos sweatshirt hides just about everything underneath it – if I didn't know it was there, I wouldn't even notice the odd lump in Frank's armpit. I'm glad one of us is packing heat. . .

"Were there any fingerprints on Betty?"

Frank stops, pulling on a similar pair of blue latex exam gloves. He looks down at his hands like they're strangers he's just been

introduced to for the first time.

“They never found your gun, Claire.”

“Is that bad?”

“That’s very bad. If we could find it, it’s possible the ballistics wouldn’t match, which would go a long way toward restoring your good name —”

“They let me go!”

“On bail, Kiddo. Five hundred large – there was a hearing; you were there.”

“Really?”

“Really really.”

With that, Frank vanishes into the kitchen, and I’m left staring at a moment in time, a moment I’ve left behind but one David hasn’t been able to. Has he been waiting for me to come back, to say I realized it was all just a misunderstanding, that everything will go back to the way it was, like nothing has changed? I can’t be, couldn’t have been that important to him, could I?

“You want a bottle of wine, Claire?”

“You know I don’t drink, Frank.”

“I didn’t think your boyfriend did, either.”

“He doesn’t – didn’t. Maybe someone brought him a bottle.”

“Twenty bottles?”

David gets – David got dizzy if he forgot to water down his Pepsi. Why the hell would he buy that much wine, unless – what? He was trying to impress me with his new-found knowledge?

“What labels does he have?”

Frank reappears with a bottle of Perrier for me, and a black bottle, already uncorked, presumably for himself. He takes a big swig from the bottle as if to illustrate the point, then waves the water in front of my nose.

“What’s that?”

“French water.”

“No, you twat, the bottle you’re sucking like a pornstar.”

He pulls the bottle out of his mouth long enough to glance at the label.

“Muninn Red. There were a couple of bottles of Huginn White, but that sounded kind of fruity to me.”

“Huginn and Muninn – seriously?”

“Why would I lie?”

Thought and Memory. Wine named for Odin’s pet ravens, and a label I’ve never heard of. I will definitely have to ask Walter about it when I catch up with him.

Frank takes another swig and jumps like he’s been stung.

“What’s up?”

“Phone call. Got it set to vibrate, but I think the damned thing has a short. Looks like I should take this one. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

The call is brief, and when Frank hangs up, I can tell he’s put the Cop back on.

“We have to get out of here now. Don’t leave anything behind.”

He means business, too. Using a dishrag he grabs from the kitchen, Frank wipes down anything we might have touched – door-knobs, handles, remotes, and finally stuffs the rag into his pocket after shoving me out into the hall. He keeps tapping his watch while I lock the deadbolt, which definitely does not help me any, then he wipes the lock down again, and drags me by my wrist back to the stairwell.

Just before the stair door clicks shut, I hear the distinctive ‘ding’ of an elevator patting itself on the back for reaching yet another floor without killing anyone. I’m convinced that they all think about it; riding up and down all day, forced to listen to muzak and awkward conversations, I can’t imagine not turning homicidal.

“Keep up, Claire. It won’t take them long to figure out which way we went.”

“Who are we running from? Who called you?”

But he doesn’t answer, and he doesn’t slow down. This feels like a dream I have all the time: I’m running away from menacing, unseen adversaries, and there’s always a stairwell between me and safety, but when I try to run down it, the air is thick, like molasses, and each step is an act of will. I always wake up, drenched with sweat,

my heart racing, and sometimes I'm screaming. I hate that dream, but this is worse.

Somehow we hit the bottom of the stairs without breaking our necks, and bust out through the back door, piling into Frank's car like a circus-clown gag in reverse. If this was Dwight, we would have laid down some serious rubber hauling ass out of there, but the Toyota just growls angrily as Frank floors it. I can't help but laugh at the chorus of honks and shouts as we blast out of the alley and snap to in the wrong lane.

"If I knew you were this much fun, Frank, I'd have gotten you fired a long time ago."

"Can't. I quit."

"You what?"

If he's not full of shit – and the Frank I know is very definitely anti-shit – I imagine this is the reason he's living with his brother, wearing his brother's clothes, instead of living with his wife, wearing his wife's clothes. . .

"Stop giggling, Claire. You're not going to convince anyone that you're not a homicidal crack-fiend if you keep that up."

"Sorry, I was picturing you wearing your wife's orange sundress."

"That's not going to help, believe me."

"I don't know – I think it would really flatter your figure."

"You're hilarious."

"So who was that on the phone?"

"Sandy."

"At least someone's talking to you. Won't she get in trouble?"

Frank doesn't bother with the labyrinthine route this time. He just circles once around the block, and kicks on the Toyota's emergency lights before stopping by the Morgan.

"The thing about being a cop is that we take care of each other, even when we're not cops anymore."

"I'm not a cop, Frank."

"You're family – same thing."

"I'm not really. . ."

“Get out of the car, Claire. Keep your nose clean. Don’t get your ass shot off. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Where —”

“There’s a few things I have to take care of. I’ll find you.”

After he drives off, I take another look at the bottle he left me with. The label is a tasteful study in minimalism; a rapid-stroke sketch of a Raven preening, the names ‘Muninn Red’ and ‘Ravencraft Vineyards.’ There’s also some bullshit from the Surgeon General about how operating heavy machinery can cause birth defects, but I doubt that’s a clue. The label tears down the middle when I try to peel it off, so I wrap the rubber gloves around the bottle and dump the whole thing in a can on my way to the Morgan.

And then all the buildings and pedestrians and traffic melt into a delicious blur, and I find myself driving nowhere in particular for an indeterminate while, just enjoying the way the Morgan swings through turns, then presses me back into the seat like an eager lover when I push the ball of my foot into the accelerator. I think there is a definite danger here; I am falling in love with this car. Falling hard. If this car was a man, I would get him completely wasted and drag him back to my apartment, where I would grind him into the floor, nurse him back to health, and do it all over again.

Concentrate, Claire, concentrate! I need to talk to Walter anyway, and if anyone might know what Ravencraft Vineyards has to do with anything, it would be Walt. You might say it’s an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. You might say that because you have an immature sense of humor that mistakes easy puns for wit. Philistine.

I hate to admit this, but I’ve driven all the way to Costco with the intention of catching Walt at work, and I’ve only just now remembered that he doesn’t work on Saturdays. But, as long as I’m here, I may as well buy some cigarettes. It’s interesting that they put the tobacco on the far side of the store, right next to the registers, almost as if they know that smokers are no nonsense, in and out, knock-you-down-if-you-get-in-my-way kind of shoppers. Or maybe that’s just me?

Let's see: Marlboros, Winstons – Camels are on sale today. They're almost cheap enough to convince me to switch brands temporarily. I'm just not sure I can do it, though...

"Only redneck faggots smoke those, Claire. They're on sale for a reason."

Walt.

"Just the man I was looking for – isn't this your day off?"

"Brent's sick, so I'm covering for him. I thought you were in jail."

I shrug, sliding the box back into the rack, and turn around. Sure enough, Walt is wearing a Costco Employee 'BRENT' nametag, and he's sporting a shiny new black eye.

"Apparently some people can be bothered to give a damn. What the hell happened to you?"

"I really don't want to talk about it. So what can I do you for?"

Ugh. That phrase again? I'm sure the shiner is related to his obvious learning deficiency. Probably pissed off a grammar nazi. None of my business if Walt wants to go around irritating the wrong people, though.

"What do you have in menthols?"

"We just got some Djarum Menthols in – they seem to be popular."

"That's a bit of a coincidence – have you been stalking me, Walt?"

Walt laughs like a donkey, but it at least it sounds sincere, almost apologetic. In fact, watching the way he squirms inside his own skin, I would think he feels downright bashful. Could the black eye be symptomatic of trouble in paradise? Seems to be going around, like swine-bird flu or something. Hunched over, Walt tucks his chin in, and wraps his arms tightly around his chest.

"Claire, there is nothing I would like more than to follow your sweet ass around, but I simply don't have the time. My in-laws are in town ..."

"You paid Brent to let you take his shift, didn't you?"

"I swear, I never understood the term 'Battle-axe' until I met Alice's mother."

“That’s both insightful and fascinating. What do you know about Huginn and Muninn?”

“Sounds kinky.”

“Thanks for nothing, Walt.”

I’m not sure why I flip the hood up on Lang’s jacket when I turn to go, but it does feel dramatic, and apparently the drama appeals to Walter, because he puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Wait, don’t – Ravenscraft Vineyard, right?”

“According to the bottle, at least. What can you tell me about it?”

“About the wine? Not a lot – it’s expensive stuff. You have to buy a barrel if you want a bottle, but they do custom labels, let you choose your own grapes, that sort of thing.”

“How expensive are we talking?”

“In the grand scheme of things, probably not huge. Depending on the vintage, maybe eight hundred to a grand.”

“For a whole barrel?”

“For a bottle, sweet-cheeks.”

Dog-damn! Maybe I should have tried some before I threw the bottle away. But assuming Walt isn’t yanking my chain, an interesting question presents itself. Why did David have to empty out my bank account when he could afford to drop twenty large on wine he would never drink? There had to be some other reason, some significance to the wine. But what?

“So these barrels; do you actually get to visit your barrel, read it bedtimes stories, that sort of thing?”

“You’re a weird, weird girl, Claire.”

“I know, but answer the question anyway.”

“I imagine you could use the barrel as a safety deposit box if you wanted; you’re literally buying the damned thing, they just fill it with wine as a courtesy.”

That’s interesting. If memory serves me correctly, a standard barrel holds about three hundred bottles, so the twenty-odd bottles in my apartment would have just barely scratched the surface – or lowered it, I suppose, since we are talking about wine here.

“Could you actually do that? Empty out your barrel, and keep stuff in it?”

“Claire, I imagine if you were willing to drop a couple hundred large on an oak tub, they’d probably look the other way if you stuffed a corpse into one. What do you have in mind?”

“Nothing . . . nothing. Can I get those menthols?”

“Sure – walk this way.”

As much as I try to resist, I can’t help but laugh when he actually waddles like a penguin. Walter demurs when I ask him if he wants to play P.I.s with me, but after selling me a couple of cases of smokes, he does give me a fair idea how to find Ravenscraft. I let myself feel like I’ve accomplished something, until I get out to the parking lot, and find that someone has lit a small fire under my hat in the passenger seat of the Morgan.

“I could have lice, Frank. You’re taking a bit of a risk there, aren’t you?”

“I think they use that kind of hair dye as a pesticide in China. Aren’t you going to ask how I found you?”

Frank flicks his butt onto the asphalt, but keeps the hat on, like he’s trying to be irritating. I’m not about to give him the satisfaction, though. Since I last saw him he’s managed to find the time to dig up a change of clothes; the jacket, slacks and linen shirt are a definite improvement over the sweats he was wearing earlier. I wonder what the occasion is?

“Could it be that I’m driving the Batmobile?”

“It’s because you’re predictable. I’m surprised it hasn’t gotten your ass shot off yet.”

“I’m too pretty to die. Would you mind not smoking in my car?”

“You mean Harold Rothschild’s car, right?”

“I think he gave it to me.”

“Why would he do that, Claire?”

“Because my car was impounded?”

“Think about it for a moment.”

To be completely honest, I’m getting a bit tired of the way everyone seems to think that they have some sort of profound insight into

my situation. Rothschild has a crush on me. Rothschild is stalking me. Rothschild is trying to buy my affection. Enough already!

“Do you have a reason for being here, or are you just being an ass on your own time now?”

“I want to go see what your boyfriend was hiding in that barrel of his.”

“What – how?”

“It’s what I do, Claire. Ok, hey; your phone was ringing a minute ago. It might have been important.”

I don’t have a phone – at least, they didn’t bother to fish it out of Dwight for me after I was released, and I tell Frank that with as much bitter irony as I can muster. He shrugs, noncommittally, if such a thing is possible, so I ignore him long enough to fish around in the leather case Morgan puts in these cars instead of a glove box. Mr. R. has filled the case with all sorts of goodies, including a smaller leather cigar case, scissors and matches, a flat bottle of expensive looking scotch I’ve never heard of, and a sleek black phone that seems to be completely screen- and button-free. Until it rings again, when the face lights up, helpfully identifying the caller as ‘unknown caller.’

Frank gives me Italian sign-language for ‘What the fuck, girl?’ when I pick it up.

“Miss St.Claire, I presume?”

“The same – But to whom am I speaking?”

“Terribly sorry; how rude of me. I left the package on your employer’s car.”

“Mr. Marlowe?”

He laughs – a pleasant, self-depreciating sound. I’m almost tempted to trust this man, except life has decided lately to remind me why I don’t trust anyone.

“It’s Mason, actually. Do you know Our Lady of Sorrows?”

“The abandoned cathedral up North?”

“Meet me there tomorrow at two.”

“I suppose you want me to come alone?”

“Actually, no. Bring Mr. Lang with you; what I’ve found concerns him as well. And be careful; I believe you may still be in danger.”

Mason hangs up before I can get in another word, and the phone becomes a nondescript block of matte-black plastic again. This conversation has left me with more questions, and nothing resembling a satisfactory answer. Where did it the phone come from? Rothschild, probably. But if that’s true, how did Mason-nee-Marlowe get the number? He’s a private investigator, or he says he is, but that’s not a free pass for inexplicable knowledge. Did he plant the phone? Does that make any sense?

“Who was that?”

“The Pope. Apparently they want to canonize me – imagine that.”

Frank seems to believe that so intensely that he’s in danger of growing a pair of ingrown eyebrows. I’ll probably need Frank’s help with this thing, so maybe I should cut him some slack.

“My P-I.”

“Odd; I figured myself for that position. What good is nepotism if you can’t count on your friends for steady work?”

“Don’t worry, Frank. I’m sure there are plenty of privates out there to investigate. You’ll be okay.”

“You’re a laugh riot, little sister. Maybe we should get this show on the road?”

Those furrowed brows lift momentarily as sixty comes and whistles past in a handful of delicious, beautiful seconds, but they settle back in by the time ninety says hello.

“It’s a fun little car, Claire. Who do you think I’d have to kill to get my hands on one?”

“Christ, Frank! I didn’t fucking –”

He drops a hand onto my knee for a light squeeze, just long enough to get my attention. I spare him half a glance, then snap a friendly salute at the silver Audi that quickly vanishes in my rear-view mirror. I am three hundred and seventy horses of shiny black sex; if you can’t keep up, get the fuck out of my way.

“I know you didn’t kill David.”

“So why are we still talking about it?”

“Because I’m working on the Who and the Why again.”

“Any leads?”

“A few. None I trust quite yet.”

“Anything I can do to help, you know?”

“Sure thing. Say, have you ever wanted to kill someone?”

“Why do we keep coming back to this?”

He shrugs.

“Humor me. It helps me sort things out when I can think out loud. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough. I’ve never seriously wanted to kill anyone, no.”

“Not at all?”

“No – but I have met a few people I’d want to live forever, so they’d never be able to escape their own miserable, petty lives. I can think of a couple of people I’d enjoy keeping in a well filled with piss and snakes.”

“Piss and snakes?”

“Don’t make fun of my metaphors, Caprizi.”

“Okay; what is it about these people that would make you keep them in a latrine?”

“I don’t want to do this right now. Can we talk about something else?”

The answer to that one turns out to be ‘no,’ but I don’t mind the opportunity to concentrate on driving. If you’re doing it right, highway driving is a deeply spiritual, almost religious experience. Traffic becomes less about cars as it does about the spaces between them, and if you let yourself go, you can feel distance and velocity through rubber and concrete, a kind of intimacy that usually requires chocolate or really good Belgian cheese. I can slip into spaces so tight where other people without my philosophy would need a couple of shots of whiskey and some lube. I don’t even have to blink – I am the car; I am the road.

My exit appears much too soon, which seems to be a design flaw for this car. By the time I park just inside Ravencraft’s wrought iron

gates a few minutes later, I desperately need a cigarette. Frank, on the other hand, looks like he could use a blood transfusion.

“Do you live in an action movie, girl?”

“What ever do you mean?”

“Forget it.”

Blah blah blah. If you can't take the heat, stay out of the fire.

“Would you look at this place?”

“God damned Hogwarts.”

Stepping out of the Morgan, I light up, and suck in a lungful of clovey-mentholy bliss, then breathe out an hour of tension. Frank has a point; the house has definite Tudor influences. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if it had been shipped block by block from Jolly-old and reassembled here specifically to prevent people from driving straight into the vineyard. Wine people – not just vinters, but the ones who collect and horde, take their grapes very seriously. Even the pea-gravel looks expensive. I wouldn't be surprised if each stone was hand selected and individual polished before being lovingly deposited by milk-fed virgins.

“They're just rocks. Watch where you're going, or you might get eaten by a bear.”

“A bear? What the fuck are you talking about?”

But I need hardly have asked, since the answer rears up in front of me, nearly nine feet of cast-iron ursinity. As a bear, he would be average, unremarkable, but as sculpture he's absolutely sublime. Beautiful. He could be I See What You Mean's dwarf twin. I wonder if this is a theme the Universe has chosen for this chapter in my life. Frank leans over the placard for a moment, but obviously does not find the answer he's looking for.

“Jolfr? It seems odd to have a bear guarding a vineyard named for ravens, don't it?”

“Jolfr was one of Odin's names – The ravens were his pets. It makes sense.”

“I'll take your word on that.”

The lobby is hung with gorgeous tapestries. In other circumstances I would spend hours just absorbing them, but the girl behind

the reception counter doesn't seem like the patient type. The way she snaps her gum doesn't say 'welcome' so much as 'what do you want?'

"Can I help you?"

"We want to look at some barrels."

"I can get you an application, if you don't mind waiting a few minutes."

When Frank turns on the charm, you can feel it like electricity in the air. Right now, when he leans against the counter and locks eyes with this particular Goth in businesswear, I can just about smell ozone. Oddly enough, it seems to work. She leans closer, locking eyes with him, and doesn't breathe for a good long while.

"We're looking for a couple of specific barrels, darling."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you owned one."

"Well, technically, we don't. Her boyfriend did, though."

Gravity grabs the corners of her black sticked lips for a moment, then turns into something that looks like disappointment.

"Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to give out any information about barrel-holders; it's a privacy thing, you know?"

"I doubt Mr. Nelson will care if we have a look around, Gorgeous – you see, he's a bit busy filling a freezer downtown."

She goes pale, which doesn't seem like something biology should allow, but here we are. Frank holds her gaze for another long minute until I think the poor girl is in danger of bursting into flames, and then she cracks.

"David Nelson? Isn't he the one who was murdered by his girlfriend a couple of days ago?"

"See, that's the thing, Sweetheart; Claire here didn't kill him, but no one wants to believe it. We need proof, right?"

"I don't understand – we make wine here."

"I know. It's very expensive wine, too. You see, I have a receipt for twenty bottles, which just happens to be almost exactly the amount of money Mr. Nelson borrowed from my friend here shortly before he died."

The gothceptionist tears her eyes away long enough to look at the crumpled sheet of Ravenscraft letterhead Frank just pulled out of his back pocket and smoothed flat on the counter. Her lips move while she reads; it's a habit that drives me nuts, but this probably doesn't seem like the moment to get into it. When she smiles, Frank smiles, and I can tell we're in. After signing the guest-book, the girl introduces herself as Amanda, and gives us each a clip-on VISITOR tag.

Brass pipes worm through the narrow tunnel that leads deep into the basement of Ravenscraft Manor, and eventually hardwood floors yield to flagstone before dusty brown soil wins out. The air down here smells thick of oak and mold, and the rows of barrels seem to stretch on forever. Amanda walks swiftly, making a dull clinking sound with every step. I wonder if she's wearing chains under that conservative pants-suit?

"That can't be good."

"God-damn-it!"

I've already stepped in the puddle before I realize what these two are so excited about. One of the barrels has sprung a massive leak recently, and has done a good job of creating a ton of what must be the world's most expensive grape-flavored mud.

"Well, this was David Nelson's barrel, Detective Caprizi. You're welcome to look around – I have to go find someone to clean up this mess."

"Just one? David had bottles of Hugging and Moaning. . ."

"There's only one registered in his name, but we do have a bottle-swapping program."

Interesting. Seems a little daring for my David, but I never figured him for a wine-barrel owner, either.

"We won't be in your way for too long, Amanda. Thanks for all of your help, again."

She smiles briefly, then tip-toes away. Frank shakes his head and sighs.

"I don't think we're the first ones here, Claire. Let's just hope they've left us something to look at."

What they haven't left is wine. When Frank pries open the door at the bottom of the barrel, there's barely enough left to float a bottle in. I know this because there actually is a bottle bobbing about in the fruity gloom when Frank shines his Maglite inside. The bottle turns out to be an empty Munnin.

"Maybe not entirely empty, after all."

"Message in a bottle?"

"Delightfully quaint – would quit you dicking around and open it already?"

"Why are women all so impatient?"

I'm not about to dignify that with a response. If Frank was that much of an idiot, Nancy would have thrown him out a long time ago. That woman doesn't take crap from anyone. If I haven't already stressed the point though, Nancy isn't the kind of girl who HAS to take crap from anyone. I expect that she gets half a dozen marriage proposals every time she goes grocery shopping. Me? There's a stockboy at Safeway who hits on me, anyway. Of course, he hits on everyone, including the girls on the covers of tattoo and biker magazines.

To save the time it would take to find a corkscrew, Frank just cracks the bottle open on the rim of the barrel.

"What's this?"

Frank tossed pieces of the shattered bottle aside and flips through the tightly rolled papers that were inside. From here it looks like receipts and forms, but finances bore the shit out of me. With the Shop, I deal with it, because no one else will, but there's a difference between doing something you want to do and something you have to do.

"Looks like your boyfriend is involved in some big-ass tax fraud."

"David?"

"No, Harold."

"Give me that!"

The fistful of papers paint an unpleasant picture. Seems Red Shield Publishing isn't just the leading producer of crappy gothic bodice rippers and poorly researched military thrillers; it's also a

front for some sort of smuggling slash money-laundering operation. There's nothing here that would prove it, but the whole thing stinks of drugs, or worse. What I can't figure is why someone as obscenely wealthy as Rothschild needs to bother with stupid games. He's never struck me as the risk-seeking type, though, but maybe you have to be to make that much out of nothing.

And where did David get involved? Definitely not the drugs, but he was perpetually broke, and people do strange things for money. It feels uncharitable to think this, but there was always something about him that didn't quite ring true. I know it sounds hokey, but I think you can see into a person's soul if you can catch them off guard. When David and I made love – he would never say 'fuck' – there was always a profound sadness in his eyes at the end, like he wanted to say something, to confess something. I never believed it was 'I love you,' either – he cared about me a great deal, but I don't think love was the word for it. Was he trying to tell me about this?

"Something about this stinks, Claire."

"I know. Is there anything else in there?"

Frank pokes as much of his head and shoulders into the barrel as he can. After a minute, she shrugs his way out, and clicks off the Maglite.

"Nothing."

"Maybe we should get out of here, then?"

"Good idea. Hold this please?"

Frank hands me the flashlight, tucks the roll of papers into his jacket pocket, and pulls the barrel door shut with some effort. When he's done with that he mops his brow with a simple cotton handkerchief from another pocket, and then puts my hat back on. Someone has been watching a lot of '40s film-noir, I think, but it fits him better than the cop uniform ever did. His knees pop when he stands up. The sound echoes mournfully around the cavernous room.

"Shall we?"

"After you, Sir."

Amanda seems rather flustered by the person on the other end of the phone conversation she's engrossed in, but not quite distracted

enough to miss us as we try to sneak past. She flaps her free arm at us like a bird with a broken wing and a strong desire to fly away. It makes her jingle festively; this is a strange bird, for sure.

“Sir! Ma‘Am – Claire? Was it?”

“Yes?”

The index finger she holds up either means she wants us to have a look at the elaborate, Raphael-inspired fresco on the ceiling, or she wants us to wait for a minute while she wraps up her phone call. The fresco is a bit overdone, in my opinion, so I take the opportunity to chew off a ragged fingernail instead. Amanda groans after she puts the handset back in its cradle.

“Sorry about that – the manager; He’s a real asshole. I’m supposed to keep you here until the storm troopers show up. You should probably go, and don’t stop until you’re miles away.”

“So why are you telling us this – won’t you get fired?”

“Probably. Whatever. The only thing I like about this place is the name – they won’t even let me check my mail while I’m here.”

“Thanks. If you’re ever down town clubbing, ask around for the best side of beef in town. When someone asks you if you prefer techno or organic, tell them they don’t care as long as it’s loud.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s like a secret handshake.”

Frank puts a firm hand on my shoulder, and gives it a gentle squeeze.

“We should go, Claire.”

He doesn’t run, but Frank has a few inches on me, so I do have to jog to keep up with him. There’s a cloud of dust heading this way from the vineyard. I don’t even protest when Frank slips into the driver’s seat, I just toss him the keys and buckle in. And then we’re off, like bats out of Hell, or ravens out of Valhalla, I guess. It’s pretty obvious from the way the car fishtails that Frank doesn’t drive sports cars, but he catches on fast enough. I snap my hat off his head before the wind does.

“I think you should be careful around Houston. In fact, I think you should avoid him altogether.”

It doesn't make any more sense after I make him repeat it.

"Look, Claire, I just think it's a little dangerous to ignore the fact that there's a lunatic out there slicing open girls in exactly the same way he describes in his book."

"Since when do you read, Frank?"

He looks hurt; I wonder if I've gone too far this time? Anyway, the suggestion is absolutely preposterous. If I don't know Lang by now, I simply do not know anyone. Impossible, absurd, ridiculous.

"You read his book?"

"I skimmed the copy you left in Holy Grounds this morning. It's under your seat if you want it back."

"Is it any good?"

"The man is your best friend, and you've never read his book?"

"The world is horrific enough – why do I need to read fictional horror?"

"Because he's your friend?"

"Look, I WAS reading the book before you stole it, so don't 'friend' me, okay?"

Frank taps the brake, and slips into the right lane between a Cadillac and a Subaru. The Subaru driver signs his appreciation of Frank's driving skill. It's one of those things I love about Colorado; everyone here is so friendly and polite. Then there's the mountains; when you live on the Front Range you never need a compass, you only need to look out your window, and if you see mountains, you know you're looking West. It's nice to have a sense of direction in life, but it's not quite the same as having a goal.

Down is a direction too.

"Alright, Clouseau, if we're going to play this game –"

"Game?"

"– you're going to have to eliminate the rest of my suspects."

"Who do you suspect?"

"There's you."

"Crime scene, remember?"

He did mention that yesterday, it's true. I probably should buy one of those little flip-books that TV detectives always seem to carry

around. It might also be helpful if I avoided handsome, muscular strangers with eyes that I steadfastly refuse to describe as ‘dreamy,’ even to myself. Dammit.

“IF you can be believed.”

“I’ll drive you downtown right now, Claire.”

“Fine, fine. Let’s assume for the sake of argument that you’re a trustworthy, law-abiding individual, with neither motive nor opportunity. . .”

He turns his head for a moment to look me in the eye – not ‘eyes,’ mind you, because that’s just not possible, unless you’re one of those lizards. Anyway, Frank looks me in the eye, and holds my gaze long enough to win a staring contest, but I only blink because I’d rather not die in a fiery wreck today.

“I think you’re actually enjoying this.”

“My world has been turned upside-down, my boyfriend has been murdered. I’ve been accused of killing him. I’m only free at this moment because a very wealthy man, a man I hardly know, lied to the police about my whereabouts on the night in question – A lie which could unravel at any moment. . .”

“Interesting.”

“. . .and to top it off, I can’t even say for sure that I didn’t kill David, because I can’t remember a damned thing. Am I enjoying myself? No, but what am I supposed to do? Curl up in a ball and weep until I’m dry?”

Because that’s what I want to do, to be completely honest with you.

“You just don’t seem to be taking this seriously, is all.”

“It’s how I deal, Frank.”

“I can respect that. So who’s your next suspect?”

“Walter?”

“Costco Walter?”

“Yeah, that one. I lent him my car that night, and that’s where I woke up, but I don’t remember him returning it to me.”

“His wife says he was home by nine-thirty. Coroner says David died around eleven.”

“Do you believe her?”

“You mean, do I trust anyone not to lie for their husband? Not really – but I do believe the neighbors. Did you know Walter has a band?”

“Sarah Straightrazor? They’re not bad, even if they don’t seem to get the difference between ‘loud’ and ‘coherent.’ Why?”

“A unit responded to several noise complaints around ten forty-five, left around ten after. Walter isn’t our man.”

“Okay. Scott, then?”

“At the Butcher Shop all night. A dozen believable witnesses.”

“So where does that leave us?”

He shrugs, slipping into the fast lane to pass a couch-laden pickup that’s obviously seen better days, judging by the shade of death pouring out of its exhaust.

“It leaves us nowhere near the point, Claire. You built this complicated conspiracy in your head, but more than likely your boyfriend got shot buying drugs or something. He had some dirt on your rich friend, sure, but this is the real world – rich people have lawyers to deal with extortionate pricks, they don’t hire assassins.”

“I guess –”

“And anyway, I’ve just told you that your best friend is a strong candidate for a serial killer, but you just shrugged it off like I said he was running for office.”

“Lang? That’s completely ridiculous. Lang would never hurt anyone.”

“Are you so sure about that?”

“As sure as I am about anything. Lang wouldn’t hurt anyone, ever.”

Except maybe himself. He is cutting himself now, and I’m not sure how serious this Dexter thing is. Damn it! There’s no way Lang is that fucked up – he can’t be; I need someone, something to make sense right now. Why wouldn’t he tell me if something – No, of course he wouldn’t tell me if he was a homicidal lunatic. Would he?

“Jesus, Frank. What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Get out of town, maybe.”

“Is that a good idea? Wouldn’t that make me look guilty?”

“Guilty or scared. Either one is better than looking dead, I think. Would you mind fishing out one of those cigars for me?”

The little leather case I found earlier holds four glass tubes, and inside of each tube is a unique cigar wearing a ‘de Leon’ band, the roaring lion’s head somehow intimidating and ridiculous at the same time.

“Which one?”

“The presidente.”

“Which one?”

“The green one with the pig-tail, Claire.”

These must be expensive cigars. Most tubes I’ve seen are either aluminum with twist-off caps, or glass with a plastic stopper. This looks like blown glass, and the tubes are each sealed with cork and a thick ring of yellow wax. There should be a pull string somewhere, but I don’t have time to find it before Frank plucks the tube out of my hand.

“I’ve been dying to try this out; watch.”

Frank pushes the tube, cork down, about halfway into the cigarette lighter under the dash. For a moment, nothing happens, then the tube gets sucked into the lighter. A faint buzzing noise is swiftly followed by the sweet aroma of burning Connecticut tobacco. A moment later, the cigar pops halfway out, the cap neatly sliced open, and the other end ablaze. Frank takes a long pull off it before passing it to me. It is, without a doubt, the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever tasted, but it has reminded me that I haven’t had a cigarette for at least ten minutes.

“You do know you’re not getting this back now?”

“What happened to not smoking in the car?”

“Oh, shut up Frank. Anyway, leaving town isn’t an option. I’m not going to spend the rest of my life running.”

“At least check yourself into a motel; eat at different restaurants. Avoid anywhere and anyone familiar.”

“How long am I supposed to keep that up?”

He sighs loudly and signals right for the next exit. Traffic is fairly thick along this stretch of 25, but Frank negotiates passage across two lanes with plenty of time to spare before the ramp. Once we've merged back into traffic, he spares me a glance, his face chiseled with a mixture of concern and impatience.

"Three days. That should be enough time for me to follow up on some leads, and talk to some people I know."

"Can I come with you?"

Frank shakes his head.

"These are nervous people. Nervous people with guns, Claire. Just watch your back, okay?"

I'm glad to see the big brother act has returned, as irritating as it is. It's reassuring that some people are always who they are, regardless of circumstances. I know that progress isn't possible without a degree of discomfort, but sometimes I just want the world to stop spinning for an afternoon. Is it really that much to ask?

"Where can I drop you?"

The question catches me completely off guard. I find myself saying 'my office' before I remember that we're not driving Frank's Toyota, and the last thing I want to do today is to add a hundred-thousand dollars of debt to my laundry list of woes.

"Like hell, Frank. The last time I loaned somebody a car, it ended up impounded and I found myself in jail. I am NOT doing that again."

"Where did you get this car?"

"I told you, Harold gave it to me."

"Personally?"

"No."

"Did you look under the hood?"

"No?"

"Did you check the wheel wells?"

"No."

"Have you even considered that it might be lojacked?"

Dammit, he's right. I hate it when he's right.

“I thought you figured Lang for the killer, and now you’re telling me I need to be paranoid about Harold, too? He’s just a harmless middle-age man with a harmless crush and too much money.”

“Money does weird things to people. Mutates their DNA or something. Makes them not quite human.”

“Like lizards in skin suits?”

“Laugh if you want, but stay away from that one too – this mess has something to do with that man, but I need a couple of days to figure out what.”

“What the hell am I supposed to for a couple of days?”

Frank pulls up to the curb, and hands me Lang’s book and the featureless phone from the glove box.

“Don’t take candy from strangers. Read a book. Order a pizza. Just stay out of sight, okay?”

“I guess I haven’t checked my voicemail in a few days.”

“That’s my girl. Call me if you need anything.”

“Gee, thanks, Frank.”

But he’s already gone, and suddenly I’m all alone with the big blue bear and my thoughts. On this particular afternoon, the bear is better company. My mind is a peat bog where lumbering beasts and innocent men have been sacrificed to dark, unknowable gods, but the gods refuse to be appeased, and the bog cries out for more blood. I have the terrible premonition that the bog will do more than insist before this is over.

I think I might be in danger of mixing my metaphors again. Fortunately I still have at least a half hour of cigar left, and an intense apathy for Denver’s smoking ordinances. I don’t own the building, but that ninety-nine year lease goes a long way toward convincing the Nancy No-smokers to go ahead and fuck off.

The thing I love about this lobby is the art; the sculpture hanging from the ceiling here is a one-of-a-kind Chihuly orrery. Right at the peak of my cancer scare, I discovered that you could blow a proper smoke ring at Jupiter just after it passed Saturn, and the King of Planets would wear it like an ethereal blue belt for a bit of his orbit. That was around my seventh pack, right around the time my mouth

stopped tasting like an ashtray and started not tasting at all. For two whole weeks after that. Which might have something to do with the extra ribs I've discovered. And my sternum, which I could have lived a long, happy life without seeing. Bones are a none-too-subtle reminder that I am filled with something other than happiness and sunshine.

Mars wastes no time tearing apart the only smoke ring I'm going to bother with today. If I was into astrology, I might be tempted to take that as a portent.

"Good afternoon, Miss Sinclair. Haven't seen you 'round here for a few days."

"I got myself thrown in jail, Lewis. How's the flower patch doing?"

"Rose and Violet are growing like weeds. You should see how many clothes we've gone through in just the last year. Two whole garbage bags, stuffed full!"

"Kids will do that, I hear."

"That's the truth. Is that a Cuban cigar?"

The number over the door flips from 3 to 4 while I consider the question. I've been smoking for ten years now, but mostly Camels and Marlboros, and cigars are a fairly new hobby for me. I do know that cigars this green mostly come from Connecticut, and that's what I tell Lewis when the door dings open.

"Sure enough, Miss, that looks like a Connecticut wrapper, but they only roll cigars that smell that sweet in Havana."

"Would you like it, Lewis?"

"No thank you, Miss. Gave up tobacco years ago. Sure does smell nice, though."

He smiles at me, and puts out a hand to keep the door from shutting. I think I'm up to the task of pressing the '4' button when I want to go up, and the 'L' button when I want to go down, but I enjoy my brief conversations with Lewis. I don't think too many people in this building realize there's another human being in the elevator with them, which is too bad, really.

When I open the frosted glass door to number 42, I find myself face to face with a bouquet of exotic blue orchids. Lucy is sitting at her desk, wearing the goofiest smile I've seen on her yet, so it's fairly obvious that she approves of the flower-bearer.

"That's one mystery solved, Claire-dear."

"It would be, if I could see past this shrub in my waiting room. Have I had any calls?"

Ted lowers his bouquet just low enough to lock those captivating baby-blues on me. If Lucy wasn't right there I'd have my tongue so far down his throat I'd be able to tell you what he had for breakfast yesterday. Damn you Lucy!

"Just the one delivery, Claire. Would you like me to find you a vase?"

"Girl, if you do any such thing I will fire you post-haste. You may, however, entertain our guest while I freshen up."

"Take your time, please."

Through this whole exchange, Ted just stands there looking the very definition of bemused. I think I'm staring, but I can't help it – the lad is so delicious, I just want to take a bite out of him right now. Instead, I relieve him of his beautiful burden, and render payment with a light kiss on the cheek. My gorgeous man actually blushes!

"I thought, maybe, you'd like to go to dinner. With me, I mean?"

Yes, my tasty morsel, I am ravenous. Come a little closer to my web. Do you mind if I put a few arms around you?

"That sounds delightful, Ted. Are you thinking... what? Casual? Formal?"

"Do you have heels?"

Anyone else, and the answer would be 'of course, right behind my toes,' but I don't want to scare this one off, and I'm not sure about his sense of humor.

"Of course, darling. I won't be a minute."

"I'll be counting the seconds, Claire."

When the door clicks shut behind me, I allow myself a breath, and suck in the exquisite aroma of Hawaiian orchids. There are too many questions to bother with, and quite frankly, thinking is the last

thing I want to do right now. I need to find an outfit that strikes the proper balance between ‘it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance’ and ‘I’m going to fuck you until your eyes bleed.’

“What do you think, Big Blue? The little black dress?”

It’s a silly question, of course; given a choice, the bear is always going to pick the black dress. Today, however, I happen to think he’s right – definitely a better choice than the baggy red hoodie I’m wearing right now – Oh Dog! Did Ted see me in this thing? I don’t even want to imagine the horrible things he must be thinking. . . NO! I am NOT going to do the self-defeating-girl thing.

The black dress then. It would be much better if my tits hadn’t wandered off somewhere these past few months, but no matter; in the black dress I would make Aphrodite weep. I am a goddess in black suede pumps. I am the reason the World stays up all night, and goes to bed hungry. I am –

“In need of a little perfume.”

It takes three deep lungs full of Cuban nicotine to talk myself out of a shower. If I shower, Ted will get the wrong idea, even if he’s probably right. There are rules to this game, and I’m not about to throw a match just because someone points a pair of sky-blue eyes at me.

So let’s see: Black dress, black panties, black heels. Check, check, check. Pearl earrings, ruby necklace; check and check. .38? AWOL. Hmmm. . . I will just have to rely on my wits tonight.

Dog help me.

Night

The steak is bloody and delicious. By the time I made it through the baked potato appetizer I didn't even want to look at the mashed potatoes I'd ordered, my brain off duty for the night. I'm pretty sure that Ted thinks I'm on some sort of New Age mega-starch diet, but he's much too polite to say anything about it.

This boy is endlessly fascinating. We've been alternating between conversation and mastication for three quarters of an hour, and already I have learned so much about him. He says he grew up traveling Europe with his parents, and I believe him because this whole time, he has kept his fork in his left hand and his knife in his right. There hasn't even been the slightest hint that it's an affectation, and that's not the sort of detail you can fake.

Ted ordered a tuna steak, and he's been systematically dismantling it with surgical precision, forking each perfect cube between his lips with casual indifference. The boy is so adorable, I'd be on that side of the table chewing on him, if it weren't for the crystal and china.

"So you're actually friends with Houston Lang?"

Of course, I've got a mouthful of medium-rare Kobe beef, so all I can do is nod vigorously.

"I'm a big fan; I have a signed first edition of 'The Fall of Knight', so I've met Houston before, but when you're in a line with a hundred other people, it's not really the same."

I almost choke laughing at this; I can only imagine what Lang would think!

"The first thing you need to know is that Lang hates being called by his first name. The second is that you haven't met him."

"I did! It was at a Barnes and Noble in Philadelphia."

"You didn't, actually. You're talking about the guy with the scar and the Texas accent, right?"

"Houston Lang, right. Why are you laughing?"

"Bob! His name is Bob, and Lang can't stand him."

"I don't get it."

“His publisher doesn’t think he’s ‘marketable’ so they’ve hired an actor to play him at signings, to pose for jacket photos, that sort of thing.”

When Ted laughs, it’s like music; Bach, maybe, or Mozart. I very much hope he’s not into slapstick, because I do not want to know the depths of self-mutilation I am capable of just to hear that sound.

“He must find that demeaning? If I wrote a book, I wouldn’t want someone else taking credit for it, just because some stiff in a corner office somewhere thinks I’m ugly.”

“You’re not ugly!”

SHIT! Why did you say that, Claire? Backpedal! Backpedal!

“Hypothetically, I mean – Lang is an attractive man, he just doesn’t have the ‘edge’ it takes to sell book, apparently.”

“He should kill someone.”

Sure, that would work. Wait, what?

“Come again?”

Ted blushes; he’s definitely not trying very hard to make cannibalism an impossible proposition.

“I’m just saying, if he killed somebody, or better yet, a couple dozen people, he’d have no shortage of readers poring over every word. Just pick up a newspaper to see what I mean. People are out there dying, and everyone else is dying to read more.”

“The problem is, the only people who’d really read anything he wrote would be psychologists, Ted.”

“Doctors are people too. Shame, shame, Claire.”

The scary thing is, what he’s saying makes a lot of sense in a Langy sort of way. Going nuts and killing people is one thing, but as a promotional scheme? I can’t think of anything more evil, and I’m sure I don’t want to.

“I don’t like where this is going. Let’s talk about something else.”

Ted forks a carefully sculpted red cube into his mouth and chews while he thinks about that. Of course, he could be thinking about the Broncos, or his laundry, for all I know, but he certainly looks thoughtful.

“Okay, I’ve got one.”

“Give it to me.”

Please?

“How did you meet Lang?”

“Oh – that. He was contemplating suicide, I was contemplating prostitution, and we both happened to pick the same bridge to do it.”

“So you saved each other, then?”

“No, that’s the thing, Ted. When you find yourself on the edge, no one can save you, because every moment is a choice. Some choices just work out better than others.”

“So what happened?”

“We laughed; at each other, at ourselves, then we laughed at everything. We laughed at geese.”

Ted stares, and looks a little less delicious for it, but that only lasts a moment, then the moment’s gone.

“All we are is dust in the wind.”

“Kansas?”

“Wow, Ted – I think I’m going to have to keep you.”

“You’ll have to catch me first, and I should warn you, it won’t be easy if I don’t want to be caught.”

“Do you want to get caught, Ted?”

“Maybe.”

He smiles, and forks more fish into his mouth. It’s a long while before either one of us says another word. For the first time in recent memory I actually manage to polish off an entire steak before the idea of food grows wearisome. I plow buttery lumps of potato around my plate while I wait for Ted to finish up. It’s not too long before he puts down his fork, and dabs the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

“So – why prostitution?”

“Why, Ted, I’m flattered. Most people ask about Lang first.”

“You must talk to a lot of morons.”

I’m going to take that as a compliment – I wouldn’t know what to do with it otherwise.

“What can I say? They’re everywhere.”

“So true. But you haven’t answered the question. Why would someone as intelligent and attractive as yourself feel the need to sell her body – and while we’re on the subject, why a bridge?”

“You’re laughing at me.”

“I’m serious. There has to be a million different things you could do first – open a blatantly illegal nightclub, for starters. . .”

“You are making fun of me. Asshole.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t –”

“Don’t. Apologize, I mean. You’ll ruin it.”

“Ruin what?”

“The bad-boy thing. You’re pretty, but you’re much too polite.”

He shrugs, an exquisitely adorable lopsided gesture that barely moves his left shoulder but practically shoves his entire right arm into his ear.

“It’s a character flaw, what can I say? Once, I helped a little old lady cross the street, and then, when she offered me a quarter, I took it.”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“I mean, I was totally in suspense the whole time – did he take the quarter? Did he give it back, and then, right out of left field – just wow.”

“Yup.”

“That was epic, Ted. I can’t wait to see the movie adaptation.”

“I hear they’ve got Keanu lined up to play me. But you haven’t answered my question; what brought you to that bridge?”

“Would you believe tuition increases?”

“Actually, I would. An education is an expensive thing. What were you studying?”

“English lit.”

And then he giggles; the man across the table from me, nothing but muscles and blue eyes, giggles. I’d take him home right now, if I had a home to go to. Look at that; David’s interfering with my sex life even now – meddling bastard!

“So you were going to sell your body to pay for the privilege of reading books written hundreds of years ago, books readily available at any public library for free?”

“It’s more complicated than that, and anyway, I dropped out.”

“Bigger and better things?”

“I waited tables for a few years, until somebody plugged up a toilet.”

“Fascinating. So why was it more complicated?”

“Short version – my Mom’s boyfriend tried to get a little too friendly with me, so I left home, wandered for a while. I thought college was my chance to finally put all of that behind me, but the thing about shit, is shit catches up with you.”

“That is a profound personal philosophy there, Claire.”

He is making fun of me, but I really don’t mind. I’m going to need a cigarette soon, though, and there are very few places left in Colorado where you can smoke inside.

“You want to get out of here? Go dancing or something?”

“It’s like you can read my mind or something.”

Chapter 6

Sunday

the Fall of Knight
Chapter 6

Sam pressed the gun so hard against Dexter's head he felt like he was going to bruise himself.

"If you kill me, Sam, you'll never know what really happened."

"I'm tired of your lies. I'm not going to let you kill anyone ever again."

"If you're wrong, more people will die, and you won't be able to stop any of it."

Sam blinked, but it did nothing to clear his head. If anything, the pounding between his ears only got worse.

Morning

I wake up to the rapid staccato sound of a skilled chef dicing ingredients. The sheets are soft and warm like cotton, but fine like silk, and I won't even try to guess how expensive they were, although I'm sure the figure was delightfully obscene.

My left hand, aware of the danger this much sheet-groping poses, decides to strike out on its own, in search of new textural delights. Crossing the Great Cotton Sea, Captain Lefthand sails directly away from the Isle of Flesh. Then, right in the midst of unexpectedly tropical, rumpled waves, the Captain runs aground. This island feels lushly vegetated, and our intrepid explorer briefly contemplates claiming it for his own, and establishing a permanent colony here, before the pangs of duty strike, and compel him to send word of his discovery back to the queen.

I open an eye just wide enough to break the veil of sleep. After blinking a few times, I'm finally able to focus on the blue orchid reposing under my hand. Ted, I was afraid last night was only a dream, but what a dream! And now – is that basil I smell?

Sitting up and opening my eyes reveals a wealth of details I hadn't bothered noticing last night. First, Ted's bedroom actually seems to be a vaulted brick loft with crumbling plaster, and not simply a faux finish, which suggests high rents, but the futon says 'I'm not just showing off.'

The second thing I notice is that the jersey shirt I'm wearing is the only thing I'm wearing, and it's not mine, but it's not new, either. Not that I mind – an artist doesn't learn to paint by reading books, after all, and that sure as hell wasn't paint by numbers, either.

I am happy to be alive for the first time in . . . months? Years? It doesn't matter – I have blood racing through my veins, I have an ocean of Egyptian (probably) cotton to wrap myself in, and the promise of something hot made with fresh chopped basil not too far away. It's almost as if I've fallen off a precipice, and landed in someone else's life. Whoever she is, I hope she doesn't mind if I linger here for a few minutes.

There are bookshelves everywhere in Ted's apartment, overfilled with everything from dog-eared copies of Gray's Anatomy to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. The books aren't in alphabetical order, an they're not sorted by size, but there does seem to be some underlying organizational principle at work here, but I can't quite put my thumb on it, until I find a copy of One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish.

Ted has his books alphabetized by color; black, blue, green, orange, purple, etc, then by title length. I'm not sure how books are assigned to individual cases, however, so I'll have to ask him about that. Surprisingly, this is not the weirdest thing I've found in a man's apartment, and as there are no signs of shrunken heads or voodoo dolls, I don't think I'll bust his chops over this. Well, not too hard, anyway.

"Good morning, Claire. I took the liberty of starting omelets and coffee, but I would be happy to make you anything else."

"No, that sounds amazing. Toast?"

"Wheat, rye, or bleach?"

"Rye, please."

Ted cuts two slices from a fresh loaf with swift, practiced movements, then wipes the crumbs off the knife, and slots it back into a weathered block. His toaster is large enough to toast whole bagels, but pristine in a way that suggests it is either very new, or unpopular. The coffee pot is one of those percolating models with the clear plastic bubbles at the top, and shows definite signs of use, but I really can't complain, because the aroma hissing out of it is absolutely heavenly. Ted brews his coffee thick and strong, but the blend is infinitely complex, with just a hint of natural sweetness. Ambrosia.

"So you've been sending me orchids for quite a while now – I thought we just met for the first time a couple of days ago?"

"A small lie. I came to the Butcher Shop with a friend about six months ago, and I fell madly in love with you right then and there."

"Seriously?"

"Love. Lust. Something like that. So quid pro quo, Claire; tell me more about the vicious scar you've got down there."

“It’s a boring story, really. I never knew my Dad, but I did get to know my Mom’s ever-changing roster of boyfriends, and some of them tried to know me. One of them had a knife. I lost a lot of blood, and my uterus. So the upshot here is that you don’t have to worry about a three-season surprise.”

“Your mother’s boyfriend stole something precious from the world. What happened to him?”

“He convinced my Mom to go along with a version of reality that had me falling on his knife, and he ended up getting off on a technicality. . . The stupid bastard got arrested and thrown in prison for robbing a liquor store not long after that, so I probably could have gone back home, but I never felt the need. Anyway, I don’t really like to talk about it.”

Two slices of toast, slightly blacker than I prefer, pop out, and before I can say anything, Ted’s already smeared them with dark jelly. He drops one slice onto the plate in front of me, and takes a big bite out of the other. Then he breaks the perfect tomato-mozzarella-basil omelet in half, and slips one portion onto my plate.

Steam escapes, carrying with it the most exquisite blend of flavors when I fork into my omelet, and once in my mouth, I know, without a doubt, that Ted is no doctor; the man sitting across the island from me, dissecting his breakfast with surgical precision, is a culinary poet in hiding. The eggs are just right; firm but moist; the tomatoes hot and sweet, as a perfect counterpoint to the dash of basil; and the mozzarella binds everything together without overwhelming the other elements.

“This is much better than I deserve – you should serve this to kings, Ted.”

“The truth is, Claire, that you only deserve what you are bold enough to take in this world. And the omelet isn’t really that amazing; the mistake most people make with eggs is milk. Adding milk to eggs should be a crime.”

“Oh?”

“Just a spoonful of water is all it takes. It’s a trick I learned in Vancouver.”

“I’ll have to try that the next time. So you’ve lived in the Northwest?”

“I live everywhere I go, really.”

“You’re such an ass; Don’t change.”

“I have no plans to do so. I try to travel as much as possible, but my favorite places are forests and mountains. When you can see, you should be able to see forever. When you want to be alone, there is no better company than trees.”

“I think you should be a poet, Ted.”

He just looks me right in the eye, his expression intensely inscrutable, and then, after a delicious enigma of a moment, he shrugs. It’s all I can do to keep myself from sweeping the island clean with a bold gesture, and dragging him up on top of it. Ruining the omelet would be a tragedy, though, and I don’t want to seem too eager.

“I want to change the world, Claire. I want to cut the sickness out of it so it can grow to its full potential. I want to nurse the world back to health, to strength and glory. I’m afraid it’s a terrible cliché, but actions do speak louder than words.”

“But the pen is mightier than the sword?”

Ted smiles, and suddenly our omelets aren’t the only source of steam in the room.

“This is exactly what happens when you play rochambeau without a third leg.”

I nearly choke on a mouthful of toast. The toast itself, despite appearances, is crunchy and chewy, and the slightly charred flavor actually complements the mystery jelly quite well.

“What exactly is this?”

“Toast? It’s bread that’s been seared on both sides – I can show you how the toaster works, if you’d like?”

I hope my laugh makes him feel the same way his does to me.

“No, ass, I meant the jelly. It doesn’t taste like anything I’ve ever had before.”

“Coffee.”

My cup sits motionless in front of me, recently untouched, forlorn.

“I’m still good.”

“No, I mean the marmalade. It’s made from coffee cherries grown on Kaho’olawe.”

“Coffee cherries?”

“Yes. Coffee beans grow in the heart of a very sweet fruit that looks like a cherry. Usually the flesh is just discarded, roasted to ash or washed away.”

“Wow. I’ve always pictured coffee beans growing in pods, like peas.”

He laughs, and I feel warm and fuzzy inside, like a stupid school-girl with a crush on the quarterback. Somewhere in the back of my head a small voice, the voice of a twelve-year old girl forced to grow up too soon, tells me to be careful, to take things slowly, but I don’t want to listen to her – just because my childhood was stolen from me doesn’t mean I have to be miserable forever, does it?

Instead of answering that question, I take a sip of the coffee in front of me, and instantly I recognize the nagging familiarity in the marmalade, and wonder how I didn’t see it before?

“Holistic Coffee – the beans are separated from the cherries manually, which is a tedious process that means production is very limited, but I think the end result is definitely worth the expense. They also make a suburb kirsch you’ll have to try.”

Ted spears the last square of omelet from his plate into his mouth and broods while he chews. After a minute, he dabs the corners of his mouth, and drops the napkin on his plate as he stands. A tiny, Mona-Lisa smile flirts with the idea of growing into a grin before he turns his back to me, and opens a cabinet. Almost without looking, Ted reaches in, grabs a small, spherical bottle filled with an amber liquor, and lets the door bounce shut on its own.

“I’m afraid all I have left is the 2006, which lacks a touch of the 2005’s joie de vivre, but I think you’ll enjoy it regardless.”

The bottle is heavy, and almost perfectly round, except for the short, corked neck. Instead of a label, it seems to be engraved on the inside with the words ‘Kaho’olawe Inselkaffee Kirschwasser, although the text is backward, and highly distorted. Ted laughs again.

“Turn the bottle around.”

When I do, the label appears, perfectly formed and suspended right in the middle of the bottle, a clever optical trick. It's a beautiful objet d'Art in its own right, and one I am giving serious thought toward accepting graciously. I can see it sitting proudly on a shelf above a window in a tiny kitchen in Seattle, playfully scattering the sun's first rays around the room.

"Thank you, Ted, but I can't accept this."

He places a wooden block on the counter. Wrapping his fingers around it, he squeezes lightly, and it springs open. The interior of the block is a velvet lined cavity that fits the bottle perfectly, and closes with a muffled click.

"I insist."

"Ted, it's a beautiful gift, but the thing is, it looks really expensive, and anyway I'm an alcoholic."

His smile trembles, but only for a moment.

"You're a delicious enigma, Claire."

"Yes; the Enigmatic Miss Moon."

Ted laughs again.

"She says, as if to prove his point."

Leaving Ted's apartment is almost as difficult as leaving his bed, but he is gracious enough to drive me to my office, so I leave him with a long kiss, and a promise of many more.

If Lucy thinks anything of it when I walk back into the office wearing the same clothes I put on before I left last night, she doesn't say a word, although I can tell by the way she arches her left eyebrow, but not her right, that she very much approves.

"Any messages for me, dear?"

"Just one. Your friend Frank says he'll be around to pick you up in, oh, about a half-hour now."

"Just enough time to freshen up. Entertain him if he shows up early, won't you?"

"Of course. Good night?"

I smile so wide I worry about the top of my head shearing off completely.

"Amazing, Lucy. Spectacular."

“The Earth moved?”

“We certainly gave it a go.”

The puzzle box will sit right in the middle of my desktop until I figure out what to do with it, but for right now, I need a hot shower and some vigorous toothbrushing. I feel the faintest phantom of guilt about leaving a trail of clothes for housekeeping to pick up, but I happen to know that Mister R grossly overpays for their service, so it doesn't linger too long. And then I'm immersed in a blisteringly hot downpour, and breathing steam heavy with mint and milk. My entire body relaxes, the delicious soreness drains away. After a few minutes I reluctantly twist off the water and grab a towel.

After I've finished brushing everything that needs to be brushed, I find myself dressing for a night at the Shop – black slacks, linen shirt, suspenders, and my violet Chucks. Only the hat is missing. I don't know what today will bring, but whatever it is, I'm going to approach it looking deadly.

“Mister Caprizi here to see you you, Miss St.Claire.”

“Thanks Lucy, I'll be right out.”

A few minutes later we're back in Frank's brother's Toyota, weaving and bobbing through traffic like a prize-fighter. Frank is seriously getting into the private dick role, judging by the ridiculous telephoto lens on the shiny-new Nikon DSLR next to the enormous binoculars and case of Camels between us on the front seat. It strikes me that we've come to this party wearing the same dress; embarrassing.

“So what's the plan, Poirot?”

“Stakeout. Didn't you get my message?”

The mystery phone; I'm actually not sure where it is. I think I had it last night, but I definitely didn't have it this morning, so – Ted's apartment? I hope he doesn't think I left it there intentionally, as some sort of sad leave-behind tactic. Oh well, C'est la vie.

“Stakeout? That sounds like fun. What are we out-staking, Frank?”

“They found another body last night. It looks like another Creeper murder, except some of the usual elements are missing.”

“What does that mean?”

“One of two things. Either it’s a copy-cat, or, and I’m very much hope so, or he was interrupted.”

“Because he might have been sloppy, and left clues?”

Frank shakes his head sadly.

“No, our boy doesn’t do sloppy. I think he’ll do what they all do, though, and return to the scene just to be sure.”

Which explains the camera and the binoculars – but that is a LOT of smokes.

“This is going to take a while, isn’t it?”

“Without a doubt, but I’m maybe he’ll show up before your appointment this afternoon.”

“And what happens if he doesn’t?”

He peels open a hardpack, and taps out two cigarettes, offering me one, which I gladly accept.

“Should we smoke in Al’s car? Won’t he get pissed?”

“Al can go fuck himself. There are three things I need on a stakeout, and two of them are cigarettes.”

“What’s the other one?”

“Coffee. Would you be a doll and fish a Thermos bottle out of the back?”

“Can I trust you not to look at my ass?”

“What ass? Get back there!”

He jerks a thumb back over his shoulder in an entirely unnecessary illustration of ‘Back there.’ Rather than argue with him, I unbuckle myself and lean over the seat. There’s at least six insulated bottles back there amid the piles of clothes and magazines, most of them variations of the same tacky plaid pattern. I’m starting to get seasick, so I grab a green Thermos and sit back down.

“There’s cups in the glove box.”

They’re styrofoam cups, slightly squashed, that have to be half a million years old, but they each only have one hole, so they’ll do. Frank takes one out of my hand, transfers it to his left, then unscrews the lid of the Thermos, and pours, blindly, while navigating a left turn. Somehow, he manages not to scald himself.

“Thanks, Kid. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Out playing Columbo?”

“Worse; Lost marathon on cable. Al is a TV-addict, and half deaf to boot.”

“Don’t really miss television myself. I bought a fifty-inch flatscreen a while back, but I could never get the cabling right in Dwight.”

“You’re a laugh-riot, Kid. Anyway, we’re almost there.”

‘There’ turns out to be a cemetery on the East side of town. Frank parks the car behind the groundskeeper’s shed on a hill overlooking most of the plots. Down below, the last squad car pulls away from the scene, leaving a lonely square of yellow tape rippling in the wind. Frank turns off the engine and lights up another cigarette.

“So what do we do now?”

“We wait.”

And that’s exactly what we do, for nearly an hour, just drinking terrible coffee and smoking Camels and intruding on the occasional mourner’s grief from a distance. If this sort of thing looks at all glamorous or exciting in movies, it’s because they skip all of the sitting around, and go straight to the bullets and car chases. If you’re doing it right, Frank tells me, neither one of these will actually happen.

A little after noon Frank jumps out of his skin when someone raps on the door.

“Oh look; it’s Sandy. I think we’re busted, Frank.”

“Yeah, shut up, St.Claire, I’m here to talk to my partner.”

“So talk to him.”

Frank raises his right hand and waves ‘shhh’ at me, which ordinarily I wouldn’t put up with, but I’m willing to cut him some slack today.

“So how are you holding up, Frank?”

“Breathing. Twelve years is a long time.”

“She’ll come to her senses. Nancy’d be a fool to let you get away. And there’s the girls.”

“I don’t think she sees it that way. I got papers from her lawyer last night.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.”

“That makes this feel even worse, Frank. I’m supposed to ask you to vacate.”

“Are you going to back that up, Sandy?”

She shakes her head, and produces a greasy paper bag instead.

“Lunch, for you and your Lady-killer. Beef on Kimmelweck, with plenty of horseradish. There’s some Jojos in there, too.”

Frank takes the bag a little too eagerly, and tears into it, passing me a couple of foil-wrapped bundles. He attacks his first sandwich with something more than hunger, although vague memories of National Geographic specials linger like lions around a fallen gazelle.

“Christ, Partner, I think you ate a couple of my fingers there. You sure you’re doing okay?”

With his cheeks packed full, he looks like a panicked squirrel, especially when he squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head.

“We’ll be gone in about an hour. Can you stall the Brass until then?”

“Well, I do have a lunch break coming up, and I think you have an extra sandwich in that bag...”

“Do you want to pop in? We’ve got plenty of room.”

Which is a huge lie, unless he means there’s a duck blind hidden under the laundry in the back. It’s possible; I tried not to look too closely. In my experience, the only way to maintain respect for a man is to never, ever go through his dirty laundry.

Sandy seems to have a similar philosophy. She snaps a sandwich out of the bag like she was expecting to find teeth, then slaps the top of the Corolla with her open palm.

“I’ll be back around thirteen-fifteen.”

“We’ll be gone by then – thanks.”

“It’s not right what they did to you, Frank.”

“Whole world seems to have my number; just means it’s time to spring for caller-ID.”

“See you ‘round.”

Sandy takes a leisurely walk back to her Crown-Vic, and drives away just as fast as anyone with business here. Frank just sits there,

chewing loudly, doing a very thorough job avoiding conversation, but the way I figure it, the bomb's already been dropped – we are damned well going to talk about this.

“So, Nancy –”

“Drop it, Claire.”

“If you want –”

“I don't.”

“You can't just –”

He sighs heavily, which mostly just spatters the dash with half-chewed beef and bread, then he drops his shoulders, and lowers his forehead against the wheel. I know he wants to talk, from long experience listening to stories no one wants to tell, over and over again to anyone who happens to be nearby, or serving drinks, but I can tell he needs to build up to it on his own.

“I have a theory, Claire. Could you grab the towel under your seat?”

I reach beneath me, and let Captain Lefthand do a little more exploring; ice-scraper; crumpled aluminum can; something cold and wet; something dry and fluffy. Turns out it's a wool hat with twice as many holes as you'd expect.

“This work?”

He nods, then uses the hat to clean off, or at least smear around, the beef shrapnel. Once he's satisfied, he pulls the hat inside-out, and stuffs it back under his seat.

“People tell you who they are the first time you meet them, then they spend the rest of the time you know them trying to convince you they're something else; who they want you think they are.”

“Interesting. . .”

“Take you, for example. First time I met you, do you remember what you said?”

The night I threw David out. It was cold and raining sideways. David had looked like a drowned rat, and skulked, literally skulked, behind Frank. Frank, who looked as big as an battleship in my doorway, drenched to the bone but oblivious to the fact.

“You can come in, but leave your dog outside.”

“No, after that. When I asked you ‘Are you Claire St.Claire?’”

“I don’t recall.”

“You told me you are whoever you choose to be, and for you, Kid, I think that’s true. I don’t know if everyone gets that, though.”

One of the first things Frank told me was ‘I’m not going to be anybody’s big brother, I’m just here to do my job.’ He’s always been a lousy liar, but maybe that’s his point.

“Okay, Frank, this is fun. Who should I do next?”

“Lang.”

“That’s easy; ‘Since you’re already dressed up, let’s get married.’”

Frank puts his index finger on my nose, and applies just enough pressure to suggest I look away – and then I see what he wants me to see, what I very definitely did not want to see; driving along the narrow lane below is a brown and white Austin Healy convertible.

“The camera, Claire.”

Oh god, no, Lang. Why? I mean, I know you have your problems, but everybody has problems! Why didn’t you come to me? Was there something I could have done? Why this? Why murder?

“Claire! The camera.”

“Your hands aren’t broken, Frank.”

But I hand it to him anyway, and take the binoculars for myself. By the time I figure out the focus and zoom, Lang’s already parked his car behind a weathered seraph, and is headed toward the taped off area with something black in his hand. It’s a little bit difficult to make out because my field of view jitters and bounces like mad.

“I think your binoculars are broken, Frank.”

“Put your elbows on your knees, and lean against the dash.”

“Oh, that’s much better. Thanks.”

It occurs to me, listening to the sound of Frank’s camera’s shutter snapping open and a closed, rapid-fire, that it’s exactly the sort of irony that Lang would find hilarious, because he’s down there, with a camera, taking tons of pictures of his own. Metaphotography is one of his hobbies, or at least, it would be, if he stuck with anything long enough to call it a hobby.

Something about this doesn’t feel right.

“It’s too quiet down there. Shouldn’t there be somebody guarding the scene, or patrolling the area or something?”

“What, and scare off the looky-loos? My guess is they’ve got somebody in the chapel by the gate, and someone else in the brick building across the street. Probably a few microphones hidden in the area. I can guarantee you that right now, someone is digging through your friend’s past while waiting on the warrant to toss his shit.”

“Why don’t they just arrest him?”

“For what? Waking the dead? Nothing illegal about taking pictures in a cemetery – I’d even say it’s the popular thing to do today.”

“Is he leaving?”

“Looks that way.”

Frank puts down the camera, and lights up another cigarette. Maddeningly, he doesn’t start the engine.

“Shouldn’t we follow him? See where he’s going, what he’s up to?”

“No need; I have a hunch we’ll see him soon enough.”

“Oh?”

“Tuesday night, how did you get to the hospital?”

“Harold Rothschild drove me.”

“Do you remember that?”

“No. . .”

“Then how do you know?”

“The E.R. nurse said it was him.”

“Janice Bowles? Age twenty-four, Caucasian, about five-five, a hundred and twenty pounds, birthmark behind her left ear?”

“The doctor only said her name was Janice. I never met her, or at least, I don’t –”

“You never will, now.”

Cold fingers play arpeggios down my spine.

“She’s ..?”

“Dead. Positive ID on the body late last night. Now, it could be a coincidence, but I think it’s much more likely that someone is getting rid of loose ends.”

“So what do we do now?”

Frank mashes the cigarette butt into the Corolla’s ashtray, triggering an avalanche of cold butts that spills out onto the floor, but he doesn’t seem concerned. He twists the key in the ignition, then puts it into reverse, and heads toward the gate.

“Let’s go find a loose end, and pull.”

For once, Frank drives slowly, almost cautiously. I wonder what’s going on in his head; he lost his job, his wife left him (although I’m still not sure exactly why) and took the kids with her. On top of that, he’s never really gotten along with Lang, so the opportunity to cast him in the role of villain has to be a dream for Frank. Under the cheap suit jacket he’s been wearing for the past day hangs a blue-steel handgun that looks like it came factory-equipped with an itchy trigger finger.

“I have a bad feeling about this, Frank.”

“About what?”

“This, all of this. Somebody’s going to get shot.”

“We’re just going to talk. It’ll be okay, I promise.”

Maybe it’s the flatness in his voice, or the way he’s stopped blinking, but I’m not reassured. That little voice in my head whispers that someone is going to die today; the little voice says it’s going to be someone I love.

“So what’s the plan, then?”

“We show up a little bit early, have a look around, make sure there are no nasty surprises waiting for us, then we hear what Mason has to say. Easy.”

It sounds reasonable, but the little voice won’t be reassured. Frank seems preternaturally calm, though, and when the long, tapered spires of Sorrows appear above the rooftops, growing longer and more sinister with every passing moment, he slows the Toyota further. With only one hand on the wheel, Frank leans back, and lights up another cigarette.

He parks right behind Lang’s car, and shuts off the engine.

“You’d better stay here.”

“Like hell, Frank.”

He locks eyes with me, but after a few seconds of that he sighs, and turns away.

“Stay behind me, and hit the ground at the first sign of trouble. Let me do the talking, okay?”

Our Lady of Sorrows is a mountain of sculpted stone that towers above the surrounding neighborhood and blots out the early afternoon sun. I have the vague recollection of stories from my childhood about some scandal, possibly involving a bishop who ate babies, that led to the cathedral’s closing in the fifties or sixties.

“You know, this has to be the first time I’ve been to church in ten years.”

“Keep your voice down, Claire. The door’s open.”

Ajar might be more accurate, actually, but with doors as massive as these, that leaves plenty of room to squeeze through. Frank touches his finger to his lips, and unsnaps his armpit holster. Without a word, he slips inside, then motions for me to follow. We cross the narthex as quickly as possible without making too much noise, but Frank still pauses to dip his fingers in the small pool of rust-colored holy water, and makes the sign of the cross. Then he draws his gun, holding it low and ready.

“I thought we were just —”

“Sshh!”

Shadows hang like tapestry throughout the nave, and only a weak, rose-colored light filters through the grimy stained-glass windows above. Newspapers and threadbare blankets litter the pews, and here and there are the moldy remains of scavenged meals.

Frank holds up his hand, then, when I stop, he points to a huddled mass in the center of the transept. It’s hard to tell in this light, but it looks like two people, and one of them is crumpled on the floor, not moving. We have to get much closer before I see that it’s Lang hunched over the body on the floor, but he’s blocking my view of the other man’s face.

“LANG!”

He stands and turns toward us, and I see too late that there’s something in his hand. Frank sees it too, and he reacts instantly.

The gunshot is deafening and it knocks Lang off his feet. Without thinking, not wanting to think, I rush to his side, and I barely even hear Frank's question, but the reply catches me entirely off guard.

"Merche Benson – I'm a doctor; I can help."

Lang hit the ground face-down, so I have to roll him over to get an idea of how bad it is. He's limp like a lead-filled rag doll, his eyes are glassy, and I don't think he's breathing.

"Damn it, Houston. You can't die here!"

Benson pushes me out of the way, and kneels down, straddling Lang's abdomen. She presses two fingers against his throat.

"It's weak, but he has a heartbeat."

She interlaces her fingers, and presses down hard on Lang's sternum, twice, three times, before he sucks in a ragged, raspy breath and blows it out with a thin, bloody whistle.

"He'll live, but I'm afraid it's too late for Harold."

I'd completely forgotten about the other body in the room until just now. The face is grey and slack, but unmistakable; just as the crimson-black pool on the floor leaves no doubt as to what happened. Benson steps off of Lang, steadying herself on the floor with one hand.

"You there, with the hat. Help me get this man onto those pews so we can do something about the bleeding."

Lang tries to say something, but he only manages to spit out bloody phlegm. It runs down his cheek when he weezes his next breath. Frank takes three steps closer before another thunderous crack echoes through the cathedral.

Frank goes down like a bag of wet sand.

"Messy. Very, very messy."

Benson's knees pop when she stands up, and she begins dusting imaginary dirt off her knee-length skirt, which somehow manages to look conservative and tacky at the same time. She looks down at me, and shakes her head.

"I told him we should have killed you first, but you know how lawyers are; never shoot a person in the face when you can stab them in the back. Would you look at all of this!"

She's going to kill me; that much is clear, but just like everyone else, she seems to want to talk me to death first. If I keep her talking, maybe I can jump the bitch, and take her gun – MY gun! – away from her. Lang catches my eye, then flicks his gaze toward his outstretched hand. When I look down, he pinches his thumb and index finger together – OK; so I hope that means he knows what I have in mind.

“I had no idea, Merche. . .”

Benson laughs, a sepulchral sound that seems to pull the shadows closer.

“Of course you didn't, you idiot. If you spent more time on your feet, and less time on your back, maybe you'd understand how the world really works.”

She takes half a step forward; so close, but still out of reach. Keep her talking, Claire!

“What are you talking about? Why did you do all of this?”

“I told you before, dear, it's always about money. We've spent years building an empire, then you show up to flash your bony cunt at Harold, and he throws it all away. A billion-dollar empire; years of ceaseless labor, careful investment, way too much of his childish antics, and this is how he repays us! Well fuck him, and fuck you. Time to die, Claire.”

Benson steps over Lang's legs, lifting Betty with two hands. Lang lifts his knee three inches, which isn't much, but it's all I need. I kick, hard, feeling her knees buckle, and then a searing hot fist slams me into the ground.

Chapter 7

Monday

the Fall of Knight
Chapter 7

“We’re in this thing together, so I think we need to agree on some ground rules,” Sam said to Dexter, who’s face he could barely see in the weak light thrown off by the ancient fluorescent bulb above the mirror. “No more violence, for one.”

“I can’t make any promises.”

“At least say you won’t bother me at home again?”

“You do need to get out more.”

Morning

I wake up when the idling motor on my chest shifts positions, and begins to lick my eyebrows with its barbed tongue.

“Damn it, Memnon. Leave me alone.”

I sound drugged, and tired, which would also explain the tubes up my nose. When the pink tongue disappears again, I find myself looking into deep blue-green eyes.

“Hao? Hao?”

It’s a fair question, but I don’t have a good answer yet. Memnon yawns, probably just to share the delicious smell of whatever he’s eaten today, then stretches, arching his back into a perfect, if hairy, parabola.

“Welcome back to the Land of the Living, Kid.”

Frank has his shooting arm in a sling, but he’s been spared the indignity of a hospital gown. His Metallica t-shirt is tight enough to hint at layers of bandages wrapped around his chest.

“You look like shit, Old Man.”

He starts to laugh, but strangles it with a wince and a cock-eyed grimace. After regaining his composure he gives me half a smile instead.

“God-damn kevlar.”

“Okay.”

I close my eyes for a second, but when I open them again, Frank is sitting closer, and now Sandy is there next to him in another one of those chairs that look almost half as uncomfortable as they actually are.

“Going to stay with us this time?”

“I’ll try, Frank. Where’s Lang?”

Memnon swivels his enormous ears around, but otherwise pretends to be asleep in the blanket valley between my feet. Frank half-shrugs, and clears his throat.

“Downstairs.”

“The morgue?”

He shakes his head, and relief washes over me like morphine. Unless that was actually morphine?

“ICU. Apparently I knicked his lung – he was in surgery for hours, but he should be fine.”

“He’s still going to have to talk to us about the murders, but we came up empty at his apartment, and it turns out he has solid alibis for most of them.”

It’s the nicest thing another woman has ever said to me, and I’m almost considering changing my opinion of her. Maybe I’ll get her a fruit basket, or something.

“But he was at the crime scene yesterday..?”

Sandy shakes her head.

“Benson started talking as soon as we got her in handcuffs, and didn’t stop for hours. Some of it concerns you.”

“Oh?”

Frank nods his head sadly.

“Looks like you’re not going to be sleeping in your car again for a long, long time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Harold Rothschild is dead.”

I knew that, but it still hits hard.

“I didn’t kill him.”

“But apparently, you did impress him. At least enough to add you as a beneficiary in his will.”

“Which pissed off Hayes and Benson, who were expecting to inherit the bulk of his assets, aside from some property he left to his daughter.”

I have a million questions, but I get the feeling that trying to interrupt now would be like getting a word in edgewise during an Abbott and Costello routine.

“Murder wasn’t the plan originally; they figured it would be enough to simply get rid of you.”

“Since they were convinced you were just a harmless crush, they’d just have to marry you off, or make you move away. So they went to work on your boyfriend, who proved . . . difficult.”

“Until they discovered he was the illegitimate son of a very prominent, very conservative senator with his eye on the White House.”

“So they tried to blackmail him to get to me?”

“They were desperate at this point; David knew who they were, and one phone call from him could mean they’d lose everything. They began a campaign of harrassment and extortion to keep him quiet until they could figure out what to do.”

“Now they had to get rid of you, and get rid of David, so it must have seemed like a godsend when he pulled a gun on Benson last Tuesday.”

“She says she wrestled the gun away from him, and shot him in self defense. I don’t buy it, but at any rate, it left them with a corpse, and a narrow window of opportunity to pin it on you.”

“Why didn’t they just kill me then, and be done with it?”

Frank smiles, and leans back in his chair before thinking better of it.

“Because now they had a paper trail linking them to David; first bribery, then blackmail, and they had to clean it up.”

“Or at least point it at someone else. Shooting from the hip now, Benson and Hayes decided to make it look like David was blackmailing Rothschild, who then killed David and tried to frame you.”

“Would that have worked?”

Sandy shrugs.

“Maybe if they’d had more time, and more nerve. The whole thing started to collapse right from the beginning. In order for it to work at all, they needed to put you at the scene of David’s murder, but Hayes had already checked you into the E.R., using Rothschild’s name.”

“So once Benson called him, Hayes had to fetch you, erase any security footage, get rid of the nurse . . . you see the problem?”

“It turned into a big, dirty snowball. What I don’t understand is why Hayes took me to the E.R. after drugging me?”

“Benson said they didn’t drug you. Remember; they were still only planning to blackmail David until that night, so someone else must have beat them to it.”

“Okay, but why did they involve Lang in all of this?”

It doesn’t look like it hurts nearly as much when Frank laughs now.

“Simple. Lang was tossing cookies in the alley when Hayes walked you to his car, and they decided they couldn’t take a chance on him being sober enough to remember.”

“Wow, what a tangled web . . . and all of this over a little bit of money.”

“Two billion dollars, give or take.”

Wait, what?

Frank smiles wryly.

“Yes, billion with a ‘B.’ And controlling interest in Red Shield Publishing. Incidentally, you’ll be getting a bill for my services in . . . the . . . my God!”

He goes pale as a sheet, but when I follow his gaze, it’s only a nurse pushing a tray laden with the generic lime Jell-o they call ‘lunch’ in places like this. The blue orchids are a pleasant surprise, though.

“Is Ted here?”

The nurse shakes her head.

“Your gentleman friend said he had pressing business to attend to, and regretted just dropping these flowers off without popping in. They are lovely, though, and so unusual.”

“How long ago was that?”

Frank is practically screaming at her now. She looks up at the wall clock.

“Oh, couldn’t have been more than five minutes ago. If you hurry, you might still catch him.”

But Frank is already out the door. I think he needs a vacation or something. Maybe I’ll buy him an island in the Caribbean.

“There’s a note in there too, Claire. Enjoy your lunch.”

The note simply reads ‘Dearest Claire, Won’t be able to see you for a while. Feel better soon. Yours, Ted.’

“I wonder what’s got into Frank?”

“He’s taking the divorce harder than he lets on. I wouldn’t worry about it. So what are you going to do with all that money?”

“I don’t know – maybe buy a steak when I get out of here. This is terrible.”

“Hell, St.Claire, maybe I’ll let you buy me a steak too.”

Lunch tastes just as bland as it looks, but the way my gut feels, maybe that’s not such a bad thing. Judging by the location and intensity of the crawling itch, that bitch put a bullet through my side.

“Tell you what, Sandy; I’ll buy you that steak AND a potato if you tell me how bad I hurt Benson.”

Sandy smiles, and I think I could actually start to like this woman.

“Shattered her knee, actually. She’ll probably be walking with a cane for the rest of her life . . . if they let her have one in prison, that is.”

“What about Hayes?”

“He did what all cowards do in the end; he ran away. He’s probably halfway to Venezuela by now.”

“That’s fabulous. I think I’m going to close my eyes for a few minutes.”

When I open my eyes, Frank is back, and now Memnon is curled up on his lap, looking like a tacky, but very happy sofa cushion. Frank strokes the cat slowly, his face blank, like he’s lost in thought.

“Frank?”

He jumps in the chair, then blinks rapidly to clear his eyes.

“It was never Lang, Claire.”

“What was?”

“Homicide calls him the Blue Orchid Killer.”

The note is still pinched between my fingers, but I don’t have to reread it to see the words, words that cast long shadows in my mind.

Afternoon

Lang looks almost as white as the linens.

“Hey, Winny, you’re alive.”

I laugh. I survived a flesh wound and a minor concussion, but the man who almost died, who is barely able to speak in a ragged whisper, is concerned about me.

“You always have to be the center of attention, don’t you?”

“I honestly have no idea what you mean.”

The wheelchair is an irritating compromise reached with hyper-vigilant nurses, but I was planning on visiting Lang even if I had to drag the bed along with me. I think Memnon was starting to get anxious without his human, too; he hasn’t eaten nearly as many of the nurses as I would have expected. Now, however, he leaps joyously from his post at my side to the open space on Lang’s bed.

“Hey buddy. They let you in?”

“Mrumf. Yao! Yao!”

Lang reaches down to scratch the cat between his huge ears. Memnon purrs loudly, lapping up the attention, but then he flops on his back, clamping his jaws and claws into Lang’s arm, opening a new set of shallow wounds.

“So you haven’t been cutting yourself, then?”

“Just the one time. You were going to come here anyway, I figured I’d tag along.”

“You’re an idiot, Lang.”

“I know. So how’s Rothschild?”

Words fail me, so I just shake my head instead.

“That’s too bad, he seemed like a decent guy.”

“I wish I’d gotten to know him better. Maybe I’d have some clue why he left me everything.”

Lang’s heart monitor bleeps a little faster. Memnon stops grooming himself long enough to give the blue and grey box a quick appraisal, but he must have decided that it wasn’t much of a threat because he goes right back to licking the spots on his belly.

“Everything? What does that mean?”

“It means ‘everything.’ Red Shield, a yacht, a private jet, a couple billion. I think he left his daughter a house and some money, though.”

“That’s quite an apology, Winn. Wow.”

“Apology?”

Lang shrugs.

“When I found him in the church, he was trying to tell me something. It sounded like ‘Tell Winter I’m sorry I wasn’t there.’ Any idea what he meant?”

“Seems everybody knows my secret identity. Maybe I’m wearing the wrong tights. Do you suppose he felt responsible for last Tuesday?”

“I barely understand why I do half the things I do. Dying people say strange things. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Except he would have had to added me to his will months, if not years ago. Lovely; solve one mystery, stir up a dozen more.

“So, it seems I slept with a serial killer.”

“That’s funny.”

“I’m serious. His name is Ted . . . or at least, that’s the name he gave me. I just got done with a police sketch artist, they’re going to put it up on the evening news.” Lang just stares at me, with his eyes wide and his jaw slack, until Memnon swats at his nose.

“How the hell did that happen?”

“He’s gorgeous, charming – I’ve been through a lot lately, okay?”

“I’ll bet.”

He says it casually, but makes a big show of clicking the button attached to his morphine drip. Ass.

“So why did I get shot, then?”

“You had a gun, Lang, and we saw you at the cemetery. It looked like you’d just shot Harold. Why were you at the cemetery?”

“I have a police scanner at home. I figured I’d do a little bit of research before meeting you at the church. Your private investigator slash stalker called me, and said you were in trouble. Why were you following me?”

How do I tell him this without completely destroying our friendship? Dance around the fact? Lie out right? No, whatever it costs me, I owe Lang the truth.

“We thought you were the Creeper.”

Lang opens his mouth, then closes it, and pets Memnon for a while instead. It’s not the first time I’ve wished I could see inside his head while it’s at work, but I hope it won’t be the last time. After a long, excruciating silence, he finally looks at me again.

“Marry me.”

“What?”

“You thought I was a psychopath, but you still rushed to my side after I got shot. Marry me.”

“No.”

He clicks his morphine button as theatrically as possible, but I can tell he’s not crushed, and even if he is, it is much too soon for another dose.

“I think I’m done with men for a while, Lang. You barely count, though, so you’re welcome to hang out whenever you want.”

“So what’s next?”

“Seattle, I think. Some peace and quiet, and maybe a real bed for once.”

“Sounds lovely. I think I might write that book, after all, and this time, I’m posing for my own jacket shot.”

“What, and force poor Bob to go back to modeling underwear?”

“He’ll live. More to the point, so will we.”

“I hope so, Lang.”

Lang works away from across the bed, and pats the narrow vacancy with his bandaged palm.

“No funny stuff?”

“I promise.”

My eyes feel ten pounds each, which doesn’t make it any easier to navigate Lang’s tangle of tubes and wires. As soon as I settle in, he slides his hand up onto my thigh.

“Lang?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re an asshole.”

“I know. Can I have the yacht?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Cool. Goodnight, Claire.”

“Lang?”

“Mmf?”

“I love you too.”

But of course he’s already asleep, and right now that doesn’t sound so bad. When I close my eyes I feel Memnon climb across Lang and settle in between my feet.

Seattle.

Follow Houston Lang's search for
'the Gatherer of Tears'
then join Claire St.Claire's discovery of
'the Devil's Tearoom'

GRATITUDE

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