

## NaNoWriMo 2007

## Chapter 1: A Proper Beginning

The first thing Jill heard when she woke up on That Morning was the sound of her own snort. Shortly afterwards, she made an attempt to open her eyes, despite a raging protest from that region of her swollen, puffy face. Squinting, she managed to raise one irritable lid for her first glimpse of the dreary gray morning light filtering through the blinds. It fell, unlovely, onto the massive pile of used tissue she had cried herself to sleep on, and subsequently used as a disgusting sort of pillow-thing, only the night before.

Her head hurt. Still, there was something for Jill to do That Day, and so it was important for her to get up That Morning. She remembered it was important, remembered it even though she suspected (and later confirmed) that one of her eyes was crusted over with sleep and would not open without manual intervention. She remembered it, even though she knew that she would much rather forget, even though, in light of last night, it wouldn't matter the slightest whether or not she remembered a stupid dentist appointment.

She rolled over onto her back and with the glacier-like speed of the very unwilling, forced herself into a sitting position. In the mirror, she saw a stray tissue pressed into the folds of her wrinkled cocktail dress and filthy mascara trails running down both her cheeks. Her hair, which, much like herself had been perky and ready for a good time last night, now sprung from her head in a meteorologically correct mushroom cloud pattern.

At about the same time, but in a different part of the city, and in a much better state of mind, Henry Denby rose to greet the day. He pulled back the covers with only haphazard care and got up, stretching fitfully before padding off towards the bathroom.

Clear eyes looked back at him in the bathroom mirror. He had very few beliefs that would lead him to be unhappy, or that would lead him to make others unhappy. At 25, Henry had already mastered the art of living without even knowing he had done so: he was a (mostly) happy man.

Henry stepped into the shower and shut the door behind him. As he swung the door shut with his right hand, his left hand reached for the knob to turn on the water. These noises together combined to drown out the low buzz of his cell phone churning in a pile of discarded clothes in the laundry bin by the sink. Once, twice – three times, and four, it called out plaintively to Henry, until finally it gave up and sunk into blinking sullenly in red.

Approximately two minutes later, a small but catastrophic incident at the power station feeding power to Henry's cell phone provider wiped the missed call and urgently pleading messages from existence. Approximately fifteen minutes after that, just as Henry was removing a pair of pants from a pile of clothes on the floor and realizing he had left his cell phone in the pair of pants he had thrown in the hamper, the person who had made the call was similarly, but more catastrophically, wiped from existence.

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Jill sat in the waiting room, staring blindly at the magazine in front her. It was full of piffle, but at least she wasn't staring at the wall like a zombie, which she felt like doing. The physical aftermath of having bullied the bartender into serving her three too many drinks was manifesting itself in the most obnoxious hangover she'd ever experienced.

She tossed the magazine aside and rubbed her eyes.

She was early. Her knock had interrupted the receptionist behind the counter, a middle-aged, no-nonsense kind of woman who had reluctantly let her in, taken her name, and had been darting her dirty looks for the last fifteen minutes. The dentist, Jill had been informed, would be in a few minutes late, if she just wouldn't mind waiting?

And so she waited. She put her head back against the wall and shut her eyes. Everything was pulsing slightly.

A few minutes later, she heard someone walking up to the secret staff door at the side of the office and she wondered: *Am I allowed to be hung-over at a dentist appointment? What if he pierces something and I bleed out? That would stink.*

And then she thought: *But would it really surprise you, Jill?*

Followed by: *Why does everything have to suck? Is it just that I suck? Is that what this is about? That I suck so much everything around me must suck by association? Or maybe I am a black hole of suck? Goddamnit.*

From slightly far back in the office, she heard a male voice say, "What do you think we should watch today, Martha?"

Martha (and now that she knew the receptionist's name, it seemed to fit *just so*) responded with a disinterested grunt. Her heavy footsteps made *fump* noises against the padded carpet, and Jill heard the chair behind the counter depress.

"The doctor will be with you in just a few minutes, Miss Gerardi."

Jill opened her eyes and said, "You know, I never thought about it, but I guess dentists are called doctors, aren't they?"

Martha's gave her a stark and humorless look.

She sunk back into her chair. "Uh...never mind."

Her head hurt more than ever. She was just beginning to think of how unappealing it was going to be to have Nurse Ratchet shove those stupid little plastic things in her mouth

when the television in the waiting room suddenly came to life, blasting sound into her tender eardrums. She jerked in her seat and dropped the magazine on the floor.

"Oops! Sorry about that. Little loud."

A young man stood behind the safety gate with a remote control, looking at her with concern.

She gave him a wan smile. "That's okay."

He grinned, "I'll be with you in a few minutes, I just need to get this thing working first. You know, for the waiters." He paused. " Which is kind of funny, because I'm making *you* wait while I'm getting it done." Then he laughed.

He looked *very* young. "That's okay. Are you Dr. Denby?"

"That's me. You can call me Henry, though." He stood for awhile, grinning. Standing and grinning. Standing - and grinning...

Behind him, Martha was shooting daggers at Jill with her eyes. Presumably for breaching protocol and fraternizing with him without her authorization. Jill felt like winking at her, but refrained.

Martha made a low barking noise in the back of her throat, and Henry Denby seemed to recall his fleshly form. "Anyway, I'll be just a moment."

He waved, and disappeared towards the back of the office.

Jill retrieved the magazine from the floor. That was weird. The guy did look pretty young though. There was no way he could be much older than she was. How long did dentists have to go to school for? She was almost sure they had to be board certified, like doctors. Well, he *was* a doctor...

She reminded herself to Google how long it took to become a dentist and looked up at the television. Claudette Colbert had just leapt off the deck of her father's yacht and was swimming away rapidly. He'd put on **It Happened One Night?**

What were the odds of a guy seeing (and liking!) **It Happened One Night?** Too slim. Maybe he was gay. She'd never known a gay Henry before. Jill sat back in her chair and sighed.

Her head still hurt.

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Henry's heart was pounding viciously in his chest as he stared at the corner of his office, counting the number of imperfections in the paint to calm himself down.

While it was true that Henry was *mostly* happy, the one thing in his life that he had very little control over was his ridiculous overreaction to women. It was his cross to bear that he should revert to his 12-year-old self whenever confronted by a woman he found to be even remotely attractive. Some days were better than others.

Today was not to be one of the some days, obviously. He'd taken one look at her and had begun to freeze up immediately. It had happened before, of course. He didn't want to admit it, but he'd taken to culling his patients and farming the more attractive females over to some of the classmates who had started practices of their own. He had a feeling Martha might have caught on, but so far she had kept tight-lipped about it. God knew that wouldn't last much longer. She was sharp, that receptionist of his.

He put his face in his hands, forcing himself to take deep, even breaths.

"*Dr. Denby.*"

Speak of the devil. He didn't turn. "Yes?"

"You can't spend all day in that corner. You know that."

He moaned, ever so faintly. "Yes."

"I'm calling her in now."

Panic flared up, flashing neon pink across his mind's eye. Above him, Martha's voice had become a slow, fuzzy bleat - he caught the word 'message' and 'desk', but did not fully process them. His first instinct was to run, but he stuffed it down, deep, deep into his belly. It wouldn't be the thing to do. He was a professional. A dentist - a damned good one. What matter if the teeth he examined were attached to a pretty woman? Teeth were teeth. And he liked teeth. So easy. Un-womanly.

When he looked up, Martha had departed, leaving behind her a steaming cup of coffee and a pile of paperwork in his basket.

Henry stood, took the coffee and tilted it back to take a deep gulp. At eye level, he noticed one of the message memos Martha left for him stuck to the bottom of the mug, and extracted it, eyes running over it distractedly before securing it underneath a larger file folder.

*Just teeth, they're just teeth.*

Passing through the hallway, he saw a muted reflection of himself in the window, and for a second caught a glimpse of his older brother Edward. The reminder was enough.

Henry steeled himself. He would not give in to his fear (again). He would go out there, and damnit, he would be the dentist he knew he was.

As he emerged from his inner office, he gave a stray thought to his stalwart older sibling: what was Edward up to these days?

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At the same instant that Henry Denby was screwing his courage to the sticking point, his brother Edward was doing nothing more remarkable than having a sanguine conversation with his assistant Delphi (short for Delphina, as in the constellation, not the...well, anything else) Follows, a maddeningly winsome redhead who would have sent Henry careening off his proverbial deep end, had he been in his brother's shoes. The conversation was going thusly:

"Don't bother trying the light switch. It's out."

"What are we going to DO? I can hear something! I can hear it! Can you see in the dark, Ed? Because I sure as hell can't!"

"Calm down, for God's sake," he snapped, "You're going to make me nervous."

"Nervous!" Delphi exclaimed shrilly, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Whatever it was on the ground, was slithering towards the both of them – more quickly than she really cared to hear. Ed moved backwards slowly in the dark, and she began to understand the importance of slow movement, especially with something slithering anywhere near them.

Last summer when her cousin Sam had been bitten by a snake, she'd grown morbidly curious and read all about snake bites on the internet. Snake venoms, she learned, came in all sorts of lovely forms, ranging from those that were mildly cumbersome to others that were lethal with a ninja-like swiftness. If Ed had the latter kind of snake in front of him, it would be the last straw. She would kill him. Quickly, and with her own kind of ninja-like swiftness. These were the things she dreamed of, these days.

Beside her in the dark, her boss, the inimitable Edward Denby, danced a slow tango with a snake of unknown (probably large) size. Her job at this point was to help him once he'd caught the snake. The details of "helping" him had not been discussed, and were therefore alarmingly sketchy, although there was a good chance she would be in trouble if it bit him. He would probably fire her. (Again.)

His voice came from the right, slow. "*Don't move.*"

She froze in the middle of her thought, fear shooting ice into her veins. Somewhere, far below her eyes (*don't look down don't look don't look it will eat your face*), she felt

something large and pulsing brush up against her ankle and continue brushing against it for a length excruciating to her racing imagination. *Oh, God, it probably had fangs the size of her head. Oh, God, she was going to die, and the last person she would ever see would be Ed. Oh, GOD.*

"You know," he said, voice low in his throat, "It's probably a good thing the lights are out."

Delphi did not ask why. Her vision was tunneling from the fierce concentration she was putting into keeping upright. Below her, she felt a scaly smoothness start to dart around her calf. The tunnel narrowed.

"It's...moving...up - up. IT'S - "

Something sliced out of the air in front of her and a hand shot out of the darkness, pushing her forcefully back against one of the tables and wrenching her out of her fearful reverie. Something slick was pumping onto her leg. For a moment, she thought she had been bitten, and the slick something was her own blood, pouring out of her body, making it nothing more than a warm, curvy spigot of wasted life...!

The next moment came, and somehow there was light. Her eyes, grown accustomed to the dark, rebelled, and gradually adjusted to reveal Ed standing over her, chest heaving, eyes glowing with a fierce triumph. In his hand, he grasped a long wooden pole, at the end of which there was a sharp, curved blade.

Delphi herself was heaving. It was a slightly more awesome sight than Ed's heaving, but for an altogether different reason. One glance down at her leg, and her breathing went from heaves to growls.

"WHAT - THE - HELL - !"

With a violent lurch, Delphi kicked the remains of the snake - a large, murderous looking creature with large fangs barely smaller than she had imagined (which were, indeed, unacceptably large). A part of its severed body tore away with a wet slapping noise and landed a few feet away. The other part sunk lower on her shapely leg and settled.

"Stop moving!" Ed barked.

Against her will, Delphi immediately froze. With the deftness of a ninja (what the hell *was* that thing in his hand, anyway!), Ed lowered the flat edge of the pole in his hand and caught the snake on Delphi's leg. With an almost careless flick of his wrist, the serpentine corpse removed itself neatly from Delphi's leg, landing close by the sliver she had kicked off.

"There," he said. "Good thing I brought this along instead of just the pole. You would have been just another rotting corpse."

He gestured to the blade in his hand.

Delphi looked from him, to the blade, and back again, and said, in a slow measured voice, "I fucking quit."

## Chapter 2: The Missing Person

Jill had eyed the nitrous oxide tank the entire time she was in the Henry Denby's office, and by the time she was through with the visit, she was seriously considering asking for a quick fix before being sent on her way. She was not prone to seeking highs by nature, understand. It was simply a circumstantial need.

Dr. Denby had acted strange throughout the entire examination, a vacant, yet intense cheerfulness on his face. With this cheerfulness, he told her she had three cavities that needed to be filled, did so in stunningly painless order, and sent her on her way, with what she had begun to suspect was a high level of relief. She wondered if this was because she smelled like alcohol.

In any case, he disappeared shortly after the procedure was done, and Martha's unsmiling face greeted (figuratively speaking) on the way out. She was drawing out her wallet from her purse when a large shadow came over the front of the office, eclipsing the light from outside. Both she and Martha looked up to see a large man pushing on the entrance door.

She did not know later on what made her do what she did. It was perhaps that at the moment she saw him in the doorway, time began to slow down for her, much like she imagined it did for a deer right before the headlights + car plowed into it and pasted it across the road. Her entire body - headache, mouth full of cotton-balls and all - tensed as she watched the door creep open. When the little bell above the door rung, Jill grabbed the large potted palm tree by the security gate and went running like a mad woman for the door, holding it like a lance in front of her.

Halfway to the doorway, she heard Martha's bark and a cry of alarm from Henry Denby. The plant met the door and the force of her speed and the plant sent the door slamming in the man's face. Before the fronds of the palm obscured her view, she recognized the distinct shape of a gun clatter down from the man's hand.

Despite the fact that this validated her otherwise lunatic rush for the door, Jill could not help but feel terribly disappointed, and said so.

"Holy shit!"

Jill turned around and saw Martha's ash-white face behind her. Henry Denby was behind Martha, no longer the maniacally grinning dentist. He held out his hand to her and said, quickly, "This way!"

Jill ran for it. Ran for it like she'd never run before, headache, mouth ache, body ache forgotten. Henry threaded the three of them through the back office deftly, shutting doors and knocking down heavy equipment to impede the intruder, even as they heard muted shots go off and glass breaking in the front office.

He grabbed the lamp from his desk and swung it hard, with both arms, against the glass. It shattered, raining down a sheet of tiny glass particles in front of him. Without hesitating, he turned, seized Martha by the arm, and hurtled her towards the opening. Jill watched him, frozen in a sudden, entirely time-inappropriate appreciation of his masculinity.

It was short lived. Henry, moved to action by the sudden and unexpected threat on the lives of the people around him, had funneled all his energy (nervous or otherwise) into the one goal of getting them all out alive. Jill's momentary lapse of good judgment (nervous or otherwise) did not deter him. In one deft movement, he lowered his back, scooped her up as best he could (sloppily), and made a flying leap out the window.

Jill went tumbling down onto the pavement, a long stretch of her thigh scraped painfully against the ground. Henry landed close by, but as quick as a cat was up, dragging her up with him. Martha, ahead of them, had already gone rushing down the alleyway by the side of the building.

They ran for it. Shots rang out overhead, and Henry fell behind, making sure both Jill and Martha were safe before following. He caught up to Jill. "Do you have a cell phone?"

It had escaped her mind until that moment. Hands shaking as she ran, she dug. Jill's purse on the best of days was a mild disaster. Hung-over mornings after being stood up by a guy she had long suspected was an asshole? It was highly iffy that anything useful was in her bag at all. Tissues came flying out at them as she grew frantic. Finally, towards the bottom and wadded up in a pair of her panties (*sonofabitch*), her cell phone.

She dialed 911 as they reached the end of the alleyway emptying out onto the deserted back parking lot of a shopping center. Panic welled up in her again as they slowed. She turned to see if anyone was chasing them, but the alley was empty. It did not comfort her.

The phone against her ear rang once, and she heard the operator pick up and say, "911, what is - " before her phone, uncharged, simply died right in her hand. She stared down at it in disbelief, futilely punched it, and threw it back in her bag.

"It's dead!" she cried. Martha uttered a low moan, shaking visibly. Henry frowned, and looked around the parking lot. It was hemmed in by the backs of various offices, and a high, solid wall. The only way in or out was the alley, and running blind back through it was not a viable option. Henry seemed to come to this conclusion as Jill watched, and his jaw set, he turned towards the wall.

"We have to get over this wall. Quickly, now!"

Jill was about to voice her concern about her dubious ability to climb walls when a loud crack snapped through the air and something hard hit the wall a few feet from where they

stood. She didn't have to turn to know what it was. Propelling herself towards the wall, she jumped and grabbed hold of the ledge, hoisting hard.

*Please, God, please help me to get over the wall, I'll never skip out on the upper body weights ever again, even if I grow unsightly veins, even if I developed man shoulders, even if -*

She hung there, and for a few terrified microseconds, truly fearing she was about to die when Henry bounded towards her, put his hands right on her butt and shoved, as hard as he could. She vaulted upwards, grabbed tighter hold, and began pulling herself over the top. Several more shots rang out, and suddenly - suddenly, horribly - a noise. The noise of Henry crying out, then something solid hitting the ground.

She turned to look behind her, and saw Martha sprawled at Henry's feet, a dark hole in her temple draining the blood out of her head. Her eyes were staring upwards, blankly. Jill felt her own body go cold at the sight of it, and urgency rushed over her, renewed. She wanted to live. *She wanted to live.*

Henry vaulted towards the wall. In a second, he was over, grasping Jill, breaking hard for the street. New houses lined the street, mostly skeletal frames and dirt. No one lived here yet - it was still very new - but Jill could hear the dull sounds of cars going by nearby. Quickly, in her head, she tried to pull up maps of the town, but could not concentrate, her eyes flicking behind them as they ran, afraid that at any moment, the gunman would come back into view.

Beside her, she felt Henry slowing down. He was looking around, getting his bearings, and she noticed for the first time one of his hands clutching his arm. It was red there, bright and growing. She looked at him, alarmed.

"I'm fine," he said, "This is all the new housing development. The main street is accessible if we continue this way for a few blocks."

"You've been shot! Are you sure you can make it?"

He was panting from the run, but nodded, "It's just flesh."

The word reminded her suddenly of Martha's dead body, lying amongst the refuse of the alley, and the sickness came violently, bowling her over in heaves. He didn't say anything above her, but she saw him hovering in her peripheral vision.

"What's going on? Who is this? What does he want?" she panted, turning her eyes up towards him. "God, is it the mob? Jesus, are you a mob dentist?"

He looked down at her, frowning, "No, of course not - I'm just a dentist! I have no idea why anyone would want to do this!"

"None at all?" she cried, pointing backwards, "Because that guy didn't want to steal anything - he chased us all the way out there, and - and - "

- and he killed someone -

She cried. The fear of death and elation at not having been the one to die - she was ashamed and frightened and horrified all at once. He only allowed her a few moments, still looking behind them to make sure no one was there, and then reached gently towards her.

"I don't know what's going on. I just want to get out of here and call the police. Come on. It's just a few blocks to Monroe."

Jill got a hold of herself, and followed after his lead, and thought *This is the worst dentist appointment. EVER.*

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"Did you get a good look at the gunman?"

"He was big, maybe six-five, six-six. He was wearing all black. I didn't see his face."

The detective eyed her warily.

"You didn't recognize him at all?"

"No. I'd never even been in there before."

"But when you saw him, you blocked the door?"

"Yes."

"With..." the detective looked down at his notebook, "...a palm tree."

Jill fidgeted in her seat. "Yeah. One of the fake ones people have in their offices."

"Hrm."

She looked at him. He was thinking she was either crazy or lying. It was not horribly surprising - she was not sure she believed herself - but it irritated her, nonetheless.

"And Doctor Henry Denby is your dentist."

"Yes."

"Friend of yours?"

"No," she replied, "I told you, I'd never been there before today."

"How did you choose him as a dentist? Friend? Co-worker?"

"I called one of those numbers that recommends a local dentist to you."

He flipped through his book. "And what about the woman you say was killed, Martha? Did you know her?"

"No." Jill paused. "Did she have any family?"

"We're looking into the background, Miss Gerardi."

Jill sat back in her chair solemnly.

"How did you get out of the building?"

"We ran to the back of the office and Dr. Denby broke the window. We ran around to the back. After Martha got shot, we went over the wall to Monroe. And called -"

The door to the room opened, and the other detective, the one that had taken Henry in for questioning, gestured to her detective. He rose, and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Jill looked at the wall. Shortly after they'd reached Monroe, they'd found an open liquor store and called the police. It was straight to the police station after that, where they were promptly separated for questioning. Despite the fact that they were safe from the gunman in the police station, Jill could not shake the nagging, nervous feeling in her belly. Like something bad was still going to happen. Like whatever was going wrong was not quite done going wrong yet. She actually longed for the morning to go backwards, for the moment of waking to come again so she could redo it all and decide to skip the dentist's appointment after all. She might be sitting at her computer even now, writing a brilliantly scathing email to the jackass who had stood her up. Or, maybe she would have gone shopping to help lift her spirits. Or, maybe even cozied up in bed with a nice, soothing drink and a good book.

But she hadn't. She'd kept the appointment instead. And goddamnit, look what had happened.

The door reopened, and her detective, who had been impatient with her all through the questioning, looked downright furious.

"What do you think this is, some kind of game?"

Jill stared, startled. "Wh - what?"

"Get up, right now. You're getting out here before I book you for obstruction!"

"Obstruction! What do you mean?"

He snarled at her, "I mean, my patrolmen were just out there and they didn't see anything. No body. No blood. No broken glass. Not even a single bullet casing. Even your fuckin' palm tree is upright and waving howdy do!"

Saying so, he came around towards where she was frozen to the spot, and wrenched her towards the door. "I don't even want to know why you would make up something like that. Maybe you're a pair of crazies lookin' to get a rise, I don't care. Just get the hell out of here before I fuckin' make you regret it."

Jill pulled free of his grasp once they had emerged from the room, and shot an angry, bewildered look towards him. "What about Martha? Where do you think she is?"

"You could have made her up for all I know, now get the hell out of here!"

She was promptly booted outside, where she found Henry waiting, frowning.

"Did they say the same thing to you?" she asked, "Did they tell you it didn't happen?!"

"Yeah, they did," he replied, nodding. Then, "I called a cab already. It should be here in just a little while."

Jill slumped against the rail. "I can't believe this is happening. It just isn't possible that they can't find anything."

Henry was silent beside her.

She sighed, and muttered. "My teeth hurt."

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Henry was thinking hard on the way back to the office. So hard, that he had forgotten to be frightened of Jill, who was sitting very close to him in the back of the cab. It was preposterous that they had both imagined it all - Martha was no figment of anyone's imagination, certainly. Which meant that someone had gone in while they were running from the gunman and fixed everything - the glass, the tree. Even the body. That much he could wrap his mind around.

But *why*?

They kept no significant amounts of cash in the office. He didn't know of any dentist office that did - and it was clearly a dentist's office from the outside. Silly teeth pictures in the window and everything.

But it hadn't seemed like the gunman was after money. None of them had gotten good looks at him, and yet he had chased them out behind the building. It was only after Martha died and then ran over the wall that he'd disappeared - could he have been after Martha? What for?

Henry did not know much about Martha's personal life (she had always been rather tight-lipped about it), but what he did know did not seem worthy of this. She'd been a widower, lived by herself, had a brother out somewhere in another state, took the bus to work.

He shook his head. Martha as a target was highly unlikely. *Besides, he reasoned, if the gunman had brought a car, he couldn't very well have left it out front to chase after us. Except - what if he hadn't had a car?*

The cab driver took a sharp turn, throwing Jill against him. She seemed to be caught up in her own thoughts, but extricated herself gracefully from him. The physical reminder of her made him slightly giddy, and he forced his thoughts back to the situation at hand.

And what about her, then? He knew very little about her, obviously. She had rammed the door with the palm tree right after the appearance of the gunman - which was a little strange - but he was prepared to believe it had been instinct on her part, rather than any sort of outright lie. She'd also saved his live in the action, something he could hardly disavow. No, he decided. Whatever was going on, she had nothing to do with it.

That only left him. Henry racked his brain to think of anyone that might want to kill him. Predictably, he couldn't think of a single soul who would want to do him that much harm. He had no enemies to speak of. He didn't have any money worth the effort of murdering him for. No shady debts (well, no debts at all, really), no anything! Henry was, self-admittedly, a straight arrow. Who would want to kill a straight arrow?

And yet, even as he turned it over in his mind, he had a feeling it was not just a random attack. Now, out of the police station, he felt that vague hunted feeling again, like just around the corner another gunman was waiting to mow them down.

The cab slowed, and let them out, and they both turned in unison to look at the dentist's office.

It was just as the police had told them. Not a single thing looked out of place. The plant was upright, sitting prettily in the corner as it had been before Jill's wild lunge at the front door. The floor was spotless. None of the glass was broken. The television was off, lights were off. It looked just like it had this morning when he had arrived.

Sans Martha.

Not for the first time that morning, Henry felt a deep pang of sorrow. She had never made herself terribly accessible, friendly-wise, but she'd been good at her job, and she'd given him cookies last Christmas when he was all alone and new to the city. He had been shaken when she'd been shot, but there had been no time to mourn. Now that there was time he realized with a jolt of anger that there was no body. There was no Martha.

"The police said they didn't find Martha's body," he said suddenly.

Jill looked at him nervously, "You want to go look at that alley, don't you? What if it's not safe? What if he's still there?"

He turned to answer her, and could see that she, too, shared the hunted feeling. He knew he would have to figure this out, if only for the sake of justice, but seeing her standing there, eyes so uncertain and fearful -

"You don't have to look, " he replied, "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to go home."

Her mouth opened, and then shut. She seemed to be battling with herself. It was only a few moments of silence, but in the end, she shook her head and said, "No. I'll go with you. I couldn't handle going home and thinking I was crazy. And you're right - we can't just...leave her there."

There was nothing there. Despite his logical deduction in the cab, he was utterly flabbergasted by the emptiness behind the alley. There was no blood. There was nothing. He walked the length of the fence, and could find no trace of his late receptionist. The window he'd broken was whole as well.

Next to him, Jill stared at the glass and shook her head, frowning fiercely. "This doesn't make any sense! Why would anyone go to all this trouble?"

"I don't know. I've been through it in my head, and I can't figure it out either. Believe me, this isn't something that happens every day around here."

"How about your office?" she asked, "Should we go in there and look around?"

Henry tugged ineffectively at the door a couple times and let go. It was locked.

"I left my keys in the office when we ran out," he told her.

"Do you have spares at home? I can take you."

He stared at her. "That's good of you."

She smiled, a little. "'Good of me'? It's no problem. I'd like to know what the hell is going on, too."

### Chapter 3: The Other Missing Person

Delphi made a savage dive for her purse and stormed towards the front door.

"Where are you going?" Ed called, following her towards the hall.

She scooped up her coat and fumbled with wrapping it around her body. "I told you: I quit!"

Ed laughed, holding out his arms, "Why? Because of the snake? C'mon, Delphi, that was - "

She rounded on him and pointed an angry, accusing finger at him. "Listen to me, Ed. Do you know how many times in the last three years I've almost died because of you? *DO YOU!?* Well no more, pal! I'm leaving! I'm done!"

Delphi wheeled back around, muttering profanities under her breath.

"I always knew you were too thin-skinned for this kind of work."

Delphi felt the fine hairs up and down her back stand on end, like a million tiny little quills standing at attention. "Do you want to repeat that?"

He was smirking at her when she turned around, arms folded across his chest. "I'm not repeating anything. You heard me."

"You. Are an asshole!"

"And you are a wussy, thin-skinned little brat. Go on and go."

"Brat? After the shit that I've had to put up with from you?" She put her hands on her hips, dug in her heels. "I've dug through dumpsters for you, bribed greasy construction guys, sat outside houses overnight! Not to mention this wasn't the first time I've almost been bitten by a snake on account of you!"

"You were never in any real danger," he said soothingly, "I wouldn't have let it bite you."

"Bull-fucking-shit! You were just as scared as I was!" She covered her face with her hands and groaned angrily, "You know, you're a piece of work. You really are. I just want to *kill* you, and then slice up your face into a million tiny strips of flesh and dance on it!"

The phone rang. Delphi whipped it up with her hand. "Edward Denby's office."

Ed grinned at her. While he was watching, her face drained of anger. She put down her purse and crossed her arms, "Uh-huh. Yes, he's here. Just a moment please."

She put the phone on hold and held it out to him. "It's a job."

"Are you still employed here?"

She scowled, flicked her wrist dismissively, and said, "Whatever, you ass. Take the phone."

Ed grinned, took the receiver, and walked back over to his desk, settling down to take the details of the job. Delphi sighed, still frowning, and sat down in hers. Her eyes followed him as he worked, suddenly serious and mundane again.

She couldn't believe it was three whole years ago that she'd strolled through the door and asked for a job. That day, she'd come home after being laid off and found her almost-fiancé in bed with one of their neighbors. Delphi, never one to back down from a confrontation (with human, non-snake creatures, of course), had yanked the covers off her bastard boyfriend and punched him right in the crotch. The neighbor fled, while he howled, and Delphi had calmly packed a single bag, and left everything else behind. She only started to cry once she'd got in the car, and as a result, rear-ended Ed on the off ramp of the freeway.

The pivotal moments in her life were staring at her a little hard in the face today. She snapped herself out of her thoughts and got to work on the accounts.

A few minutes later, Ed had hung up the phone.

"What is it?"

"A guy named Thomas Moore - says his wife is missing."

She frowned, looking up. "Really? Why aren't the police handling it?"

"They don't think it's a valid missing persons case."

"Why not?"

"There's no sign of struggle, and apparently, she's gone 'missing' before. He doesn't think it's the same thing this time. Says they've not been having troubles, everything's going good at work for her."

Ed stood, "His house is on Vincent. I'll drive."

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Ed usually let Delphi do the talking when they first met a client in person. They'd developed a nice little routine in the three years she'd been working for him. Despite her

runaway temper in the privacy of their office, she usually managed to put people at ease immediately. Men, of course, took to Delphi like crazy. She wasn't beneath using her ample charms to get information out of them either. Delphi was no fool - she was always dressed modestly for females, but managed to always show just enough curve to give guys runs for their money. To his credit, Ed had never once asked her to stack the cards one way or the other. She just knew. She had a dead on talent with people.

Thomas Moore was no different. Despite being distraught over the disappearance of his wife, he still managed to ogle Delphi significantly when she walked through the door. She gave him a sympathetic smile, and began to question him about her whereabouts while Ed went to the bedroom to check out the missing woman's things.

The first thing he noticed was that her side of the room was very neat. Yes, they had sides, and yes, hers was very neat. Nothing seemed out of place, and not even a tiny bit of it was dusty. Some of his things, by comparison, seemed to have been sitting there for ages, with a corresponding not-so-thin layer of dust. He stored it in his memory.

The next thing he noticed was that there were flowers. *Everywhere*. Flowers on the covers, flowers on the table, flowers on every single possible surface of things that she owned, used, or even, it appeared, breathed around at some point. He winced. What a nightmare. The guy must be a little glad to be rid of her, surely...

It was then that his own strangeness started to happen. He was walking towards the bathroom in the master bedroom when he saw something move out of the corner of his eye.

Ed was quick to pull out his gun, whirling around. All was still around him, but he remained alert. His ears perked up, and he heard Delphi's smooth tones downstairs, uninterrupted, unhurried. Good. Whatever had happened had not happened to them. He cautiously edged around the room. It was still early enough in the day so that the room was flooded with light, but crossing the window, Ed suddenly felt his primordial life-preserving instincts kick in, pouring extra blood into the capillaries of his ears, enabling him to hear the tiny click from outside the window.

He ducked, quickly, seconds before the gunshots went off, sending shreds of flowers and glass flying everywhere. Ed grabbed the lily-shaped handle of a looking glass (he hadn't realized anyone still used those) and crawled across the floor, towards the billowing rose-covered window treatment, trying to inch his way up toward the window to look out when another round of gunfire socked the bedroom. He could smell the overpowering scent of perfume let loose to suffocate the room from a broken bottle, and once again cursed the missing woman for her ridiculous flower proclivities.

The shooting abated once again. It was silent out in the living room for a moment, and then a sharp whistle - Delphi's signal that she and Moore were alright.

Ed slowly raised the arm with the mirror on it, and put the slightest tilt to it, searching what little part of the yard outside for the gunman. It would be amazing if he found the guy - nobody was stupid enough to stand on someone's front lawn and empty a couple of rounds into a house without taking off, especially on a Saturday afternoon when most everyone would be at home. A few more slow moments on the ground, and he confirmed it enough to be satisfied the shooter was still not there.

Slinking low, Ed headed out towards the living room. Delphi and Moore were crouched low by the couch, Delphi's hand on her own handgun. She lowered it as Ed came into view. Moore looked petrified, and had taken the chance to squeeze in as close as he could next to Delphi.

Ed joined them, and quickly put in a call in to the police. Shutting his cell phone, he put his head against the couch and sighed.

"Well? Are we going to make a run for it?" Moore asked, his voice tense.

"No. We're going to just sit here and wait for the police to show up." Ed answered. "Get settled in."

"What? What if - what if he comes back? You know, it isn't normal around here! I'm not used to so many guns..."

Ed was not terribly surprised by this admission, having observed several dozens of things in the living room also awash with flowers.

"The chances are slim that he'll keep forcing his way in, unless he's very stupid," Delphi explained. "We can handle him if he does, but best to let the police come and secure the area. It's safer, less messy that way."

She was speaking slowly. Ed could she had also pegged the guy. Moore nodded, and curled up into himself further, after shooting a wistful glance at the Delphi's magnificent, slightly heaving chest. "You don't think this has something to do with Amy being missing, do you?"

"Do you have reason to believe someone wants to kill you?"

"Me?" he squeaked, "No, no! I don't know anything!"

He collapsed into babbling sobs. Delphi gave Ed a weary look over Moore's head.

"Mr. Moore, is there something else you forgot to tell me over the phone?" Ed asked, after letting his tears subside. Good god. Maybe it hadn't been the wife's side of the room that had been neat, after all.

"She'd been getting strange calls," he confessed, his voice shaking, "In the middle of the night, at dinnertime. All sorts of weird times. At first I didn't say anything - she likes her privacy and her space, you know - but after awhile I started to suspect something was going on, so I confronted her about it. She got very angry - scared too, but she wouldn't tell me what it was about. She just told me it was going to stop soon, and not to worry about it. I...I didn't believe her. She's had some drug history in the past, with her ex-husband, so I thought she might have been using, or owed him money, or something - so I got mad and left. And when I returned two nights ago, she wasn't here. She didn't come home yesterday either, like I told you." He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "I didn't want the police to think it was drugs. I didn't want her in trouble."

He looked at Delphi plaintively, asking for clemency. "I didn't want you to think she was bad, into drugs again. I didn't think they would come here..."

Ed could see Delphi's temper was starting to churn inside of her.

"The police are going to be here in a little while. You're going to have to tell them what you know. We can still look for her, but they're going to know what you think this is about."

Moore sobbed into his hands. "Oh, god. Oh, god. She's gone for good. She's gone, that's why they're looking for her."

Ed had to admit it didn't look good for her return if drug runner gunmen were after her.

Somewhere far away, but growing closer, Ed heard the sounds of sirens. He sighed again, and saw Delphi attempting to lock eyes with him again. She pointed to Moore, sobbing still between them.

"We're still getting paid, aren't we?" she whispered to him.

Ed sighed. It didn't look good for that, either.

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After giving their statements to the police, Ed and Delphi departed. Thomas Moore was a wreck by the time the police had gotten there, barely coherent except to give Delphi's breasts one last parting glance. Ed could tell it annoyed her this time, especially since she knew she probably wouldn't be getting paid for the ogling.

She slammed the door when she climbed into the car. "Son of a bitch."

"At least we didn't waste a lot of time on him."

"That slimy little bastard," she seethed, "He practically hit on me while you were in the bedroom!"

"You ought to know, Delphi, that some men do not behave as honorably towards women as, say, *I* do."

She snorted, shifting in her seat as he started the car. A few minutes later, "A shooting spree seems like a bad idea on a weekend in the middle of the day."

"Yeah."

"If I were someone Amy owed money to, I wouldn't collect it in such a stupid way. Of course, I'm not stupid, or a drug dealer."

"No, you aren't."

"Still..." She tapped her chin with her finger. "Still, it's weird, in a semi-nice neighborhood like that. Someone must have seen something, huh?"

"Odds are good," he agreed.

More tapping. "*Hrm.*"

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It was dark before she finally suggested it, and he'd been waiting for it all afternoon.

"I think we should go back and ask around."

Ed didn't look up from the report he was writing to another client. "To what end?"

"To the end of finding out what happened to her! You even said it was a good chance someone saw the gunman."

"And if they did, what of it? Do you know how many good reasons there are not to go chasing after drug hit men?"

"What if that Moore asshole did it? And he's just trying to throw the police off his trail by hiring us?"

"You're suggesting that he colluded with the gunman to make it seem like a drug hit."

Silence from her side of the office.

"Delphi, we're not going back there. You're not going to find anything. Let the police handle it."

More silence. Then, foreboding silence. Against his better judgment, he looked up. She had her hands on her hips and her lips screwed up in a disagreeable, tight little frown.

"You know, you *suck* as a detective."

He opened his mouth, and she cut him off abruptly. "Where is your sense of justice? Where is your professional curiosity? Don't you go to bed at night and just *weep* for all the good you could have done!? Do you always come up this limp!?"

Ed had been subject to her irrational outbursts before. It never ceased to amaze him, this inexplicable volatility in feminine nature.

"You're being ludicrous."

Eyes flashing, comely curves undulating, she took a step towards him, and sneered, "Am I? *Or are you just too thin-skinned for this type of work?!*"

Ah, yes: they also never forgot a goddamned thing anyone said.

"Delphi - "

"Well, if you don't want to go, fine. Fine. It's 5:00 anyway."

She gathered her things, face stuck in a mask of resolute irrationality. He knew what she was planning to do. The first tendrils of irritation started creeping up inside him. Goddamn it.

He reached out to grab her as she was walking past.

"Alright, you lunatic, alright. Give me a second, and we'll go back."

As he turned off the lights and grabbed his wallet, keys, and holster, he wondered if it were possible that she'd stored up that whole argument from the moment he'd called her thin-skinned that morning, wondered if a human being could be so fixated on anything that it would stew for hours on end, just for the opportunity to strike. He stepped out into the hall, caught sight of her - the velvety red hair glinting faintly in the dim hall light, the clear, creamy white skin of her brow, and those deep, dark green eyes, positively smoldering in triumph over him - and decided that it was indeed possible for such a human being to be so fixated.

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Delphi heard Ed hang up with his contact and looked over at him expectantly. "Well?"

"He says nobody was taken in this afternoon in regards to the shooting here. Moore's still out and about in the world."

Delphi frowned, and looked at the dark house in front of them, Moore's car parked right in the driveway. It was nearly 8:00. They'd been there nearly three hours and not seen a single sign of life from within the house.

"He must be in there then."

Ed corrected her. "Or, he could have gotten a ride from someone else somewhere."

She sat up, "That means it's possible that there's no one home, and we can go in there and check it out."

There was silence from the other side of the car.

"What? Like we haven't done it before!"

"I'm just sitting here getting accustomed to how dark it's going to be inside my prison cell at night."

"Shut up, Ed. Are you coming, or are you going to be a pussy?"

"Jesus, could I stop you if I tried?"

Delphi heard him, but was already busy slipping noiselessly out of her door. The soft sound of shifting to her left, and she knew Ed was following.

The back door was not ajar, but Delphi fixed that with a neat yet illegal trick she had learned somewhere in her past. She could practically hear Ed groaning behind her - he really seemed to hate when she broke into houses.

It was pitch black inside. Ed tapped her on the shoulder and pointed to the microwave. It took her a moment to realize he was pointing to the dark time panel. She ran her eyes over several other appliances and realized that they, too, were dead.

It gave Delphi the chills all of a sudden. She knew the lights on the street were working, she knew the neighbor's lights were working - the sounds of some prime-time dance show had been leaking out into the street for the last half hour - so that meant if Moore had fallen asleep, he had also cut his power before doing it.

For the first time that night, Delphi wondered if she had been a tad brash in forcing their return. She did not like the idea of wandering around someone's house in the dark, when someone had already obviously made sure it would remain dark for some other reason.

She was feeling unsure about her job again.

In the dark, she felt a hand reach out and fall on her wrist. It was cold, and damp. She had never known Ed to be *that* much of a coward and was about to turn around and tell him to let her go when another hand - a warm one - grabbed her other hand.

*Oh, Jesus, not again, please I already had snakes this morning!*

Something moaned next to her, on the side of the cold and damp hand.

Delphi bit down on her lip, hard, to keep herself from screaming, but jerked violently, shoving everything at once, and grabbing for the gun at her hip.

"Something fucking touched me!" she hissed.

Ed moved towards her, and she heard the click of his flashlight turning on.

On the floor in front of them, the eviscerated body of Thomas Moore lay in a growing pool of its own blood. Delphi put a hand over her mouth, and swallowed to keep the vomit from coming up.

"Well," Ed breathed, "*Shit.*"

## Chapter 4: Women Are Trouble

Someone had been in Henry Denby's apartment.

*A woman.*

He could smell the faintest touch of perfume as soon as he stepped across the threshold, and it was a bad, bad sign.

Jill entered behind him, seemingly unaware of the smell. Of course, she wouldn't know what was normal and not. She could not know that a woman's perfume in a place that had not seen a woman in nearly a year was an unacceptable anomaly, given their morning's activities.

He held out his arm, and turned to her. The look on his face must have alerted her to the fact something was wrong, because she shrank an inch in front of him, instinctively balling herself up for flight.

"What? What is it?"

"Someone's been in here."

"How can you tell?" she asked, her eyes widening.

"I can smell perfume," he said, "I live alone. Nobody else has the key."

"Let's get out of here," she said quickly, "Like right now."

"I live here," he said, more calmly than he felt, "The keys are here. If someone's in here, I want to know it. Look, you go downstairs - "

She shook her head vigorously. "No. Let's get out of here."

"No," he said, "We'll just take it easy, room by room."

"Oh, fuck," she whimpered, "Fine, fine. Do you have anything we can use as a weapon?"

Henry kept things pretty sparse in the apartment, so there was not much. He rummaged quickly in the closet by the door and finally yanked something out of the back of it.

She stared at it wildly as he handed it to her. "Are you kidding? Is this - is this a badminton racquet?"

"I used to play," he replied, shrugging.

They moved slowly through the kitchen to the rear part of the apartment. He never realized how unnerving the silence could be in his apartment. Once or twice, Jill fell against him as he halted, and her startled breath seemed to echo on for minutes. It continued on this way for what seemed like an eternity, until the only room left unchecked was his bedroom. The keys lay that way. The smell, too, had been beckoning from that direction, but Henry had been reluctant to leave any room unsearched to his back when he entered the final chamber.

Henry pushed open the door with the tip of his racquet, and the smell was sudden and overpowering, at once the cloying floral scent of rank perfume, and the other - and more visceral - the smell of something sweet, and dead.

Jill froze behind him. Henry hesitated only a moment, and then entered, slowly, glancing every way, checking every corner. He'd left his closet door open that morning. It was shut now.

"The closet," he said softly. If Jill heard him, she did not indicate it. He touched her on the shoulder and indicated that she stay where she was. She nodded to this direction weakly, but tightened her grip on her racquet and held it up for easy swinging.

He moved to the other side of the room, keeping safe distance from himself and closet, and checked the bathroom. There was nothing he could see out of the ordinary. From where he stood, he moved slightly, and could see nothing hidden in the deeper parts of the bathroom. When he was satisfied, he moved back to where she was, and moved his lips close to her ear.

"I'm going to open it. If someone comes out, I'm going to swing. If you see a gun - swing, hard."

She stared at him, trembling slightly, but nodding assent.

Henry crept towards the door. A thousand thoughts raced through his mind, not the least of which was what sort of odds a badminton racquet held against the velocity of a bullet. No matter how he played it over in his head, it was always no good for him.

Finally, he was at the edge of the door. He thought about how long it would take for the gunman (or woman?) to pull the trigger once he opened the door. How long it would take for a knife to cut through his arm.

*Just do it, Henry. Faster is better.*

Not thinking any longer, Henry grabbed the edge of the closet, and shoved. The door glided down the rails, the loudest noise that either of them had ever heard, and something came tumbling out of it onto the floor. Henry gritted his teeth and stared at it, expecting

bullets to go flying every which way (especially up at him), his heart hammering in his chest, all senses supernaturally enhanced.

It was one of his coats. It had weighed down part of the hanger, and the door opening had caused it to fall to the ground.

He stared at it, doubled up from the tension, and exhaled a long, ragged breath. He looked up at Jill above him, holding the racquet in preparation for deadly assault.

They started to laugh. Jill first, then Henry - a choked, relieved sort of hysterics, relaxing the tenseness in their muscles, a brief reprieve from the day's many troubles.

It was not until Henry looked up from this laughter, and his eyes fell on the bed, did he realize how strangely misshapen the sheets seemed to be, curved inwards on themselves on the bed.

He froze where he was, quickly moving back through the morning - he'd gotten out of bed and just tossed the covers aside. They should be turned inside out, not curved underneath, right side up.

Something was tucked in under the covers.

His laughter stopped abruptly.

The last notes of Jill's laugh fell on his ears, an angry tin mockery of what laughter had been moments before. It was only a moment - just the one moment - before she realized what was going on that her voice died down as well. She took steps behind him, and stayed close to him as he moved slowly towards the bed.

He was certain now that what they had to fear inside the apartment was not a live gunman, but whatever lay dead under the blanket in front of him. The racquet dropped to his side. He raised his hand, and pulled the comforter down, and away from what lay beneath it.

Jill gasped, grabbed hold of his arm.

Martha's body lay on Henry's bed, the congealed blood from her wound winding a crimson path on the sheets underneath.

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Henry drew back, sucking in air through his teeth. Martha's corpse was not yet fully decomposing, but the skin had grown unnaturally pale. He imagined the blood had begun to pool in her back.

It was not the first time Henry had seen a dead body. As a child, he had been witness to both the death of his mother, and then later, almost an adult, that of his father. He remembered well how careless the orchestrations of death sometimes were, how merciless they were to the living. It filled him with an impotent rage for all the injustices in the world, how so many of them went unavenged.

Lowering the racquet onto the bottom of the bed, Henry reached up and gently closed Martha's wide-open eyes.

The movement shifted the body every so slightly. Something small came unlodged from under her body, drifting slowly to the ground.

Jill moved forward and picked it up.

"What is it?"

Her brow furrowed. "I can't quite make it out. There are some numbers, and then something else is scratched there - what's that say?"

She held it out to him to look at. He took it from her hand.

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He squinted at it, and then shook his head. "I don't know."

"Does it belong to Martha?"

Henry took another look at the paper to examine the writing, and shook his head, "No, that isn't her writing. And look - "

He gestured towards her form on the bed. "She isn't wearing anything with pockets. Whoever moved her left this on her."

Staring at the piece of paper in her hand, he had the feeling he'd seen something similar to what was written on the paper before. That morning, in fact. While he was staring at the wall, Martha had come in and said something to him. He wracked his brain, frowning. She'd said something about a message. Something about a message.

*And a desk. Had she left something on his desk?*

*And then Under the coffee cup. I put it under the folder.*

Jill was giving him questioning look. "What do we do?"

"I think - "

Something in the front room clattered to the ground.

They both froze. For a moment there was silence, and Henry was almost tempted to believe that it had been the wind (*impossible, windows are closed*), or something other accident of gravity that had made the noise, but in a moment his hopes were shattered. A very clear footstep wrang out on the hard wood floor. A few more. Not yet close.

They had to move fast. Henry's mind whizzed. As quietly as he could, Henry moved to the other side of the room where his desk was, and slid one of the drawers open. Terribly aware that every millisecond he wasted meant they were possibly that much closer to facing down a very persistent gunman with only badminton racquets, Henry fumbled silently for the spare keys to his office.

"What are you doing?" Jill hissed at his side, "Let's just get out of here!"

"We need the keys," he replied quickly, "I think there's something back at the office."

"Hurry!" she urged, turning towards the doorway, "Please!"

His fingers seized on the metal, and he clutched the grip of keys firmly in his hand to keep them from jangling. She'd already headed towards his bedroom window and was fumbling with the screen when he turned. She was trying to be careful, but it was no use. He could hear the footsteps in the front of the house pause, and then pick up speed, heading right their way.

For the second time that day, Henry Denby found himself taking a flying leap out of a smashed window.

They ran like mad for Jill's car, wisely parked a few houses down, partially obscured by unlawfully overgrown bushes. As she pushed down the gas in the car, Henry looked out the window towards his home. A long blonde ponytail whipped away from view as they drove by, and the silhouette of a very petite woman appeared in the frame of the doorway before disappearing the next second.

He sat back in his seat. All his years of being afraid of women were paying off and it didn't comfort him one bit.

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Sitting in the driver's seat of her car in what might very well be a deadly high-speed pursuit, Jill thought about all the things she had always taken for granted in the crates and crates of mystery books she read. The beleaguered heroine, running from deadly assailants with a dashing stranger, the man she would fall in love with while battling for their lives, against the clock, while the fate of the world hung in the balance...!

*What a crock of shit.*

None of them knew what the hell they were talking about, because what had happened to her today? *Was fuckin' scary.* It was not romantic. It was not fun. It was not even thrilling. She just wanted to go home and crawl between the covers and pretend this had never happened, goddamnit. She probably could not do that, though. Henry had told her about the female (gunman?) he'd seen from the car window as they'd passed it. The world was suddenly full of gunpeople. There was probably a gunman at her apartment right now. And another around the corner from her apartment, for good measure.

Obviously, whoever was writing *this* story had chosen the wrong girl to be the heroine.

*Do you hear me? Get me out of this bullshit, goddamnit! I quit! I quit!*

She half-sighed, half-whimpered as they sped break-neck down the street, running a very *late* yellow light -

The tray beneath the car radio began to rattle. She started at the noise, and nearly dove for cover before she realized it was her phone clamoring from attention in the crevice where she'd thrown it after plugging it into the car adapter.

She darted a glance towards it, reluctant to answer. Real life - or at least, the pseudo-real life that she had had prior to the morning's events - had been shamefully negligent of her all day, and it seemed profane that it should rear its head now, when she was running for her life.

Or worse yet, when she picked up the phone, it would be the low, gravelly voice of the gunman (*Because that's how all gunmen sound, right? GODDAMN BOOKS!*), uttering frightful threats right in her ear. He would tell her there was a bomb on the car set to detonate if she went below 50 miles per hour. Or that he had her entire family and her cat rounded up and would execute them one by one if she didn't comply with his wishes. Or maybe he had a lethal biological agent ready to let loose on -

*Get a grip, Jill!*

She pulled the phone out and flipped it open. Her Pseudo-Real Life came back and slapped her right in the face. And it was more lethal than a gunman. More lethal, by like twenty thousand times.

"Janet Lessard told me you broke up with her Gregory last night. After all the trouble we went to to get you two together, honestly, Jill, I don't know what I'm going to do - "

*Gee whiz, ma, I can't talk right now, I'm too busy being chased by a psycho with a gun!*

"Mom, listen, please. We're being chased by someone. Someone's been killed, and the police don't believe us."

There was a silence on the other line. Jill pulled the phone away from her ear. Full bars, still connected.

"Mom! Are you still there?"

"-lian Elizabeth Gerardi, I do NOT appreciate you throwing that twisted sense of humor of yours into my face when I'm only trying to help you."

"What? NO! Mother, I - " Jill cried, exasperated. Was this really happening?

"HONESTLY, Jill. You're not getting any younger, and soon men - good, solid, nice young men like Gregory won't be available and you'll end up an old maid, just like your *Aunt Jane*."

Jill chomped loudly into the speaker. "MOM I'M NOT KIDDING I NEED YOUR HELP WILL YOU PLEASE LISTEN TO ME!"

"*JILL*. WHO DO YOU THINK YOU'RE TALKING TO WITH THAT VOICE!"

It was no contest. Her mother had decades of practice getting her way. The conversation was both maddening and ludicrous at the same time. Jill wanted to slam her head into the steering wheel.

"I have to go, Mom!"

"Very well, dear, you just think about what I said about Gregory though, won't you? Have a nice day, darling."

*Click.*

She gave a frustrated cry of anger and threw the phone at the dashboard. It bounced off onto the floor of the passenger side.

It came flooding out of her in a mighty roar, punctuated with her hand chopping the steering wheel for emphasis. "I CAN'T (chop!) BELIEVE (chop!) WE'RE BEING CHASED (chop!) BY SOMEONE WITH A GUN (chop, chop!) AND I'M STILL GETTING NAGGED BY MY MOTHER (chop!) ABOUT MY LOVE LIFE! (chop!) WHERE DOES IT STOP!?! (chop, chop, chop, chop!)"

Heaving, she saw a blur in the corner of her eye: Henry picking up the phone and gently placing it back in the crevice of her dashboard. Then, he sat there, silent. Unmoving. And she remembered that they were basically strangers, and it might not have been appropriate, what she just did. But then who gave a shit about etiquette when running from killers? Did he really care about that? Why was he being so quiet!?

Highly irritated (on top of already being on edge for almost dying twice before 3:00 PM)  
"What the hell are we going back to the office for, anyway? Shouldn't we call the police?"

She turned to look at him.

*Did he actually just cringe away from me?*

"I - I think Martha might have left something on my desk. I think I've seen something like what was on the note - before."

"And why is that more important than going to the police?"

He shifted in the seat to face her, and held up his hands, as if warding off an attack. "I realize this may be an odd time to bring it up, but I think there's something very strange going on here. Look at this: a gunman walks into a dentist's office - "

In spite of the situation, Jill chortled. Henry stopped abruptly, and gave her a quizzical glance.

"You know - like the joke?"

Henry shook his head slowly, "I don't ge - "

"Don't you have jokes in dental school?" she asked pettishly.

He gave her a weird look, and continued. "The gunman *enters* a dentist's office. He came dressed in black with a gun - ostensibly prepared to do harm. But why? What's in a dentist's office that he could want? We don't have money there to - "

It came to her in a flash. "Dental records."

He stopped again, mid-sentence. "What?"

"Dental records. Right?" They pulled up on a red light and Jill, excited, turned towards him, anger and annoyance forgotten. "They obviously have no qualms about killing people. Maybe they've killed one of your patients and they're trying to erase all record of them so they can't be identified!"

He fell back in his seat, thoughtful. "Hmm."

"But," she continued, "Why go to all the trouble? What about DNA tests? They can't possibly still have bodies that are only identifiable by dental records. That's straight out of a mob movie, right? Or what do you know?"

"Well, they can work in tandem. Say a body is too far decomposed, or burnt, or otherwise traumatized to take DNA from the soft tissue. DNA can still be taken from teeth, which are far more likely to be able to withstand heavy trauma than soft tissue. It's actually an excellent place to extract DNA."

Jill wrinkled her brow. "But, if you're going to do a DNA analysis, why do you need dental records at all? I mean, why not just pull it? The teeth aren't any more easily identifiable than the DNA, are they?"

"No. It's a less expensive process, but given what we know about the people who are doing this, it does not seem expense is a concern."

They sat in silence for a moment. Jill made a turn. They were nearly back at the office.

He shook his head. "I don't know. It doesn't make sense. Why did they bother sending a gunman? They've covered up a murder in broad daylight, so they're obviously very organized - why not just steal the information? It'd be a long time before we discovered it was gone, and at that point, we wouldn't even suspect theft. Why all this fanfare? No, it's something else. I just can't figure out what."

He was absolutely right. It didn't add up. What could they gain from it? She didn't know. She wasn't even sure she wanted to find out.

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Jill called the police from her cell phone while Henry went to look for the message. He opened the door to his office, and found everything just as it was when he arrived earlier in the morning. All the papers that had gone flying from his desk in their rush to escape had been replaced. It was an eerie sight, as if they'd never been there at all.

He moved over towards the stacks of paper on his desk and quickly rifled through them. They'd been gone through - he could tell from the neat way everything was ordered (exceeding neatness certainly not one of his defining characteristics). His hopes of finding the message were dwindling when he opened one of the files near the bottom, and found his note, coffee stained still, jammed haphazardly between the pages of another file.

It was just a request for a call back from one of the younger colleagues he'd been sending business to.

6:35 PM, Friday November 8, 2007

Dr. Christopher Shackelford

Message: Please call back ASAP re: Preston referral. Will call your cell phone.

He pulled out the note they'd found on Martha's body, and squinted hard at it.

"It could be Shackleford," he murmured. "But what does that mean? It's not Martha's handwriting. Why would they have Chris' name?"

From behind him, Jill replied, "Dr. Denby."

He turned. She was standing in the doorway, leaning against it with a weary look on her face. It felt strange to have her refer to him that way, although, for all intents and purposes, they had barely met.

"The police are on their way to your apartment. You and I are supposed to stay put," she approached him. "What've you got there?"

"It was just a message from one of my classmates from dental school. I think his name could be on the note we found on Martha's body."

She peered at the notes. "Hrm. They look the same. But that doesn't make sense. Why would his name be on Martha's body?"

Henry sunk into his chair, and sighed. Jill took the notes, and took a seat across the way from him.

"Did the police believe you?"

Jill looked up. "I don't think they've put this call together with the other call. Yet."

Henry didn't want to think about what would happen if Martha's body disappeared again. He shut his eyes and put his head back against his chair. Chris Shackleford. He couldn't imagine Chris getting into any trouble - at least, nothing amounting to this. He was one of the mellowest people Henry knew. And Preston, Preston...he couldn't remember any patient with that name. They must be wrong. It couldn't be Shackleford written on that note.

He was tired. It was mid-afternoon and he'd felt like they'd been running from this thing for ages. Now that the police were (possibly) on the job...

"I don't know if I'm supposed to go back to normal life now or not," he confessed quietly. "I feel like I'm going to get shot any minute."

"Me too," Jill nodded. And then, "I didn't have a chance to thank you for saving my life the few times you've done it today. Thanks."

"I think we're even. If you hadn't rammed my front door with the palm tree, we might have been killed before we had a chance to run at all."

She smiled at him, and Henry felt an upsurge of the familiar weakness in his stomach from gazing at her. It was not quite the same feeling he'd had that morning. But then again, he'd not had any reason to think she would have saved his life that morning.

"Dr. Denby?"

"It's Henry. Yes?"

"That filling you put in this morning? I think it fell out."

\*\*\*\*\*

Detective Damien Newly slowed as they approached the front of the house, and saw the red lights of the squad car going, bathing the front lawn. Some of the neighbors had come out of their houses to gawk, and the two uniforms on the porch weren't doing anything about it. He could guess what they were preoccupied with.

As they pulled to a stop behind the squad car, his partner Frank Lang let out a low, wolfish whistle.

"Holy shit. *Look at the tits on her.* Is *that* who we're looking for?"

Damien did not have to look to know to what and whom he was referring. Frank was a new partner, and had never met Delphi before. If Damien's instinct was right - and it usually was - Frank would get himself a nice, painful introduction to Delphi's temper if he continued to take *that* tack.

*Still* Damien thought *I should warn him.*

"Yeah, and I'd take it easy if I were you."

"What? That guy her boyfriend?"

"Not *quite*," Damien replied, "But it's not him I'm trying to warn you about."

Frank turned to him, his big, chiseled face breaking into are-you-shittin-me grin. "What, you don't think I can handle myself? What's a little thing like that gonna do to me that I won't like?"

Damien held up his hands in defeat. "Alright, alright. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Frank released the seatbelt from around his broad, barrel chest. "Alright. Let's get acquainted."

Damien rolled his eyes as he got out of the car. It had only been a couple weeks, and he could already tell this assignment was going to be hell. Frank oozed a greasy kind of

machismo, and he was the size of a small bear, muscles and all. Already, Damien had been regaled by tales of Frank's sleazy, over-the-top encounters with the opposite sex - both on the job and off. Damien was no boy scout, but this guy was ridiculous.

The two uniforms were both giving Ed stern looks, while trying hard not to gape at Delphi. Delphi looked a little pale, but unscathed, while Ed's face was beginning to take on a surly, caged look. They all looked up as Damien and Frank approached.

The older one swiveled. "Are you Lieutenant Newly? We were told to wait for you before calling in."

"That's me," Damien said. "Thanks, guys. We'll take it from here."

"Alright," he replied, and casting one last furtive glance at Delphi, the two cops started back towards their patrol car.

Frank turned and called after the cops, "Why don't you go and send the neighbors to bed, huh?"

Damien cringed inwardly, imagining (accurately) how the two cops were giving Frank dirty looks behind his head. Having dismissed the troops, Frank folded his arms across his chest, almost puffing himself up, and looked at Ed and Delphi.

"Are you two the damsels in distress we're here to rescue?"

Damien watched Delphi suddenly turn to attention, her eyes sharpening dangerously in dislike. Ed's expression had lightened considerably. He was nearly smiling. In anticipation, Damien imagined.

"This is Frank Lang, my new partner. Frank - " he gestured at Delphi and Ed. "Delphina Follows and Edward Denby."

"Nice to meet you," Ed said agreeably. Delphi gave Frank a curt, withering nod.

Frank, nonplussed, barreled forward like a rutting moose. He looked straight at Delphi and said, "So, I understand you have a body."

Delphi actually smiled, but it was a cool and dangerous expression Damien would not have given anything to be on the other side of. "It's in the house, dickhead."

Frank winked at her, and sauntered off towards the house.

Damien sighed. "Sorry. He's an asshole."

Delphi waved it off, "I can take care of myself."

"M.E. hasn't been here?"

"Not yet," Ed replied. "You guys got here pretty quick after the uniforms."

"So," Damien said, shooting Delphi a meaningful look, "Should I ask how you got in the house?"

She gave him a dazzling smile. "No, I would say you shouldn't ask that particular question, Damien."

"The door was open," Ed interjected evenly. "We came back to check on Mr. Moore, who had procured our services earlier today. That's when we found him, Lieutenant."

"Ahhh," Damien said, and frowned. "What did he need your help for?"

"Missing girlfriend. She might have been mixed up with drugs. Probably split already."

Delphi eased her way off the railing, revealing a flash of uncompromisingly gorgeous leg. Damien forced himself not to stare.

"It looks like your shooter came back to finish the job," Damien said. "Did you get anything useful off of him when you talked to him?"

"Just the drug bit," Ed said. "You'll probably see it in the report if you look for it. The uniforms earlier this afternoon took his statement." He changed the subject. "Why'd you ask them to hold us? You going to arrest us?"

"You're probably going to have to make statements about this," Damien replied, "But no, I'm not going to arrest you. I was headed over to your office when the call came over the radio. Captain wants me to hire you for some legwork."

Ed asked, "What's the case?"

Delphi asked, "How much?"

## Chapter 5: No Rest for the Weary

Jill found herself sitting in the bleak interrogation room again, alone, flanked on one side by the one-sided mirror, the other by a dingy gray wall. A single bulb hung in a lamp above the room, casting severe shadows everywhere. It smelled of stale sweat and unhappiness and at the moment she was not at all sure if that was a remnant of interrogations past, or a manifestation of her own current state of affairs. She was all alone at the moment, left to her own thoughts.

Which were:

*- massive cluster fuck. How are we going to get out of here? What the hell is my mother going to say? Am I going to jail? Oh god oh god oh god oh god. Fuck. FUCK.*

As it turned out, Martha's body did, indeed, stay put long enough to be found by the police.

Unfortunately for them, it had also stayed put long enough for their prints to be found all over it, and a very incriminating pistol - coincidentally the same caliber and build - to be found buried far in Henry's closet.

She'd found this out just a few minutes ago, from the same apoplectic detective who'd yelled at her earlier in the day. He'd left her a few minutes ago, and was, she assumed, sitting behind the mirror, watching her sit. She had precious little else to do. She wondered, fairly worried, where Henry was, and though, ludicrously, *What if he cracks?*

The door opened, and Angry Detective walked in, followed by another man, who Jill presumed would play Good Cop. Angry Detective took the chair in front of her, while Good Cop sat in the chair across the table from her.

She looked at Angry. "Where's Henry?"

"He's being questioned in another room. You're calling him Henry now? This morning it was Dr. Denby, and you'd never met him before."

"I haven't before today. We've been through kind of a lot."

He smirked. "Like the receptionist being shot, and her body being moved across town."

Jill felt her lip curl into a sneer, and controlled it. "Yeah."

Good leaned across the table to her right and said, "Miss Gerardi, my name is -

Jill thought, *Oh, I KNOW what your name is, asshat. Your name is I'm Going To Get Buddy Buddy With You And Then Send You To Jail To Rot. Well, fuck you!*

" - Detective Branson. Would you like to have a lawyer present?"

"No! I don't need one. Neither of us have done anything wrong. It's just like we said - "

"There is no evidence of another gunman. We've had our men dust the office, the apartment - and they're lousy with your fingerprints, *Miss Gerardi*." Angry again.

"Because I've been there! And I touched stuff while I was there!"

Branson, whose voice was very soothing, said, "May I call you Jill?"

Jill, who was repulsed by the smooth-talking man at her elbow, pointedly said, "No, you may not!"

"As you like, Miss Gerardi. Now, you said you're an assistant to the owner of a small bookstore down on Steller. Am I right?"

Jill folded her arms in an attempt to seal herself off from the desperate anger constricting her chest. "Yes."

"Steller's in a middle-class area, book store is a small business - you can't be paid very much to work there."

Now they were sounding like her mother, and it pissed her off. She did not answer, but she felt her face crumple and darken.

"So - you meet Henry Denby. He's a handsome guy, charming, and he's a doctor. Say he offers you money to keep quiet, or - "

She glared at Branson. "Are you thick? Do I look like I just strolled out of a crack den? What makes you think I would say yes to an offer like that? Is that the best you have? Seriously?"

Angry leaned forward menacingly. "Now listen here, girly. You're in a world of trouble here. You don't cooperate with us, and you're looking at 25 years to life in prison. You know what they do to little girls like you in prison?"

*This is retarded. How stupid do they think I am? Can't they tell I can tell what they're doing? JESUS!*

"No, Detective, you go ahead and expound, and I'll sit here and listen," Jill said indignantly.

He went off on a screeching diatribe, now and then punctuating his speech by sticking his face right up to hers and talking right in her face, blasting garlicky breath at her. Jill sat

still, arms crossed, tuning him out as best she could. It was a talent of hers, born through 26 years of life with her mother.

"We know you were there! We know you helped him!"

"No, you don't," Jill replied, "Because we didn't kill anyone."

Branson looked at her. "Miss Gerardi - "

"We didn't kill anyone."

"Just tell us and - !"

"We didn't kill anyone."

"You knew him before didn't you? You've planned this? Why did you kill her? Why did you move the body!"

"We didn't kill anyone."

They were silent for a moment, staring at her. She stared at Angry in front of her, breathing hot air through his considerable nostrils, trying to intimidate her. To her right, she saw Branson make a slight gesture to the mirror. She snapped her head to the mirror, and then back at Branson.

"Let me guess: Bad Cop exits?"

Branson kept an even gaze on her, even as the door opened and Angry was called from the room. Ha!

"My partner can be a little abrasive, and I apologize for that."

*Yeah, I bet you do, ass.*

"Now, Miss Gerardi - you should know this is a very serious matter. I know you feel a sort of allegiance to Dr. Denby, but you've got to think about your family - your mother, your father, your sister in college. How do you think it would make them feel to know you've been helping a killer? The shame you would bring on your family?"

Aha! He'd done his research. Jill felt a prick of annoyance, but shoved it down, down, far down into her belly. That was their game. They were just going to keep pushing until she gave him up. Jill felt a strange, feverish calm spread over her. It was just a matter of will. If she backed down, they would win. That meant she was simply not going to back down - not when she knew she and Henry were innocent. There wasn't any way this asshole would make her give in. She'd sit here all night, if that's what it took.

Branson opened his mouth, and Jill cut him off, abruptly.

"Listen, Detective Branson, if you're trying to get me to feel bad for shaming my family, you're about 20 years too late. I'm going to keep telling you the truth: WE. DIDN'T. KILL. HER. You can keep going if you like, but it's not going to change that." Jill affected a flourish with her hands. "Proceed with your bullshit, if you must."

And she refolded her arms, and sat back.

Branson looked at her, his gaze unwavering. She met him back, eye to eye. Minutes passed, and her eyes began to burn, but that, too, she would not give up. She stared stubbornly, through the burning.

He blinked.

Jill smiled.

\*\*\*\*\*

"We think it's a new drug on the streets - some new meth derivative. We haven't been able to get a hold of it yet - "

"You're not a narc," Delphi said. "Why are you working on this?"

"I'm not, officially," he said, "But the numbers are starting to creep up. The Commissioner's worried about it, but we just don't have the force to do the investigation necessary."

"I haven't heard anything about this on the news."

Damien nodded. "You wouldn't have - a lot of the victims we have so far have been homeless. And we wouldn't have caught it if it hadn't been for one of our M.E.s finding something unusual in one of the victim's lungs."

Ed sat back in his chair. They had returned to the office after two hours of preliminary interrogation, toting Chinese take out food and thankfully sans Frank Lang.

"So you want us to figure out what the new drug is and where it's coming from."

Damien nodded. "I can provide you with some of the death reports. I have the authorization to release funds - "

Delphi sucked up a noodle from her carton. It slapped against her lips, leaving a shiny trail of oil. "How many funds?"

"Enough," Damien responded. "You'll be pleased."

"Hrm. We'll see about that," Delphi said, mouth full. "What are we getting up front?"

Damien grinned at her. "You're a mercenary."

"I'm practical," Delphi replied, grinning back. "How much?"

"\$5000 to start."

Delphi's eyes went upwards. Damien could almost see the numbers crunching in her mind. She took another mouthful of noodles. Finally, her eyes lowered. "Fine. What if we need more?"

"Just let me know, and I'll see what I can do," he said, "But keep good records. You're dealing with a government agency."

"Oh trust me," Ed said dryly, "You don't have to tell her that."

"Just," Delphi repeated, slurping another noodle, "practical."

Damien reclined in the chair in the middle of the room between the two of them, and tossed a shrimp in his mouth.

"Have you guys found any leads on the missing girl?"

"I haven't heard anything," Damien said.

"Hrm." She tapped her chin with her chopsticks.

Damien marveled at her ability to look the way she did, even with greasy Chinese food smeared across various parts of her face. He sat for a moment, staring at her in admiration.

"You're fucking amazing, Delphi."

Delphi put her carton on the table, and stretched out in a mighty yawn, affording Damien the full view of every delicious, illegal angle in her body, and then got up from her desk. She announced, "I'm going to bed."

As she passed Damien, she bent down and kissed him on the head, nearly flashing them, then trounced off towards the stairs and disappeared from view. Damien sat back down in his chair, his jaw slightly agape.

"What sort of evidence did they find in the lungs?" Ed asked pensively, hands behind his head.

"Tiny cysts. Almost pre-cancerous." Damien leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. "God, it hurts."

Ed grunted his inquiry, deep in thought.

"The fact that she puts on that entire show just to piss you off."

"That's what she does best."

"Ed. Level with me, man. You can't possibly live under the same roof as that drop-dead beautiful woman and never - "

"Did they find the cysts anywhere else?"

Damien sighed. He was about to respond when the phone in front of them clanged to life. He sat up, looked at the ornate golden Chinese clock on the wall. 11:32.

Ed straightened in his chair, shifted the take out box to his right hand and picked up the phone with his left. "Edward Denby's office."

"Mmmhmm." Ed said nonchalantly. That was Damien's cue to lean back in his chair and stare back at the ceiling. Somewhere above him, the woman of his dreams was getting ready for bed. He wondered what that entailed. His mind drifted, in so many interesting and distracting directions...

He was brought back to life by a strange and sudden tightness in Ed's voice.

"I'll be there right away."

His friend got up from the table, grabbed his coat and keys. "Damien - stick around and make sure Delphi's alright for me."

"Yeah, sure," Damien agreed, frowning. "What's going on?"

"Henry's in trouble."

Damien was taken aback. Ed hadn't mentioned Henry for several years.

"What? What kind of trouble?"

"He's in jail."

"*Henry?* What the hell for?"

"Suspicion of murder."

\*\*\*\*\*

Ed arrived at the police station nearly two hours later, pushing through the double doors forcefully. A weary looking uniformed woman sat behind the desk to the far corner of the office. In the waiting room, there were a few of the night's pull-ins and normal stragglers. His eyes moved over the people in the office until he saw, standing up and moving towards him, an exhausted young woman with dark hair and solemn eyes.

"You're Edward," she said. "You're like him, only...bigger."

"Where is he?"

"They're holding him in one of the cells. They won't let you talk to him until morning."

Ed clenched his jaw and turned around, "Who'd you talk to? Her?"

She reached out and grabbed hold of his arm. "It won't do you any good. She's -"

"I can handle difficult women," he said, wriggling out of her grasp.

He stalked towards the woman at the window. He heard the girl - was it Jill? - mutter behind him, "That's what all of you think."

His approach caused the officer to look up. She was a slim, stern type of woman. *Not wholly unlike Delphi*, he thought.

"Can I help you?"

"My brother Henry Denby is -"

"I'm sorry sir, visiting hours are over. You'll have to come back tomorrow morning."

He smiled at her. She did not return the greeting, remaining blank and faintly dismissive.

"It's really very important -"

"It's all important. I'm still sorry, visiting hours are over. You'll have to come back tomorrow morning."

He changed tack. "If you want to be responsible for -"

She squinted at him, an expression that stopped him in his tracks. "What *I* am responsible for is keeping *you* out. Nobody goes in after 4:00. Are you done talking?"

Ed stared at her. "Uh -"

"Good. You can go. And," She pointed out towards the room, straight at Jill, who was standing, and scowling. "Take her with you. She's been lurking around here for hours."

With a frustrated sigh, Ed turned around, approached Jill. Everything on her face seemed to be screaming *I told you so* (he knew the look very well), but she did not reproach him. She simply bent down, retrieved her bag, and looked up at him expectantly.

"Kicked you out?"

"Yeah. We'll have to wait until morning."

A loud groan wafted up from her stomach. She put a hand on her belly, and she gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry about that. I haven't eaten all day."

"Tell you what," Ed said, holding open the door for her, "I'll buy you dinner, and you tell me what the hell is going on."

\*\*\*\*\*

"He's out *where*?"

Delphi had her arms crossed across her chest, blazing eyes directed at Damien. He'd fallen asleep on the recliner in the living room when she'd roused him to ask what he was doing there. Groggy and unguarded, he'd let slip Ed's whereabouts. He was now in process of paying for it.

"He's in the city," Damien repeated, rubbing his face, "He didn't say exactly where."

"Is he on a case? Was that the phone call that came through after I went upstairs?"

Damien shifted uncomfortably. Ed rarely talked about Henry to him, and he'd known Ed for decades. He had no idea whether Delphi knew about Henry or not; but he didn't want to be the one to tell her if Ed hadn't.

"He didn't say, Delphi."

She frowned, giving him a searching look. His sleepiness was working for him. Lying or not, he must have looked as exhausted as he was.

"Fine," she said. "Goodnight, Damien."

She turned and went up the stairs. When he was mostly certain she was out of earshot, he fished his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed Ed's number.

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Jill sat back in the booth, the first bite of food melting in her mouth like hot butter. She let out an audible sigh, and relaxed her tired body.

Across from her, Henry's brother - who really was just a bigger, rougher version of Henry - was drinking coffee, watching her. She'd given him a very condensed version of what had happened. He'd taken it in stride, asking very few questions while she spoke.

"You barely know him," he said, holding the mug in his hands. "Why are you still here?"

"He saved my life. I can't just leave him in jail. Besides - it's not like whoever did this is going to leave me alone just because he's in jail."

She gave a humorless smile. "And...I'm just afraid to go home."

"I would be too, in your shoes," he said. She took another mouthful of food.

"Did he ask you to call me?" He asked this quietly, not quite looking up at her. She knew it wasn't her business, but she could not help but wonder what was going through his mind.

"Not explicitly," she admitted. "He declined his telephone call. But when I talked to him, he mentioned you briefly. I thought it might be a good idea to call you."

"What did he say to you when you talked to him?"

"He told me," she said softly, "To be careful."

Ed Denby smiled a grim smile, and shook his head. "That sounds like Henry. Chivalrous, and entirely unhelpful."

He sat back against the booth, "Do you still have those papers?"

Jill nodded, and then turned away from him slightly, slipping her hand inside her coat and under her t-shirt. His eyes widened slightly, and then settled, amused.

She shrugged, smiling faintly. "I hid them when I heard the police coming down the hall. Just...instinct."

She passed the papers to him. He examined them for a second, and then held up the note found on Martha's body. "This says Shackelford."

"That's what we thought, but - "

"Have you called Dr. Shackelford?"

"No." And she gave him a wry smile. "We were going to leave that up to the police."

"Let that be a lesson to you, young lady. Don't leave up to the police what you can get arrested for."

Jill smirked. "That sense of humor must run in the family."

Ed smiled at her. His eyes were solemn, though, running over her face. She realized he was sizing her up.

"Come on," he said, "We're going to visit Dr. Shackelford's office."

"What? At this time of night? How are we going to - ?"

Ed shot her a look, a fiendish, shifty look.

"Oh," she said, and thought *Oh, shit.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Delphi lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Try as she might, she had not been able to go to sleep ever since Damien had told her that Ed had gone. Where the fuck had he gone to at this time of night? She turned her head and saw the bright red number at the side of her bed. 3:47 AM.

"What do I care where he's gone?" she demanded. "Fucking go to sleep, Delphi!"

She threw a pillow over her head and thrashed uselessly. It did nothing to alleviate the worry building up in her chest. If he was out on a case, why hadn't he woken her up to take her with him? It wouldn't be the first time. No, it wasn't that, she was sure. If it wasn't that, the only thing that remained was that it was personal.

*But Ed doesn't have **personal**. I've been living here for three years! I would know...wouldn't I?*

She growled into the pillow, and then restlessly cast it aside, across the room. It bounded off the wall and fell on the vanity, knocking off a bottle of perfume onto the floor.

"Goddamnit!"

She got up and went to clean the mess up. The fragrance, overpowering in such volume, began to overtake the room. Delphi felt irritation creep up her face at her own stupidity.

She grabbed a pillow and a throw and opened the door, walking downstairs hard on the stairs. Damien's figure was sprawled out on the recliner, but his eyes opened as he passed. Too alert for this time of night. She could tell he hadn't gone back to sleep.

"I'm sleeping here," she stated, pointing to the couch.

He held out his hand. "Be my guest."

Delphi threw the pillow and blanket down, not without showing a little annoyance. "I spilled something in my room."

"I heard."

She threw herself down on the couch and pulled the throw up over her.

Again, she just lay in the dark, staring at a new ceiling, aware of Damien close to her, aware he was still awake.

"Damien," she called.

"What?"

*If I find out you know where he is and you're not telling me, I'm going to kick your ass.* But Delphi stopped herself just in time, just before it came out of her mouth. It really was none of her business - she could recognize that. But it ate away at her just the same. Still -

"Nothing. Good night."

There was a moment's pause, and then he said, "Good night."

*He knows something, Delphi thought, staring in the darkness. He's not telling me - why? Damien keeps me in the loop.*

Once again, the word **personal** flashed in Delphi's mind. She hated it. It was a boundary she was always prone to respect. That didn't stop it from driving her crazy. Keeping her up at night.

*I'm acting crazy. she told herself. He shouldn't have to worry about me sneaking around like a lunatic around him, if he wants to have - if he's out - if -*

She could not finish the thought in her head, for fear that the real import of it all would dawn on her.

"FUCK," she muttered.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ed stepped back from the lock and scowled. He did not make a habit of breaking into places - but the one time it was really important to him to do it, he was failing utterly. It

was not without irony that he recalled chiding Delphi for doing the same thing earlier that night.

Jill was closer to the front gate of the dentist office, keeping watch. Every now and then, she would cast him a look over her shoulder, to see if he'd managed to open it.

He tried once more, and once more, he failed. He clenched his teeth, and then crept towards Jill.

"I can't get it open. We'll check the windows and see if there's a back door."

She nodded silently, and followed him around. They had no luck with any of the windows, and the back door was a solid metal door, opening onto a small garden. It was one of those houses converted into an office building, much like his own. Unlike his own, it was carefully maintained and manicured, with benches for people to sit on and relax. An outdoor waiting room. He was about to turn to Jill and suggest they give up for the night when something caught his eye halfway underneath one of the benches.

He moved past her and bent down, retrieving a small metal nozzle. He held it up for Jill to see.

She looked at it. "It's a nozzle."

"Yup."

She shrugged, tired eyes barely looking up at him. She looked even more exhausted now than when he'd first seen her.

"What would that be for, like the nitrous tank? He's a dentist, right?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Weird that it should be out here." He looked from the building to the bench. 60 feet. He looked around. No dumpsters.

"Hrm."

Jill had backed herself against the pergola and was staring around, her eyes tired and hollow. Ed pulled himself up. They couldn't go on with her so exhausted. He was running low on energy himself.

"Okay, let's get out of here."

He took the wheel of car, and they pulled into a rundown motel a few blocks away. Ed paid the front clerk, parked her car towards the back where it would not be visible from the street.

As soon as the door opened, she stumbled into one of the beds and collapsed, already asleep by the time her head hit the pillow. Ed looked down at her as he loosened the collar of his shirt. She was not as blatantly alluring as Delphi, but she was a passingly attractive woman. How had Henry dealt with being stuck with her all day?

He settled down on his bed, and shut his eyes, expecting sleep. Instead, a dull thumping noise began to resonate in the wall behind his bed. The muted sounds of athletic sex punctuated the silence in the room.

He put his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling, wide awake.

## Chapter 6: Monsters and Demons

Henry woke the next morning, groggily lifting his face from the small pool of saliva underneath his chin. Muscles aching, he raised himself from the - where was he? He was suddenly alert, looking around. The room he was in was very small, gray-blue walls, and -

Bars. The events of the day before came flooding back to him. He sat up in the bunk, causing the bunk to creak ominously. From below him, a low warning growl drifted up.

"What it the fuck up there," a voice called threatening. "If you come down on me, you're a fucking dead man."

*I may be one already anyway, pal.*

He looked down at his wrist to check the time, and then remembered they'd taken everything from him when they'd escorted him in. A look out the bars afforded him no additional information. The bars faced a plain wall. Down the further end was the door where people were escorted in and out. Nothing was going on there.

Henry slowly eased himself down the side of the bed. When he'd fallen asleep the night before, he'd been alone in the cell. This morning, an almost ludicrously large fist hung off the side of the bunk below him. When he hit the ground, he turned, and saw the largest man he had ever laid eyes on reclining on the bed underneath, giving him a murderous glare underneath a very pronounced brow. The bed was sagging visibly under the man's weight. On one of his arms was an intricate barb wire tattoo, in which was inscribed the word "Michellin".

Henry was not a coward - not when it came to men, anyway - but he felt the slightest little bit of apprehension looking at the sasquatch occupying the cell with him.

"What the fuck you lookin' at?" "Michellin" growled, "You want me to rip you a new one? Mind your own fuckin' business."

Henry obliged him, turning to look out of the cell. It was a futile effort. There wasn't a single thing for him to see that he'd not seen last night, staring out the bars. He sighed, wondering what would happen next. Lawyer, he supposed. He did not have one, being mostly disinclined to worry about things like that - but he realized at this point, it would be prudent to -

A sharp yelp came from Michellin on the bed, and Henry turned. The man had sat upright, and was holding his jaw. Fresh bruises - some of them bloody - decorated the bottom half of his face. As Henry observed, the man turned his head and spit a bloody wad onto the ground.

"Motherfucker!" he cried, wincing. It was like watching an elephant begin a rampage. He held his mouth and moaned against, falling back against the wall next to the bunk. Unconsciously, Henry stepped a little closer to the bars. It was looking like he was going to be trampled to death long before any gunman found him again. He was not sure which fate was worse.

Another howl from the large man, and when he straightened his face, one of his fingers was in his mouth and tears were streaming down his cheeks.

He caught sight of Henry, and rage seemed to boil up inside of him. It was very evident that whatever was wrong with him had become Henry's fault. "Whazhafur oo rook rahd?!"

Michellin stumbled out of his bed, sending up a raucous chorus of protesting springs. He removed the finger from his mouth and straightened up to his full height.

Henry actually gulped. He himself was nearly six feet tall - the hulk in front of him was at least six or seven inches taller than he was, and almost twice Henry's breadth. Henry wondered what it would feel like to have himself snapped like a toothpick.

"I told you, asshole - " He paused in his tirade to send up a mournful bay, and then took a step towards Henry, even more angry than he had been the second before. "You're going to pay. I'm gonna smash in your - "

All through the speech, the tears had continued to stream down his cheeks, and now, as he raised his fist, intent on smashing it into Henry's skull, he fell to his knees, and starting sobbing like a little girl.

"Holy fucking *shit*, this fucking hurts! Motherfucking ass ahhhhhhh!"

As he howled, Henry had a magnificent view of the cavernous hole that was Michellin's mouth. Deep in the recesses, he saw several crooked teeth, one of them hanging on by a thread. He squinted, and observed a large, bleeding gash that had abscessed closeby. No wonder he was in pain.

Wary since he had nearly been beaten to a pulp by the man in front of him, Henry approached. He held up his hands, feeling like a lion tamer approaching a feral cat.

Slowly, he asked, "Can I take a look?"

"Get the fuck away!"

Henry stopped moving forward, but did not back up. "I'm a dentist. I might be able to help with the pain."

Michellin's eyes opened a little wider. "Dentist?"

Henry nodded, in what he hoped was a friendly, reassuring manner. "Can I see it?"

"You're not pulling my (ahhhh) chain, are you? 'Cause if you are - !"

"...you're going to kill me. Why would I lie to you about being a dentist?"

Michellin considered this. Then, he seemed to assent. Henry approached, his love of dentistry somehow muting the surreal events of the last day and a half. It soothed him. He was in need of soothing. After running his hands through the hot water to get at least a bare minimum of sanitation, he turned towards Michellin, giving him a frightened look laced with rage.

"Rinse out your mouth first, and then let me take a look."

Michellin rinsed, spitting out a few mouthfuls of blood before sitting in the middle of the room and tilting back his giant head. Henry gazed inside.

The abscess did not look as bad as he thought, but it was still a considerable beast. The two teeth that were loose he could do nothing about. The one tooth that threatened to fall out, though -

Henry felt the rush of love for his profession, and, bracing himself, said, "Now, take it easy. This is probably going to hurt. A lot."

\*\*\*\*\*

Damien turned the wheel, and stole a look at Delphi as he did so. She was casual this morning, long red hair swept up in a messy, but somehow attractive ponytail. Not a stitch of makeup on - but it didn't make any difference in Damien's opinion - she was still gorgeous.

Despite all this, she still looked remarkably unhappy this morning. Shortly after she'd come down the stairs the night before, he'd managed to fall back asleep. It was apparent she had not.

That morning, he'd gotten a call from Ed - who had sounded like he'd gotten just as little sleep as Delphi had - giving him the address of the motel where he'd stayed last night, and instructions to grab a change of clothes, and an extra shirt besides - which Damien had promptly packed, and almost been out the door when Delphi had insinuated herself between him and the front door, looking quite frightfully ready to tackle him - and not in the pleasant way. She'd demanded he take her with him, and despite his intentions, she had somehow managed to talk him into it.

So here he was, driving out to meet Ed in a motel on his day off, brooding assistant in tow. They were only a few blocks away now. Delphi had been silent the whole way - an amazing thing, to be treated with the highest level of suspicion.

Needless to say, Damien was on edge when they finally parked the car. He heeded Ed's instructions and parked near the back. He didn't see Ed's car, but did see the room number Ed had mentioned. With a deep breath, he turned over to tell Delphi to stay in the car, and was greeted by the door shutting behind her.

Damien scrambled out of the car, grabbing the clothes and trying to beat Delphi to the door. He didn't make it. She raised her fist and rapped firmly three times.

A few seconds later, the door swung open.

Damien's heartbeat started to race. He felt like calling for backup. Something. The word *bad* just kept flashing in his head in a mad bright green. He didn't dare turn to look at Delphi.

A young woman with dark hair peaking out from under a towel opened the door. Beyond her, in the background, the sound of the shower. Ed's unmistakable coat lay on the ground, along with his clothes.

For a moment, Damien was not sure what was going to happen. His police instinct was to draw his gun, but it seemed a little out of place. Instead, in preparation for the near-impending cat fight, he readied himself on the balls of his feet.

Delphi moved. He nearly moved, but instead, he saw her extend her hand, and say, firmly, "Delphina Follows. Are you here with Edward Denby?"

The young woman blinked, and then blushed slightly. "Well, yes, but not like that. I'm sorry, Miss Follows, he didn't mention you. But are you, " she turned her dark eyes towards Damien, "Detective Newly?"

"That's me," he said, relief flooding through him. Crisis averted.

"Please, come in," she opened the door wider to allow them entry. "Mr. Denby's in the shower right now, but I think he'll be done soon."

Delphi walked in, holding her head high, no trace of her emotions on her face. Damien realized she was playing the room - something she did when she was very unsure of how to proceed. It was how he'd seen her question clients before. It was her poker face.

The young woman shut the door and turned. "My name is Jill Gerardi. I'm the one who called Mr. Denby about his brother, Henry."

Damien saw Delphi's eye blink furiously for one moment, and go still. She hadn't known, after all.

She turned her green eyes to Damien. "Ed has a brother?"

"A younger one," Damien stated. "Henry."

"Here? In town?"

"Last I heard."

She shook her head in disbelief. "I can't believe he didn't tell me!"

He kept diplomatically silent, seeing Jill turn her head across the room, doing the same. A moment later, and the shower nozzle could be heard shutting off. Another moment, and Ed emerged, shamelessly clothed in only a towel. He looked from Delphi, to Damien, then to Jill, and back to Damien, a wry look on his face.

"Did you bring the clothes?"

Damien held them up.

"Give the T-shirt to Jill. I'll take the rest of it."

Damien divvied out the clothing accordingly. Jill excused herself and went in the bathroom to change.

Again, without seeming embarrassed, Ed started to put on his clothes. Jill once again averted her eyes, but Delphi - oh, Delphi had no problems with Ed's near nudity. She said, very archly, "So, I hear you've just discovered a long lost brother."

"Not so long lost," Ed replied. "And what are you doing here?"

"I was worried for your wellbeing, if you must know."

He gave her the same, dry look he had given her when he first emerged from the shower. "Hrm."

"I was. Besides, if something happened to you, I'd be out of a job *and* a home," she said. And then, "Is everything alright with your brother?"

"He's in jail," Ed said flatly, "We're going to -"

" - spring him!" Delphi leapt to her feet, "I brought my tools with me."

It was true, Damien thought ruefully, she had brought along with them the tools of her nefarious trade. Damien managed to avert his eyes each time he saw her with them, and half-heartedly convince himself she just kept them around to get into her car if/when she locked herself out.

"We're *not* going to 'spring' him," Ed told her sternly, "I'm going to talk to him."

"What did he do?" she asked.

Ed looked at her in the mirror. "He's in for attempted murder."

Delphi's expression changed. "Oh."

"I can't believe that," Damien chimed in. "Henry? Henry wouldn't kill a fly."

"He'd surprise you," Ed said, giving Damien a look. Damien blinked back at him, surprised, but did not reply outright. What did *that* mean?

Jill emerged from the bathroom, her hair falling straight to her shoulders, and her face flush from the steam inside the bathroom. She was wearing one of Ed's old shirts. This one had REO Speedwagon on the front of it. Damien suppressed a grin. Her entrance prompted Ed to turn around. He looked at the shirt, and shook his head, turning to Damien.

"What the hell?"

Damien held up his hands, and shrugged, "You were not specific."

Ed turned to look at her again. "Well, it looks good on you, anyway."

She was looking down at the shirt quizzically. "Thanks."

Delphi was looking at Ed. Then, she was looking at Jill. Then, back at Ed. Damien looked away from her. Was there trouble brewing, after all?

"Thanks for bringing the clothes, Damien."

"No problem. That wasn't all you needed though."

"No," Ed said, "I need your help looking up someone: a Dr. Christopher Shackleton."

Damien had flipped out his notebook and written down the name. "What do you need?"

"I need everything you can get." He paused. "I know it's your day off, Damien. I appreciate it."

Damien rose. "Sure thing. You've saved my ass enough times."

Ed turned around, and reached for his coat. "Jill and I are going to visit Henry. Can you have everything by - two?"

Damien nodded, "Shouldn't be a problem. Where do you want to meet?"

"There's a Denny's down on Third. You know it?"

Damien nodded again, and got up to go.

"What do you want me to do?" Delphi asked, standing, looking at Ed.

His coat on, he turned towards her, and said, "Nothing, Delphi. I'd like you to sit out of this one."

She seemed taken aback. "What? Why?"

"It's not a real case. Not like our work - "

"I know that," she said, "I want to help."

Ed looked severe. "Delphi, I'd really rather you sat out on this."

She let out a breath, "But - "

*"Please."*

The finality of the word struck Damien oddly, as well. He turned to look at his friend, and the look on his face did not brook refusal. Delphi shut her mouth, and then moved, stiffly, towards the door. She opened the door of Damien's car, and shut it - not quite a slam, but certainly not a very happy noise.

"You'll have an earful on the way back," he warned Damien. "Sorry."

Damien shrugged it off. "Alright, see you at two."

Ed waved. As Jill and he headed down towards their car, Damien heard her ask, "What is a ree-oh speedwagon, anyway?"

\*\*\*\*\*

The noise of draining the abscess had alerted the guard, despite the early hour. He'd come careening down the hallway with his gun ready and drawn, and been greeted by the sight of a teary-eyed Michellin (who preferred being called Mitch) wailing while sitting on the floor of the cell. Henry was standing with his hands bloody, looking at his

handiwork with a careful eye. A tooth lay on the floor, surrounded by a thin halo of blood. He'd gotten Mitch to spit most of it into the sink.

The guard did not know what to make of the situation, so he called out, "Freeze! Stop what you're doing, right now!"

Henry froze. Mitch, unperturbed by the threat of a mere gun, turned his head to the guard, and, blood and spittle spraying outwards, exclaimed, "Fuck off, he's a dentist!"

And then, Mitch stared. He raised his hand to his cheek. "Well, *shit*. That's fuckin' amazing. It doesn't hurt!"

Henry smiled, pleased with himself. "Yeah, I think that got all of it."

The guard was still standing in front of them, not sure what to make of it all. Henry could tell by his expression that he was not sure whether to be walk away, or raise the alarm. Instead, his eyes focused on the blood on the ground, and the tooth.

"Clean that mess up!" he barked, "I don't want to see it next time I come around here!"

Mitch gave him the finger, but Henry replied, "Sure."

The guard lowered his gun and started towards the door. Henry moved over to the farthest edge of the bars, and called, very politely, "Officer?"

The guard turned. "What?"

"Can I get some salt?"

He narrowed his eyes. "What for?"

Henry gestured to Mitch. "To ward off infection. I'm going to have him rinse with it."

From behind him, Mitch chimed in. "Yeah, you don't want to see this bad motherfucker with an *infection*."

The guard scowled at them both, but returned a few minutes later with a couple packets of salt he gave to Henry through the bars.

Mitch rinsed, grimacing slightly as the salt hit the cut in his mouth, but dutifully holding the warm water and salt in his mouth for as long as Henry said so. After he was satisfied the wound would be safe until Mitch could get to a real dentist situation, Henry rinsed his hands, and then sat down on the bottom of the cell floor. Mitch, who was still rubbing his face in pleasure that the excruciating pain had departed, gave Henry an appraising look.

"Look, doc - I want to apologize for how I gave you shit before. I've had a pretty shitty night. But I guess I don't have to tell you that - you were in here before I was."

"That's okay," Henry said, waving the need for apology away with his hand, "It happens to everyone."

"You're a pretty decent guy." Mitch continued, "What they got you locked up for?"

Henry sighed, his forearms resting on his knees. "Murder."

"No shit? You don't look like a murderer."

"I'm not," Henry replied. "I was framed."

Mitch seemed to be amused by this news. "No *shit!* Who the hell would frame a dentist for murder?"

"I have no idea," Henry told him truthfully. "But I'd better find out before they really put me away for it."

Mitch nodded. "Good luck to you, Doc."

"Thanks, Mitch."

Mitch settled onto his bed, once again setting off the mad screeching of the springs. "I beat the shit out of some guy that was banging my wife. Didn't lay a finger on her though - just him. The pussy just lay down and took it."

Henry didn't want to say he would have done the same, what was the good in fighting to keep a rock slide from happening? but decided not to. Instead, he listened.

"So, they get me on assault and battery, and don't do nothing to the asshole that broke up my home. I tell you, man. There's no justice in this world."

This time, Henry had a reply. "No, there isn't."

And then, curious, he said, "If he didn't hit you, how did you hurt your jaw so badly?"

Mitch turned an eye towards him, and said, "My wife beat the shit out of me for beating the shit out of the guy."

Henry blanched. "That sucks."

"Tell me about it."

\*\*\*\*\*

Damien had been in less tense hostage standoffs than the situation going on in the car during the first hour of the drive back. An ominous silence sat in the car, and all of it radiated out of the sharp eyed redhead sitting in the passenger seat, arms across her chest and a look of intense concentration on her face. He'd attempted to turn on the radio once, and she'd somehow made the silence extremely disapproving. It was quickly switched off.

He was merging onto another freeway, about halfway there, when she finally said something. Unexpected.

"She was a nice girl."

Damien blinked. "Who? Jill?"

"Yes," Delphi straightened her t-shirt, her fingers smoothing it efficiently. "She was nice."

"I guess so," he said uncertainly, "She didn't talk much, though."

"No," she agreed, "But the situation was not altogether comfortable."

Damien snuck a look at her from the corner of his eye. She looked thoughtful, brow knitted. And then, with a little sigh that came from deep places, she turned to look at him.

"Do you have the files for the consult job?"

Damien blinked again, and it took him a moment to shift from red alert to normal. "Yeah. Back at my apartment. I was going to bring it over tomorrow."

"I'd like to work on it, please, Damien. If you would bring it over - "

"What's going on here?" Damien turned towards her. "You're not going to freak out?"

Delphi took a deep breath. "No, I'm not going to *freak out*. I'm sure Ed has good reason for keeping me out of the loop."

He noticed she could not resist throwing in a nearly inaudible sniff after this statement.

"We've still got to do work," she said nobly, "I'll just hold down the fort while he's helping his brother."

Damien considered this. "Okay. We'll swing by my place to pick up the paperwork before I drop you off."

Delphi turned and looked out the window.

"If he isn't nice to me for this," she said, "I'm going to kick his ass."

Ah. *That* was more like it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jill fidgeted in her chair. They were sitting in the visiting room, waiting for Henry to be escorted into the chair across from Ed. Ed himself hadn't said anything for moments.

She felt awkward, as if she were about to intrude on a reunion. It was clear something had happened between the two brothers. Ed had not mentioned any of it to Jill in the drive over there - he'd gotten remarkably silent after they had arrived in the jail. Whatever was going on in his mind, he did not share it with her. She didn't expect him too. But whatever it was that had kept them from speaking to each other, Jill had a feeling it was serious. She could not see Henry losing contact with his brother otherwise.

*You're an expert on him, all of a sudden?*

She quelled the bitchish voice inside of her, and turned towards Ed. For the second time that morning, she asked, "Are you sure you don't want me to wait outside?"

"I'm sure," he replied.

Even as he answered, the door across the thick glass panel opened, and Henry was ushered in by a guard. He looked well enough - a little disheveled, but oddly cheerful. His eyes moved over Jill, and he smiled, relief touching his features.

When his eyes finally fell on Ed, he stopped where he was altogether. Jill braced herself for whatever anger was to come - but none did. Henry Denby was not stopped by anger.

He blinked a couple times, then approached, seating himself on the chair.

"Eddie," he said, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to get you out of here," Ed replied matter-of-factly. "You didn't think I'd just leave you to rot, did you?"

Henry looked at his brother - Jill thought, a little sadly. "I wasn't sure. Ed - "

"Look, that can all wait," Ed said, waving his hand, "Forget about it for now. Jill told me what happened."

At this, Henry turned to her, gave her a slight grin, and touched the glass with his hand as greeting. She smiled back.

"You don't know who Preston is?"

Henry shook his head, "No. I don't remember a patient named Preston." He paused. "It would have been her last name, though. Do you think that has something to do with this?"

"It's a start. What do you know about Dr. Shackleton?"

"Chris was a couple years below me in school. He has a practice a few miles away from here. It's a startup, so he doesn't have a whole lot of patients yet. I thought I could help him out."

Henry fidgeted a little, saying this. For reasons unknown to Jill, Ed nodded, a trace of a smile on his lips. "Ah. I see. What else do you know? When was the last time you saw him?"

Henry squeezed his eyes shut, concentrating.

"It must have been a few months back now. He'd called me to let me know he'd opened up shop."

"Is he a good dentist?"

"He was always a little rough, handling-wise, and he could have done better in organic chemistry. But otherwise, he was a decent dentist."

Ed reached into his pocket, and pulled out the item they'd found yesterday underneath the bench. "Can you tell me what this is?"

Henry looked at it. "Yeah. It's the nozzle of a nitrous tank."

"Hrm," Ed said. "When you run out of nitrous in a tank - "

Henry pointed to the nozzle in Ed's hand. "You use something like that to refill it. Where'd you find that?"

"Under a bench behind Shackleton's office. Can you think of any reason for it to be there? Would he throw it away after he was done?"

"Sure," Henry said, "Some people keep it around. It can be used to drain the tank."

"Hrm," Ed said, thoughtful once again. And then, "Did they take your keys with you when you were arrested?"

Jill reached into her purse and dangled the keys in front of her. "I took them."

Henry pointed at her. "She took them."

"Good. We'll need to get back to your office to find out who Preston is."

Henry nodded, and then, almost as an afterthought, asked, "Eddie, do you know any lawyers?"

Ed smirked. "None who I like."

Jill did. Several of them. Unfortunately, it would mean speaking to her mother - who would definitely want to know why she needed to contact them. It was a miserable prospect, but, she thought, better than Henry spending the rest of his life in jail.

"I do," Jill said. "Would you like me to call them for you?"

"Yes, please," Henry answered. "We could use some legal advice."

Ed's eyes narrowed. "We?"

"Oh," Henry said, grinning sheepishly. "A friend."

\*\*\*\*\*

Of course, Delphi had no intention of staying out of it. Ed needed her - he was just too dumb to admit it.

The first thing Delphi did when she got home was do a search on Dr. Christopher Shackleton. The search pulled up a bland, clinical looking website (which made Delphi frown - she hated mediocrity in design - what was the point in making yourself look like a template?) He had an office downtown, just a little ways away from where the motel they'd met at that morning. The hours listed on the website showed closed both Saturday and Sunday.

Delphi lay her head back, shutting her eyes - her classic thinking pose. Ed would have already tried to get inside - despite being a pussy when it came to breaking into places, he grew a remarkable daring when it came to things he cared about. Which, she imagined, included this long-lost brother of his. He hadn't mentioned anything - but Newly had been there. But he had asked for a profile. She bargained he had not gotten in.

A smile curled the corner of her mouth. It was not too late - she could be in town in an hour (Damien drove like an old lady), in Shackleton's and back in no time at all.

She sat up in her chair, and hid her connection, and typed a raw IP address into her Firefox. Ten minutes later, she had her purse - still containing the files Damien had given her - and Shackleton's home address in hand.

Delphi was a woman of many talents, most of which she did not disclose to her boss. It would only lead to trouble.

\*\*\*\*\*

"We're not going back to Shackleton's office first, are we?" Jill asked uncertainly.

Ed shook his head, "No, we're not. It'd be crazy to try that in the middle of the day - we'd be caught for sure."

"Back to the Henry's office, then."

They were seated in Delphi's car, in the parking lot of the police station. Henry had been escorted away shortly after the request for a lawyer, and they'd left quickly, just in case Jill was recognized and harassed by anyone of the other officers. Ed pulled out the parking lot, then turned to her. "You going to call the lawyer you know?"

She sighed. "Alright."

Ed eyed her. "What? Something wrong with the lawyer?"

"Not quite," she admitted. "It's - it's nothing. Just - give me a second. I have to get his name."

Ed had a healthy respect for women, but Christ, sometimes they were hard to understand.

She reached into her purse and took out her cell phone. For a moment, he was sure she had an expression of apprehension on her face, but then she flipped it open and dialed a number. She put it up to her ear.

A voice came on to the line, and she winced, pulling the phone away from her ear momentarily. Then, she clenched her teeth.

"*Mother*, I didn't make it up. Now, I need you to listen to me - NO, *YOU LISTEN TO ME, PLEASE*. I need the name of -"

The phone erupted in feminine shrieking. Jill pulled it away from her ear like it were on fire and then proceeded to hit her head against the window methodically, growling as she did so.

"Okay, Mom, bye!"

Jill snapped her phone shut, breathing irregularly through her teeth.

Ed was at a loss as to what to say. It was unusual for him. He looked straight ahead at the road.

"Didn't get the name?"

There was the sound of labored breathing from her side of the car, but eventually, it evened out.

"I got it," she said. "Give me a moment."

"Difficult family?"

"No, the rest of them are fine. But my Mom. She thinks I'm too old and too unmarried to be out alone in the world without a man to protect me. Which is *bullshit*, since the last three guys she and her old biddy social sisters set me up with were complete *assholes!*"

What to say to *this*?

"That's too bad," he murmured.

She put her head back against the rest.

"Are there more Denbys, or is it just you and Henry?"

Ed was taken aback by the question aimed at him, and did not answer immediately.

"I mean, are there other siblings?"

"No," he replied, "It's just Henry and me."

"Your parents live close?"

Once again, an unexpected question. Ed was not usually one to volunteer information about himself, but she seemed to be using the conversation to steer herself away from the scary place she'd just been. That was fine with him.

"They died years ago, when Henry was just a kid."

"Oh!" She turned to face him, flushed. "I'm sorry - I didn't know. I mean, I don't know you that well - I didn't mean to pry, I was just...trying to get my mind off everything. Sorry."

He gave a dismissive nod. "It's alright. It was a long time ago."

It had been, too. *Long enough to let sleeping dogs lie*, he thought. He was not going to lose his brother as well.

## Chapter 7: Dr. Shackleton, I Presume

Delphi drove past the office, and parked a few blocks down the street. The dentist's office was along a somewhat busy stretch of road, flanked on either side by other quaint homes renovated for business. An old folks' home and - what was that? - some sort of financial services company. The financial services company didn't appear open, and nobody was around in the old folks' home. Perfect. Nobody would notice her. Just to be certain, though, Delphi had worn one of her wigs, bound her chest and put in some extra padding around her body. A pair of lifted shoes and large sunglasses topped off her costume. Even if anyone noticed her, they would not be able to put in a correct description of her.

In a past life, before the crotch-punched boyfriend, Delphina Follows had been someone entirely different than she was today. Raised by Mormons to respect males no matter what ass-backwards thing they were up to (and this amounted to a great big load of ass-backwards behavior), taught to be quiet and submissive, Delphi had grown up feeling something was awfully awry - but eager to please her parents (god rest their souls), she had done everything right. She'd gone to church, said her prayers, ate all her vegetables, covered up her body as if it were a manifestation of her dirty, female soul. It was not until the day she'd turned 16 and gotten yelled at for forgetting one of the lines in the psalms did Delphi really understand what it meant to be her own person. She'd stormed outside - or, at least, she *went* outside, and found the cute, curly-haired non-Mormon teenage boy next door working on the yard with his shirt off. He'd smiled at her. They spent a few minutes talking. Later in the day, she'd gone down to his basement and gotten herself the first feel up of her life - and it had felt *fucking incredible*.

When she turned 18, Delphi had packed her bags, kissed her parents (who lovingly warned her of tempting the devil and exhorted her not to forget her Mormon bible) goodbye, and left for the big city. Halfway between Utah and Denver, she misplaced the bible. The rest of the way, and the eight years in between then and now, Delphi had lived the life of at least eleven different people: acrobat, cat burglar, baker, make up girl, factory worker, secretary, bookkeeper, beekeeper, garbage woman, hacker, and convenience store clerk. She had learned some things in her eight years, the first being that she could always rely on her looks as a last resort. The second being that looks only got you so far (witness the asshole cheating boyfriend). The third being not to tell people about the other eleven lives.

The fourth - and the reason why she was thinking about it all now, on her walk between her car and the dentist office - was to trust her instincts. Instinct was telling her there was some bad juju in the air, and to be careful. She had no intention of going against her instincts.

Unless, of course, they got in her way.

Her suspicions grew deeper as she got closer to the front of the office. There was one other car parked on the street: a relatively new Volvo. Spectacularly clean and tidy,

except for the bright pink ticket underneath the wiper blade. She peered in as she walked past. A glasses case. A cell phone charger and headset. Otherwise, spotless.

Dentists, she imagined, even ones with new practices, could afford Volvos. Her eyes searched the surrounding area, until it fell on the sign she had a feeling she would see:

Street sweeping, every second and fourth Friday  
Parking citations will be issued

Things were not looking great for Dr. Shackleton.

She neared the front of the office, and gave two nonchalant glances either way before jumping the small iron fence in front bordering the lawn of the office. The front door was definitely out of the question, so she headed around the back towards the security door. It was a large metal, solidly locked door.

It would be tough, she assessed, but not impossible. She was just drawing her kit from underneath her jacket when she heard a shuffling sound and forced herself to turn, slowly.

An old woman was shuffling down the backyard of the old folks' home. She saw Delphi through the fence and smiled, harmlessly. Delphi wondered if she needed to explain herself, and then decided that if she said anything without first being queried, it would look suspicious.

"Nice day out," the old woman said, "But the dentist is closed today, you know."

"Oh," Delphi said glibly, feigning confusion, "Is it? I thought for sure my appointment was today."

"Oh, oh no, dear," the woman said, shaking her head and smiling. "No, no. He doesn't see patients on Sundays."

"I guess I had the days wrong," Delphi shrugged. She turned towards the woman, and flashed her best respectful smile. "Do you know Dr. Shackleton well? I'm a new patient."

"Oh, he's a sweet young man! He comes in every now and then and does free dental exams for some of us, you know."

"That does sound nice."

"Yes. And you know, such a hard worker! He always stays extra long in that office. Sometimes I don't see him leave for hours and hours after the last patient is gone. You don't get dedication like that these days."

Delphi continued to smile, while her mind whirred busily, storing everything she was hearing. "No, you really don't."

"That must be why he has so many patients," the old lady continued, smiling her benign little smile. "So many people, always coming and going."

Delphi's ears perked up.

"Oh?"

"Yes! Just this weekend alone, he's had several visitors. I see them," she turned and pointed back towards the building. "From my room there, you know. I meant to come down and tell them he's closed on the weekend, but it's hard for me to move around in the dark, and they would have been gone by the time I got here anyway."

"They were here in the dark?"

"Yes - yes, it was rather dark." The old lady now frowned in consternation. "Now, was that Friday or Saturday? Goodness, I can't remember these days. The memory isn't what it used to be, you know."

"Anyway, dear - I just thought I'd tell you. I was out for my walk, anyway."

"Thank you very much," Delphi said, smiling. She watched the lady shuffle off towards the greener part of the lawn, in the far part of the house. Delphi took her phone out of her bag and pretended to be calling someone until the lady was well out of earshot.

She then turned towards the back door with the sinking sensation in the pit of her belly. Why was she getting the feeling Thomas Moore's body was not the only one she was destined to see this weekend?

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Jill sat back from the machine, and looked up at Ed, who was going through the physical files behind her. "No Preston, either first name or last name, in the client list. Any luck with you?"

He ran his fingers through a few more tabs, and stood. "No luck here either." It had been a shot in the dark, since if Henry had transferred a client to Chris Shackleton, the hard copy files would be gone.

"Any chance it's out of order?"

"Not a one," he replied, "These are meticulous."

From what Jill remembered of Martha, it did not surprise her.

Ed put his hands up to his eyes, rubbing them. "This all has to do with Preston, somehow. I can feel it."

"Whoever that is," Jill said, "We don't know, remember?"

"That's why we've got to get into Shackleton's office to see what he has."

He snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "What about the message you kept from Henry's office? Didn't it say he would try Henry's cell phone?"

Jill shook her head, "It did say that, but when Henry checked his cell phone, there was no message from him on there."

Ed frowned. "When did he call the office?"

Jill's face screwed up in thought. "Martha gave it to him yesterday. The call to the office was placed on Friday. There were no cell phone calls at all, no messages on Henry's phone."

"Is there a cell phone number for Shackleton on the message?"

She shook her head again. "No."

"Did you check Henry's addresses for it?"

Jill blinked, and then swiveled in the chair, typing into Martha's console. She opened Outlook, and waited for it to load.

"Check for a Preston, too."

She nodded. The program came up sluggishly. She clicked on the Address Book icon, scrolled through the names, and reached the Ps.

"Patil, Phillips, Phuong's Pho, Presserman, Pulov - nope, no Preston." She scrolled down further to the Ss. "Savage, Seville, See's Candy - he's got the number to See's Candy here?"

"He likes the caramels."

Jill shook her head, "Good grief. Ah - here. Shackleton. Cell phone - (123) 555-3812."

She pulled the phone out of her purse and started dialing. Ed grabbed her hand. "Don't call from your cell phone. We'll find a pay phone and call from there."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because if something's happened to him, you don't want them to be able to trace you to it. Not unless you want to end up in jail with Henry."

Jill shut her phone, and placed it back in her purse. "Right." She copied down the number and put it in her purse. Then, she looked at Ed.

"So, what do we do now?"

"I want to check the nozzle on the nitrous tanks."

"Why? You think that nozzle came from one of these tanks? Wouldn't you think it would have come from Shackelford's office?"

"It probably did - but there's a connection between Henry's office and Shackleton's office. I just want to make sure we aren't missing something here."

They shuffled towards the back of the office. There were three examination rooms, and each one of them had a nitrous tank. Ed examined the first one carefully.

"There aren't any signs that it's been replaced..."

"How can you tell?"

"There are no wrench marks around the nozzle. Look." He held up the nozzle he'd gotten from behind Shackleton's office. "There are wrench marks around this one."

Jill nodded, "Ahhh. That's why *you're* the private detective, and I'm the innocent bystander."

He grinned faintly and, giving the equipment a quick once over, raised the inhalation mask. "We should test this."

She raised an eyebrow. "You want to get high while you're brother's in jail?"

"No; I think someone replaced the gas with something else. The only way to know is to try it."

"Uh - if someone *did* replace it, don't you think it's a bad idea to try it?"

"I won't inhale much."

Jill looked visibly worried about this turn of events. "Mr. Denby - Ed: I really don't think this is a great idea. I think - "

"If I start doing something unusual, pull the mask off me."

He reached down and turned the knob on the tank. For a moment, there was nothing. He could see Jill standing over him, holding her hands and eyes intent on him.

The next moment, he was feeling pretty good. Pretty *damn* good, actually. It had been a long time since he felt so good. He felt airy, light as a bird and he wondered why -

The mask was yanked forcefully from his face, but it did not perturb him. Jill's brown eyes looked down at him.

"Jill."

She was disentangling herself from the mask and tube. "Christ. What? What? Are you feeling alright?"

"I feel - uh - fine. Fine. That was definitely nitrous. Let's move on to the next one."

She followed him, a marked look of disapproval on her face. Women all had that face. It was probably hard-wired into their second X chromosome.

Blinking to clear his head, Ed knelt by the tank in the second room. It took him a moment longer to clear his head, but he saw no visible signs of wear on this tank either. He lifted the mask again, turned the knob.

It took less time for the nitrous to kick in this time. He felt lightheaded, slightly cool. He saw Henry's face in his mind's eye. Henry, his little brother. It had been years since they'd spoken, and everything was under the bridge. He was just so glad to have seen him again.

The mask, like before, was snatched off his face.

"I don't like this," she stated blankly. "This is a dumb idea. What if one of them has sarin gas in it, or something?"

Ed had to concentrate. "That is extremely unlikely. And if it did happen, you would feel it too."

"That's not comforting."

"But a useful fact."

She grasped his shoulder and somewhat forcefully dragged him up. "C'mon. There's only one more room. And then we're getting out of here. You're supposed to meet Detective Newly at 2:00."

"What time is it now?"

She took out her cell phone and flipped it open. "11:30 AM."

Ed got up from the table, and walked to the next room. He still felt pretty good, but it was clearing up rapidly. He approached the tank in this room, and knelt to take a look at it.

This one had wrench marks. He hesitated, and then said, "This one's been changed."

Jill bent down, twisting her head to get a good look. Her face went solemn, but she stepped back as he reached for the gas mask.

If he felt any nervousness with this mask, it soon disappeared from his list of cares in the world. Even as he was under, he heard a loud crashing noise, and eased his head up towards Jill. She'd backed up into the tray of tools and cotton swabs, and was quickly trying to pick them up from where they had fallen. Ed eased back down onto the chair, enjoying the extended feeling of relaxation - she would be along soon enough to ease it off. Too soon. Ah...

A few moments later, Jill had removed the mask from his face, her face more relaxed as well.

"You don't look like you're in pain." she said, "Now we're leaving."

They walked out towards the door. Ed, still slightly giddy from the three rapid infusions of nitrous oxide, followed after her like a puppy.

"I haven't seen Henry in years."

Jill opened the door for him, and then rummaged around in her purse for the keys. "I figured it was something like that."

"He's doing well for himself. Very proud of him."

He smiled, and nodded, still feeling quite good. He heard the loud sound of the bolt clicking in the lock plate, and Jill turned around, giving him a look square in the eye.

"Are you clearing up? You stayed down longer on that last one. Can you drive?" And then, "No, I'd better drive. Just in case. Can you give me directions where we're going?"

Ed nodded. "Yes, directions." He gave them too her, his words less airy as he went. By the end of the instruction, he was back to normal. They got into the car, Jill at the driver's seat.

Ed fished the nozzle out of his pocket. "This means Shackleton's nozzles were messed with."

She eased onto the main road, heading towards the freeway. "You think he has sarin in his tanks?" She smirked as she said this, but Ed's next words made the expression drain from her face.

"No - but it wouldn't matter if he did," Ed said, "Given the way things have been going, I would wager that in all likelihood, Dr. Shackleton is probably already dead."

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It took Delphi longer than she thought for her to open the back door of Shackleton's office. When it did come unlocked, it did so with a great clanging noise. Delphi looked around furtively - she even sent an eye up towards the nursing home to see if she could discover any over-watchful senior citizen peering from the window - but she saw nothing. Quickly, she slipped inside the door, and shut it behind her.

Delphi rubbed her arms. Her blouse was thin, and it was faintly chilly in the office. She strode quietly, keeping herself mostly in the dark, and did not turn on any of the lights. She headed straight for the front of the office, ignoring the two closed examination rooms. Once there, she slid into the chair in front of the computer, and placed her gloved hands on the case. With a quick lift, she had the computer in front of her. With deft hands, she pried open the case and peered inside. Only one hard drive. Easy as pie. She reached in and disconnected the IDE cables, extracted the hard drive, and placed it carefully into a box in her bag. Just as easily, she had the case back on, the computer on the floor, in near the exact place it had been before.

Technically, what she was doing was illegal. It did not bother Delphi - they always managed to find someone else to blame.

She rose from the chair. Behind her was a wall, and on the other side were the hard copy dental records. She could do nothing with them - she had no idea who they were supposed to be looking for, or even why Shackleton was important. She bypassed the wall, and headed towards the back. The first room was a storage room doubling as a kitchen: a microwave and a pot of coffee were plugged into the far back wall. She could see stacks of paper and forms neatly stacked in boxes around the room. Nosing through it quickly, she could see nothing that was out of the ordinary.

*I wish I knew what I was looking for. Ed's such a dumbass sometimes!*

Delphi moved from that room to the next. A small bathroom. Nothing special here either. Next, she moved to what was probably the dentist's office. A diploma on the wall - he'd only graduated from dental school three years go. She didn't see any personal pictures or effects around the room, and guessed he was a bachelor.

She edged around the room, trying cabinet doors. Some of them were open, but all of them were equipped with locks. It made her wary - either they were fairly lax around

here - and judging by the neatness of everything else, she guessed that was not it - or someone had come in here, unlocked some, and something had interrupted them from locking the cabinets. After finding nothing around the room, Delphi zeroed in on the desk.

The first drawer she pulled open sent a chill down her back.

A wallet and a set of keys sat inside the drawer. Delphi reached out and gave the keys a nudge. Sure enough, the large car key had a Volvo symbol on it.

*Oh, goddamnit. Not again.*

She reached in for the wallet. Chris Shackleton stared up at her from his driver's license photo. He was small looking, sandy brown hair and glasses. He *looked* like a dentist. The wallet contained some credit cards, all in his name, and \$236 of cash. Well, she could rule out burglary. That only left the worst of motives left.

Replacing everything back where it belonged, she shut the drawer.

There were really only two rooms left to go. She stood in the hallway, staring at them. They were both closed.

*Well, Delphi? Is it to be Door #1 or Door #2?*

She wondered what good it would do her to actually see the body. She couldn't call it in with no excuse as to how she got into the locked office on a weekend. She wouldn't be able to tell Ed - at least, not right away - so, couldn't she just skip the body?

Except, she knew she couldn't. She had to find the body.

Taking a deep breath, Delphi pushed open the door closest to her. It swung open, revealing inside of it a normal dental examination room, including the creepy reclining chair with tools and mirrors hanging over it. Except, in the creepy reclining chair was a rigid corpse, still wearing the white doctor's coat and shoes and other mundane habiliments of life. Over its mouth was the inhalation mask for the nitrous tank.

Delphi stood, swallowing back the rising bile in her throat and attempting to compose herself before going into the room. Thomas Moore's body had looked *much* worse. Now, that had been a wet, bloody corpse. This one was just sort of - sitting there. Dry. Dry-ish, anyway.

Her thoughts were not really comforting herself.

*C'mon, Delphi. C'mon. You're not going to let a dead body scare you. He can't do anything to you. Think of something - think of something that makes you angry. Angry.*

And, of course, Ed showed up in her mind. *You're too thin-skinned for this kind of work!*

She felt a surge of annoyance. If she didn't get into that room, she would prove him right. And worse yet, she wouldn't even be able to tell him she'd been a coward. She'd have to suffer in pseudo-silence. And damn it all to hell if she was going to let that happen.

Slowly, she peeled herself off the wall, and took tentative steps into the room. The body did not move. Delphi reached into her purse and pulled out the flashlight, noticing as she did so that her hands were shaking slightly. Holding her right hand with her left, she held up the wan flashlight, and shone it on the dead man in the chair.

There was no mistaking the body in the chair. It was the same Chris Shackleton she'd seen on the driver's license in the office. Granted, she thought grimly, a much stiffer and deader one. She approached, then paused. The body had not moved. She was not in danger. She approached the entire length of the room and looked down at the body.

She could see no apparent cause of death. There were no blood stains visible to her naked eye (and she was not about to peel him open to see if there were any anywhere else - there were limits, even to a non-thin-skinned individual) - no knife wounds, no bullet holes. She could see nothing on his wrists, or around his neck.

It couldn't have been the nitrous, could it? She frowned. She was pretty sure nitrous oxide was not toxic. He would have to have been plugged in to the machine for an entire day in order to die from it - and why would he not have gotten up? It didn't make sense.

Keeping careful eye on the body - lest it move - she went around the side, and looked at the nitrous tank. N<sub>2</sub>O. Delphi had never been good at chemistry. She stored the molecular formula in her head and straightened herself. It would have to wait for later.

And that was enough. Delphi moved towards the door, and shut it, just like she found it. She headed towards the back door, and after cautiously eying out to see if anyone was looking, she snuck out, and shut the door with a snick.

Delphi walked the other way, away from her car. There was a park around the corner. She would change into her normal self in the restroom there, and then go around the block to get back into her car.

When she got into the restroom, she opened one of the stalls and vomited violently into the toilet. Two bodies in two days had gotten to her. There were some things a good Mormon girl couldn't shake, after all.

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Ed sat in the booth, looking at the papers Newly had handed him in the manila envelope. Shackelford had just opened his practice about six months ago. Unmarried. No children,

no family nearby. No strange outstanding debts, decent credit. He flipped the page. He lived on Washington without roommates. No record.

No reason at all why he himself would be targeted. It had not been personal, then - at least nothing they could trace from his background. He tapped his chin with the paperwork, then slid it back into the bag.

"Why are you looking for Shackleton anyway?"

They had explained the basic facts of the case to Damien, who had taken it in stride. Of course, they left out the illegal bits. Ed had explained it was a long-standing unspoken agreement between Damien and himself: Ed would not go out of his way to incriminate himself, and Damien would not go out of *his* way to suspect. Too much, anyway.

"We found his name on a paper left on Martha's body," Jill explained. "Martha is - was - Henry's receptionist. The one he's accused of murdering."

"Have you managed to get hold of him?"

Jill had tried the number in a phone between here and Henry's office. It had gone straight to Chris Shackleton's voice mail. They'd not left a message.

"No - his office isn't open on weekends.."

Damien nodded, and then turned to his side. It was vibrating slightly. He unclipped his phone from his belt and flipped it open. His eyes flickered out towards the car, and he sighed, "Okay. I'll be there in an hour."

Ed eyed him, "Back to the grind for you?"

"They think they found something on the Moore case."

Ed said, "Hrm."

\*\*\*\*\*

Delphi slipped in through a back window at Shackleton's house. Once again, not knowing what, if anything, she could find in the house, she started in the living room and moved through methodically. The man's living room was sunken, sparse, and did not contain a television set. She avoided thinking about what kind of man did not have a television set, mainly because she did not want to think about the man - or what *had* been the man. She'd already had a hell of a time eating her lunch for thinking of the -

She stopped herself just in time.

She did not find anything out of ordinary in the bathroom - one of two places anything out of the ordinary might be. No prescription drugs - just the normal stomach stuff, allergy stuff. He used dandruff shampoo.

Delphi moved on the bedroom, the other place that incriminating (was she even trying to incriminate this guy?) evidence might be found. His closet was stocked full of suits and polo shirts and slacks. Not a pair of jeans or a t-shirt in sight. Nothing strange in the nightstands. Shoes were all normal. Nothing strange.

"Damn it!" she cursed, stepping back from the closet. For the billionth time, she cursed Ed for not giving her the details. What was he at, leaving her out of it? She was the most valuable asset he had! God, what an idiot.

There was only one other room in the house she hadn't checked, but she was ready to head home and crack open that hard drive. The doorway was jarred when she was walking by. Delphi had every intention of just passing it by, but as she passed, she felt a cold breeze across her legs.

*That was unusual - I could have sworn that I didn't feel anything on the way to the bedroom...*

"Oh fuck," Delphi muttered to herself, "What the hell is going on now?"

Slowly inching her hand down her side, she unbuttoned the holster, paused to see if any noise could be heard inside the room. And, indeed, she heard the soft sounds of someone shuffling papers - and then, the sound of another person, entering the room less quietly.

She was good, but two people at once - without knowing whether or not they were armed, and with what - she didn't like the odds. She'd never been a sharpshooter.

Regardless, it would be best if she were armed. Still moving slowly, she grasped the handle of the gun and extracted it, very slowly, and held it at ready. Her best bet would be to sneak out of the house and get away. She went still again, listening. The two were not speaking to each other, but she heard the paper rustling, and a drawer sliding open. Delphi inched along the wall, straightening so her stride was less ungainly.

The living room was in sight, the back door only about twenty feet away, when Delphi, forgetting it was sunken, stumbled. Her heel skidded hard against the wood, and she ended up doing a half split down between the upper hallway and the lower living room. Her muscles protested angrily, and she had to bite down on her tongue, hard, to keep herself from crying out. Scurrying upwards awkwardly, she realized it was too late to keep quiet. She could hear an ominous silence emanating from the office. Then, she was cursing herself. One of the voices - a male - began to whisper.

Delphi knew hesitation was deadly. Without giving it one more thought, she sprang to her feet, and bolted towards the door at a full run.

Luck was not on Delphi's side. She'd only managed to get halfway across to the door when her high heel, stressed from the heavy treading split a few moments earlier, decided to snap off. She stumbled, flying headlong into the dining room chairs. Turning quickly on instinct, Delphi's deflected the brunt of the impact to her trunk. It still hurt like a son of a bitch, and worse yet - there were footsteps now, coming on fast.

Delphi raised her gun towards the hallway, and yelled, trying to sound as fierce as possible, "Come any closer, fuck face, and I'll blow a brain right through your eye!"

*Wait. Oh, goddamnit. Smooth, Delphi, smooth.*

Unexpectedly, the voice that answered her was familiar. And annoyed.

"*Goddamnit, Delphi, why can't you ever do just one thing I ask you to do!*"

## Chapter 8: Police Business

Damien looked down at the phone records. In the month before he was murdered, Mr. Thomas Moore had made dozens of phone calls from his home to a poison control center. Transcripts of the calls were on their way to the office, but the preliminary interviews had disclosed that each time, Moore had called about a different ailment, each time regarding his pet. The name of the pet had changed several times. Yet, none of the neighbors had remembered Moore or his wife Amy ever owning a pet - either cat or dog.

At the desk across the way from Damien, Lang sat down on his chair. It groaned ponderously under Lang's massive weight. Looking at the large bag of grease Frank was clutching in one of his paws, Damien wondered the chair did not simply give up the ghost right then and there. It wouldn't be much longer. Even as he watched, Lang yanked out a gargantuan specimen of pastrami sandwich, dripping fat and mustard out of both sides.

Lang took a huge bite out of the sandwich, and, chewing with his mouth open, said, "Man, I can't believe they called us in for a bunch of lousy phone calls. I was in the middle of getting head from this - "

Damien cut him off quickly, feeling his stomach turning over watching the clumps of meat roll around in his partner's face. "Ed and Delphi were on a case for the guy, looking for his wife Amy - do you have any updates on her whereabouts?"

"Ah, Delphi. That was the red-headed pair of tits, right?"

Damien sighed, scowling faintly. "Are you actually working today, or are you just going to keep running your goddamn mouth off about tits?"

Frank laughed, holding up his hands, which were dirty in addition to being covered in grease. "Take it easy there, pal, I'm here, ain't I? You and I just have different styles of work."

Damien tapped the file in front of him pointedly. "The wife's whereabouts?"

Frank shook his head, "Nope, no dice there. Nothing in the phone records. She didn't have any family either, as far as they could tell."

"And what about the morgue? Did you call them?"

"Nah - Peters had already done it by the time I got in. She told me that the coroner told her that they haven't had anyone come in with her description in the last two or three weeks."

"And Moore said the last time he saw her was just a few days ago."

Frank nodded, chewing loudly.

"Alright, when are we expecting those transcripts in?"

"Tomorrow. Captain said we're running interviews and searching the house again today, just in case those knucklehead blues missed something."

"I got a better idea," Damien said, "Why don't you start on calling the wife's co-workers and see if you can get a better idea of where she might have gone - her habits - things like that."

Frank wagged a finger at him. "I'm not Missing Persons, but you know what, I'll do it for ya. 'Cause I like you, Damon."

Damien bristled, and considered correcting him, but as he watched Lang licking his fingers of both the fat and the extant layer of dirt, he figured it wouldn't matter if he said anything or not, the man sitting in front of him only had brain capacity for two things: eating, and fucking. Damien had no doubt that as soon as he finished eating, he would start spouting off about what bimbo had gone down on him earlier in the day.

"Call me if you get anything interesting."

Frank gave him a thumbs up and went back to chewing.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Hey, doc."

Henry gave a brief greeting smile to Mitch. "Hey. You're out, huh?"

"Yeah, once she got a whiff of the lawyer guy you sent over, she dropped all the charges. I just didn't want to leave without saying thank you for everything. You're a good guy."

Henry waved his hand, "Don't mention it. Remember, you have to go see a dentist for that laceration in your mouth. You want to make sure it doesn't get infected."

"Yeah, yeah - and rinse out with the salt water, I got ya."

Henry nodded, and then rose. He hadn't heard from Ed or Jill since they'd come in that morning. The talk with the lawyer had made him perfectly aware of how real this situation was. He'd told the story over again, and no matter how couched he'd made it, it still came out sounding like he was insane.

"Doc. You listening?"

Henry snapped back to the present moment. "Yes, Mitch? What is it?"

"Storm's rolling in tonight, so the boss's got us all off until it passes. That means I got a few days. You need anything done? On the outside?"

Mitch was indicating outside with a movement of his head. Henry stared at him. "Huh?"

"You got anyone I want to visit? You know? To...*talk* with 'em?"

Comprehension rolled over Henry, and he held up his hands, "No, no, nothing like that, Mitch. Don't worry about that."

Mitch bent close to the glass, and started whispering. "I don't usually offer that sort of thing, you know," Mitch explained, a little sheepish. "It's just - you know, it ain't right you being in there for doing nothing. Someone's gotta pay for that."

"I wouldn't know who to send you at, anyway," Henry told him. And then, a thought occurred to him.

"Actually - you got a few days?"

"Yeah. What can I do?"

"My brother, Ed and one of my patients, Jill - they're looking into things for me. I think whoever framed me are after them. If you could go - "

"That's good enough for me, Doc. No problem. Where do they live?"

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Jill sat in the passenger seat, trying to make herself as small as possible to avoid the angry heat rolling off of Ed. He hadn't spoken at all to her on the drive back, but for a moment in the house, she thought that Delphi and he would start to exchange blows. They were more like - what? Lovers? Mortal enemies? - than they were like employer / employee. She hadn't said so, of course. She wasn't going to get into the middle of *that* for anything.

Even now, he would periodically shoot angry glances at the rear view mirror to see if Delphi was still behind them. She always was. Jill had looked back once to see her flipping Ed the bird, but had wisely kept her smile from showing.

Not to mention, they hadn't found a single scrap of evidence, or anything even remotely resembling evidence. She wondered if Delphi had. Once or twice during the shouting match, Jill thought she'd seen Delphi sneering a little smugly at Ed. There might still be hope.

She'd gotten a hold of Everett Kincaid, the lawyer who had handled her cousin Ron's "unfortunate drug incident" a few years back, and he'd agreed to go downtown and consult with Henry, and Henry's friend - whoever that was. Everett had also intimidated

that the cost would be taken care of by a third party, and the third party hoped that she appreciated it, no matter what kind of lowlifes she was running around these days. He'd seemed a little ill at ease in passing along this message from her mother, but he sounded like he knew which side of the bread the butter was on. Jill reminded herself that her mother's heart was in the right place, even if she was insane, abusive, and overbearing.

And intrusive, and stubborn, and -

The car swerved sharply and pulled into the driveway of a large, dark brown Victorian with green trim. The sign hanging from the roof to the left of the doorway read "Ed Denby, Private Investigator". Ed opened the door, climbed out, and slammed the door behind him. Jill breathed, and then opened her own door and exited the vehicle. By the time she was all the way out, Ed had unlocked the front door of the house and slammed that door behind him as well. Jill stood in the driveway, hesitating.

Soon enough, behind her, the sound of another car, and Delphi pulled up in her VW Rabbit, and climbed out of the car - one leg, and then another. Jill was amazed by the caliber of Delphi's body, envying her the sumptuous, supple curves of her body. Reaching back in, Delphi pulled out a large dark backpack, the contents of which were half spilling out of it. Jill caught sight of a wig, and quickly looked away.

"I swear to God, sometimes that man is just such an ass," Delphi said loudly. "Did he just leave you out here?"

Jill opened her mouth to reply, but Delphi spoke again before she had a chance. "Come on in. It's going to get cold out here, radio said it was going to snow. You can stay in the room next to mine. Just give me a little time to spruce it up - it's been awhile since anyone's been in there."

"I - "

Delphi took her arm gently, moving her along towards the door. "You're going to stay, right? I guess whoever's doing all these killings must be after you to get to Henry. Or, something like that?"

Jill nodded, and then frowned. "*All* these killings? How many have there been?"

"Oh," Delphi said quickly, "Um."

Jill had a feeling she'd been right about Delphi knowing something, but glossed over it. "You live here too?"

"Yeah," Delphi opened the door for her. She stood only a few inches taller than Jill, but Jill felt like a little girl standing next to her. How the *hell* was it possible to look like that? She wondered how old Delphi was. Couldn't be older than her - right?

Her thoughts regarding the woman in front of her disappeared as soon as she stepped through the door.

The inside of the house was decorated..."oddly" was the best word Jill could find to describe her impression of it. There were things everywhere she looked - odd drums, weird statues, boxes, large peacock feathers. Strange masks lined the top of a giant mirror, underneath which there stood a beautiful Queen Anne sofa table. A bell jar holding nothing sat on the table, next to a large blue and white Chinese plate, in which Ed's keys and wallet were tossed.

Jill turned her head. The living room to the right of the entrance was hexagonal, and had a couch in three of the four walls, each a different color: a deep green couch, a vibrant orange couch, and a black couch. The black couch had a neatly folded blanket on it - the deep green couch had a scarlet and black comforter messily strewn over it, as if someone had slept there recently.

Delphi did not bat an eye - of course, she lived in this strange and wonderful place - and threw her own keys and purse next to Ed's things on the plate.

"Give me just a second to get you some covers and things."

Delphi disappeared behind the stairway where several boxes were stacked haphazardly. She opened a doorway close by, and examined it.

Ed appeared from out of the room to the direct left of Jill. He looked at her, and then in the direction she was looking.

"Hey, I want to talk to you, *now*."

Delphi didn't miss a beat. "You're waiting, because I'm busy."

"Goddamnit." Ed disappeared through the door. Almost as an afterthought, he called out, "Make yourself at home, Jill. I need some time to think."

At least, she thought he'd said *think*. It could have been *drink*.

Jill stood, with her purse close to her. She was almost relieved when it began to vibrate, and she had something to do instead of stand around.

It was an unfamiliar number. Thinking it might be Everett calling from the jail, she flipped it open.

"Hello?"

*"I'd think twice about helping them, if I were you. I'd get out of that house right now, if I were you"*

Jill froze where she was, her eyes falling on Delphi, still digging through the linen closet.

"What?"

The line went dead.

She stared down at her phone, and her hands shaking, she quickly moved forward, towards Delphi. Delphi looked up at her.

"Would you prefer cotton, or - "

"Someone just called me and told me to get out of this house."

Delphi went very still, and then reached out for Jill's phone. Jill surrendered it, and followed the swift red head into the room Ed had disappeared into. This room was an office. A very messy office. Two very long desks faced one another, with a large black recliner in the middle, backed against a gigantic antique armoire.

Delphi sat down in her chair, booting up her machine and simultaneously flipping through Jill's phone. She looked at Jill.

"What service do you use, and what is your number?"

Jill blinked at her. "It's AT&T. And (123) 555-1739."

Delphi quickly typed into her machine, setting Jill's phone back on the desk. Her fingers flying furiously about the keyboard, she spent a very intense two minutes clicking and typing. Jill turned to sneak a peak at Ed, who was sitting back in his chair, staring at the ceiling with his eyes closed. For a moment, she thought he was sleeping. Until he opened his mouth and said, "Are you going to call down the federal government on me again with what you're doing there?"

She smiled, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ed sighed, but was otherwise silent.

"Anyway," Delphi said, "It's not like I was the one who got a poisonous snake loosed on the house. At least you can reason with the federal government."

"Do you and I live in the same country?"

"Of course we do. You're just not as attractive."

He grunted.

Delphi paused, and then ten keyed in Jill's number. Her features twisted in consternation. "It's Thomas Moore's cell phone."

Jill heard Ed sit up behind her. "Was it a man or a woman on the phone?"

"A man," she replied, "Who's Thomas Moore?"

"A dead man," Delphi answered macabrely. "Whose cell phone is apparently missing."

"What are the odds, though?" Ed considered, "Thomas Moore warning her about being here?"

Delphi tapped her chin - Jill noticed Ed had this same idiosyncrasy. If she wasn't so scared, it might have amused her.

"Pretty slim," Delphi replied, "Unless whatever is going on is massive. What if it's some conspiracy?"

"*Please*," Ed said, "Please don't start with your crazy conspiracy theories."

"I don't have any crazy ones - all of mine are grounded in reality."

Jill interrupted, not a little flustered. "Hey! Can we get back to this phone call? The guy told me I shouldn't help you, that I shouldn't be in here!"

"You're mostly safe here," Delphi told her, "Whoever is calling you is just trying to get your hot under the collar."

"But," Jill asked, starting to feel a little bit of panic, "How do you know they aren't just right outside the house? How else would they know I'm here?"

When she turned towards Ed, he was staring down underneath his desk.

"What are you doing!"

"There's no strange cars on the street," he answered. "Nothing out of the ordinary. If they were out there, they're gone now."

"What are you looking at? How do you know that?"

"He's got security cameras around the entire perimeter."

"What about the house? How do we know nobody came in here and planted a bomb or something!"

"Nobody got in," Delphi said, suddenly soothing. "Trust me on this. It's very difficult to get into this house."

Jill put her face in her hands and sighed. "God, it's been a shitty weekend. I feel like I'm going to die any moment."

Delphi had come around her desk, and put a reassuring hand on Jill's arm. "Take it easy. Come on, help me take the stuff upstairs and we'll get you set up."

"I have to call my boss. I have to let her know I won't be in to work tomorrow."

Delphi reached over and handed Jill her phone back. "There. Come on."

Jill walked up the stairs, and Delphi left her momentarily to grab some covers from the cabinet. She then led the way up the stairs. Jill followed in a daze. She hadn't got a full eye view of the upstairs before, but the outside was deceptive. It was a very large house, with several doorways on the upstairs portion. Delphi opened one of them, and Jill entered. The room itself was also very large, full of things - mostly full of a large, four poster bed.

"Sorry about the mess. He has all this junk all over the place."

"I noticed," Jill said, smiling faintly. "Some of it's beautiful."

"I think they were from his parents," Delphi said conversationally, laying the bedding down on the bed. "They collected all this stuff from all over the world. That's all I know. He doesn't talk much about them."

Jill blinked, and then moved forward. "Oh, I can do that. Thanks. Sorry for wiggling out back there - I'm just not used to this...this stuff."

Delphi grinned at her. "I'm still not used to it most days. Try to get some sleep. I'm right next door. Ed is in the room all the way on the other side of the hall."

She left, shutting the door behind her. Jill sat down on the bed and sighed. Her boss was definitely not going to like her missing work, but she couldn't face going in. She didn't know if it was possible for her to go back to normal, not with the idea that there was someone out there who wanted her dead. How would she get around that?

She expected to have a hard time going to sleep - but the second her head hit the pillow, she was out like a light.

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She shut the door and blew out a long, shaky sigh. Delphi was scared, and not just a little, but it would have done no good to have Jill around for it. She seemed wired - Delphi did not blame her. She'd be no good to them all strung out like that.

Delphi still had to tell Ed everything she'd found that day, and crack into the hard drive. She'd not had time, what with Ed screaming at her at Shackleton's and driving back. And her body hurt. She rubbed her back as she walked down the stairs, and walked into the office where Ed still was.

When she entered, he was still gazing down below his desk at the surveillance cameras.

"Did you really see nobody out there?"

"No. Nobody left about fifteen minutes ago."

Delphi had been afraid of that. "How many nobody's?"

"Just the one. Couldn't really see him, though. He looked big."

Delphi slid into her chair and looked at him. "Hey. I can't help you if you don't tell me what's going on. Why are you keeping me out of this?"

Ed looked her square in the face. "Two reasons. One: we have that police case we promised Damien we would work on. That is what pays for your salary. I thought you could work on that while I try to get my brother out of jail. Two: I don't want you getting hurt. It's more dangerous - "

"Than a poisonous fucking snake?" Delphi demanded. "Who are you trying to kid here?"

She had her hands back on her hips. "Is this about the thin-skinned thing? Is that what this is about?"

Ed shut his eyes for a moment, his jaw clenching. "Delphi, it's *personal*, okay? This is something I have to deal with - "

"Hey," she said, insistent, "I understand you want to keep your personal things personal. Fine. I understand that. But this is not something only *you're* involved with. Your brother - that girl upstairs - their *lives* are on the line here. Whatever - and excuse me for this, really - *bullshit* - that you're holding inside, that you don't want to share with anyone - it has to take a back seat to making sure they don't die. And you know what I'm good at? You know what I'm good at? I'm good at keeping people from dying. You have the responsibility to use everything you have to keep them alive and figure this out. Everything. That means ME."

"What about - "

Delphi held up a finger. "I am choosing to do this. You don't have a say in that, either. You can fire me. I'll still try to help."

Ed tapped his desk with one hand, eyes staring off into space. It was a long while before he spoke again.

"Okay," he said finally. "Okay."

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Delphi sprung to life.

"Alright. You brought something in that bag of tricks of yours when you came back into the house. What do you got?"

She pulled up the bag onto the desk, and yanked out the hard drive. "I went over to Shackleton's office - "

"During the day!?"

"Take it easy - I was disguised!"

Ed covered his face, "Goddamnit, Delphi. Are you crazy? What if he'd been there?"

"His car was outside, with a ticket plastered right on the front windshield - I don't know any dentists that stay over night at their practices, do you? I knew something was up. I have a nose for these things. Now, are you gonna let me finish?"

Ed shook his head, but did not interrupt further.

"So, a lady from the old folks' home behind the house said that he worked late, and he'd had some visitors. I went into the office, grabbed this, and then - I found Shackleton."

"Dead?"

She nodded, "Yeah. In his chair. The mask was over his face. I couldn't see any external perforations - he was hooked up to the tank - N2O, it said."

"Delphi, did you look at the tank? Did you look at the nozzle on that tank?"

Delphi blinked. "No. Not really. I just looked at the writing on the side. N2O, or NO2, or something. Nitrous, right?"

"What?"

"What what?"

"NO2? That's nitrogen dioxide."

"No, no, I meant N2O. Nitrous."

"Hrm. Right." Ed sat up. "What do you have in the hard drive?"

"It'll take me a few minutes to pull it up. Have to put it in my other machine."

Delphi tossed the bag to the side to get to her computer. The files Damien had given her flopped out onto the counter.

"What's all that?"

"Oh. Damien gave me the files for the police case that's going to pay our bills."

Ed sauntered over, and picked up the files, flipping through them, eyes scanning. Pathology reports. Some of the missing victims. Locations where bodies were found. The locations were sprinkled over the entirety of the city, and there seemed to be no pattern other than that they were inside the city.

Moore's cell phone had called Jill. That only made sense if it were wide open. Say - a conspiracy a city wide? He looked down at Delphi, wriggling underneath her desk, adding Shackleton's hard drive to her second computer. It was too ludicrous an idea. He was starting to think like her.

Still - Moore calling Jill?

"Alright," she said, "I've just got to fiddle with the computer to make sure it reads correctly. Few more minutes."

He nodded absentmindedly, still looking at the files Damien had left for them. He wandered over to his desk, and picked up the phone.

Damien picked up, sounding harassed. "Yeah?"

"You said you had a breakthrough on the Moore case?"

"Something like it. Why?"

"We just got a phone call from Moore's cell phone to Jill."

A pause on the other line. "We didn't find his cell phone."

"I thought you might not have. What did you guys get on the case?"

"Phone records. They indicate he called some poison control center a couple dozen times the month before he died. We're still waiting on transcripts. I'm back in the house right now, doing a search."

Ed tapped his chin. "Is that partner of yours with you?"

"Nope. He's back at the office, doing some background work on the wife."

"Right. I'll be out there in a few minutes."

Ed hung up the phone before Damien could protest. He stood, threw on his coat. Delphi looked up at him. "Where are you going?"

"Damien's back at Moore's house. I'm going to see what he can find out there. We may have to hand over the phone information to the police. It's an active case. In any case, you stay put, and do what you do. You know, keeping people alive."

"Yeah, yeah." Delphi looked back at her computer. "Keep me posted."

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Ed stepped outside the house. His eyes immediately went across the street towards the place he had seen the car in the security camera. Nothing was there now. He was not entirely sure that the person was gone - at least, he was mildly paranoid about it. Delphi was no ordinary woman, but he remembered the size of the guy in the car, and it didn't sit easy with him.

Climbing into his car, he backed out of the driveway and drove down the street slowly, eyes shifting back and forth. He could see nothing, so accelerated and headed for the freeway.

Ed's head was full of thoughts as he drove. Henry, first and foremost. Three years at least since he'd seen his little brother. It had been a long three years. After both their parents had died, Ed had come back to the old Victorian house that they'd all lived in, and raised Henry. Henry had always been a sweet kid - never bullied anyone, never threw tantrums, never broke rules. Smart as hell, too - like their mother had been. Ed took after their father - a little rougher around the edges, a little more likely to cause trouble. It'd been lonely for awhile. Raising a kid - even one that was as well behaved as Henry, and as old, turned out to be harder than he thought.

Henry went off to college, then to dental school. Ed stayed home, opened the business, and learned to sift through dull paperwork in a house full of their parents' lives collections, to pay for Henry. Ed was made of sterner stuff than most others - he never resented Henry for dragging him down, although he did recognize the hardships of it. One day, he'd met a woman. She was beautiful and polished, and seemed to have an appreciation for him - Ed had fallen, and hard. It had been lonely, he told himself. Henry

was gone. His responsibilities - and, admittedly, his personality - had precluded serious relationships while Henry'd been around.

It had been something of a whirlwind experience. Ed was not prone to them. He'd been happy - or so he thought. Then, on one of Henry's school breaks, he'd come back to the house. He'd met the woman - and things had started to go wrong. Henry - his mild-mannered little brother, who'd been afraid of women his whole life - hated her. It was the only time in Ed's life he had felt an enmity for his brother - the only time he'd persuaded himself he might be better off without him.

It had come to a heated wrangle - Ed had shot off his mouth and told Henry exactly that: he'd be better off without him, he'd have to go out on his own for awhile. Henry, rarely silent and angry, had left - and just like that, three years had gone by. Henry'd been right about the woman, of course - his brother, although younger and admittedly afraid of women, was a good judge of character.

Ed sighed. And now his little brother was in trouble, and deep down inside, he wondered if there was anything he could do. It frightened him to think of losing him again - like this.

By the time he reached Moore's house, Ed had exhausted his mind on it, and was glad for a change of pace, to be able to do something. He parked a block down the way, and walked up to the house, careful to avoid the more brightly lit houses. The evening was coming on quickly - clouds were obscuring the moon and it felt like a storm. Rain was no good for detective work. The whole world got muddy, and things got difficult to hide.

Damien was inside the house when he stepped through the back door. The body outline was still on the floor. The rest of the house, in all of its floral glory, had been gone over.

"Damien?"

"In the office," he called. "I think I found something."

Ed wended his way into the office, and found Damien sitting at a chair in front of a computer. It was hardly an office - more like a den. A den of something. There were Japanese animation girls plastered all around the room, all of them buxom and falling out of their costumes. Ed could not help but notice the likeness to Delphi, but quickly moved his mind away from it.

"What do you have?"

Damien's gloved hands raised, and threw Ed a pair. Ed quickly put them on, and took from Damien a small slip of paper. It was a receipt from Home Depot. He scanned over the items. Screws. Rope. A power saw. Tarp. A shovel. Lime.

"Did he just plant a tree?"

"Nope. No new trees around the property."

"Maybe it's for work," Ed suggested. "What's he do?"

Damien gave him a meaningful glance. "He's an accountant."

"You're not thinking what I think you're thinking," Ed said. "You're not thinking he actually murdered the wife. Who would be stupid enough to buy all these things at once, on the same receipt?"

"'Stupid enough' is not a consideration you have to take into account when dealing with most people," Damien answered. "But, let's assume he did murder her. One: why would he do it? What's he got to gain from it? Two: Where is her body hidden? and Three: Who killed him?"

"I assume he doesn't have any incriminating holes on his property."

"Nope."

"Hrm." Ed looked down at the date and time of the receipt. "Did you notice he bought these things on the same day he called us in? The same day he died?"

"Yeah, I did."

"We were here staking him out for three hours - no activity in or outside the house. Which means he was killed before we got here."

"It's possible. His wallet was also still on his body - including the card he used to purchase these items. No, it was him who bought these things. But why?" Damien sighed.

"Have you heard from ballistics?"

"Nope, they are still out on that. Lang is supposed to track that down. That is, if he manages to remember. Which is really fuckin' doubtful."

Ed grinned. "Don't complain to me about difficult partners."

"No, this guy is as different from Delphi as you can imagine. There's no comparison. She's brilliant, ballsy. This guy is just a jackass. Jesus, I must have pissed someone off bad to get this assignment."

"How long has it been?"

"Three or four weeks." Damien shook his head. "I'm not gonna lie man, I try to find things for him to do back at the office so I don't have to listen to his stupid ass all day."

Ed chuckled shortly.

"So, someone called Jill from Moore's phone?"

"Yeah," Ed nodded. "So someone involved in this murder got a hold of that phone some how."

"But - both you and Henry? Isn't that a bit of a stretch?"

"I've been through the odds with Delphi. They're huge, I know. She's got some theory about it being a city-wide thing. I don't know. I don't know what the fuck's going on, and it's scaring the shit out of me."

"Henry holding up?"

"He seems to be alright. I haven't spoken with him since this morning, though. We sent a lawyer there to talk with him."

"Good," Damien nodded. "Maybe if we get to the bottom of this Moore murder, it'll help Henry out."

"I'm hoping," Ed agreed.

"Alright. Let's get into the garage and take a look around in there for some of the things here."

They headed down towards the garage. Ed was glad to see that the floral decor did not reach into the garage. He felt vaguely relieved not having to stalk around in a pastel colored nightmare any longer.

The garage was a mess. Boxes of greasy tools and metal littered the floors, and there were neglected pegs on which nothing hung. Everything was in piles, all around, in disarray. Damien headed towards one end of the garage, and Ed turned and walked to the other. Reaching into one of the boxes to check what might have been a saw, he was suddenly startled by a loud squeak and jumped back as a large rat scurried out of the box and dropped to the floor, racing away into the massive piles of junk. Ed cursed, reached down to retrieve the fallen wrench.

As he was straightening himself, he saw a strange thing in the back seat of Moore's ancient parked car. Far down below the seat, almost undetectable, he saw a tiny rip in the panel of the left back seat. It looked like someone had unraveled the stitching, only -

"Damien."

Damien looked up from where he was searching. Ed gestured him over and pointed towards the inside of the car. "Do you see that?"

Damien squinted in at the seat. After a few moments, he straightened and said, "No. What are you looking at?"

"There's a tear in that seat cushion. Do you have a key to this car?"

"Not with me."

Ed looked around himself. Seeing nothing he could use, he bounded up the stairs to the house proper and retrieved a hanger from one of the closets. Bending as he walked, he fashioned a makeshift slimjim, and pushed it into the space between the window and the door. After sufficient amounts of fishing around and grunting, Ed was awarded with a satisfying popping noise, and the lock disengaged. Stepping back, Ed swung back the door, and immediately began to probe the back of the seat. Sure enough, as soon as he pressed hard enough upon it, he could see where the cut area pulled off of the rest of the seat. He insinuated the hanger inside the cut, and reached in, pulling back the cut cushion.

They did not see anything bloody. Instead, inside were three or four sheets of paper, all of which contained carefully inscribed dates, dollar amounts and - what was the last? mg?

Then, it hit him. "Dosages."

"Dosages. For what?"

Ed ran his eyes down the page - no names. Nothing. Just the information, in neat, orderly columns. He handed some of it to Damien. "Drugs?"

"These stop a few days ago."

"Right around the time Amy went missing. He said she'd been into drugs."

"You think he was dealing for her? Or they were dealing together?"

Ed shrugged. "I don't know. Does this match his writing?"

Damien looked at the pages. "I couldn't say 100%, but I'd say it's pretty close."

Ed sat down on the car seat, tapping his chin with the papers. "I don't understand how Henry is involved in this. There's nothing that connects these two cases at all, but these random ass occurrences. But I know it isn't coincidence. It's just something we're not seeing. Goddamnit!"

He put his hand on his head, and shook it.

"C'mon, Ed. Let's see if we can round up those tools. Tomorrow's Monday - you guys can check out Shackleton and see what that message was about. It may have the link you're looking for, and we can take it official."

Ed had forgotten about Shackleton - forgotten what he knew about that good doctor that Damien did not. Damien wasn't a fool. If he found out Shackleton was dead, he'd know they'd hidden it from him, and it would be that much more shit for him to clean up. If he told him - Ed gambled.

"Shackleton's dead, Damien. Delphi went there today and found his body in one of his chairs, mask on."

Damien froze, turned towards his friend. Myriad emotions streamed through his face, most of which were restrained carefully. Damien could be a very diplomatic man.

"Alright," he said quietly. "Do you know how?"

"No. She didn't see anything externally traumatic. He was strapped to his gas tank, though."

"Was he a user?"

Ed frowned. "Drugs?"

"Nitrous," Damien said quietly. "Do you know if there were signs he took it for recreation?"

"I have no idea."

"Fuck, this is bad," he said, sitting. "Murder all over the fucking place, and I just know all of it's connected."

"You're a homicide cop. Aren't you used to this shit?"

"This is not regular homicide. Someone is going out of their way to cover shit up. I don't like it. It's bad. I got a bad feeling."

He sighed. "All right. We still gotta look for these tools. Then you're gonna get the hell out of here, and start working on that police file I gave you and Delphi, and stay down until we can discover his body officially on Monday. Hopefully it won't be long before his receptionist tries to get in and finds it. Shit."

They resumed their look. They found nothing in the garage matching the items on the list. As Ed was going through the door to leave, he turned and said to Damien, who was on the phone dialing Lang's number to check up.

"Thanks, Damien."

Damien shook his head. "Goddamnit. This is going to kick my ass."

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Delphi sucked another few strings of noodles out of the leftover Chinese food and stabbed at the keyboard a couple times. She was having a hell of a time with the stupid dental record program. Who still used DOS based program nowadays, anyway?

With a sigh, she set the container on the desk. It had been quiet for some time, and Ed had not called. Thinking she better check up on Jill upstairs, she rose, and walked up towards the bedrooms. The door to Jill's room opened without a sound - which was a miracle in and of itself - and she saw Jill, unmolested, sleeping soundly in the bed. Delphi looked at her sleeping there - and despite the vicious emotions rushing threw her when she'd first seen Jill open the door of the motel, she actually felt sorry for her. There'd been enough times in her own life when Delphi felt afraid and tossed out - more than a few times, actually.

And God knows she could empathize with being thrown in harm's way by a Denby man.

She shut the door, and walked back down the stairs, yawning. It would take little while yet, but she was certain with some time, she could crack the -

Delphi was suddenly hoisted off her feet. Without knowing why or how, she started thrashing wildly, kicking as hard as she could kick - but it was no use. Whoever had her was too big. There was only so much someone of her small stature could do (no matter how curvy) - and just as she started to feel the beginnings of real fear, the bedroom upstairs burst open, and Jill, hair wild around her head, was staring down at them.

"Delphi!"

Jill took a deep breath and grabbed the closest thing to her - a green vase - and hurled it, as hard as she could, down the stairs. Delphi saw it coming, and prayed - prayed as hard as she could - that it would not hit her instead of her assailant.

It did neither. Jill, who was mildly impressive at ramming people with fake palm trees, was absolutely no good at throwing heavy vases. It crashed ineffectually a few steps above Delphi and whoever it was that was holding her. Jill frowned, and then vaulted herself down the stairs, shoving as hard as she good, again, leaving Delphi to hope against hope that she would not be crushed in the aftermath.

Jill rammed them both, and they fell down the stairs, in a tumble. For a moment, Delphi thought she was going to break some sort of bone. It didn't happen. Instead, Delphi was dragged forcefully across the floor, like a football, and suddenly, she felt the biting rain crashing down on her barely clothed skin.

"LET ME GO YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE LET ME GO NOW OR YOU'RE GOING TO PAY FOR IT I SWEAR TO GOD I'LL CUT YOUR FUCKING NUTS OFF WITH MY TEETH!"

Several more bits of pottery littered the doorway after them. Delphi heard Jill running after them, and saw Jill's aim finally strike gold: Something sharp flew towards Delphi's assailant, grazing him low on the neck before falling to the ground. Delphi saw a thin trickle of blood forming, and the man cursed, deeply, but was undeterred.

Now, Jill was running behind them, clawing at the man holding Delphi, who she could tell by now was dressed all in black and -

Delphi saw the gun before Jill did. In a thorough panic, she gnashed her teeth and lunged for any part of him she could get a hold of. The closest place was his shoulder. Quickly, and with as much fierceness as she could muster, she lowered her head and bit.

It didn't have any affect at all. The kidnapper moved on like a mad bull in pursuit of a red flag. Delphi was caught - and it infuriated her. She would have no qualms about actually biting off the asshole's balls. None at all.

But all this was unimportant! Jill was in danger! She saw the gun being raised again, and before she could do anything - what could she do? What?! - the sound of the gun went off. The rain obscured what she could see, but the last dreaded moment before she was thrown into the back of a car, she saw a dark mass laying in front of the house, very still. Delphi's rage flooded her senses. She hurled her entire body towards the door, and it slammed right in her face.

She raised her fist, intending to smash the window, but from behind her, a high, annoyingly sharp female voice said, "That'll be enough of that out of you."

The last thought Delphi had was of Ed, and his stupid face, and how desperately sad it was that she would never see it again.

## Chapter 9: Cracked

Jill lay on the ground, feeling the rain seeping down on the ground underneath her. She was breathing heavily, frightened and horribly confused, her head pounding and every bit of her hurting from the skidding fall she had somehow taken in the dark. How had it happened? Where was she?

She'd seen the man who had taken Delphi. It had been the gunman. The gunman who had come to Henry's office nearly two days ago. How was it possible? What was he doing here? She'd been frightened and livid at once. Why had he taken Delphi? Where was everyone?

And...why was it not raining ON her?

Jill blinked, several times. Then, her eyes focused. They moved, up and down, over something very large, curled up over her, staring down at her. Eyes out of a large - no, no - HUGE face. It was so close to her she could not make it out, but the orangey light from the street lamp cast itself on an immense bicep with a name on a tire company on it.

A deep, rumbling voice asked, "Are you alright? Did I hurt you too bad throwing you down?"

It took her a moment before she found her own voice. "No. No. I'm...who are you? Where's Delphi!"

"They got her," he said, "I tried. They were too fast for me, by the time I realized what was goin' on."

When he pulled back from her, she saw he was clutching his arm. The bullet -

"You saved my life!"

"Don't mention it. It don't hurt half as much as pain in your teeth. Trust me, I fucking know."

He helped her up, and they headed up towards the house. Once they were inside, Delphi shut the door, and turned to look at him.

He was the biggest man she'd ever seen. He looked like that comic book character - the one that hung out with the rest of them in the movie with Jessica Alba - THING. Only, no cracked earth skin. And, this one was bleeding all over the floor.

"Jesus, is it bad?"

"Nah. Like I said, doesn't hurt so bad once you've known what an absinthe is."

"A...a what?"

"You know, like a lump in your teeth?"

"An *abscess*?"

"Ah, yeah. That thing. I had one of those earlier." He looked down at his arm, and prodded it with a huge finger. "It'll be fine."

"I have to call Ed," Jill said, rushing around. She stopped, stared at the man. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"That's what I was about to tell ya! My name's Mitch - Henry Denby sent me."

Jill stopped in her tracks - she couldn't help it. It was too terrific a story to be true.

"Henry sent you? Are you...are you a friend of Henry's?"

"Sure am! He helped me get released from the clink this morning. Told me to watch after you - Jill?" She nodded slowly. "Yeah - and his brother, Ed. Where is he?"

"I don't know," she said, "I have to call him. Stay here. I mean - it's not my place - I'm sure they have some sort of peroxide or alcohol or whatever for your wound there. You don't want it to - you know...fester."

Mitch shook his head, "No, ma'am. Henry told me to watch you, so I'm gonna watch you. If I'd only come sooner, I could have saved the red head, too. Goddamnit!"

The memory of Delphi being dragged away and thrown in the car caused Jill to kick back into gear. She blocked out the fact that a giant was following her up the stairs, pushed that rumination away for a less hectic time. Fumbling in her purse for her phone, she finally located it, and began to dial.

\*\*\*\*\*

The rain was making it a bitch to drive in. It was coming down in sheets and sheets, and Ed could hardly see through his windshield on the drive home. It made him uneasy - he hated the rain. He was cruising down freeway, only four or five miles from his exit when his phone rang.

Static garbled the connection, but he did recognize Jill's voice trying to come through. What bits he caught were not comforting.

"Ed!...came and got...tried to stop him, but they got her...Henry sent...to do? Hello? Hell - ?"

The line went dead.

Ed's insides roiled. It was too uncertain from the phone call what had happened, but it frightened the hell out of him. Had one of them been taken? Both of them? Why had he left them? GODDAMNIT, WHY HAD HE LEFT THEM ALONE?

Despite the rain, despite all - Ed rammed his foot hard against the gas and gunned it for home.

He fought back the impulse to think up scenarios. He did not try to call again. He could tell by the volume of rain that it would be no use. He was completely helpless.

Through the darkness and rain, Edward Denby drove. That was all he could do.

\*\*\*\*\*

Newly shut his phone in disgust. Goddamn that lazy son of a bitch! He'd probably not done a goddamned thing he'd been asked to do, either!

Lang had called him to tell him he was taking off early for the night - hot date with some stupid piece of fluff or something. It annoyed Damien no end, but he'd already gotten approval for it - what could he do? Damien didn't want to call him back. It wouldn't do any bit of good. Goddamn it!

He was annoyed enough by the fact that there was another body floating around out there, and he couldn't even do anything to reveal it. Anonymous tips may be well and good on television, but actually doing it in real life was just a recipe for disaster. He was annoyed that he could do nothing more to help Ed and his useless, brain-dead partner was out there having a goddamn fucking good time and he was stuck on a case from hell, left with a whole slough of disconnected patterns leading - where? Goddamn fucking no where, that's where.

Damien was in a rotten mood by the time he parked his car and walked up to the office. It was well onto evening on a Sunday now - the detective wing of the station was low-staffed. He shrugged off his wet coat and went to the coffee machine to pour himself a cup of sludge. Eileen Finneran, the evening dispatcher, had just turned in her chair and she caught sight of Damien.

"You look like shit, Damien."

He growled at her. "Thanks a lot. Would you like to kick me in the crotch while you're at it?"

Eileen shook her head. "Take it easy there, lieutenant, your crank rash is showing."

Damien had known Eileen for a number of years - ever since he was a wet behind the ears rookie, and he knew he was out of line when she had to tell him. Purposefully

calming himself down, he shook his head, and took a deep drink out of the coffee. It was lukewarm, as usual.

"Lang leave yet?"

"Left hours ago. Said he had a hot date, and that he would be calling you about it."

"Fucking prick," Damien muttered.

"Ah," Eileen said sagely. "So that's it. You don't like the son of a bitch, then?"

Damien gave her a dry smile. "Does it show?"

She nodded. "All over yourself, like a crank rash."

Damien shook his head. He knew Eileen would not tell others what he said, so he indulged, and let himself vent. "I mean, Jesus Christ, how did that fucking idiot ever pass as a blue, let alone a detective? He's a lazy, overbearing, stupid son of a bitch!"

Eileen smirked. "Oh, you haven't heard, huh?"

"Heard what?" Damien leaned against the counter. "Don't tell me he's someone's bitch down at city hall?"

Eileen didn't have time to reply before a departmental courier came into the office in front of them. They both stopped gossiping. The courier looked at Eileen, and down at the envelope. "Lieutenant Newly."

"Ah, you can give to him yourself. I'm not anybody's bitch."

The switchboard lit up and Eileen winked at Damien before turning back to her job.

"I'm Newly."

"Here you go, Lieutenant." The courier walked off. Damien tapped Eileen's back and headed back to his own desk, feeling slightly better for having gotten some of his aggression off his chest. He eased into his chair, and looked down at the envelope the courier had sent. It was from the poison control wing of Ashland Pharmaceuticals. He opened it and pulled out the contents.

For several dozen telephone calls, there certainly wasn't any meat to the conversations.

October 9, 2007 12:37 AM

Operator (O): Ashland poison control. What product, please?

Moore (M): My dog Clifford ate one of my girlfriend's birth control pills.

O: Your dog may experience some mood swings or mild foaming. If more serious side effects occur, sir please consult a local veterinarian.

October 12, 2007, 11:45 PM

Operator (O): Ashland poison control. What product, please?

Moore (M): My cat Garfield ate one of my antacid tablets.

O: Your cat may vomit, or become dizzy. It will pass, sir. If he experiences any more side effects, we do highly recommend you consult a skilled veterinarian.

October 26, 2007 11:30 PM

Operator (O): Ashland poison control. What product, please?

Moore (M): My dog Clifford drank some of my antacid tablets.

O: I see this is your second call, sir. Has there been heavy vomiting?

M: Yes.

O: We highly recommend you consult a knowledgeable veterinarian.

And it went on like for pages about little Clifford and Garfield. Damien read four or five more cases, and they were all the same. Always one of the pets. Sometimes a different type of medicine, but all of them recommended that he consult a veterinarian. It was nothing out of the ordinary in and of itself. The strange part all lay with Moore himself. Not only was there no evidence of ever being pets in the house, but the sheer number of calls about his pets consuming so much?

It was all apart of the bad feeling he was getting. It was a code. Some sort of code, and he felt sure he could break it. He *had* to break it. His mind was tired, though - he was sore. He stretched, opening and closing his eyes.

He took another drink of his coffee. There was nothing on his desk from Lang - that was no big surprise, but he still needed to hear from ballistics.

Damien rose, reluctantly, from his chair, and headed down the back stairs towards the ballistics lab. Maybe Vivian Vu was still working down there. She sometimes pulled all nighters - the sweetheart of the detectives division, actually. She never lacked for flowers on her birthday, although Damien did hate to bother her. Everyone else did, and he tried to give her a break if he could.

Sure enough, as Damien rounded the corner, Vivian's bright face greeted him. "Hey Damien."

"Viv. How are you?"

"I'm doing alright. Tired, but who isn't around here? What are you looking for?"

"Ballistics back on the Moore shooting."

Vivian's eyes rolled back to her head - she was thinking. "Moore, Moore. Yesterday? D'you put in a rush?"

"Actually," Damien leaned in, "It's not really my case. I'm hoping there is something I can use, though. There was a homicide at the same place last night, and I wanted to see if there was any - "

"Ah," she pulled up something from underneath the counter. "Sorry, Newly - it hasn't come back yet. That one had to be sent away. We're swamped around here, downtown is trying to pick up the slack - if I'd known you needed it, I would have done it myself. You know how the holidays are around here, though. 'Tis the season to shoot up your neighbor."

Damien grinned. "Alright, Viv. Thanks anyway."

"Sure." She replaced the clipboard. "So, I haven't seen you around these parts in awhile. Breaking in the new wife?"

She was referring to Lang, and it made Damien wince. "Yeah - I'll stop by and tell you about him some other time. I need to get back upstairs and make some phone calls."

Vivian waved, "Yeah, slave to the job. I know how it is. Don't be a stranger. Bring me some nice juicy ones soon, for old time's sake."

In black humor, Damien's mind wandered to Shackleton. Too bad there didn't seem to be any bullets in that case to please the fair lady of ballistics.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ed sat still on his chair, Jill and Mitch in front of him.

"It was raining too hard to see the license plate," Mitch told him. "I tried to see before I jumped in front of Jill, but - "

Ed nodded. His insides were cold, and he felt off balance, but held it together. She'd been alive when the car had taken her. He'd have to go with.

"It was a dark car. New-ish," he said, "Like one of them fancy ones - Mercedes, or BMWs. One of those."

"It was the same guy who attacked Henry and me at the clinic. The same guy who killed Martha."

It was all related. Delphi was right. Somehow, it was all related. He just had to figure out how. Ed wanted to clutch his head, wanted to beat the shit out of something, anything - but he didn't. He sat, still, forcing his brain to continue its revolutions over and over the information he had.

Henry was attacked. The day after he received a message from Shackleton. Shackleton was dead. Most likely poisoned. The only connection between the two: same dental school, and a referral. This Preston. Whoever Preston was.

If they could figure that out -

Ed looked up at Delphi's computer. Whoever had taken her had not bothered to remove the computer information. They'd either been ignorant of what she was doing, or just wanted to take her. It might be good. She still might be alive.

Ed clenched his teeth. Goddamnit. Couldn't think of that now.

"Delphi took the hard drive from Shackleton's computer. She was trying to crack it when she was abducted," he said. "What's the computer say now?"

"It's a blank," Mitch said, shrugging.

Jill reached over past him and moved the mouse. The computer screen flickered, and went out of screen saver mode.

"Oh," he said, "I never was good with computers."

\*\*\*\*\*

Jill stared at the screen while Mitch and Ed stared over her shoulder. The addition of Mitch to the inner circle had been taken in stride. He was big, willing to help, and most of all, he had Henry's vote of confidence. That was enough. Questions about what he'd been in jail for could wait until later. Or, judging by the size of him, maybe never.

The computer showed an open address book, and, as before at Henry's office, she went looking for Prestons - nothing there, but then Shackleton's contact list was very sparse. It looked like he only kept professional contacts there, not patients. She opened the Control Panel and looked at the installed programs. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Frowning, she went back to the desktop.

An antiquated icon in the corner was marked "Patient Systems". Jill clicked on that.

The windows interface disappeared, and the computer went black. Then, an ugly menu appeared in front of her, along with a userID and password.

"Oh, son of a bitch," Jill said. "It's in DOS!"

"What's that mean?"

"It means Shackleton's a dinosaur. No wonder she was having problems with it."

"Can you crack it?" Ed asked over her shoulder.

"Jesus, I sucked at programming in college," she scratched her head, and started typing, "I can try - but I don't know if I can do it or not."

When she turned, Mitch looked entirely mystified, and Ed -

She'd never seen a man look so intensely focused in her life. His face was a mixture of sadness, worry, anger, despair, and desperate resolution all at once. This was not the face of a man that would hear no. She would just have to find another way.

"It'll get done," she said, "Hang tight, Ed. I'll figure something out."

Jill thought. Programmers? Where could she get her hands on a few programming whizzes?

She typed, and went through all the people she knew. Her mother? No way, thank God. Hers was the way of the telegraph and rotary telephone. Gregory was a computer guy, but she was sure he had mentioned that he was more in database management, and that was equally desperate a source. Elsie, her younger sister, was in Europe, backpacking, and unlikely to know geeks.

*C'mon, Jill, c'mon. You must know some geeks. You must.*

Ever since she had moved to the city, her list of friends had dwindled. Most of them had only been passing acquaintances, it turned out. Who did she know? She knew her boss. No help there. Who else? Who -

*Derek.*

Jill's face lit up. He worked at the bookstore. He was always hanging around those Dungeons and Dragons things, talking about gaming. AND, he'd been hinting at asking her out for weeks. He would help her. But what the hell was his last name?

Quickly, Window keyed out of the DOS program, and launched Firefox (ah, she knew she liked Delphi! No stinkin' Internet Explorer!). She keyed in the address of the bookstore, and hit the Staff page. Andrea Gray, her boss. Jill Gerardi - herself, a couple of the other clerks, and then, near the bottom, shaggy headed and grinning - Derek. Derek Porretto.

Jill reached for the phone on the desk, and checked the clock. It was only 8:21. There was still time. He would still be awake.

"What city, please?"

Jill gave the name of the city.

"Name?"

"Porretto, P-O-R-R-E-T-T-O, Derek, D-E-R-E-K."

"Hold, please."

Jill alternated between drumming her fingers and crossing them.

"What are you doing?" Ed asked, "Who are you calling?"

"Someone who can help me crack this."

He nodded, staring at her with those intense eyes. Jill, already wired from interrupted sleep, the attempted murder and actual kidnapping, couldn't stand it. She pointed to Mitch.

"Will you bandage him up, please? He's still bleeding."

Ed snapped to activity, quickly corralling Mitch out of the room towards a deeper part of the bottom floor where she imagined the bathroom was. Left alone, Jill let out a shaky sigh. The operator came back on the line.

"I have two numbers: Porretto, D, and Porretto, Derek A. Would you like both?"

"Yes, please."

"Porretto D is (123) 555-1927. Porretto, Derek A is (123)444 - 2731. Would you like me to connect you to one?"

Jill copied down both number furiously as the operator spoke.

"Porretto, D, please."

"One moment, and thank you for using AT&T Information."

The line clicked, and she heard ringing. After several rings, the phone call went to an answering machine.

"Hello, you've reached the Porretto residence, home of Darleen, Larry, Kelly and Cole. Please leave a - "

She hung up, and then picked up the phone and dialed the second number. *Please, Derek, please be you please be you, please be...*

"Hello?"

The sound of his sleepy, low voice nearly made her cry out with joy.

"Derek! It's Jill."

There was a slight pause, and then, "Whoa. Hi Jill. I didn't know you had my number."

"I looked it up. Listen, Derek - I know this is kind of weird to ask you, but I'm in...I have a big problem. It's too long to explain, but - are you good at programming? Cracking stuff?"

"Me? Nah. I don't know much about that stuff."

Jill's heart died a little in her chest. She shut her eyes. What would she do now? Who else did she know?

"But if you need anything like that, I'm almost sure one of my friends would know how to do it. Can you hold on a minute?"

Jill, hanging on by a thread of hope, held. He did not, she noticed, actually put her on hold. He just put the phone down. She heard typing. Clicking. Then, martial strains of music erupted into the phone. She held it away from her ear. She heard him calling out "Sorry" to her above the receiver, and then the volume decreased. A little more typing. Some solid banging noise, sounded like it came from the computer speaker. And then - a few more banging sounds, like drums. What the heck was he *doing*?

Furious typing. Pause. More furious typing. Rinse and repeat a couple more times. Then, he fumbled with the phone, brought it back up to his ear.

"Jill? You still there?"

"I'm here, Derek. What do you have?"

"Where are you? Are you at home?"

"No. I'm - I'm somewhere else," she said. "I'm in the suburbs."

"Great!" he said, "Great. That's perfect. I can have someone over there in no time, if you give me the address. Or, I can have him call you - "

"Hold on one second - let me get the address. I'm - it's a DOS program, does it matter?"

"Hrm. Let me check. Shouldn't be a problem..."

Some more typing. Wait.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Is this someone you know?"

"Sure! He's one of my guild mates."

Jill did not ask what that was. She took Derek at his word on that. "Alright, let me put you on hold and get the address."

Fumbling around the desk, Jill picked up a bill from Delphi's pile of paperwork. She brought the receiver back up to her ear. "Derek? Is it okay?"

"Yeah, he's a whiz. Shouldn't be a problem. What's the address?"

She gave him the address. Some more typing, and then, to her vast relief, he said, "Yup! He's logging off now, should be over there in about 15-20 minutes. Lives right around the corner from there actually. His name is Guy Strobol. He says he'll be wearing his exclamation mark hat."

Once again, Jill had no clue what he was talking about, but took him at his word.

"Derek - you've saved my life. Thank you so much. I'm sorry to call like this out of nowhere."

"Jill," he replied, sounding slightly bashful over the phone, "It's okay. A call out of nowhere from you is always welcome."

She smiled, and then exchanged goodbyes and hung up, mentally reminding herself to have his child if it worked out. Rising from the computer, she went in search of Ed and Mitch. They were down the hall, in the bathroom. Mitch was gritting his teeth, and Ed had a pair of tweezers. Just as she entered, the bullet dropped into the sink, bloody, and a mass of irritated red tissue was glaring out from Mitch's sizeable arm.

She had seen enough of that for the day. Quickly turning away, she flattened herself against the wall.

"It's okay - not as bad as it seems," Mitch called.

*Why did all men say that?*

"Yeah, he'll be fine," Ed said. "Just clean him up, and he'll be able to use it, right as rain. What happened with the call?"

"Someone's coming over. I called a guy from my work, who's sending a friend over here to look at it. He said it shouldn't be a problem."

There was silence from the bathroom, and then the muted mewling and breathing through teeth. She imagined Ed had just poured alcohol on the wound.

She wondered, out in the hall, if they would all die before it was over. If Delphi was dead already. What Henry was doing. She wanted to cry, but didn't. Sometimes, that just did not help.

Another loud yelp from the bathroom. Jill leaned, and waited.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was very dark. Very dark, and she hurt, all over. She could feel herself being jostled about, but had no comprehension of what that meant. Focusing hard, she remembered that she was supposed to - what? What was she supposed to do? It was too much effort. She lay back again - at least, her mind did. It was very dark, after all. She heard voices, very nearby. Next to her, in fact. What were they saying?

"...fucked this up from the get go. If you'd let me handle it to begin with, we wouldn't have been stuck trying to move that god damned body, and none of them would have known to go looking for each other. Jesus Christ, this has been an amazing cluster fuck from day one."

That one was a woman. The next, swimming out of the darkness, was a man.

"Would you just shut the fuck up? I've got it *handled*. You're worrying too fucking much."

"And why the hell did you fucking take this one? I told you to get the other one - the dark haired one! She's the one that was with the dentist - you - "

"I got my reasons," the male said, "I got my fucking reasons. Now are you going to shut up, or am I going to have to go back there and teach you who the fuck is boss around here, huh? Huh?"

She shut up, but Delphi could feel the tension in the air. It was like a game, right? Delphi's head felt very heavy, very groggy. She knew she was supposed to be careful - but it was a game, wasn't it? It would be alright. It was just a dream. A very, very bad dream, with very very bad people who said the word 'fuck' a lot -

She moved, shifting to try to find a more comfortable position. The female turned swiftly in her seat.

"I think she's coming around."

*"Fucking take care of it!"*

Delphi tried to wriggle, but found her arms and legs were trussed. In a moment, it didn't matter anyway. Everything went blissfully dark again.

\*\*\*\*\*

Guy turned out to be just a teenager. Jill gaped at him, but saw, without doubt, a bright yellow exclamation mark floating out of the rainy darkness off his head.

"You Jill? Thrax - I mean, Derek - sent me over here to help you crack something?"

Jill opened the door for him, not able to say anything for a minute. He was so young. So young it made her feel like she was ancient. He had a halo of curly brown hair, flattened neatly underneath the hat with the exclamation mark.

"Sorry. Come on in. It's in here."

He followed her in, looking around the room as he went. "Holy shit, you got some nice junk in here."

"Thanks. It's not mine - it's a - friend's, but thanks. You want something to drink or something?"

He waved his hand, "Nah. Just show me the program. I'm going to try to get back for a raid at 9:30."

She showed him the chair where Delphi's computer was. He opened the program, looked at the interface, and then navigated to the file contents to look at it.

"So, do you play?"

Jill stared. "Play? Play what?"

"WoW! World of Warcraft?"

"Uh. No. Is that - how you know Derek?"

"Yeah - he's totally cool. Helped me when I was just starting. Dude, you should play. You should see him rocking out on his shaman. And he's got this *sick* setup at home, it's fucking rad. I mean, it's rad. Sorry."

While he was chattering, Guy's fingers were moving faster than she'd ever seen anybody's fingers move on a keyboard.

"Ah, this is cake. Should be done in a few minutes."

"Really?" Relief flooded through Jill. Ed would be pleased. Where the hell were those two, anyway?

"So, if you don't play, how do you know Derek?"

"I work with him. I'm - "

"Oh. Whoa. You're totally the girl he has that mad crush on, huh? No wonder he was all hot about me going out here tonight. He offered to tank for Kara tonight, even though there's nothing in it for him."

"Thanks a lot for coming," Jill said, balking at the lingo. "Tank" must be a new word the kids were using. Fuck, she was old. "I really appreciate it."

"Yeah, no problem. Battlegrounds are dead, anyway. Might as well do something constructive before raiding. And, my mom's always nagging me to get out. She thinks I'm at the bookstore. Doesn't hurt her to have a little peace of mind, too."

He was still typing. Still typing, and looking around. "Dude, this place rocks. Are those samurai swords?"

Jill turned around, and looked where he was gesturing with his chin. They did, indeed, look like samurai swords. "I guess so. It's not my house. The guy who owns it - he's around here somewhere."

"Cool, cool."

The kid stopped typing, pulled up another window, opened a file, and typed some more. Then, he turned towards her. "There, dude. It's all done. User name is sacklet, password is 102754. Go ahead and give it a go."

He got up from the chair and offered it to her. Jill double clicked on the icon, and the same ugly menu came up. She entered into the information Guy had given here - and then -

It went in. Ugly interface inside, but there were the options, right in front of her. She pushed 1 for Records, and the search came up.

"Awesome," she said, and turned. "You're amazing!"

Guy waved her compliment away again, but smiled, obviously pleased with himself. She walked him to the door. "Okay, I'm out. Nice to meet you, Jill."

He walked out onto the porch, grabbed his umbrella, and hoisting it high over the hat with the exclamation mark, called out, "Throw Derek a bone, huh? He's a nice guy!"

And he disappeared into the night. Jill stood there, in awe of human ingenuity, and how young it looked these days. Kids were amazing.

Jill shut the door, and turned around, bellowing, "Ed! Mitch! It's working! I got it!"

Ed emerged from another door on the ground floor, carrying a box of what looked like takeout. "It's a day old, but there's plenty. Have some."

"Later," she said impatiently, but could guess where Mitch was. Ed followed her into the room, and she sat down at the desk. She typed the last name Preston into the database. For a moment, they thought nothing would come up. For a moment, it seemed like they had done all that for nothing, that it would get them no where at all, that the teenager with the exclamation point had driven out in the rain for -

But then, DOS worked its charm. Right in front of them, they saw it, the name they'd been working so hard to discover:

Preston, Amelia J.  
1927 Vincent Lane  
F  
DOB 07/18/75

Scanning a few lines down, Jill saw it. She pointed.

Refer: Henry Denby DDS, 11/15/2007

"That's it. There was Preston, after all!"

"Wait a minute. 1927 Vincent Lane is Moore's address," Ed said quickly. He grasped the chair. "Amelia J. Preston. Fuck. It's Amy. That's Amy Moore. Preston is probably her maiden name, or her ex-husband's last name."

Jill looked at him, "Who is Thomas Moore?"

"A case Delphi and I were working on before you called me. We'd been called by Thomas Moore to find his missing wife. Then, we found Moore in his house, murdered. Damien took over from there, but after someone called you from Moore's phone, we knew the cases were related."

Jill was looking at the screen, a frown of confusion on her face. "But - what are the odds that they would be after Henry for this - and then...you guys are working on another part of it? And why? Why were they after her? Who is it?"

"I don't know everything - I don't know," Ed said, "But they're related. That's the connection. We just have to figure out why. Damien and I found something in Moore's house tonight - a list of numbers, of dosages - drug dosages, we think - and dollar amounts. It has to have something to do with that."

Ed turned, once again reaching for his coat. Jill saw a dangerous, furious animal underneath his brow, waiting to get out, and did not want to be on the other side of it when he found whoever was responsible for this.

"We're going to call Damien. We're going to find these people. The longer we wait, the less likely it is that Delphi will be alive."

Jill knew it was the truth. She knew one other: the longer they waited, the less likely it was that any of them would survive.

## Chapter 10: Delphi Bound

The three of them piled into Ed's car - in Mitch's case, squeezed - and Ed once again made the drive into the outer city, where the police station was.

Jill sat in the back seat, staring out the window into the rain, thinking in her head, thinking as hard as she had ever thought before. If Amy Moore had used the name Preston with Shackleton, what if she had used the name Moore with Henry? Maybe that's why Henry hadn't heard of her. If that was the case - why hadn't whoever was responsible for this - clearly an organized group, by the feats they had been able to pull off - if that was the case, why hadn't they gotten rid of the records? Why would you go to all the trouble of attacking, killing two people - if you weren't going to destroy the records?

And then, she went back to the question of, "Why?" Why kill them? What was so damning that they did all this? What had Amy Moore known? Drugs? Was it drug dealers? But if it had been - why was Henry involved? Why two dentists? What did dentists know that other people didn't? Teeth. Gums. Fillings?

"What if," Jill volunteered, "Amy Moore was smuggling drugs in her fillings and Shackleton discovered it?"

"That's not a good place to hide drugs," Mitch said, "Too moist. Too small. Someone's gotta have teeth like a horse to be able to do that."

Jill did not ask him how he knew, but recognized he did have a point. "Oh. Right."

She settled back in her chair, mind churning still. So, that was out. What else? What about Shackleton's missing phone call? Where was Shackleton's phone?

"Did Delphi mention she'd found Shackleton's phone?"

"No," Ed said, "She didn't say anything about his phone anywhere."

"Damn it," Jill said, biting her nails. "Damn it. There are too many holes. Why? What goes on in a person's mouth besides drug smuggling? What could Shackleton have called Henry about? Why didn't they take the records!? But he has to be related. Otherwise - why kill him?"

To this, Ed suddenly looked slightly contemplative, but did not reply.

"What if he wasn't killed by them - what if he just died?" Mitch volunteered. They'd given him a quick and dirty run down of the situation. He seemed enthused about the prospect of solving this, and had been strangely lucid in his observations. After the computer thing, that was.

"Then why was his name on the note we found on Martha's body?" Jill asked. "Why would he have called Henry just a few days before this all started, and regarding the woman we now know is apart of another murder investigation? I mean, it's possible - but...does it really make sense?"

"It's all fuckin' messed up," Mitch observed. "It doesn't make any sense that Ed should get the call to research the Missing Persons case, and somehow Henry is involved too. What are the odds of *that*, and it still happened. No, I'm agreeing with your missing red head on this. There's something big going on. It's just dumb luck the two brothers happened to working on it. Kismet."

"Can kismet mean bad things, too?" Jill asked.

They pulled into the parking lot of the police station. The three of them got out of the car. Jill had to admit they were a motley bunch: Ed with his long coat, looking like Sam Spade in the flesh, Jill with her dirty jeans, exhausted face and REO Speedwagon tshirt, and Mitch, just bein' Mitch, with his "Michellin" tattoo on one arm, and a bloody bandage on the other. Jill was not entirely convinced that they would make it through security, remembering the hard-ass police officer who had barred Ed and herself from visiting Henry early in the weekend.

They walked into this precinct, and saw a middle-aged woman (Jill's hopes sunk a little - were they all the same? Would she be that woman in ten years?) at the dispatch switchboard. They walked up, and her eyebrows arched.

"Hi there," she greeted them, looking them over each in turn. "What can I do for you?"

"We're looking for Lieutenant Newly," Ed said, "We need to speak to him, immediately. Please."

Jill expected them to be summarily drummed from the station. Instead, the lady grinned slightly, and said, "I should have known it would be Newly."

She turned her face, and called out, "Hey, Damien. Friends of yours here." She reached down beneath her desk and pushed the buzzer to let them in.

"Go on. He's back there. Hopefully, he's awake, but he looked pretty tired the last time I saw him tonight. You three don't wear him out."

Damien was there to greet them, giving a brief smile to Ed and Jill, and a strange look at Mitch. Mitch was a little less friendly to Damien, looking a little wary of him. Damien's eyes, after Mitch, went back to Ed.

"Where's Delphi?"

"She's been kidnapped," Ed said quietly.

Damien looked shocked. "What? Delphi?"

"We need somewhere to talk in private," Ed told him. "Right now. It's important."

Damien's eyes widened, and then grew serious. He gestured them towards one of the offices in the back. Once everyone was inside, he turned to them again.

"Tell me what you know."

Ed recited the facts and theories quickly. "Amy Moore is the Preston patient that Henry referred to Shackleton. Shackleton is dead - most likely killed by the same people to keep him quiet. We don't know about what. They took Delphi while I was with you. Jill thinks whoever took her are the same people who killed Shackleton, the same people that attacked Henry and framed him for Martha's murder. You can check me on Preston, but I've got a feeling we're dead on to this, Damien. The only thing we can't figure out is why. Why all of this? What could they possibly gain from killing these people? What are they afraid Henry would know? Shackleton?"

"What do dentists know?" Mitch said suddenly, "They know stuff that goes on with teeth. In your mouth. What if they found something - like the abscess Dr. Henry found in my mouth? What if that other dentist found something?"

"That's what I said," Jill said petulantly.

"No - you said drugs in the teeth." Mitch replied pointedly, flailing his arms for effect. "I'm not sayin' he found drugs. What if this other dentist saw something like a weird growth or a weird something, and called Dr. Henry? I mean, people just don't go to the dentist. I know. I wouldn't have gone to the dentist. I fuckin' hate it. But, if something hurt - and believe me when I say that teeth fuckin' hurt *bad* when they hurt - what if that's why she was goin' to the dentist to begin with? And since Dr. Henry referred her to this other doctor - and that's when he saw something?"

The sounds of the rain pelting the roof above their heads played a steady staccato, making them all aware of the sudden and startling silence in the room. Mitch looked at them all, then held out his hands. "What? That don't make sense?"

Ed gave him a slow, appraising look. "No, Mitch. It makes perfect sense. I think you've hit it dead on."

Damien looked at Mitch curiously. "Who are you?"

"A friend of Dr. Henry's. From jail." Mitch added, suddenly slightly gruff. Jill had the feeling he did not really care for policemen. Not that she blamed him. Or, even if she blamed him, not if she was going to ever say so.

"Okay, Mitch, fair enough," Damien said, "It makes sense. But there's still a few minor little details that need to be addressed: 1) Why would Shackleton finding something in Amy Moore's mouth be so devastating? And 2) How did whoever it was that is doing all of this - how did they find out about Shackleton calling Henry?"

Damien shook his head, "You've got a good theory there - but I need evidence to back it up. So far, it's just a real good guess. I have nothing to move on. And I need something, hard. Believe me, I want to solve this as much as you do. For Delphi, Henry, and all your sakes."

Jill had been watching Ed as Damien spoke with Mitch. He had that same contemplative look on his face, as if he were trying to remember something, fishing it out of his head. As Mitch began his rebuttal against Damien's argument, Jill saw the look on Ed's face break, the flood of knowledge filling every line on his face.

"Damien." He said urgently. Mitch and Damien went quiet, both turning towards him. "That file you gave Delphi - the file on the case you hired us for. You said one of the things that the coroner found in the victim's mouths - what did you say it was?"

And suddenly, whatever they were talking about dawned on Damien's face too. He covered his mouth, shook his head. "Holy shit. You think that's what it is?"

"It fits. It fuckin' fits. Delphi said it had to be something big - bigger than just a few random people getting killed and the killings covered up. What if it was a whole group of people? What if it was a new drug out there - and someone doesn't want the fact that they're testing on people to get out?"

Jill broke into the conversation. "What are you two talking about? What new drug?"

"This doesn't go beyond this room - at least, not yet, not 'til we're sure," Damien said sternly. "But there've been a rash of dead homeless people around both the suburbs and the city proper. It's been kept quiet, mostly because they are homeless people, and it's spread so wide. But the medical examiner found something. He's been finding something consistently on the bodies since they've been coming in: rashes, tiny bumps in the mouth. I put Ed and Delphi on the case, since we can't officially put any bodies on it here in the police department."

Jill's mind whirled. "So, Shackleton must have told them. They must have learned about what he found - right? Do you think he was in on it?"

"I'm not sure," Damien said slowly, "But I'm guessing he wasn't. There was nothing in his record that suggests he had any connections with drugs. Not enough money, for the first part."

Ed chimed in, "Damien, what about that list that we found earlier at Moore's? There were dosages - money amounts. Moore was in on it?"

"You think he was testing it too? I don't think M.E. found anything on his body."

"What if he was using his wife? What if he knew his wife was testing for them? What if he was keeping track of the dosages on his wife with that list?"

Damien suddenly stood, and quickly left the room.

Jill looked at Ed, "This could be bad, couldn't it?"

Ed nodded mutely, and turned to look out the window. She wondered if he was thinking of Delphi, and thought he must be. He was worried. He had a lot to be worried about. More than the rest of them. His brother and his – well, not just his assistant. Something else to him, too.

Damien came back into the room, shutting the door behind them. He put two stacks of paper on the desk. "Look at this."

They crowded around the paper, and looked down at them as Damien spoke. "This is a transcript of the phone calls that came from Ashland Pharmaceutical's poison control center, all of them made from Thomas Moore's phone. This - " he pointed to the other paper, the list of numbers, dollar amounts, and dosages that Ed had mentioned. " - this is the list that we found in Moore's car. Look at the dates: the entries all correspond with a call made to the poison control center."

Jill frowned, looking through the transcript. "But - these are about his dog and cat."

Mitch snorted. "Garfield and Clifford? Gimme a break."

Damien shook his head, tapping the pages. "But the Moores didn't own a dog or a cat. Also - "

He flipped through the pages, pointing at the times of the calls. "Look at these times. 12:54 AM. 1:30 AM. 11:27 PM. 11:23 PM. 12:37 AM. 1:27 AM. 2:18 AM. 4:12 AM. 3:18 AM. Look at them - all of them are between the hours of 11:00 and 6:00 AM."

"What do you think, a swing shifter?" Ed asked, rubbing his chin (instead of tapping it, for a chance), "But how could he be sure he was getting the same person every time? There must be hundreds of people work over at Ashland."

"I think that's why it doesn't work backwards - why there isn't an entry for *every* call he made." Damien was picking up speed, getting urgent. "And I don't think it's hundreds of people. I think it's three or four. Ashland is a local company - big here, but only marginal in the national market. They'd have a local line."

"What do you think these mean? Garfield getting poisoned? Garfield getting nauseous? Clifford foaming?" Mitch asked.

"Reactions she was having to the drugs? Some other code?" Jill suggested.

"No. It would have been something else. He has a dollar amount next to each one. It's code. These words meant something to him."

"Alright, let's assume he knows what these words mean, he can get an amount for each one of the. But what about Shackleton?" Jill asked, "I don't understand how they'd know what he was doing. Not unless Amy Moore told him she was testing some illegal drug and he was dumb enough to call their local poison control center."

"We don't have Shackleton's records. I can't tell," Damien said. "I don't even know he's dead yet. There's no way I'd get authorization to check his phone records without at least that."

"So," Ed said, "We're going to call it in."

"You can't call it in," Damien explained patiently. "They'll know something' up if you do it."

"Hey, don't look at me," Mitch said, holding up his enormous hands, "I don't want nothin' to do with the cops."

Then, all three men turned and stared at Jill.

*Goddamn men!*

"Are you kidding? I can't do it! I've been arrested by those cops down at the downtown headquarters. The *last* thing I need is to give them another reason to link me to another death. You're going to have one less brain out here with you, then."

Damien breathed through his teeth. "You're right. We don't need them to link to you. We're all too close to Henry and this entire case to say anything about Shackleton."

"I'm not just going to fucking sit still and do nothing!" Ed snapped.

"You're upset, Ed, but there isn't a goddamn thing you can do. Listen to me on this one. We can't do anything without Shackleton - "

"Yes, we can." Ed, looking frightfully focused, looked around the room. "We can start working on that case you gave us. We can go to Ashland. You sit and wait for the Shackleton body to break. The rest of us are going to start trying to find out more about this drug. We're going to go after Delphi."

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Ed made the drive back to the house in silence. Mitch and Jill said very little. Damien had promised to call him the second he heard about Shackleton, the second he had news.

But it was going to take too long, Ed knew. They had to start looking, and *now*. He'd been silently ticking away seconds in his head since she'd been gone. How long to kill someone? How long to hide the body? He knew too well how quickly these things went.

Every moment, it was worse. Every moment, he thought, could be the moment they were hurting her. It came back to him in a rush, what she had said about Henry, Jill - protecting them, keeping them safe. He could think of nothing else.

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Delphi, still very much alive, woke up to find herself in - of all the trite places - an old warehouse, chalk full of metal things. She could not identify them. They did not quite look like scrap metal. She tried to sit up to see if she could get a better look, and discovered the movement made her head want to split open. There went that idea.

With a grunt, Delphi let herself settle back on the floor. It had a grimy, greasy feel to it.

Delphi sighed, blinking slowly. The headache did not seem to want to go away, even on the floor.

"How the hell did I get here?" she murmured. "Where the *fuck* am I?"

Hrm: that word seemed familiar. A car? She definitely wasn't in a car right now.

Slowly, it came back to her - the bumpy car ride, the woman, and the man. The word *fuck*. Her mind went back further. Jill, throwing, running. It had been raining.

She'd been kidnapped.

*Goddamnit*. A great end to a perfect weekend.

Delphi turned over on her side again, doing her best to ignore the vicious pounding in her temple. Her eyes scanned the periphery - she could really not see anything except for these racks and racks of greasy, dirty metal things. But if she could see them, that meant there was light coming from somewhere.

And, since she could see anything, at least she wasn't dead. That was a definite plus.

Gingerly, she pulled her hands away from her body. They only went so far - she was definitely tied. But what about the rest of her? She tested her feet - yeah, feet too. Shit,

it hurt to move. Her entire body felt like it had just run a marathon - everything was sore, tingly. She imagined it had something to do with the chloroform they'd used.

She let herself rest a moment, breathing shallowly. Besides the pain and dizziness, everything else seemed to be intact. No actual limbs missing, no gaping wounds, no blood.

*Yeah, but how long is THAT gonna last? Get up, Delphi. You have to get up.*

She attempted to sit up again. A sharp, jagged bolt of pain shot through her head. What had they done, poured the stuff down her throat? Christ! Breath coming short because of the pain, Delphi finally managed to right herself, and then slumped, exhausted, against - what was it behind her? Her hands wriggled, testing - it was smooth, and metal. Probably a beam of some kind, a support pole.

Her eyes had adjusted to being open, and she did another quick look about. There was nothing really within reach for her to grab, nothing to loosen the rope with. Real fear began to creep into her, fear that this might be the place where she died, afraid, dirty, alone.

She wanted to cry. A few frightened tears escaped her eyes to trickle down her lovely, dirt-smearred cheeks. But that was all. She didn't have time to cry. There was no crying in baseball. Baseball, or greasy warehouses.

Delphi took a deep breath, mounted her strength, and shoved her feet against the floor and her back against the pole, straightening herself. She learned two things: 1) She was definitely tied to the pole and 2) this made every single cell in her body hurt like a motherfucker. Tears came to her eyes again, but not from anxiety. In fact -

Delphi buckled over as far as she could, and threw up. Most of it landed on the floor - but not a little bit of it landed very much on *her*. It was a pretty pathetic moment.

*BUT*, she insisted to herself, *not my worst moment ever. C'mon, Delphi.*

She let the sickness take a moment longer, to ensure she would not do a repeat, and then opened her eyes. Higher up, she could see clear off in the distance high windows and light weakly bleeding in through them. From the distance, she could tell the walls were corrugated, but the room itself appeared very expansive.

Delphi moved to her right, experimenting with her bindings. There was no resistance with this movement. She shimmied a little further, stopping for a few breaks to keep from puking again, until she was turned 45 degrees. This way, she could see a path through the large racks of metal objects. The objects themselves appeared to be different wheels and shafts. For what? For cars?

Way down towards the end of the warehouse, attached to the wall was a fire extinguisher, and a snaked hose, in glass. The floor was indeed grimy - just bare cement, stained and course. She remained in this position a few minutes more, and then did some more moving, until she was turned another 45 degrees. In this direction, she could see an office - several offices, in fact. She could not see in them - the doors were parallel to her vision, as were the windows. There was no discernible sound coming from them, and she was glad for that.

As quickly as she could, she turned the other way. Yet more rows of the unnamable items. Delphi gave a frustrated sigh, and her eyes wandered towards the nearest row.

There at the bottom, one of the metal things had fallen. It looked like a flattened, oblong pipe. The edge did not look quite thin enough to cut, but she quickly dropped down, ignored the bile threatening in her throat at the sudden movement, and awkwardly stuck out her bound legs.

They didn't even come close. With an angry roar of frustration, Delphi tried again, jabbing the air with her legs as far as they would go before bringing them down. Again, nowhere near long enough to get the metal object.

She pulled on her arms, tied behind her back. The knots were tight there. Legs, too. The pole knot was only slightly less tight, but it wasn't budging.

Fear, thick and monstrous, fought up inside her. She could do nothing. If the kidnappers came back - she would be killed. There was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

Delphi sagged against the pole, and fought back the angry, desperate tears to no avail. They fell, splattering on her chest, mixing in with the trails of vomit and grime.

She saw Jill's body, lying so still on the ground in front of the house. The husk that had been Chris Shackleton. Henry Denby in jail. His receptionist, guiltless, dead.

And then she thought of Ed. Ed was still out there. Ed would go back to the house and figure out what had happened. He would come and find her. And then, she would fucking maim whoever had done this, whoever had done all of this.

Deep inside, where the fear was worst, she wondered if he would find her in time at all. Delphi did not indulge herself too far in that direction. If she was given the chance to save herself, she would need all the strength she had, and it did her no good to dwell too long on what would happen if he didn't. She needed to stay sharp.

But as she stood there, forcing herself to stay alert and not let up her guard, she could not quell the frightened voice insider of her.

*Please find me, Ed. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.*

## Chapter 11: Searching

Ed looked down at the map given to him by Damien, giving the location of the bodies found dead of the drug. They were truly scattered, all over - but there were two or three vague pockets of bodies. He recognized them as areas where homeless groups congregated.

"Alright," he said, "I'm going to take this one in the city. I want you two to take the one closer to here - you have to be a little persuasive - money might do it, but most of the time if you threaten them, they'll just clam up." He gave Mitch a look at this last statement.

"Okay," Jill answered, and Mitch nodded next to her.

"We're looking for a miracle here, guys," he said quietly. "It's going to have to come fast if we're gonna have any hope of finding her."

They nodded mutely. Ed reached into his pocket and threw them the keys to his car. "Go on. I'll take Delphi's car."

Jill and Mitch grabbed their things - Mitch's eyes brightened as he got hold of one of the bos sitting in the corner of the office. Ed thought about telling him that was hardly non-threatening, but decided against it. Despite what he'd said, he wanted them to be safe. Mitch, as he was, was deterrent enough. Carrying a large stick, well - it would take a brave man to approach that.

Or, one with a gun. Ed turned his thoughts away from the possibility, knowing there was no point in it. They knew the dangers.

Once again, they went outside. Jill gave a brief wave before they backed his car out of the drive way and headed in the direction of their assigned target. Ed got into Delphi's car and turned the other direction, towards the freeway and the city. It was dark, late night, early next morning. He was exhausted. It wasn't an unusual state for him to be in, but the danger of not being sharp enough was constant on this little sleep.

It would have to do. He couldn't imagine sleeping now, anyway.

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They had no luck at the first site they went to. None of the people milling around in the alleyway acknowledged them, except to ask for money. Jill, who had never been around homeless people in such abundance, followed Mitch silently. He seemed to have no compunction about talking to anyone.

After busting up at the first site, Jill suggested heading towards the third site on the list. It was a small shanty town in the dead end of an old abandoned lot. Light pieces of

plastic and some metal - probably from the local junk yard - served as shelter from the rain, which had let up slightly. As soon as they reached the enclave, Mitch barreled forth, seemingly oblivious to how the eyes of the people around him were following him, already apprehensive. That must be something only ridiculously large people ever knew, Jill thought.

She followed close behind him. Every few minutes, he would turn to make sure she was there. It did comfort her. However Henry managed to win this one over, she did not know, but she was glad.

All at once, they stopped. Mitch, removing his wallet from his pocket, yanked some bills from the billfold and waved them in front of him.

"Alright. I got this money for anyone who can tell me about someone peddling weird drugs around here."

Jill gaped.

Mitch was eying the crowd, who were eying him. Most of them backed away a little, thinking, and she didn't blame them, that he was some raving lunatic.

"C'mon!" he bellowed, "I know you know. Someone's killing off homeless people with this drug, so if you don't want to be next, come and get it!"

*Christ, they were going to be killed.*

From the side, someone called out, "Hey. Over here!"

Mitch turned like a pointer, and zeroed in on the voice. A man, covered in a makeshift blanket was sitting up underneath a lean-to, which was doing only a marginal job of protecting him from the rain. He was waving them over. When they got closer, Jill noticed he was wearing a worn jacket, with the tattered remains of "Roger" embroidered on the chest.

Mitch lowered himself to a kneel when they got next to the man. Jill followed suit, forcing herself not to wrinkle her nose at the unsavory smell wafting upwards from the man.

*Don't be such a ninny. He's just a guy living on the street, not some killer zombie.*

"So, what information do you have?" Mitch asked.

The homeless "Roger" held out his hand. "The money?"

Mitch eyed him sternly. Without breaking the gaze, he pulled out a few bills and passed them along.

"That it? Shit, man," he complained. "I guess you don't really want to know what I saw."

Mitch's eyes narrowed. "Tell us what you know, and there may be more in it for you. Don't tell us anything, and I'll pound your fuckin' ass."

Jill had no doubt he would do it. Apparently, neither did Roger, because he put the money away, gave Mitch a furtive glance, and started to talk. "The other day some new guy started wandering around here, coughing up some nasty shit. Wasn't any worse than some of the folks here, so I didn't really pay it any attention. One day, I see him down by the cafe on the corner - girl there sometimes helps us out with some warm food when it's real cold out - talking to some guy. Big motherfucker. Almost as big as you." He gestured to Mitch, who grunted.

Jill saw him take them in again with his eyes, calculating.

"You know, it's raining pretty bad. Be nice if I had a little more of that money to get myself something to warm up with."

Silently, Mitch reached into his pocket and pulled a couple more bills out. Roger pocketed it quickly, and resumed speaking. "The guy handed him something. I left then - didn't want them to see me if they were dealin'. That's just got all kinds of trouble on it, you know? So next day, the new guy's gone. Don't see him for awhile. Few days ago - maybe a week or more, he shows up again, still hackin' away. But this time, he sets up. Right fuckin' next to me, in my fuckin' spot. I get up to yell at him to get the fuck away - and see he's holding this bottle in his hand, green pills in his hand."

He looked back and forth between them again, and Jill grimaced, thinking he was going to test Mitch for money again. The vibe she was getting from the big man next to her was indicating he would not take well to it.

Roger seemed to realize this as well. He said, "You ain't cops, are ya? Because if you are, you have to tell me you are."

"We're not cops," Mitch growled.

"What about her? She a cop?"

Jill blinked at him, and said in a much smaller voice than she intended, "I'm not a cop."

Roger eyed them a little while longer, trying to size them up. Mitch bared a few more teeth, and started Roger right back up.

Roger smiled faintly, revealing blackened gaps where teeth once were. "I think the green might be worth something, you know? So I didn't say anything. Waited until he went to sleep, and took the bottle."

"Do you still have it?" Jill asked.

His smile widened, a sly, cloying look on his face. "I might."

It was absolutely the wrong thing to have said to Mitch. Jill almost heard his teeth grinding next to her before he lunged at Roger, and gripped him by the jacket. Roger started making a faint whisking noise in the back of his throat. Jill looked around, slightly alarmed. Most of the people around them had turned away - if they were looking, they were doing it well-hidden inside their respective shelters.

"Do you really want to fuck with me?" Mitch asked gruffly, "Do you want to know what happened to the last guy that fucked with me?"

Roger whimpered, writhing slightly underneath his blanket. "Alright, I have it, I have it!"

Mitch released him. "Hand it over."

Trembling slightly from the encounter, Roger reached inside the pocket of his jacket and held it out to Mitch. Mitch received the bottle, and twisted the top off to look at the pills. They were inside, four of them.

Mitch replaced the cap and resumed looking fierce. From his pocket, he pulled the rest of the money out and flashed it in front of Roger. "Anything else happen?"

Roger eyed it, and his whimpers suddenly died down. He reached his hands out for it. "The guy was dead the next morning. Someone told them. The cops came and took him away. Then that big guy came. Looked around for awhile, roughed someone up. Then he left. That's it. That's all I know."

Jill was about to pull Mitch away, when he narrowed his eyes at Roger. "D'you take anything else of his?"

Roger's eyes grew shifty, but they remained fixated on the money. After a moment, he said, "I took his sack."

Mitch growled, and Roger held his hands up to defend himself, cringing. "It's all free game when someone kicks it!"

"What did you do with it!"

Shaking again, Roger reached behind him and pulled out an old, oily, torn-up canvas bag and held it out. "There's nothing in it but some clothes. What do you need it for, man?"

Mitch snatched it out of his hands and wrenched it open. The stink that exploded out of the bag was horrendous. This time, Jill could not keep herself from covering her nose.

Mitch, on the other hand, did not seem to have any problems pawing through the bag. From what Jill could see, it all seemed to be just a mass of tattered clothing. Mitch was surprisingly thorough - from deep in the bag, he pulled up several worn papers, a matchbook, and a corked syringe. After a moment's hesitation, he balled all of it up in his hand and took it from the bag.

Roger's fingers shut on the bills, and Mitch pulled it away slightly. "If you're bullshitting me, I'm gonna find you. And it ain't gonna be pretty."

He released the money, and stood up, putting a giant paw on Jill's back. She was slightly breathless, not sure whether what she had witnessed was real or some seedy nightmarish pantomime.

"Let's get out of here," Mitch said. Roger had taken the bag back and was jostling through it, resentful eyes cast up towards Mitch. Jill saw him finally pull it together and roll over, away out of the rain.

When they got out of the rain and into the car, Jill drove away from the alley. They stopped at a well-lit, 24-hour fast food drive through. A couple cars were waiting in line. They would be alright here for the time being.

Mitch pulled out the papers when they stopped. Some newspaper scraps, none of which were interesting, pictures of naked women torn out from magazines, a book of matches from Edie's Cafe - that must have been the restaurant that gave out food - and then some scribbles and shapes on a paper that looked like nonsense.

He sat back. "It's all junk."

"We've still got the pills," Jill said. "That'll tell us something, right?"

Mitch took the bottle out of his pocket and rolled it around his hand. "There's nothing on the bottle. We couldn't tell where it's from just from the pill."

Jill realized he was right, and sat back in her seat. It was still a start. It was something. Maybe they could trace the chemicals.

Mitch threw the papers on the floor near his feet. The matchbox slid between sheets of paper and lay still.

Looking at it, Jill remembered a scene out of one of her favorite movies, **The Untouchables**, in which Eliot Ness (played by the uninspired Kevin Costner) found the address of the dead Sean Connery (she couldn't remember his character's name) on the

flap of a matchbook Kevin had taken from Frank Nitti. Impossibly dramatic. But still - if they'd met there - if they were testing a drug, they had to get status on it, right?

Jill reached down beneath Mitch's feet, and fished the matchbook from the floor. She held her breath, and flipped it open.

Nothing was there. Just a bunch of matches.

Jill exhaled, shaking her head. Too many damned movies. She was about to shut it when Mitch pointed, and said, "Hey, what's that?"

"What's what?"

He took the matches from her, and then reached behind the actual matches, struggling for a moment with his overgrown fingers. He pulled out a thin piece of paper.

Unfolded, it revealed a phone number: (123) 928 - 3739.

Jill stared at it, stunned. "Well, what do you know. All those stupid movies I watch finally paid off."

\*\*\*\*\*

No matter how Damien had run it through his brain, he had not been able to figure out a way to report Delphi's kidnapping to Missing Persons without having to incriminate the lot of them. Frustrated and restless at having to wait for Shackleton's body to be found before he could help find Delphi, and rather than going home to sleep, he headed back down to Vivian's office.

She saw him before he walked into the lab, and gave him a wave. "Back so soon?"

Damien leaned against the counter. "Yeah. Don't you sleep?"

She grinned. "Huh. Who sleeps around here?"

"Listen, Vivian. I know you aren't on the Moore ballistics, but - "

She arched an eyebrow. "You want me to call in to City and see if they can rush it for you?"

Damien held out his arms in a gesture of defeat. "I wouldn't ask for it if it weren't important. I - I can't sleep on this case. I think there's something going on, and I'm so close to - "

"Take it easy," she said, smiling tiredly at him, "You can save the ring kissing and the prostration for the old men around here. How soon are you talking?"

He gave her a sheepish look. "An hour. I want to drive out there and see if I can pick it up."

Vivian shook her head, "You're lucky I know Ruben pretty well, otherwise you'd be up shit creek. Alright, Newly. You owe me big for this. Like, dinner. And a movie."

As tired as he was, Damien thought he heard wrong, and blinked several times, staring at Vivian. "Are you asking me out?"

Vivian, who did not bat an eyelash, said, "No - you are obligated to *take* me out. Now get your ass out of my lab. If you don't make it over there after I call in this favor, you're a dead man."

Having recovered from the mild shock, Damien grinned, and said, "You know, I think I like it when you threaten me, Viv."

Vivian winked. "Then we're going to get along just fine."

She pointed towards the door, flicking her finger to command him out.

\*\*\*\*\*

Damien caught his concentration wandering off, and stopped at the 7 Eleven on Hatley for a cup of bad coffee. Stepping in, he saw an old man talking with the attendant about the price of a bag of beef jerky. Warily, he stepped over to the coffee machine.

When he'd done finishing with the coffee, he picked up a pack of gum and headed to the counter. The old man, hunched over a cane, was still in the middle of his tirade about the price of beef jerky. Behind the counter, the young man looked embarrassed.

"I'm sorry sir, I can't do anything about the price. That's just what it is."

"It's ridiculous! I'm not going to pay \$14.00 for this bag!" He waved it around threateningly. "I've never heard of such a thing! Do you know how much \$14.00 is when you're on a fixed income?"

"I - "

"I bet you don't," the man sneered, "You kids - you don't know the value of a dollar. You don't know how hard people have to work. I worked my entire life - "

"I'm sure you did, sir, but I can't do anything about - "

"And you don't respect nothing! Listen to me - are you listening? I'm telling you, I'm not going to pay \$14.00 for this bag! This bag is only worth \$5.00, if it's worth anything at all!"

Damien sighed softly, shifting the coffee to his other hand. The kid behind the counter - he did look like just a kid too - sighed, less softly than Damien.

"Sir, I can't do that. If you want the jerky, you have to pay \$14.00 for it."

"I *told* you, I'm not paying \$14.00 for this bag!" The old man gestured behind him where the beef jerky was kept. "You've only got one bag size. I know your tricks. You only keep one bag size so you can trick people into paying \$14.00 for it. What if I took some out? What if I took out enough so it would only be \$5.00."

"Sir," the kid was beginning to look annoyed. "I can't let you do that. If you open the bag, you have to pay \$14.00 for it."

This argument lasted a few more minutes. Finally, Damien looked down at his watch. He couldn't take much longer - he didn't want to piss Vivian off by being late to City just because he was stuck behind an old man. She'd already done a huge favor for him in calling down there, waking someone up to get the results for him.

The old man was trying futilely to pull the bag open, holding the bag against him and yanking with one hand. The kid had come around the corner and was trying to take the bag from him. As Damien watched, the old man took his cane, and shoved at the kid with it, knocking down a rack of horoscope scrolls, but not going far towards actually injuring the kid.

Damien set his coffee down on the shelf, and pulled out his badge. "Sir, you can't open that package without paying for it first, and you're going to have to put your cane down."

The old man whirled around, "Why don't you mind your own damn business?" Then, he saw the badge, and he blanched.

"I need you to stop being so belligerent. There isn't anything the attendant can do about the price of that beef jerky," Damien explained, feeling the weight of his exhaustion on his mind.

The old man looked down at the jerky, reluctantly, and then set it on the counter. "It's damned robbery, that's what it is."

Damien, who at heart was a soft-spot for kids, the elderly, and people in distress, put his hand into his wallet and pulled out a twenty dollar bill. He lay it on the counter and said to the attendant, "I got a small coffee and a pack of Dentyne Ice. Take his jerky out of that too, will ya?"

"Thank you." This last came from the old man, who took the jerky, and headed towards the door. Right before he exited, Damien heard him mumbling, "Ripping off a police man. I can't believe this place."

The attendant looked truly relieved, and punched the cash register, quickly returning the change to Damien. "Thank you."

"No problem."

Damien took his change, and looked down at his watch. Fuck. That had taken 20 minutes. He took a deep gulp of the coffee, which was only mildly hot. Setting it in his console, he gunned it for the City office.

When he arrived inside, he flashed his badge and signed in, and headed straight for Ballistics. Inside the lab, an older man with bag under his eyes was signing a form. As Damien entered, he gave him a gruff greeting. "You're Vivian's friend?"

"Detective Newly," Damien said, holding out his badge. The older man - who must have been Ruben - glanced at it, and then went back to the paperwork.

"One moment. I just have to sign a couple more of these, and have you sign out the information. Then - and this is the fun part - *I get to go home.*"

Damien grinned. "You ballistics people all have the same sense of humor."

"Don't fool yourself - Vivian and I are diamonds in the rough."

Ruben handed him the report, neatly placing his pen back in his pocket. "Have fun."

Damien thanked him, and went outside, flipping through the pages. Before he could get very far, the cell phone in his pocket vibrated.

"Damien Newly,"

"Damien." It was Ed. "We think we've found a bottle of the pills."

"You serious?"

"Jill and Mitch got it off a homeless guy."

"Okay," Ed stuffed the report back in the envelope and glanced at his watch. "Take them down to the police station. I'll be there in - "

"They also got a phone number," Ed continued.

Something in Ed's voice made Damien stop. "What are you going to do?"

"We're going to drop off the pills at the police station, and then we're going to Ashland."

"Ed, you've got to be - "

"I can't just leave her to get hurt," Ed said quietly. "And I can't leave Henry in jail. You can try to stop me, but I'm going."

Damien knew he would not be able to talk Ed out of it, partly because he understood the anguish of helplessness. "Alright, Ed. Be careful, then. I'll get the pills looked at right away."

"Thanks, Damien."

Damien hung up, and suddenly had a very bad feeling something was going to go very, very wrong. He stared at his phone, and headed quickly out towards his car.

## Chapter 12: Comeuppance

The Ashland factory was on the outskirts of the suburbs. The massive gray Ashland building rose like a dark beacon over the trees spread out below it. Jill had never really driven this way before; she'd had no idea how sepulchral the entire location was. Falling back into the seat, she cast a surreptitious glance over Ed's way. He was gripping the steering wheel, eyes forward, the dark thoughts churning in his mind evident in his brooding expression. She was not afraid of him; not really. She felt rather a strong, fierce sort of desperation for him, and through him, for Henry. They couldn't come all this way and find Delphi dead. It would be too heartbreaking.

Of course, Jill thought dryly, life had a way of being heartbreaking.

In the back seat, Mitch had stretched out as far as he could - not far - and rested his head against the window. He looked asleep. Jill marveled at him, envying him the rest. Her eyes periodically fluttered shut against her wishes, and her body, now wired on mad adrenaline, cried out for relief. None was to come, not any time soon. She had no idea what they were going to do once they were there - she had never known anything like this. She was still scared.

The road leveled out, taking on a newer aspect. It looked clipped, clean. That's what money got you in the middle of the woods. They probably had monkeys inside too, being poked by all sorts of nightmarish instruments. Jill shuddered. It had been a long time since she'd wondered how she'd gotten into this situation. She could still not believe it had only been two days. Tomorrow was Monday - a work day. The entire world would be bustling around, doing what they wanted, going on about their normal lives, unaffected by heinous murders, body snatchers and movers, and jails.

Ed pulled the car off the road, onto a slim shoulder. Jill came to attention, turning her head this way and that. He slowed the car to a crawl, and then eased it carefully into the woods between two trees, obliging spaced just far away enough from each other to allow for their vehicular approach.

Mitch snuffled in the back seat as the car slid to a stop. Ed turned off the lights, and said, "We're walking the rest of the way. I don't want them to find the car."

Jill nodded, and thought about how they would be getting out of the place if chased. Which she thought might be a distinct possibility. "Are we close?"

"About a quarter of a mile," he said. "Far away enough."

Jill turned towards Mitch. "Hey. Hey!"

Mitch sat up immediately, eyes bleary. "Wha?"

"We're getting out and walking."

"Aright."

Jill was last out of the car. The two men were looking up towards the large building. It was only sprinkling faintly now, misty and definitely eerie. Jill had the impression of the world's smallest turnout for the storming of a castle. Now outside of the car, and only the final walk left, she grew terribly afraid.

But Ed. And Delphi. And Henry.

Swallowing the feeling, she ran to catch up with the other two, as the three of them made their way, quiet as possible, through the woods to the foreboding building ahead.

\*\*\*\*\*

Delphi woke with a start. She hadn't realized she'd fallen asleep until the noise jolted her awake. The warehouse was even darker now than when she'd seen it earlier. The noise - a large, metal grating sound. Standing up on her feet, she listened carefully for the sound of footsteps. Sure enough, there was someone approaching. Her heart starting racing in her chest, eyes widening. One last time, she looked around for anything she could reach to defend herself. No good, no good anywhere.

The footsteps stopped. Far away, Delphi thought. They were not close to her yet, but she wasn't able to set a firm direction on them. And why so quiet? What was -

Then she heard it. The thin, shearing sound of metal scraping against metal. Like someone sharpening knives. Or, pulling one out of a sheath.

*Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck*

Involuntarily, her breath started coming through her teeth. She had to force herself to calm that down - she wouldn't be able to hear. Blood rushed through her ears, flooding her brain with the sound of it - the fierce, primal pounding of an animal being hunted. All her energy went into calming down, but she could not stop the barrage of warnings from going off inside of her. She wanted to scream, shout, thrash about - but knew it was no good. There was no where to go.

Delphi twisted the ropes, rubbing raw the already irritated skin around her wrists. She would have to break them to get out of the rope. Broken hands were no good in untying feet. She'd been over this again and again - fuck - but it had to be done. She had to get loose, somehow, or she would just be slaughtered. She could not take the chance that whoever was coming around the corner was going to give her time to talk. That wasn't how things happened, not in real life. Real people killed you without saying a word.

Long, long, long ago, when she'd first left Utah, she'd run into a troupe of traveling carnival workers. The ring leader, a marvelously built man by the name of Ben Faleri,

had taken one look at Delphi and announced that she would become his next flying sensation. Up until that moment, Delphi hadn't even realized carnies still put on acrobatic displays - apparently, she'd found the most antiquated carnival known to the entire Great Basin area. Next thing she knew, she'd been squeezed into a shimmery red costume, her boobs mostly falling out, and thrown up on a high wire. It had only taken her three months to learn how to walk it without falling, not a little egged on by a red-hot tempered Faleri, screaming at the top of his lungs at her to walk more gracefully, walk with a straighter back, walk with a smile. He'd not praised her when she learned how to do it right, just pointed to the swinging bars. The night she learned to release her bar and grab the approaching bar in midair, Faleri had called her down, swept her off her feet, taken her to his tent, and given her the first fuck of her life - a sweaty, loud, thrilling experience. Afterwards, lying in bed with him, he'd traced the various bruises on her body, inflicted from falls from the net.

"You need to learn to fall, Del-fee-na, or you will need to learn to take the pain." He'd grasped her bruised wrist, and lowered his head down to her breasts. While he nuzzled and licked, the squeezing in her wrists became more insistent, until she'd cried out - not entirely without pleasure.

She'd never become the flying sensation he'd thought she'd be. But she remembered him now - remembered the feeling of pain in her wrist, the blood pounding so close to her, making her so aware of the mortal pulse that meant she lived. Then, it had been a celebration of her body - now - now, it was a frantic, maddened cry for escape. Bracing herself, halfway in the warehouse, and halfway back in the bed with Faleri, so many years ago, Delphi pushed her wrist against the pole, and forced her entire body down on it.

She cried out, tears springing violently out of her as she felt the wrongness of a part of her body snapping. Gasping wildly, she swept up all the strength left in her and she forced herself to wriggle the arm, slide it out of the rope. It caught - the pain surged up the length of her arm, setting everything on fire, and she faltered, fell to the ground.

It was only a moment, only a moment and then she was pulling it - it was loose! It was out! And then her other hand out! It hurt like a motherfucker - but she could still feel it. It had not compounded. It was just a sprain. Just a sprain enough to dislocate something - fuck, fuck it hurt.

Her hands free, she quickly took her hurt hand and set it against the rope as an anchor weight, and used her good hand to attempt prying loose the knot.

Delphi did not see the figure suddenly appearing to her left, a dark, sharp object in its hand, catching the light, glinting. She did not see it, that was, until an arm reached around shoulders, yanking her back against the pole, and the knife, wicked and cold in the moonlight, pulled up against her neck.

Delphi froze. She heard a gun cocking. Her mind went wild, and try as she might, she could not rein in her thoughts for the one thought in her head that was overriding all else: *I'm going to die.*

Out of the darkness, a voice at once familiar and repulsive whispered to her: "Now, you're gonna pay for all the trouble you and your fuckin' friends have caused me."

\*\*\*\*\*

Damien hurried into the police station, rushing past an alarmed Eileen, to his desk. As if something had come alive and pushed out of his nightmares, he surveyed his desk in rank disbelief.

It had been rifled through - not in a methodical way, but a strange, desperate sort of movement. Damien approached, began turning papers over. The envelope, with the information from Ashland was gone, along with the envelope containing the papers they'd found at Moore's house. *How the FUCK had someone gotten to his desk?*

He turned around, and saw Eileen, standing behind him. Cecily Rivers, the other officer on duty, had taken over Eileen's seat for a moment. Eileen had an uncharacteristic look of doom and gloom on her face, and Damien gestured to his desk.

"What the HELL happened here? Who was at my desk?"

"It was Lang," Eileen said quickly. "He came in here about an hour after you left. I thought he was acting real strange - more than usual - muttering and nervous. He said he'd left some paperwork over here. I was at the com, so I couldn't turn around and stop him - but I saw him going through your stuff."

An awful, cold feeling came over Damien. Slowly, things in his mind started to pull together - the grease on his fingers, the weird, irresponsible absences.

"Eileen - what were you going to say to me before about him? When the courier came?"

"He's Harold Ashland's nephew. The guy that owns the big pharma - hey! Where are you going?"

Damien turned around near the door. "Eileen, I need you to call backup behind me, to the Ashland building. Make sure - *make SURE* - they turn off their sirens before they get too close. I don't want them to know we're there."

"Alright, Lieutenant," she said briskly, heading over to the dispatch.

Damien hurried towards the door, and then remembered the pills. He turned. "Eileen - did the group who came here - "

She reached into her drawer, and held up the bottle. "It's here. I thought it would be best if I hid them - in case Lang came back."

Damien gave her an appreciative look, before shoving open the doors and running out into the night.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mitch pulled the bodies of the unconscious guard into the bushes, and paused briefly before taking off his jacket, and setting it over the bush, covering the guard's head from the rain. Jill saw him heading back to where she and Ed were waiting.

"You covered him," she said.

He shrugged. "Couldn't leave him to drown out there, huh?"

Ed hushed them with a finger to his lips, and they crept towards the large building. Up close, it looked no less sinister - just darker, and higher. The windows were high off the ground, with ugly vents like metal gills interrupting the sheer vertical walls. It gave her the creeps.

Ed moved forward like a shadow, his silhouette in the moonlight like an old fashioned phantom creeping up on an unsuspecting victim. Jill imagined his face was set and hard - he'd gotten increasingly severe and focused with every step closer they'd gotten to the building. They reached the parking lot, and settled between two trucks. Ed held out an arm to stop them while he looked at the doorway.

"How are we going to get in there? It looks real locked," Jill whispered, casting uncertain eyes on the solid bolts on the doors.

Ed did not answer right away. He kept his eyes moving around. They stood out in the rain while he was doing this. Mitch cleared his throat loudly behind them.

Jill turned to look at him. He was pointing towards the other side of the parking lot. She turned her gaze to where he was looking. At first, she didn't see anything other than a few cars parked out near what looked like a large domed building. She cast an impatient look at Mitch, "What?"

He pointed again. "Between the cars."

By now, he'd caught the attention of Ed, who turned to look in the same direction. Jill peered out, squinting her eyes in the darkness. After a moment, she saw a flash of movement, obscured by the body of the cars. The figure emerged from the safety of the cars - holding something small, that glinted in the sparse light: a gun? - looming like a monster in the dark. Her throat constricted. It was not the form she'd seen at Henry's office - this one was much smaller, petite - the woman Henry'd seen at his apartment?

Next to her, she nearly heard Ed's anger sizzling in his veins. He rose, but this time it was Mitch who stopped him.

"What're you gonna do? Run out there and give him a good shot? There's no way you're going to be able to make it across all that space without him seeing you. Wait until they're inside the building."

Ed did not argue. Jill was glad for that. It was tense enough without him going ape shit on one of them, too.

It seemed like an eternity before the slinking figure reached the mouth of the domed building. The figure fumbled with a lock, and then hurled the doorway to the building open. The very second she stepped through the doorway, Ed darted out of their hiding place and headed towards the building. Jill saw him draw a gun.

"We're gonna kick that motherfucker's ass!" Mitch snarled, rushing off towards the dome. Jill followed after, wondering if Mitch's size made him bullet proof, and whether or not it would be okay to just duck behind him the whole time.

\*\*\*\*\*

Delphi stared up at Lang balefully, wishing she had free use of any one of her limbs so she could smash it right through his ugly gorilla face. Her hands had been rebound, painfully. He'd gotten no small pleasure out of her pained cries. He undid the knot that fastened her to the pole and roughly shoved her forwards, at a sick little hop, towards the office. Once there, he'd promptly tied her to a chair. He had his back turned to her, locking the door behind them.

Setting the knife on the desk, he turned to leer at her. His gun was pointed directly at her head.

She forced her expression to stay neutral. She felt faintly calmer, now that she knew who she was dealing with. The threat of death was still present - but she knew she was smarter than Lang. And while that was true, she still had the chance of surviving.

"I'm gonna kill you, you know," he said, smiling lasciviously. "They're never gonna find you. You, or that other stupid bitch who tried to rat me out."

"Rat you out for what?" she asked, feigning a desperate panic, "I don't know what you're talking about!"

He pushed the barrel of the gun up against her check, and then with a violent thrash, whipped the side of her face with it. Delphi saw stars, but kept the anger from boiling to the surface. Instead, she whimpered, and let the tears from the pain of it fall.

"Not so fucking mouthy when you're all tied up, are you?" he sneered. "None of you fucking cunts ever are."

"I'm sorry!" she cried, "I'm sorry - please, please don't kill me. Please, I don't know anything." But she thought, *I'm going to rip your balls off with my bare hands, you fucking cocksucker.*

"Oh? Is that why you've been sniffing around Shackleton's office? That why your friends have been fucking around Moore's apartment? I took the papers that asshole partner of mine had. They'll never prove anything!"

Beneath his angry threatening exclamations, she caught a trace of panic. He would kill her if she provoked him the wrong way. Luckily, provoking men the right way had never been hard for Delphi. She did not relish the idea of having him grope her - but a horny man was a stupid man, and the stupider she got him, the better chance she had of finding a vulnerable spot.

She turned her body to the side, and squirmed just right so that her breasts were nearly popping out of the blouse she was wearing. Lang noticed. He took in an eyeful of her and reached right out with his free hands and ripped open her blouse with a violent tug. Buttons went flying. Delphi gave a helpless yip, turning her head aside and lowering her eyelids: the picture of modesty about to be violated. To a fucking creep like Lang, it would be irresistible.

"You're gonna pay," he said, squeezing hard on her breast, "You're gonna pay for all the shit I've had to go through."

He put the gun down on the desk, his lust getting the better of him. Lowering himself, he started to suck on her. Disgust rose up in her throat, but she continued making the frightened noises in the back of her throat. Delphi knew she was taking a huge chance - he was a very big man, and she would not be able to overpower him, unless she hit him right, and hard. If she could trick him into untying her - any part of her -

Delphi made herself moan. It was an exquisite sound, both frightened and sensual - and Lang lapped it up like a cat at a milk saucer. He raised his head, eyes clouded with desire.

"You want it, don't you? You want me to fuck you, don't you?" He sounded threatening, mad - Delphi recognized danger when she heard it, but she had no choice, tied as she was.

Her voice low and breathless, Delphi whispered, "No, please - no."

"Oh, you want it," he repeated, gripping her hair in his hands. "All you fucking whores are the same." He pushed open her mouth and wrenched his tongue inside.

On top of everything else, his breath stunk. Delphi wondered if it was worth her life to throw up in his mouth - she actually had the idea that it just might be - when she heard something echoing in the warehouse without. Lang, mouth moving over her throat and down again to her boob, was making pig noises, and seemed totally unaware of what may or may not be happening outside the room.

Delphi shut her eyes and sent up a fervent prayer to please, please, let it be Ed.

\*\*\*\*\*

For the first time in her life, Jill tripped on her shoelaces. Growing up, she'd been frightened to death of leaving her shoes untied - her mother had regaled her with stories of what horrible things happened to nasty little girls who went around looking disheveled and unkempt. It was only recently that an element of human sloppiness had started to take root in her. She liked it. She liked it, all except when it made her fall flat on her face in front of the building where she most likely would be facing a very close shave, or first and final meeting, with her own death.

And the fact that her mother had been right about her tripping over her shoelaces just pissed her off.

She looked up and saw that both the men had already gotten into the building. Jill had no desire to be out here in plain sight if someone else were to show up with a gun. Hoisting herself up with her skinned palms, she quietly entered the building through the gaping hole left by Mitch and Ed's entry.

The second she stepped foot in the place, she froze. Something felt very wrong. She had the preternatural prickling feeling she'd experienced two mornings ago, seeing the gunman reaching for the door of Henry's office. It was dark in the warehouse - off in nearly every direction, all she could see were rows and rows of metal bits. She searched for Mitch and Ed, but could not locate them.

Carefully, Jill moved to her right, to clear her vision of the racks in her way.

It only took her a second to take in the situation. Ed was far ahead, dead set on getting to the office at the far end of the cavernous warehouse. It was reckless, the pace he was keeping up.

Behind him, Mitch was being slightly more careful, looking left and right at certain intersections, but hurrying too much after Ed to be aware of the third figure stalking the two of them - lithe, quick, and still carrying a gun.

Mitch and Ed were only about ten feet in front of her. Jill watched, her heartbeat roaring in her ears, as Ed paused at a support pole in the middle of the warehouse floor, staring down at the floor, allowing Mitch to catch up with him. She didn't get a chance to see what they were looking at, not before Mitch turned around at the figure approaching

them, no doubt obscured by all the metal, all the many dark rows of metal, and said, "Jill?"

One shot rang out - only one. She did not see which one of the men it hit, she did not see anything. With a maddened dash, Jill covered the distance between herself and the other woman, diving like a wide receiver would dive for the catch that would vault him into stardom, into a \$10 million dollar a year contract, into the arms of the most voluptuous trophy wife a \$10 million dollar a year contract would buy him!

The woman turned. Jill had time to think *Oh, SHIT*, right before she heard the sound of another bullet leaving the chamber of a gun, and a mountainous shock of sound crashed down around her. Jill shut her eyes, made the last, hopeless, profane supplication to God, heaven, the devil, Shiva -

*OH MY FUCKING GOD ITS OVER PLEASE THIS SUCKS GODDAMN FUCKING NO NO MOM NO!*

Pain ripped through some part of her side, pain like she'd never experienced before, and Jill writhed on the ground, clutching her -

Her *arm*.

Jill's eyes fluttered open. She was on the ground, clutching the arm she'd just landed on, looking down at the unnatural angle at which it was bent, and seeing someone else underneath her. Someone blonde, and little, still scrambling around, pushing Jill off of her with surprising strength.

"*Oh no you fucking don't!*" Jill cried, and, balancing her body on with legs, smashed her good fist into the woman's face. Blood squirted like a fountain from the woman's nose. Jill didn't stop with one. Over and over, she sent punches down on the woman's body, punches stored up from two days of high-strung, otherworldly fear and anguish. The woman finally went still, and Jill stood up, scanning the ground for the gun she'd dropped. It was there, just a few feet away. Quickly retrieving it, she held it up, aiming straight at the woman's head, and sent a swift kick right into her stomach to check to see if she was still alive. A hoarse cough erupted from the lips, and several more. Angry, pained eyes stared up at Jill.

"She's already dead, you stupid bitch!" The woman spat onto the ground, heaving breath to get enough air.

Jill blinked, desperation curdling her blood. If it was true...if it was true, at least they could find her body. If not - the woman had just unwittingly revealed Delphi was here.

Jill, who knew taking her eyes off the woman would mean she would immediately try something to disarm her, took a step back, far away enough so that the woman could not come at her. She seemed unlikely to rise, anyway, but in all her books, that was when the

villain got someone. *Can't let my guard down. You're not gonna get me, bitch, I'm a badass motherfucker!*

"Ed! Mitch! Are you okay!"

Something large slunk towards them, and she heard Mitch's voice from the darkness. "Ed's been shot."

Rage and horror welled up inside her, and the moment's adrenalin was torn away. She felt cold, little, and very, very frightened. She took a step towards them, but stopped, remembering the woman on the floor.

"Mitch," she called, her voice shaking. "I need you to come here and get this woman. I need you to make sure she doesn't move. I have her gun, but - but my arm is broken."

Mitch rose from the ground, and quickly moved over. With one scoop, he had the woman in his arms and had turned around. Jill followed him, wincing at the pain jolting up her arm with every step. Out by the pole, there were several pieces of rope, a puddle of something that looked like vomit, and Ed, lying very still, in blood.

Mitch did not look that way. Jill saw him keep his head down, doing as she had told him to do, tying up the woman against the pole with the rope.

Jill walked over to where Ed lay, and saw, with sick apprehension, how pale he looked. She knelt by him, and reached her fingers out to touch him.

His eyes fluttered open, blinking rapidly.

"Delphi!" he urged her, and sunk back to the ground, his breath shallow and rough. Mitch walked over to where they were, and cast a hangdog, worried look at Jill.

She knew what he was thinking. He was thinking if Ed didn't get help, and soon, he was going to die. He was thinking of the car, parked a quarter of a mile away, thinking how far that was when there was already so much blood on the ground. And he was thinking of what he'd heard Ed say: *Delphi*.

Jill shut her eyes, fighting back tears. *Goddamn SHIT. Goddamnit! FUCKING BASTARDS!*

But she had no time. Quickly rising to her feet, she gestured forward towards the office. They had to go after Delphi. Ed would see her safe, even if it was the last thing he saw. Jill would make goddamn fucking sure of that.

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Lang backed away from her, and ran a hand down her chest, down towards her waist.

"You're going to like this," he told her, licking his lips. "Oh, you're gonna like it a lot."

He began to undo the buckle on his belt. Delphi leaned her head back, desperate now, bracing herself for any movement he might make towards the rope holding her to the chair.

Through her lashes, she suddenly saw the light darken in the office. Something large was blocking the wan light coming from outside. Too large to be Ed!

Then, she saw the largest man she'd ever seen in her life staring through the glass at her. Panic flooded through her. If there were two of them, she would not be able to get away. She'd die, unspeakably.

But then, she saw another face, an impish, young face, framed by a dark mass of tangled hair.

*Jill.*

Delphi wanted to cry, but instead kept herself sharp. She saw Jill see her, see the man in front of her. Lang had lunged at her again, rubbing himself against her leg - *fucking disgusting!* - and Delphi moved her chin, staring down at the knife and the gun on the desk, hoping that Jill could see it.

Jill's face disappeared from the glass.

A second later, and pandemonium: the door cracked open on its hinges, and the giant vaulted inside, grabbed Lang, and tossed him off of Delphi. In a blur, Delphi saw Jill in the doorway reach for the gun, the knife.

Lang's scream of rage at his interrupted rape filled the room, but was silenced the next moment when the larger man held up his fist and sent it flying right into Lang's face. He fell, limp - *All over*, Delphi thought - to the ground.

Jill rushed over towards her with the knife, and cut the ropes around her. Delphi looked up at her, the relief of the moment dulling her senses, and said, "I knew I liked you."

Jill did not reply, but worked feverishly at the ropes. It was then that Delphi realized Ed was not with them.

She went cold.

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The first thing Damien saw when he walked through the open doors of the building was a small blonde woman tied to a post, her swollen, bloody face staring up at him defiantly.

Gun drawn, Damien approached. Behind him, he could hear the uniformed officers running towards the building. When he drew closer, he could see Delphi, Jill and Mitch all surrounding a body on the floor. Delphi was sobbing wildly.

Damien's gun arm dropped. In a daze, he moved forward. First slowly, then with increasing alarm.

Jill looked up from where she was crouched, and seeing him, quickly called out his name. She came towards him - he could see one of her arms was twisted badly.

"Ed's been shot," she whispered. Tears were glistening in her eyes as well. "Is the ambulance here? We called from the office phone here. He's just so - so still..."

Damien nodded, and said, softly, "It's outside. I wanted to make sure everything was okay before we let them in."

He turned behind him, and gestured to the silent bank of officers at the doorway. "Call the EMTs in now! There's a man down needs to get taken to a hospital immediately!"

Jill stepped aside to let Damien pass. He knelt by his friend, on the ground. Ed was very pale, and indeed, very still on the ground of the warehouse. His eyes were closed, but his chest continued to move - he was still alive. There was a lot of blood on the ground around him.

Damien reached out and touched Ed's hand. "It's Damien, Ed. The ambulance is here - they're going to take you to the hospital and get you patched up. Don't try to move - I know you can hear me."

Damien looked up at Delphi. Her eyes were bloodshot, bursting with tears. She was half naked, and didn't seem to notice. Damien removed his raincoat and draped it over her shoulders. She took it, gave him a quiet thank you, but did not remove her eyes from Ed's body. She was holding his other hand, gently stroking it with her own.

He had to turn away. If Ed didn't make it...

The EMTs dashed into the room, and the crowd around Ed moved quickly away from him to allow them to do their jobs. Ed approached Jill again, who, despite a distraught expression, looked to have the most presence of mind at the current moment.

"What happened here?" he asked quietly.

She drew herself up, looking exhausted, and said, "We found the guy who attacked Henry's office."

Lang. "Where is he?" Damien asked.

"He's in the office over there." She pointed with her good hand, wincing slightly.

Damien came to his senses, and raised his hand to flag the EMTs. Jill shook her head, "No. It's not bad. Let them take Ed first. And Delphi. Send her with him. She wouldn't be able to take it not being with him right now."

Damien lowered his hand, and nodded. Then, he gestured towards the office where Lang was interred. "How do you know he's the one who attacked Henry's office? Did he make a confession?"

Jill looked at him, and a wry, tired smile played on her lips. "A girl never forgets a man she rammed with a palm tree, Lieutenant."

Damien returned the expression. "Is he tied up?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Mitch took care of that. I, uh, don't think he'll be moving much anyway. Delphi kicked him in the balls."

He frowned. "But - "

"She kicked him in the balls...um...*a lot*."

Damien blanched. He pointed towards the woman tied to the pole. "Delphi do that, too?"

"No," she said flatly, "that was me."

There was a ferocity behind her statement that precluded comment. Damien turned and focused all his attention on her. "I think we've got it all figured out - but I need to ask you some questions tonight, while it's fresh in your mind. You'll also have to come down and make a formal statement tomorrow, and testify in the trial."

Jill actually laughed. "My mother's going to *love* this."

## Chapter 13: Denouement

"So," Henry said, grinning and taking a bite out of his chicken, "You're telling me that you actually spent most of the 'Big Rescue' lying on the floor in a pool of your own blood? And I missed it?"

Ed gave him a dry look, and took a bite out of his drumstick. They were in Ed's kitchen. It was a week and a half after the whole debacle - Thanksgiving now. Delphi had invited everyone to the house for the occasion, and to celebrate Ed getting out the hospital, and proceeded to burn the turkey to unidentifiable hash. Mitch had made a run to the local KFC. The other four had hoovered down their food and gone outside to wreak childish havoc in the snow. The Denby brothers sat in the kitchen, stuffing themselves with what remained.

"I got shot through the lung," Ed said stiffly. "I'd like to see you running around with a bullet in your lung."

Henry ignored him good-naturedly. "So then, the whole tussle with the armed woman, the valiant combat against the evil detective - all them. Not you. All..." Henry pointed outside, where Delphi's shrieks of pleasure could be heard. She was an excellent shot, apparently. "...them. Not..." Henry pointed back at Ed. "...you."

Ed shook his head, "When did you get to be such a pain in my ass?"

"Well, Eddie," Henry replied, sitting back in his chair with his hands behind his head - unconsciously making himself look exactly like Ed, " - being in jail can change a man."

Ed rose from his seat, and threw his plate in the trash. From the living room, he could hear the sounds of the news going off. He looked out of the kitchen into the living room, and snorted. Frank Lang's lawyers looking harried, making no comments as they dodged reporters going out of the court room downtown. Briefly, the station flashed a picture of Lang's mugshot.

"If I have to see if damned face one more time," Ed muttered.

Once Damien had Lang in possession, it had only been a matter of time before he cracked. Frank Lang had not only forgotten to destroy the evidence he'd stolen off of Damien's desk, but a search of his car revealed both Thomas Moore's and Chris Shackleton's cell phone numbers - which he'd taken off the body on the night Damien had so fortuitously taken him right to the crime scene. His home and bank accounts were also given a thorough once over - and it was dirty. It was dirty, blatant, and egotistical: all hallmark characteristics of Frank Lang. Turned out that he'd been illegally testing Ashland's anti-withdrawal pills on whoever would take them - mostly old junkies, like Amy Moore and the various unfortunates sprinkled about the city. He'd been paying them with funds from the company - and while it had not gone all the way to the top of

Ashland, it had prompted enough public outrage that Ashland was certainly feeling heat for it.

The pieces had fallen into place shortly after Lang's arrest. Amy Moore, a user of the drug, had shown up at Henry's office, frightened because of the strange lesions in her mouth. Unaware of her problem altogether and strictly for his own personal phobic reasons, he'd quickly dispatched her off to Chris Shackleton, who had discovered the lesions in her mouth, and called Henry to check up to see his take of it. That was the message left on Henry's office phone on Friday. On Saturday morning, while Shackleton was working on paperwork at his office, Amy had been killed by Lang, but not before admitting to him what she had done. In a panic, Lang and the woman Ashland had denied hiring to take care of the mess - a Laura Geller - went to Shackleton's office, where Shackleton had just called Henry's cell phone, and killed Shackleton by switching out his nitrous with nitrous mixed with nitrogen dioxide. They'd found Henry's number in the phone, discovered he was a dentist, and deduced that he must know what was going on.

Thomas Moore had been murdered by Geller - he'd been using Amy as a means to extort money from Lang. Lang, in an irrational rage, had sent Geller to kill Moore after his failure to kill Denby. The receipt found by Ed and Damien in Moore's apartment had been items bought by Moore on Lang's threats - they'd been found near the warehouse, where Amy Moore's body had also been found. She'd been found wearing a flower pattern.

When Ed had learned all the fact, he'd been amazed at the sheer stupidity of so many of Lang's actions. In the end, he had to admit that Damien's assessment had been right: being stupid enough was not a consideration you have to take into account when dealing with most people.

Ed's gloomy thoughts were interrupted by the sound of shattering glass and the feel of frigid air blowing against his neck. He turned around.

A gaping hole was staring at him through his own kitchen window, a sheaf of snow sprinkled in a fan out on the floor where the snowball had kamikazed.

From outside, a female voice - suspiciously like Delphi's, cried out, "Hey, I saved your life! You aren't going to hold that window against me after I saved your life, are you?"

Henry, who had flattened himself against the wall, looked at Ed, a merry expression on his face. "So, she saved your life, eh?"

"We're the same god damned blood type." Ed covered his face. "Fuck. Do you realize how much shit she thinks she's allowed to break now?"

Henry did not reply. He just smiled.