

Illinoir
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Prologue: Reach out and Touch Someone

My cell phone rings. I put down the camera and pull my phone from the inside pocket of my sport coat. The caller ID display shows that it is my wife, Livvy. I haven't been around much lately what with one case or another always taking up my time and it seems that the only way we communicate now is through clipped, awkward phone calls. I flip open the phone.

"Bonnet," I say – it's a habit.

"Mr. Bonnet, this is Mrs. Bonnet," she says. She sounds happy, her voice lighter than it's been in a while.

"Hello there, Mrs. Bonnet," I say. "It seems like it's been forever since I've heard from you."

"It certainly has been a dog's age and a half. How are you?"

"I'm quite well, thanks very much for asking. How are you?"

"I'm feeling wonderful. The sun is shining, the birds are singing, the flowers are blooming and the air is clear."

"That's quite an impressive list. I wish it were all the same out here," I say.

"Oh, Charlie, I'm sorry to hear that. Is work bringing you down?"

"Don't worry about me, my dear. I'll pull through."

"You always do, Charlie. That's one of the things I love about you. Say, when are you coming home?" she asks.

"I don't know, sweetheart. Soon, I hope," I say.

"Well, I hope so too. Don't forget dinner with my mother. And I'd really love to see you tonight."

"I'll do everything I can to make that happen, Livvy. I promise."

"I will too, Charlie. I love you."

"I love you too, baby."

We hang up. I drop my phone back inside my pocket and pick up the camera. As I look through the viewfinder, I hear footsteps behind me. I don't get a chance to turn around before I feel a stinging blow on the back of my head and everything goes black.

Chapter 1: Her Blood is on My Hands

(In which I wake up for the first time tonight, am arrested for a crime that I did not commit, or arrested for a crime that was never committed, or committed for an arresting crime, or perhaps not arrested, nor committed, nor criminalized in any way at all.)

I wake up. My eyes stay closed, but I can tell it's dark. I have a feeling about these things and this darkness is definitely the kind you can feel. It's the kind of darkness you can feel even when your eyes are closed, your head is pounding, your body aches, you don't know where you are, you don't even know who you are. Your hands are sticky.

My hands are sticky. I open my eyes. The predictable darkness is there, thicker than life. It's the kind of darkness that forces you to swim through rooms, carefully making your way, feeling for obstacles. Your eyes will never adjust to this darkness. Your pupils cannot grow large enough to allow you to use whatever slight amount of light might be present to make out even the murkiest edges of the objects around you.

I'm pretty sure I'm on my back on a hardwood floor. My slight movements -- ginger attempts to assess my situation -- cause pain to shoot virtually everywhere through my body. These slight movements bring echoes: more clues to my environment. It sounds large, empty, and alone.

Carefully, I pull open a pants pocket with my right hand and reach in with my left, not wanting to get the blood on my hands -- I know it's blood, it must be blood, only blood feels like this, and in my line of work, I know what blood feels like -- onto my pants if I can help it. I find the lighter in my pocket and remove it.

I observe a moment of silence before I light it. Do I really want to know? Do I want to disturb the darkness that is the only thing between me and whatever horrible thing has happened? Do I want to disturb the darkness that is between me and responsibility? The darkness is a cocoon. It could keep me safe and whole forever, if I just keep from turning the wheel, igniting a spark, facing the facts.

But curiosity gets the better of me. I'm not a private detective for nothing, after all. There's a reason I got into investigation -- I just couldn't keep my nose out of it. And so I light the lighter, half expecting the darkness in the room to just swallow the flame, and keep me blissfully ignorant.

However, physics beats symbolism, as it always does. The lighter works. The flame is tiny in the room and reveals little other than the dark red stains on my hands. On my arms, my sleeves, my jacket. Nothing else. Seeing more would require lifting or turning my head. I lack the strength or the will to do either. I let the flame go out.

I don't think the blood is mine. The amount present on my person doesn't correspond to the amount of pain I feel. Granted, I am hurting, but not that badly. Realizing that my clothes are already beyond salvation, I search my body for wounds and find none. So, whose blood is it?

How many times do I have to wake up in darkness, in strange locations, in pain, wondering whose blood I am covered with, before I'll get the message and realize that this just isn't the business for me? And yet, I don't know how to do anything else. One might think that finding oneself in such a state more than once might indicate that I'm not that good at this either, but I let my record speak for itself. I'm pretty damn good. I've never let a case go unsolved, never not gotten my man. Sure, I've never been Detective of the Year, but that whole thing is just a popularity contest anyway. I've got more than enough crap cluttering my shelves without some cheap-ass trophy to add to the mix. That might sound like I'm making excuses or trying to justify the lack of peer recognition I've received, but seriously, those guys are a bunch of assholes. If you'd ever been to one of the dinners, you'd know exactly what I was talking about. I just don't need it.

But then, how much do I need this? I'm sure software engineers don't wake up covered in blood. More often, they wake up covered in takeout food, sticky with soy sauce and Diet Coke. At least they know exactly who it belongs to. Doctors might wake up covered in blood, but it's the blood of someone whose life they just saved. A lawyer will wake up having sucked the blood of the innocent.... But I digress.

I try the lighter trick again, flick it on and take a glance at my watch. 1:30 AM. Good

to know, but all I can think is that my wife is going to kill me. Did she expect me home for something? Some sense of an obligation flits at the back of my mind; I tug at it, but it doesn't give. I leave it alone, for now. Examine my hand in the light of the flame. Blink my eyes. Maybe the blood will go away. It does, but only when my eyes are closed. This is the real deal. Again. Lighter out again, but I know, I'm going to have to figure this all out. It won't just go away no matter how much I want it to.

No time like the present. I draw up my feet, preparing to sit up. These bigger movements send even more pain to my brain and I almost give up again, but I am nothing if not persistent and I love a good mystery. I prop myself up on my elbows, each action a positive step towards actually standing up. It feels good to make progress like this. At least I'm doing *something*.

Next on the agenda is sitting up. I grab my knees and pull. I can't tell if my pants are bloody as well, but I'm pretty sure that it's not just the blood on my hands that I'm feeling. My best pants, too. I must not have been expecting trouble like this when I dressed. I've got outfits for situations like this and this definitely isn't it. A trip to the tailor is in order.

So now I'm sitting up. This is good. This is a good thing. And it only hurts when I move. I've learned, over time, that that's a good thing too. Breathing is no more or less of a problem than it always is for me, so that's a good thing too. The grunting and swearing that I'm doing (but not bothering to recount) is also a good thing. It all adds up to me still being alive and in one piece. Obviously doing better than at least one person I've encountered tonight.

Okay, enough of this. I could stretch this out forever. I'm not what you would call a man of action by any means, but when it counts, I can certainly stand up. I rise, and I'm proud to say that I'm relatively steady on my feet. My knees and legs protest the effort but I'm capable enough to show that I'm still in charge here. I'm calling the shots. I'm the boss. I take a moment to admire the superiority of my will over my body and then bring the lighter out again.

I'm still able to see no more than a couple feet around me. I could do this the easy way -- crawling on the floor, lighter held out in front of me until I find a wall which I could follow to a door or light switch, but judging from the blood, there's probably something (someone, really) in here with me that I don't want to see revealed in the flickering and barely adequate light of my Bic. The alternative, of course, is stumbling blindly on a hideously mangled corpse, but I'm willing to take my chances. I'd rather my feet find it first anyway.

So I make my way across the room. Slowly. Carefully. It seems to take forever -- the room is large, larger than any room in my apartment for sure. And careful though I am, I still somehow manage to find the wall with my face. I add not just insult to my injury, but a good deal of new pain. My face was the one thing that hadn't been hurting. Still, it's a small victory and if you couldn't tell already, I'm not above celebrating these things as they come. I take a few moments to lean against my new best friend and regroup.

Though I'm reluctant to move on from my current stable position, I figure I've already come this far, and there's no point in giving up now. Not wanting to make any more of a mess than I already have, I take off my jacket and wrap it around my left hand. There's no reason to leave bloody handprints marking my trail as I make my way towards the door. Sure, it'd be incriminating, but it's also downright embarrassing.

Slowly but surely, I ease my way along the wall. I come to a corner, make the turn, hit the next corner and turn again. Finally, I find what I'm looking for: a light switch. Steeling

myself for whatever may come -- I'm not expecting anything bad, but you never know when some prankster is going to rig a light switch to a bit of C4 or dynamite and you won't see anything but a brief flash before it's lights out forever-- I flip the switch. I'm not ashamed to say I closed my eyes. You would too.

But nothing out of the ordinary happens. The light comes on. Through my closed eyes, I guess it's an unshaded 60 watt bulb. Probably a cheapo off-brand bulb, based on the quality of the light. Slowly, I open my eyes, satisfied to see that I am right. There's a lone fixture in the middle of the ceiling. And nothing else.

When I say nothing else, I'm not kidding. I'm not exaggerating. The room is empty. Completely. Just the bulb, the switch, and me. I return to where I assume I'd been lying and there's not even any blood on the floor. I get down on my knees to do a careful check and turn up nothing, not even a drop. It's clean -- and yes, I'm going to say it: too clean.

I stand up, ignoring the pain still clamoring for my attention. This is a doozy here. Not a pleasant situation. Not the way you want to start your day, or end your night depending on how you look at it. You know what I would have preferred to nothing? Absolutely anything. Even that horribly mangled corpse would have been more of a comfort.

Apparently the room doesn't want to completely disappoint me though. When I turn back to the switch and the door it's conveniently placed right next to, I see something that makes me long for a minute ago when there was nothing. Something that makes me long for darkness. It's a note. Well, it's more of a message -- written, in blood, on the door.

"Her blood is on your hands."

I look down at my hands, turn them over, turn them back, searching the now-dry blood for any clue, waiting for it to tell me something, knowing it won't, not yet at least.

I look back at the door and ask it, "Well, no shit. But who the hell is she?"

Chapter 2: My Name is Charles Bonnet

(In which I discuss my past, my secret origins, and my prior arrests.)

When faced with a situation like this -- and I've seen more than my fair share of intimidating messages written in blood on the door of an unknown room -- I find it best to take a deep breath or two and start over. I give myself something of a little reboot, begin at the beginning. Take a deep breath.

Take a deep breath. And let it out. Hold your head high, keep your back straight. Do everything you can to maximize the flow of your own blood and maybe it will feed your brain and help you figure out who this other blood belongs to. Start at the beginning.

My name is Charles Bonnet. I am 34-years-old, and aside from being a private investigator of above-average skill and moral fortitude, I am average in every way. Mine is not the face that you will remember from a crowded room. I don't tower over the crowd, nor am I towered over by it. I don't stand out from the crowd; I'm right smack dab in the middle. While this hasn't particularly helped me with the ladies, it has undoubtedly aided in my investigative career. Until I became a private detective (please, please, never call me a "private dick") I cursed my forgettable features, my average height, my neutral voice, everything about me that made me blend in. Now I know

they're my greatest gifts. I know, I know -- it doesn't seem like that'd make me the most interesting guy in the world, but what can I say? I am what I am.

I grew up here, in this city. I realize I'm making an assumption here -- this anonymous room with its anonymous light switch and once anonymous door (now covered with...well, covered with chapter one's eponymous message) could be just about anywhere. But, I've got a feeling about these things. I told you that already, but believe me, I'd know it if I wasn't in the city anymore. Anyway, I was born here, like I said, 34 years ago, and from what I can gather, I had an average, run of the mill kind of childhood. The average kid doesn't get beat up, the average kid doesn't get abused. The average kid just gets ignored. And while it seems the average kid also doesn't find a permanent home, at least he makes it through his childhood relatively intact -- a goal of mine that has lasted well into adulthood. There's nothing better than being relatively intact, especially considering the alternatives, which again, I've been forced to consider on more than one occasion.

So there I was, 18 years old, graduated middle of my class (of course) and now on my own, alone in the world, afraid (I'm not ashamed).... Okay, terrified, really. For all my averageness would do for me later, it certainly wasn't going to help me out in terms of getting into a college, getting a job, getting anywhere.

I tried a bunch of things: sales, business administration, baking, carpentry, scuba diving, farming, plastic surgery, zamboni driving, sales again, modeling, personal training, electrical engineering, custodial engineering, structural engineering, engine engineering, sales again. Nothing fit me quite right. None of these jobs were suited to my talents. I did okay, but I was tired of doing just okay. I needed to excel.

I was well-skilled in the area of finding information. In fact, I had this amazing capability of discovering just about anything about just about anything. It's like the old joke, "Between me and my brother, we know everything." Each question asked, the response is, "Oh, my brother knows that one." Except in my case, my brother was the Internet, and I was more than capable of finding it. Anywhere. Quickly. So, I figured, let's try law enforcement. Solving crimes, solving mysteries, my skills should come in handy, right? So I applied to be a cop. I figured I'd manage to work my way up to detective, use my skills, have a positive affect on society and all that.

Only, they wouldn't take me. I failed the damn psychological profile. It's not that I'm crazy -- stop looking at me like that -- but I just couldn't take it seriously. And apparently, their psych experts don't take kindly to that. So they turned me away and I was without direction again -- until I saw the ad.

You've all seen the ad -- the one that says you can become a private investigator for cheap; the one that says you will lead a life of adventure and excitement. I had visions of smoke-filled rooms and beautiful women with long legs, damsels in distress who would fall in love with the man who solved their problems.

None of you have ever followed up on it because it looks fake and like a waste of time and money. But none of you have ever been as rudderless and lost as I have and so I followed up on it. I scraped together a few thousand dollars, took the classes and took the exams got a license.

And finally, I had found something where I wasn't just average. I got a job with an insurance firm in town and became a claims investigator. When the company got a large claim, I would visit with the claimant and determine whether or not the deal was legit. Using my natural skills at gathering information and my ability to read people and situations, I excelled at my job. The company was excited about the amount of money I

was saving them and gave me raise after raise. Unfortunately, I wasn't as excited about the work I was doing. I found myself craving the adventure and excitement that I'd been promised in the ad that got me into detective work in the first place.

Amidst a romance and some controversy, I quit the insurance racket and decided to hang out my shingle. I took an office above a Laundromat and opened for business. Charles Bonnet, P.I. quickly gained a reputation as being one of the better investigators in town, even if his peers weren't as impressed as his clients. A private investigator with a conscience is something of a pariah in the industry, no matter what the National Association of Professional Investigators tells you. Even the name change -- from 'private investigator' to 'professional investigator' -- is indicative of the problems in the profession. It was an attempt at image control rather than an attempt to solve the problem. Most people, when they think of private detectives either think of Holmes and Marlowe or they think of some sleazy, corrupt ex-cop who spends his time taking pictures of cheating spouses and serving subpoenas to debtors.

Well, I'm not like either of those images, really, though I fancy myself to be closer to Marlowe, with perhaps a little more wit and charm. But that's probably not entirely accurate either. Truth be told, I'm just (as I've said) your average ordinary guy, who dresses a little nattier, talks a little faster and drinks a little more than the next fellow. "I am everything a well-dressed private detective should be." Or something like that.

Granted, I did spend a lot of time taking pictures of cheating spouses and serving subpoenas. It's what actually pays the bills for those detectives that actually manage to pay their bills. In the real world, a long-legged blonde doesn't come strolling into the office every day.

Chapter 3: Sweet Home Chicago

(In which I make my escape, discuss my love for this city, my hatred for other cities, and am most likely arrested.)

Yeah -- none of this changes the fact that there's still this message on the wall. My detecting skills aren't getting the job done yet. I am no closer to discovering what is going on. I'm not even any closer to the door. Still standing in the middle of this room in the middle of who knows where. Still lost. Another glance at the watch: it's 2:27 AM now, a testament to either the size of the room or how easily I can get lost in my own thoughts, in my own head. I fight the urge to close my eyes again, knowing it will lead to more of the same. The urge to sag back to the floor is nearly overwhelming. The urge to close my eyes, to rub them, do anything to eliminate the image, if not the reality of the blood. It always works, but it never lasts. Got to get out of here.

Across the room to the door, try to avoid reading the message again, turn the knob - the door opens to another room, bigger than the first. There are windows here that don't offer much beyond a beautiful view of the building next door and little else. But at least there's still an outside world. Sometimes I'll get so locked up in my own head that I'll forget that it exists. The windows provide enough light for me to see lofted ceilings, exposed beams, desks placed in orderly, even rows. I wander around the room, looking at the various knick-knacks and trinkets on the desks. It seems like such an ordinary,

innocent office compared to the ominous, mostly evil feeling one might get from the other room. I grab a business card from someone's desk and other than that, I'm not in much of an exploratory mood so I make for the stairs and take em two at a time to the crash bar on the door at the bottom and outside where it's....

Still Chicago. I told you. I don't need any landmarks or street signs to tell me. It's my city. You know it when you see it, you feel it and you know it. It's the smell, the feel, the air is different here.

I stumble out into the street and immediately recognize that I am downtown, in the heart of the city. I turn and look at the building, marking its location in my head for future reference. There is nothing extraordinary about it. Nothing to make you think that anything strange might have ever happened there. Just another former warehouse converted into loft offices, abandoned after one market bust or another. I've been in one of these before, investigating some corporate espionage back before I started doing more interesting work.

The morning is moist. It's summer here and the rain has been frequent. The Midwest heat kicks back as soon as the rain pauses and turns everything into steam and dampness. Everything feels swampy and thick, not unlike my head at the moment. It makes everything sweat, even the street. The sewers belch a constant steam, spewing forth at every intersection, filling the air with a treacly sweet smell that belies its dirty origins. Everything sounds wet, the tires on the few cars out at this hour slicking over the pavement, more sticky sounds.

I swim through the humid air, early morning fog forming, adding more mystery to an already confusing morning. Everything has a fuzzy edge to it, streetlights reflecting of the particles of water hanging in the atmosphere, hazing the edge of my vision.

I decide to walk home. I don't think I drove here -- I refuse to drive downtown, it's just too much trouble to be worth it -- and I'm not in the mood to deal with the rabble that you find on public transportation at this hour. Plus, there's never a cab when you really need one and I don't think I could handle the small talk that that always involves. The air, no matter how thick and disgusting it is seems to be doing me some amount of good anyhow. Regardless of this absolutely repulsive weather, I still think it's the best city in the world. Sure, I have my fair share of that "Second City" self-consciousness but I think it's bullshit and it's just instilled in me by the media's portrayal of the city. We're constantly overlooked, out here in the middle of the country. Everyone always thinks of New York or L.A. Well, let me tell you something -- I've been to both of those cities and there's nothing in either of them that would make me want to stay there. In New York, everyone thinks that Chicago is some tiny village. "What if you want Thai food? Can you get Thai food?" Dammit, you can get anything you want at any time you want. "Not cold noodles with peanut sauce." What? I'll show you some cold noodles. They're in my fridge. I could make those in Alaska if I wanted. "The best cold noodles with peanut sauce in the world!" Oh yeah? Is New York City in China all of a sudden? I don't have the same problem with the West Coasters, though they've got their own issues. And I don't know why anyone who doesn't have to would ever want to live in Los Angeles. It's amazing how a city that produces that much entertainment can be so completely devoid of anything resembling genuine culture. But maybe I'm just prejudiced.

It just seems to me that on the whole, as a city, Chicago is pretty mellow, unassuming, and unpretentious. We just want to get along, you know? We just want to get our work done, kick back and eat six pounds of ribs and drink a couple cases of Old Style. I guess it's tough to be pretentious when you're the fattest city in the country.

And it's not that we don't have our share of assholes here. Trust me, they're around. If they weren't, I'd be out of luck and out of work. I make my living off assholes. And besides, whoever stuck me in that room, covered me with blood and gave me this headache can't be the princeliest of people, right?

As I stretch my legs, much of the pain leaves my body, making it easier for me to move. The aching in my head has taken up residence, however, and refuses to go anywhere, making it no easier for me to think. Thus, I make my way home by concentrating solely on the idea of putting one foot in front of the other until one of them manages to hit the front step of my building. Huzzah! Another in the long list of small victories achieved by Charles Bonnet on a hot summer night.

My jubilation is accompanied by a fluttering in my chest. If just making it back home is going to cause me some sort of heart palpitations, I figure I need to get a hobby. This sort of thing is going to lead to me having a heart attack when I manage to tie my shoes in the morning or a stroke if I finish the crossword puzzle while sneaking peeks at the answers. Surely, there are more exciting things out there in the world.

I take conscious notice and control of my breathing, holding onto the railing for support. Pressing my fingers against the carotid artery in my neck, I count my pulse. It's as normal as can be. Why now would I feel such a tingling in my heart then? Perhaps whoever dumped me in the room gave me some sort of drug, to knock me out and this is a side effect? Or perhaps they gave me something that would cause a heart attack and miscalculated the time it would take? As my paranoia runs free and I think of any number of possible malevolent plots that might have been used against me (what if they put a pacemaker in there and are making it make my heart explode right now, just like in that one episode of *Lost*?) and I cause my pulse to jump, the fluttering stops.

Relieved, and a little sheepish, I walk up the stairs to the entryway door when the fluttering starts again. This is too much! They're just fucking with me now. Angry and frightened, I shove my hand inside my jacket to attempt to massage my heart back to some sort of calmer state. I no longer feel the vibrating in my chest. I now feel it on the back of my hand. Further investigation (that's right, I'm an intrepid investigator! Even while facing my darkest fears, I will press on and find out what it is that is buzzing inside my jacket's pocket!) reveals it is nothing more nefarious and disturbing than a cellular telephone.

Chapter 4: Can You Hear Me Now?

(In which I discover a cell phone hidden between air molecules, use it to talk to not one, but two different people, and am arrested for killing the superintendent of my building.)

I know I know. All this time, in my jacket's inside pocket, my cell phone, just sitting there, waiting for me to use it. Why didn't I think of that right away? I didn't even bother to look at it. It used to be that when a plotline demanded that a person or group of people be cut off from society and any hope of rescue, the phone lines would be cut. Before that it was that the bridge had been washed out. Before that, I don't know, the fire for the smoke signals had gone out or something. My point being that even with all

our advancements in technology, we'll still find ways to be cut off, feeding into one of our greatest fears as a species: being out of touch. Every now and then, you'll hear people rail against cell phones saying, "I don't want to be constantly connected to people," or, "I don't want people to be able to get in touch with me all the time," but you know that's bullshit. We need that kind of contact, and those people know they don't have to always answer the phone. They can claim the newest of technological malfunctions: the loss of signal. The characters in the middle of the woods in the middle of nowhere will be able to use their phones until it is dramatically exciting for their phones not to work. A character smack dab in the middle of the city will receive unusual interference from surrounding buildings if it helps build excitement. Even a fellow who is seated comfortable atop a cellular tower with just one chance to warn the populace of impending invasion, disaster or doom will find himself unable to get a single bar of signal.

Even worse is the broken cell phone. If you ever see a shot or read a scene where a character's cell phone breaks, prepare yourself for a moment later on where he will say (or you will think) "If only the cell phone hadn't broken! If only, if only, if only!" And then you shall stop the movie or throw the book across the room. This I command!

Anyhow, I wish I could say that at some point during the last couple hours, I had thought to look at my phone and I wish I could say that when I looked at it, it was just blindly searching for a signal, or that the battery had drained completely due to my lack of foresight and failure to charge it or that the screen had shattered or the buttons had broken and no amount of American ingenuity (i.e. smacking the phone against the nearest hard surface) would help.

None of these things are true. I am simply an idiot.

This is what I get for buying that super-slim, ultra-light, nearly-nonexistent phone that all the 16-year-old girls would put silver sequins on and the boys would buy in black if only they could see the thing but you need an electron microscope just to dial the numbers. And this is what I have, in my jacket pocket, vibrating the weakest little buzz, like an anorexic hummingbird's death rattle against my chest.

I pull the phone from its nest, squint to read the name on the caller ID -- it is my mother, God bless her. I manage to execute what amounts to opening the phone on this particular device -- several complex maneuvers, not unlike the opening of one of those end of the world puzzle boxes from the Hellraiser movies.)

"Bonnet," I say.

"Oh, Charlie, thank God," says my mother, worry and concern evident in her voice. She never approved of my going into business for myself. She wishes I'd stayed at the insurance company where it was safe. "I've been trying to get in touch with you for hours."

"I'm sorry, Mom. It's this stupid new Motorola ATOM. You can count the number of subatomic particles in it on one hand. I knew I should have gotten the BRCK."

"You know I don't know anything about those things, honey," she says, cutting me off. Nothing will make my mother interrupt faster than when I start discussing technical gadgetry. Come to think of it, that's what gets *everyone* to interrupt me. "Where are you?"

"Why I do believe I'm at my front door," I say, reaching for my keys. And they're not there. I'm really off tonight. "But it seems I've lost my keys somewhere or another."

"If you'd given me a spare set like I told you too, you could come over and get them, but you never listen."

"Mom, if I'd given you a spare set of keys to my apartment, you'd constantly be

dropping in unannounced.”

“Oh, I would not. I totally respect your privacy,” she says.

Oh sure, I think, just tell that to Livvy who still remembers the times Mom walked in on us – you know what I mean – while we were staying at my parents’ house.

There is an awkward pause. I can tell my mother is steeling herself to say something she doesn’t know how to say.

“Go ahead, Mom,” I urge.

“Charlie, are you drunk?” she asks, hesitantly.

“Mom? What? Of course not. I’ve just been working.”

“Sure, working. I don’t understand why you have to work such terrible hours. It’s not right for you to be out so late.”

“Speaking of which, Mom, why are you calling me at this hour? It’s like six days past your bed time.”

“Oh, Charlie, I just can’t sleep. It’s just such a sad day. Your father’s sleeping like a log, of course, and I just had to talk to someone. It’s only been three years but it still feels like yesterday”

One thing about my mother – she remembers and honors the anniversaries of almost every event that’s ever happened and most of them are bad. She can be very emotional about it too. On one hand, it makes every day special. On the other hand, it makes most days real depressing. I’m supposed to remember them all – she gives me calendars every year with each birthday, wedding, divorce, death and other notable event clearly marked. I stopped looking at them years ago. I couldn’t let myself fall into the same trap. I make a token effort to puzzle out what she’s speaking of, but nothing comes to mind.

I pretend I know what she’s talking about: “I know, Mom. It’s terrible, but all we can do is move on and keep on living.” I hope my generic consolation will have its desired effect.

She starts crying; definitely not my intention. She asks, “Oh honey, how is it that you’re so strong?”

“I learned it from watching you, Mom,” I tell her. It’s not even close to the truth. If I’m strong, she didn’t teach me that. She taught me how to lie, how to avoid pain and confrontation.

“You’re so sweet, Charlie,” she sniffs. I give her a minute to collect herself. She continues, “Oh, but here I am bawling on the phone with you and I haven’t even asked how you’re holding up.”

“Well, now’s your big chance. It’s never too late,” I joke.

She laughs – there we go, I’ve finally done my duty. “Well, sweetie, how *are* you holding up? You sound tired.”

“I *am* tired, Mom,” I say. I’m definitely not telling her the full story behind my exhaustion. I give her the less gory details. “I’ve been working all night on a boring case. It’s 3 AM and all I wanted to do was to get home and go to bed, but now I have to find a way to even get to my bed.”

“Well, don’t let me keep you any longer. You need to get your sleep.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’m glad you called – remember you can call anytime you want to talk.”

“You’re such a good boy. Someone raised you right,” she says. I can hear a smile returning to her voice. I’ve done my good deed for the day. “And you remember that if you need to you can always come here to stay.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’m sure I’ll find a way inside. I’m a resourceful lad.”

"I didn't just mean tonight, Charlie," she says. "Any time you need to you know you're welcome, okay?"

"Okay, Mom," I say, rolling my eyes. I think she forgets that I'm 34 years old. It's one of the perils of being an only child. I will perpetually be a baby to her. I don't think I'll be taking her up on that offer – as much as I love my parents, I don't need to be living with them again any time soon. "Good night."

"Good night, sweetheart. I love you."

"Love you too, Mom. Thanks for calling."

The call ends. Time to find a way into this building – one I chose for its security. I know what you're thinking. "You're a detective, Charlie! Don't you have to break into locked places all the time?" Well, just between you and me, yes I do. Usually it involves breaking something though and this is my house we're talking about here. Plus, I don't have my tools with me. They're up there in the apartment and I'm down here defending myself from you. I know they're not doing me any good up there, and no, I don't keep an extra set secreted on my person for emergencies. For the love of God, I'm not a magician. Besides, I'm better with a hammer and a screwdriver than I am with a set of picks. I never had the delicate sensitivities you need to use lock picks. All five of my senses are as dull as an evening with your Aunt Harriet.

Content though I am on the front stoop, I have work to do, or at the very least, some sleep to get. Plus, there's booze and aspirin upstairs and I would very much like a little of each. Or a lot of one and two of the other, anyway. I'm not one to bother my neighbors at such a late hour and their buzzing me in would only get me so far as the apartment door anyhow. I bite the bullet and dial Livvy's number, an effort requiring incredible concentration and dedication considering the size of the phone. The phone rings one and then goes directly into her voicemail. Either she's pissed off and avoiding my call or else she's asleep already. Either way, leaving her a message about how sorry I am isn't going to help.

I decide to strain my eyes again and call the super. Sal Winkler is a swell guy and I'm sure won't mind coming down to let me in.

"Whothefugisthis?" asks the sleepy voice on the other end of the phone.

"Sal!" I exclaim cheerfully.

"I'msal," Sal mumbles, obviously confused by the brightness and joy in my voice. Frankly, I'm a bit confused by it as well. I have no idea where it's coming from, but as long as it's there, I decide to go with it. I've already woken him up, I might as well sound friendly.

"Why, yes! Yes, you are! That's the spirit, buddy!"

"Who is this, really?" Sal asks, consciousness finally starting to seep in.

"Ah, Sal, it's your old buddy, Charlie Bonnet. You remember me, don't'cha? Sure ya' do."

"Bonnet!" Sal barks. "Why are you calling me at...." There is a long pause, fumbling noises.

I am nothing, if not helpful. "3:17 AM?"

"Yeah. Why are you calling me at 3:17 AM?"

"Well, Sal, it's like this. I find myself locked out of my apartment and unable to enter. And Sal, I'd really like to be in bed right now."

"Yeah, Bonnet," Sal replies grumpily. "I'm in bed right now, and I've got to tell you it was going just great until you called and woke me up."

"I'm glad to hear you've figured out the art of sleeping, and I apologize for

interrupting your practice of it. However, I really am in a bind here--"

"Why don't you get that dame of yours to let you in?" Sal asks. There is a twisted sneer in his voice. I can just picture the ugly look on his ugly face.

"I'm sorry-- did you really just call my wife a 'dame'? Did you really just use the word 'dame'?"

"I am hanging up the phone, Bonnet."

"No no. Don't do that, Sal. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'd get my...dame... to let me in only she's out of town and I'm loathe to have her come back from Switzerland just to open the door for me." I am such a stinker.

"Switzerland, eh?" Sal asks. "Then how come yesterday I heard you arguing about not whether or not you were going to her mother's for dinner tonight?"

Shit. That's what we were supposed to do tonight. I wonder how pissed Livvy is about it. She's usually pretty understanding about my work taking me out at odd times but if tonight's dinner had something to do with whatever anniversary Mom was lamenting – which is entirely possible; she tracks the triumphs and tragedies of people even only remotely connected to her – then I might be in serious trouble. I put it aside for the bigger issue of why Sal is listening to our conversations. "How did you hear that? Were you eavesdropping on us?"

"Hey, pal. It's not my fault you're the loudest talker in the building," Sal says. "I was replacing the light bulb in your hallway and could hear every word you said. Didn't hear a peep out of your wife though. That woman is quiet as a mouse. Jeez, cut a guy some slack."

"Alright, alright. Look, I made that stuff up about her being out of town. The truth is, she'd just kill me if she knew I was out this late. I can't wake her up. Could ya just come over and let me in?"

"Oh, out and about with your girlfriends, Bonnet?" There was cruel pleasure in his question. "I think I'm just going to let you deal with this one on your own."

"It's nothing like that, Sal," I sigh. "Oh hell, just come down here. There's a hundred bucks in it for you."

"I'm on my way."

Good old Sal. He's always ready to help out his fellow man. I feel inside my jacket to find that I actually do have my wallet. Opening it reveals several \$100 bills and the other usual items (driver's license, four credit cards, fortune cookie fortunes, Scrabble tiles of my favorite letters -- R, S, T, L, N, E, free delivery coupons from my favorite restaurants, three receipts from three different ATMs, preferred customer cards from six different grocery stores, two different shoe stores, five different gas stations and a Laundromat, three different video store membership cards, free sandwich punch cards for several different delis and Vienna Beef joints, another driver's license, a photo of my lovely wife, a photo of my lovely cat and a photo of a not-so-lovely corpse.)

Let's just back up here a second and take a look at that last photo, right? I'd love to play it off and say, "Hey hey, that's right. I'm a detective and I carry around a picture of a corpse in my wallet. For...uh...you know, good luck." But I don't. I don't like corpses. I mean I really, really, really don't like corpses. I've turned green, puked, fainted or done some other things of which I will spare you the details around just about every corpse I've come near. There is no way I would keep a picture of a corpse as a souvenir and I would do almost anything to avoid taking a picture of a corpse for any reason, business related or not. You've seen those cops on television who can have these light and witty conversations while standing over a dead body. One guy's saying crap like, "Well, he just

went out for a haircut." And the other guy pulls the sheet off the body and you see he's been decapitated and he says, "Looks like they took a little too much off the top." And they both laugh. Or the first guy says, "Come on, Louie, let's find the bastard who did this." Or some shit like that. Maybe there are cops like that out there, and maybe it's just their way of avoiding the really seriously disgusting and disturbing fact that the bag of blood and meat they're looking at once was a living, breathing individual. Not every death is a huge loss, mind you, but every death is, at the very least, a death. I don't want to get all deep and heavy on you here, because I know you're just in this for the suspense and mystery of it all (and what are you complaining about? You've already got mysterious blood, a mysterious note, a forgetful detective and some witty banter. Stop your whining and get back to reading) but I'm serious about this stuff.

So alright, another clue. I tell my stomach to calm down and take a closer look at the photo. It's a corpse alright. Dead as they come. Judging by the way the blood is pooling, it looks like she (for it was a woman) has been shot at least twice. It also looks like she's in the same room I was occupying just an hour or two ago. There are no shortage of anonymous empty rooms in Chicago, much less in the world, but fair is fair and I'm going to make this assumption. Besides, it seems like I'm lying right there next to her in the picture, dressed in tonight's outfit. So that's how her blood got on my hands. That's one mystery solved. I'm almost ready to call it a night.

But then I remember that the question remains: Who is she? It's tough to say as the photograph isn't an example of the finest work I've ever seen. She's dressed as if she were going out somewhere nice -- an evening gown, high heels, expensive jewelry. Her face is blurred, though, almost as if on purpose. Still, I can tell that we make a dashing couple. Too bad she's not my type. I prefer my women alive. It's just one of those little things that I decided long ago. I have my standards.

I turn the picture over. Written on the back, in the same hand that wrote the note on the door back in that loft (albeit much smaller and not with blood -- I'm guessing it was a Paper Mate Flexigrip Elite. Not my first choice in writing instruments, but not terrible by any means) is written the date and the now familiar words, "Her blood is on your hands."

"I knew that already," I say to the photo. "It's all over my clothes, too. Tell me something new, God dammit. Tell me something I don't know already."

I shake the picture for good measure. It's a technique that sometimes works with humans, occasionally with cats, but rarely, if ever, with inanimate objects such as the photograph in my hand. Oh well. I return it to my wallet for later examination.

"Who you talking to, Bonnet?" asks a voice from the darkness. I turn to find Sal approaching warily. His face registers shock when he sees me. "Holy shit! What happened to you?"

"What do you mean?" I ask innocently.

"You don't look so good," Sal says.

"Well, I'm sorry I woke you up," I reply. "But that's no reason to be insulting."

"Okay, okay," Sal says, reaching for his keys. He actually keeps what looks like a hundred different keys on one of those retractable key rings janitors always have. I don't know what else Sal does, but I know he only manages this one building. What could those other keys be for? His heart? His dreams? "I get it, top secret private dick stuff, right?"

"Sal, please, I've asked you not to call me that."

"Oh yeah. Sorry. You prefer public dick?" Sal laughs at his own joke. I am certain nobody else will. Remember when I mentioned that Chicago has its fair share of assholes? Sal here is one of them. Remember when I said that Sal was a swell guy? Well, I

was fucking kidding.

I roll my eyes, take a deep breath, count to ten, attempt to find my peaceful center and remember my place in the universe. All this results in me not popping him one. I actually manage a somewhat convincing polite chuckle.

"Good one, Sal." I am happy to report that my voice does not betray a single trace of the hatred and animosity that I feel towards this man. "Never heard that one before."

Sal shoulders me aside and approaches the door, flipping through his keys. He begins trying various of them in the door seemingly at random.

"Is this going to take long?" I ask.

"Never know which key this building is," he replies gruffly.

"Perhaps, after you find it, you should label it," I suggest.

"Hey, I don't tell you how to do your job, dick."

I decide to let the matter rest. Oh sure, I know fifty different ways to kill him without even breaking a sweat (honest, I do) but I imagine I'm in enough potential trouble for one night as it is without having a dead building superintendent on my hands. I'm not going to say that it wouldn't be worth the trouble (because it would be) but I'm just not in the mood.

"True enough. Say, you haven't seen any suspicious people coming or going around the building, have you?" I love asking these kinds of questions. They're so reassuring to people. When you fit exactly into the mold that people have made for you, nothing will relax them more. The only one that works better is when you ask, "Where were you on the night of such-and-such a date?" I haven't been able to use that one in a long time, but I'm looking forward to whipping it out soon. Just you wait.

"You mean besides you? Nah. I haven't been around here in a few days. Ah, there we go." Sal opens the door and lets the key zip back to its holder, ensuring that it's lost again. He must enjoy these little chats. He holds the door open for me and gives a sarcastic wave. "In you go, Bonnet."

I walk past him and into the entryway. Sal stands there with his hand held out. I am tempted to slap his hand. Or to slap him. I do neither and wait as expectantly as he is.

"The C-note, if you will."

"Sal, I need you to get me into my apartment as well, or didn't you figure on that? I'm not going to sleep in the hallway."

"Oh, jeez," he says. "I gotta do everything for you."

I'm quite certain that it's not the prospect of more lost sleep or the dread of spending more time with me that's making him act so put upon. Sal really hates stairs and going up to my apartment to unlock the door means climbing a whole bunch of them. His bad mood has just gotten decidedly worse. If I lived in the garden unit, this wouldn't be an issue.

"Come on, Sal," I say, taking his arm. "I'll help you up."

He swats my hand away, disgusted. "Get your dirty paws off me. I don't need no help from you."

"Fine, fine. Let's just go. I hate to keep you from your bed any longer."

We climb the stairs in silence, Sal huffing and puffing with each step. He's not a particularly big man, but he is spectacularly out of shape. He's the kind of out of shape that makes you think that whoever it is really had to work at it. It would likely take less effort to stay in shape and healthy than to be as out of shape as Sal. I'd point it out to him but the only reason I would even care is because it would make this trip up the stairs transpire a little quicker and with a little less heavy breathing. I don't plan on making this

trip with him ever again (not that I planned this one, though) so I don't see any reason to invest in his future.

We go through the same painful routine with the keys at my apartment door. He flips through them one by one as I go through a list of things I'd much rather be doing.

Sal tries to make more small talk as he goes through the keys. "Working on anything interesting?"

"A couple things, here and there. Honestly, I don't remember."

Sal nods, "Yeah, sometimes my work is so boring I can't remember it either. Or it's so dull I try to block it out of my mind, hey?"

"Sure, sure. There's something I just can't figure out though, and it's driving me nuts."

"A real whodunit, eh?" Sal asks.

"More of a 'who is it?'" I reply.

Finally he gets to the right key. As he turns it in the lock, I position myself off to the side. Sure, I'm being paranoid, but if there's someone inside my apartment waiting for me to come stumbling in, ready to open up with a hail of bullets, I'd much rather that it was Sal who got the full brunt of the force. Wouldn't you? Be honest now. Would you rather have him telling this story? Because if you would, we can switch over right now. I'm not kidding.

Nothing happens, save for Sal giving me another funny look. I pull a hundred dollar bill from my wallet and hand it to him.

"Many thanks, Sal. You're a lifesaver."

"Don't mention it," Sal says, holding the bill up to the light. I'm pretty sure the bill is real, though there are even odds that I took cash from the wrong pile this morning. Apparently satisfied he turns to go. Just as I start to close the door behind me, he turns back. "Say, Bonnet. About the case you're working on?"

"Yes, Sal?" I ask.

"Just remember, it's elementary," he pronounces each syllable like it's the first time. "It's always the person you least expect."

"What? Oh. Suspect."

"Excuse me?"

"The saying is, 'it's always the person you least suspect.'" I say. "But thanks, Sal. I'll keep it in mind."

He nods and tips his cap and heads down the stairs as I close the door.

Chapter 5: Home is Where the Heart Is

(In which I finally return home, let my paranoid flag fly and am arrested...by my thoughts!)

Finally, I am safe and sound inside the apartment. It is dark inside and Livvy's purse and keys aren't where she usually leaves them on the table in the front hall. I quietly steal into the bedroom and confirm that she's not home. I sigh and sit on the edge of the bed, happy to be home, but my relief at the familiar surroundings and the prospect of drink, drug, and sleep is quickly replaced by fear, paranoia and other such non-relaxing

emotions. I cautiously step out of the foyer and into the living room. The sky is lightening with the coming sun but the room, though dimly lit, still holds an untold number of dangers and deception. Or at least it does in my mind. I stealthily make my way around the couch, check under each chair, look behind the television until I am satisfied that there is nobody laying in wait, ready to pounce when I let down my guard.

I repeat my searches in the kitchen (check in side the oven and dishwasher for good measure), the bathroom (nobody behind the door or in the shower... or in the medicine cabinet), the study (closet, desk, chair) and then return to the bedroom (closets again, dresser, and yes, of course, under the bed.)

The apartment is silent. Empty. I am alone with my thoughts and for that, I am almost sorry. My thoughts are very often not fun thoughts to hang out with. They're not the first thoughts you invite to a party, not the most popular thoughts in school, not the thoughts voted most likely to succeed. My thoughts are shunned at dances, last picked for kickball and shoved into mud, dirt and dog doo. My thoughts are in halfway houses, prisons and asylums. When my thoughts moved into my head, the rest of the neighbors packed up and moved out and now the rest of the neighborhood is abandoned and desolate. And there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

Satisfied that it's just me and the thoughts, I set about pulling off my plan -- the aspirin, the whiskey. I head back into the bathroom and open the medicine cabinet, finding some pain relievers. As I close the cabinet, I can't help but be dramatically distracted by the site of my bloody mug in the mirror.

It's the first look at myself I've gotten since it all...went down. Whatever you want to call it. I look like hell. It's no wonder Sal was giving me funny looks. Funnier than usual anyway. My usually average features are anything but average. Right now, I am anything but unnoticeable. I would no longer blend in as I'm used to. Were I in a crowd, all eyes would be on me and that's not how I like it.

My clothes too are a mess. I pull off my bloody jacket to reveal a slightly less bloody shirt. My pants are dirty and stained. The only thing worth saving are my boxers. I suppose my socks would be okay if I ever wore them but I don't. I never wear socks. It's just this thing I have. I don't want to go into it. Just don't ask, okay?

Stripped down to my skivvies, I present quite the pretty picture. Aside from the dried blood here and there, there's also the bruises that are beginning to form in various places on my body. Someone must have worked me over pretty good. Either this was one hell of a traumatic experience such that I blocked it out of my mind or else I got a bad knock to the head that shook everything right on out of there. Either way, I know I've got some detecting to do.

I throw on my robe and throw down the aspirin, swallowing them with a gulp of water from the sink. As I raise my hands to my mouth I catch sight of the blood again and that's just the last thing I need to see right now. The blood of this woman who was lying next to me, dripping on me, her blood is on my hands.

Now wait a second -- sure, I can see as I look down that her blood is literally on my hands. It's a second skin, filling in all the nooks and crannies, painting my fingerprints red, caked on my fingernails. But is there more to it than that? Was I somehow responsible for this woman's death? What actions did I take this evening that might have lead up to her demise?

I turn from the sink and pace through the apartment. I should have gone to the office. Undoubtedly I would find something there that would help me figure all this out, but the need to get home was so overwhelming I didn't even think about it. I pick up

various objects in the house -- a paperweight, a book, a camera, a lamp -- weighing each as an object to throw to vent some frustration. But though these urges take me, I always have the restraint to keep myself from breaking things. I may be crazy, but I'm not destructive. And I hate cleaning up messes.

My pacing grows wilder, more aggressive. My breathing is intense and labored. I mutter nonsense to myself, louder and louder, but then check myself so as not to disturb my neighbors. I may be crazy, but I'm not inconsiderate.

"Her blood is on my hands, her blood is on my hands, her blood is on my hands," I repeat. I realize I'm losing my grip. I realize I'm in over my head. I realize I should really wash up.

After my shower, I feel much better. And much cleaner. As I dry off, I chuckle to myself. Another small victory. The message on the door and the note on the photograph are both wrong now.

"Ha ha!" I shout in triumph, addressing the distant door and walleted photograph. "You didn't see that coming now, did you? You're both wrong now! Nobody's blood is on my hands! Nobody's at all! You thought you could beat me, but you won't. Nobody ever beats Charles Bonnet! Now, where's my cat?"

Oh, there he is.

Chapter 6: Yahooogle

(In which I debunk the myths about modern detectives, search the web, tell you how I met Livvy, and discover the joys of having an email address.)

It might not surprise you to know that modern private investigation is mostly all a sham. You already figured that most of the private detectives (I'm sorry -- "professional detectives") were crooks, or at least slightly crooked. Well, even the "good" ones -- and here I'm talking about the ones that aren't just trying to get a few extra dollars out of you; the ones with integrity and class; the ones like me -- aren't doing nearly as much footwork. We still wear our gumshoes of course, but usually kick them up on a desk as we use search engines to find our quarry, whatever or whomever it may be.

You see, anybody with forty dollars and an internet connection can find anybody or anything they want. Modern life leaves a trail that's so easy to follow and yet we don't even think about it as we go about our days. Every transaction we make -- even seemingly untraceable cash transactions -- are logged somewhere and with a little patience, someone who is looking for them will be able to find them.

So my first instinct is to just sit down at the computer and fire up Yahoo! or Google or InfoSeek or WeFindEmForYou or Looking-For-People or whatever. But what am I going to do? Type in "Who the fuck beat me up and locked me in a room with some girl's blood all over me?" Like that's going to work...

Hell, it's worth a shot. And good lord, I get 758,000 hits on Google for that. They're all unsurprisingly depressing and completely irrelevant to my situation. Lots of crime fiction, blogs with too much information, and porn sites that your mother wouldn't want you to see. Even Vincent Gallo is in on the action with another one of his drug-induced bits of good time fun.

"Her blood is on your hands" also gets me nowhere. I'm back at square one. Unless....
Nope, www.herbloodisonyourhands.com doesn't exist. It was a long shot anyway.

I take a look at the business card I grabbed earlier. It belongs to one Marcia Dalton, account executive for Lobranches, a full-service, end-to-end, eDetailing and market modeling systems solutions company. I wonder if she even has any idea what they do. I check out their website – lobranches.net – and get a lot more of the same. Founded ten years ago by Dean Warmasher, went up and down with the dot-com boom and burst and now settling into a stable existence providing some sort of service (I guess) to some sort of clients. Nothing special, nothing spectacular. Another vaguely-purposed company in a city full of them.

I find an old pack of cigarettes in the desk drawer and take one out. Technically, I quit smoking months ago after years of effort on Livvy's part, but I still have the occasional cigarette. In moments like these, the ritual and habit are calming. I need calming.

I light the cigarette and lean back, putting my feet up on the desk. I exhale smoke rings and a haze forms in the room, hanging from the ceiling. As smoke fills the small room, I am mesmerized by the swirling patterns and I remember when Livvy first stepped through a haze like this and into my life.

It was a different office, to be true, but it was filled with smoke all the same. Much of my time at Allrock Insurance was spent in a similar state of repose to the one I currently occupy: kicked back, feet up, smoking a cigarette. A lot of the life of the claims investigator is spent waiting for someone to bring you some files or preparing files to take to someone else. I was in the business before the computer revolution had fully taken off and things were all still taken care of on paper. In fact, I'm sure that even today Allrock hasn't fully embraced document imaging and paper reduction. They never showed any interest in going "green." Regardless, I made my money mostly by being a highly-paid courier and that meant that there was a lot of downtime.

There was a knock at my door. I closed my game of solitaire and shouted that it was open. I didn't receive a lot of visitors in my office and as I said, the long-legged blonde doesn't often come into your office when you're a private detective, much less when you're an insurance investigator. But sometimes she does.

Olivia ("Livvy" to her friends, and eventually to me) Tweed was stunning to say the very least. She walked into my office like she owned it and honestly, the second I saw her, I was willing to give her my office, and anything else she wanted, for free. She was about 5 foot eleven with the aforementioned long legs and dirty blonde hair. Her smile very nearly killed me and though she was dressed conservatively (in fact, I've never seen her dress that conservatively since) it did nothing to hide the fact that she had a wild, sensual side like I had never seen before.

I swung my feet off the desk and stood up in one fluid motion. It was just about the most graceful I'd ever been in my life. "Good afternoon, beautiful. Can I help you?"

She waved some of the smoke out of the air. "Don't you find it ironic that you work for a health and life insurance company and you're creating a toxic environment for yourself? Don't your bosses object?" She asked this in a friendly way though. She wasn't accusing me of anything, or chastising me. Just asking. That's one thing I grew to love about Livvy: the way she could just talk.

I chuckled and put out the cigarette. "I think about it every time I light up. This whole place is lousy with smokers though. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

"Well, I've found that very few things in life do make sense," she said.

I smiled at her. I assumed that she was in the wrong place. Most of the visitors I got were people who got lost on their way to their adjustor's office. But I didn't want her to leave if I could help it. "Ain't that the truth? It's a mad world."

"It is indeed," she replied. She looked back and forth at me and the visitor's chair at my desk.

"Oh, how rude of me. Please, take a seat."

"Thank you, Mr. Bonnet," she said. So she was in the right place after all.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name," I said, sitting down as well.

"Oh. I'm Olivia Tweed," she said, extending her hand across my desk. I took it lightly in mine but found that she has a powerful grip. We shook hands and honestly, I didn't want to let go, but I did before it got awkward. She asked, "Didn't Mr. Barnum tell you I was coming?"

Of course Mr. Barnum didn't tell me you were coming, I thought to myself. Mr. Barnum is a fat, lazy slob who wouldn't know how to relay a message if Samuel Morse, Alexander Graham Bell and Steve Case were all giving him pointers. But of course, I said none of this. I simply told her that unfortunately, I had no idea she would be visiting me that day.

"Well, that's too bad. I'd hoped you'd be able to prepare for me," she said.

I took a surreptitious glance at her left hand. There was no ring. "Don't worry, Miss Tweed, I'm always prepared for everything."

She smiled. "That's nice to hear."

"So, what can I do for you?" I asked.

"Well, Mr. Bonnet," she started. "I'm a freelance writer and currently I am working on a piece about a man named Peter Seward who, allegedly, is the head of a large crime syndicate here in Chicago. Through the process of my investigations and interviews, I discovered that he recently took out a large life insurance policy for his wife—"

"Pardon me, lady," I said, "but that really ain't my gig. I investigate claims fraud. Guys who try to pull one over on us about being sick or whatnot. You should probably talk to one of the guys down in sales."

"I know what you do, Mr. Bonnet. If you'd let me finish..."

"My apologies," I said. "Please, go on."

"Thank you," she said. "Now that, in and of itself, is not very interesting. What *is* interesting is that Alicia Seward was found dead this morning.

"What? I didn't hear anything about this," I said. I was in the habit of following news of crimes and criminals. This was at the point where the insurance racket was losing its luster and I'd been thinking more and more about trying to find some exciting work.

"Nobody has. The police are keeping everything quiet for the moment. It looks like she was murdered by a rival mob boss to send a message to Seward."

"How'd a lady like you get the scoop on this?"

"Let's just say that I have my connections on the force," she said vaguely. "It's not important. What *is* important is that Seward is going to be making a very large claim against this company in the very near future."

"Well, sure, this is closer to my line. But there's still no way I'll have anything to do with it. If there's any question about his business, it's gonna be on the fuzz to figure it out. If the cops shake Seward down for the murder, he won't see a penny. But it's out of my hands. It'll be on the courts."

"Seward's going to be able to fix it so the cops won't make any accusations he doesn't want them to," she said.

"How's that?"

"He has more connections on the force than I do. He'll be able to make the investigation go any way he wants it."

"So what do you want from me?" I asked.

"Your boss is going to ask you to take a look into this. It won't be anything official, and if you know what's good for you, you'll keep as low a profile as you possibly can."

"What's your angle?" I asked.

"I need a man on the inside," she said, and don't think I didn't think about the possible meanings of that after she left. "I have a vested interest in this. Seward has enough money as it is, but I want to make sure he doesn't get a penny from killing Alicia."

"That don't sound like a line from a freelance writer," I said.

She stood up. I did as well. She was already very tall and in her heels, we saw eye to eye. "I just want to make sure that my story has a happy ending."

With that, she walked out of my office, leaving me in a smoky haze.

My reverie is interrupted as my email application indicates that I have a new message.

"I've got mail!" I chime happily, as I do with each incoming missive. But then I pause. According to the clock in the upper-right hand portion of my screen (which is synched to Apple's time server, which is undoubtedly synched to an atomic clock buried deep within the mountains at NORAD, making it undoubtedly the most accurate timepiece in the world) it's somewhere around 4 AM. Who on Earth would be emailing me at this hour?

With fear and trepidation, I click on the icon of my email client, causing the window containing my inbox to expand beautifully from the dock at the bottom of the screen. Once it is done (and I finish contemplating just how much I enjoy the animation each and every time) I hesitantly scroll to find the new message. It's an email from someone identified only as "Wilkerson." I try to remember if that name has come up before but nothing immediately comes to mind. I make a mental note to Google the name and check my personal files later.

The subject of the message is somewhat perplexing: "urgently to you 112.5% increase all-important." What could that possibly mean? I spend several moments trying to figure it out before I decide that I may as well just open the email.

Oh. It's spam. Yeah, it's all about how I can be better in bed if I just increase the size of my.... Dammit, this is the last thing I need right now.

And then the police start pounding on the door, and I realize that I'll take spam over that any day of the week.

Chapter 7: The Long Arm of Johnny Law

(In which I attempt to make a drink, and am visited by the police. Certainly, this time I will actually be arrested. Right?)

So the police are here. This is just fantastic. You might wonder how I know it's the police without leaving my comfortable seat in the study. "Is it another one of Charlie's crazy 'feelings' that he's been working so hard to convince me of?" It is nothing of the sort, I assure you. "Well, Charlie, are you about to tell me about some ridiculously expensive and high-tech surveillance system that is conveniently linked to your desktop

computer so that at this very moment you are chuckling as you watch a frustrated police officer knock at your door?" No, my dear friend, that is not either. Here is how I know:

The police officer is actually bellowing, "Open up in the name of the law!" as he pounds upon my door. I know, it seems a little far-fetched. It almost seems like it's too good to be true for those of us who enjoy this sort of thing. But it's true. This is exactly what is happening right this very second.

Sighing, I get to my feet and go to the front door as the pounding continues.

"Open up, Bonnet!" shouts the policeman. "We know you're in there!"

I throw open the door just as the cop, a plainclothes detective, winds up for a mighty swing, no doubt intending to knock my door down.

"Hey there," I say with a smile. I look up and down the hall. It's empty. "Why'd you say 'we know you're in there' if you're alone?"

"Force of habit," he says with a sheepish look on his face.

"I know how that is," I say. "What was with the show of force?"

"I just don't get a chance to say that stuff often enough," he says. The sheepish look still hasn't left. I love getting him to admit stuff like this.

"You really need to get out more often," I say. "So, what can I do for you, Detective Law?"

Again, I'm not kidding here either. His name actually is Jonathan Law. It's just too much. If you ever run into him, don't bother making the obvious jokes about it. I found out the hard way that he actually has heard them all.

"Bonnet," Detective Law says, composing himself, "what took you so long?"

"I'm in the habit of being asleep at this hour, Detective. You might try it one day."

"I'm not in the mood for your wisecracks today, Bonnet. I'm working a murder."

"A murder? Goodness me. Would you like to come in?" I step back from the door and usher him inside. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Naw, this won't take long. I just wanted to ask you a couple questions."

"By all means. Won't you sit down?" I gesture towards one of the chairs in the living room. As the detective sits, I cross to the bar where I fill a martini glass with ice and water. "Is it about the murder?"

"No, no," he says. "Why? You know something about one?"

I laugh and fill a shaker with ice. "Of course not, Detective Law."

"Oh, alright," Detective Law says, taking a quick glance around the apartment. "I like what you've done with the place, Bonnet."

"Thanks, Detective," I say, pouring a shot of black cherry vodka into the shaker. "Livvy did all the decorating. I don't know a thing about interior design. You haven't been up since we moved?"

"I guess I never made it to one of your end of case victory parties," Law says with a sneer. He and I have butted heads on a few occasions and I may have shown him up once or twice, but I didn't realize that he held any animosity towards me. He's a good cop and I know he's more interested in seeing justice done than in getting credit for a collar.

"Well, let me just tell you right now that there's a standing invitation to you. My wife thinks the world of you, you know." I pour a two count of Godiva dark chocolate liqueur into the shaker.

"Well ain't that something. I'll keep that in mind," Law says. There is a tight smile on his face. "Say, where is the little lady anyhow? Did she manage to sleep through all that noise I was making?"

"Oh no," I laugh as I add a splash of Grand Marnier to the mix. "She's not here, actually."

"That's not what your super said."

"You talked to Sal?"

"He called over to the station, said you'd come home looking like you'd been in a title fight and came out on the losing end," Law says, giving me a glance. "Only you don't look so roughed up now."

Damn that Sal. "I took a shower."

"You clean up nice. He says he had to let you in on account of you didn't want to wake up your wife. Says you first told him she was out of town." He actually looks concerned. I'm almost touched.

I cap the mixer and give it precisely three and a half shakes. "That's right."

"And then you told him she was asleep. Well, which one is it, Bonnet? Is she asleep or out of town?"

"I think she might have stayed over at her mother's. We were supposed to have dinner there tonight. I missed out. I talked to her earlier tonight."

"You did, huh?" Law gets a funny look on his face that I can't read. "What did she say?"

"I don't really remember. She probably reminded me of our dinner tonight. I don't really remember." Law looks like he's about to say something but stops, so I continue. "Look, Law, I just didn't want to get into it with Sal. The last time I told him that my wife was out at 3 AM, I didn't hear the end of it. He's old-fashioned when it comes to women – and really about a lot of other things, as well. I thought I might avoid some trouble by telling an innocent lie. Obviously, I was wrong." I dump the ice and water from the martini glass and pour my drink into it. "So, Detective Law, is this what you came here for? To ask me about the whereabouts of my wife? We can call her if you like."

"No, that's alright," Law says with a chuckle. "I just came by to check up on you."

"Why, Detective. I didn't know you cared."

"I don't, Bonnet. I really don't. But, I made a promise to Livvy."

"What promise was that?" I ask.

"Don't worry about it," he says. He points at the drink and asks, "What's that you made there?"

I take a sip of the drink. It tastes terrible.

Law sees my face and asks, "No good, huh?"

I shake my head. "Back to the drawing board." I pull a small notebook from the bar and mark down the ingredients of the failed experiment on a fresh page. The notebook is getting full -- I'll need a new one soon.

"What are you calling this one?" Law asks.

I look up. "What do you mean?"

"You name all the failures, don't you?" he asks. He quickly adds, "That's what I heard anyway."

"Yeah, I do. How about 'The Killer'?"

"Isn't that what you name them all?"

I flip through the book -- the same name is written on every page. "What do you suggest?"

Law considers it. "How about 'Damsel in Distress'?"

I nod. "I like it," I lie. I write 'The Killer' at the top of the page, close the book, and replace it in the bar. I pour a glass of water and sit on the couch across from Law.

"So what was with all the blood?" he asks.

"I got into a bit of a scrap this evening. Someone did a number on me."

"But you should see the other guy, eh?"

"Actually, I'd love to. I never got a look at him. If there even was a him. I'm not entirely sure what happened."

"Why don't you lay it on me?"

I tell the detective a condensed version of the story, leaving out the details of the ominous message and the disturbing photo. Perhaps he could help if I trusted him more and told him the whole story but right now I'm thinking that it might lead me to an overnight stay in the lockup. Even though the night is growing shorter and shorter, that's not something I look forward to.

"That's one hell of a story, Bonnet," Law says when I finish. "I don't know what to make of that at all."

"Nor do I, Detective. I'm hoping a visit to my office will shed some more light on the matter."

"Why don't you head over there now?"

"Detective, I'm exhausted. I've had a very difficult night. If it's all the same to you, I'll check it out first thing in the morning and give you a call once I know something more."

"That's fine, that's fine," he says, standing and retrieving his hat from the coffee table. "I'll hit the road for now, then. Just make sure you give me that call tomorrow."

"That's a promise," I say, leading the detective to the door.

"Alright, Bonnet. Get some sleep. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He is halfway down the hallway before I remember that he had mentioned a murder. "Detective? What was that about a murder victim?"

He turns. "Oh yeah. A civilian found a body just down the street. Blonde lady, nice dress, shot twice at close range."

"Was it another robbery?" There had been a recent string of robberies in the area. Rich folks from the suburbs had been getting their expensive things taken from them by the jealous and less fortunate criminal element in the city.

"Don't think so. She had some diamonds in her ears and around her neck that weren't even touched."

"That's strange indeed."

"Murder's almost always strange, Bonnet. But this one's nothing compared to some I've seen."

Curious, I ask for him to give me an example.

He thinks for a second, considers blowing me off – I can see it in his eyes. Then he relents. "There was this one, a while back. Never got an ID on her. Her face; her fingerprints.... They were gone." he says, shaking his head.

"Were they burned off? Mutilated?"

"No, it's more like.... It's more like they were blurred."

My heart skips a beat. Maybe three. "Blurred?"

"I know. It sounds crazy, but there you have it. Just when you think you've seen it all, huh?"

I take a deep breath. "It's a mad mad mad mad world, Detective."

"Don't I know it, Bonnet?" Detective Law tips his hat to me and heads down the stairs. "Anyhow, I'll look forward to your call tomorrow."

I call after him, "Good night, Detective."

I close the door and turn back into my apartment. A dead woman with "blurred"

features? How is that possible? Could it be the same as the woman in my photographs? Perhaps I'll turn my planned phone call into a visit down to the station. My curiosity outweighs my dislike of corpses. Besides, I hate talking on the phone. You miss too many non-verbal cues. I like to look a person straight in the eyes while I'm talking to him. I'm able to get a lot more out of it. But really -- blurred features? And what am I going to do with that drink? I hate to waste all that alcohol, but it was really awful. I've been trying to come up with something to make with that black cherry vodka but everything I've tried has been disgusting. Maybe I'll look online for a drink recipe or some suggestion of something to do with it.

I walk back to the study but am interrupted by yet another knock on the door. Perhaps Johnny Law forgot something? I head back to the door and take a look through the peephole. There's nobody there. This is suspicious. I wonder what made that knocking noise. Maybe I imagined it. Regardless, it wouldn't hurt to check outside just to be sure. I open the door, poke my head out and look to the left down the hallway. Nothing and nobody there. I turn slowly and dramatically to the right and am rewarded with a quick burst of pain, a bright light, and once again, my good friend, the darkness.

I wake up to Beckett, my cat, licking my face. Other than that, it appears that there is nobody else in the apartment. I glance at the clock. It is now 6 AM. At least I've gotten some amount of sleep tonight, though none of it in my bed which is where I usually prefer to slumber. I find myself, once again, on a hardwood floor. There is no blood this time, which I count as a score for the home team. I sit up, welcoming yet another headache into my life. Whoever popped me popped me a good one. I can feel my face swelling already. As I rub my eyes, I realize I am sitting next to a full highball glass with a 4x6 index card inside a protective plastic sleeve sitting atop the rim. I pick up the card and see that there is a drink recipe handwritten on one side.

"The Gang Up
1/2oz. Triple Sec
4oz (chilled) 7-Up
1/2oz Cherry Vodka
1/2oz Gin
1/2oz Strawberry Brandy

Pour ingredients into highball glass. Garnish with fruit, add straws, and serve."

Something isn't right here. First of all, whoever made this drink (which, after tasting it, I have decided is my new beverage of choice) did not add a straw or a garnish. That's just sloppy work. Second of all, where the hell am I supposed to get strawberry brandy? I didn't know there was such a thing until now. Why is this called "The Gang Up"? Is that another clue? I turn the card over and find another note, written in the same hand as the first two:

"It's always the person you least expect."

"Well, Beckett," I say as I get to my feet. "What do you think about that? I was always sure that the saying went, 'It's always the person you least suspect.'"

Beckett rubs his head against my calf and meows softly in reply. I reach down to scratch his head, careful not to spill the drink.

"Still," I say. "At the very least, it's the answer to my self-involved and misguided prayers. Finally, something to do with all this cherry vodka."

But could this be all they came here to do? Would someone really knock me out in order to leave behind a drink recipe? I consider repeating my meticulous search of the

apartment from earlier but realize I don't have the energy for another performance of that nature. Still, I don't feel safe. With my free hand, I reach down to scoop up the cat and retreat into the study. I lock the door behind us and now it just cat, drink, computer and me and I feel secure. Beckett and I curl up in the corner together, he in my lap, me on the floor. I take the occasional sip as I stroke his fur, and we discuss my latest case in detail.

Chapter 8: Dream a Little Dream of Me

(In which I reluctantly relate to you the contents of a dream and we finally discover the origins of the title.)

I hate dream sequences. Really, I do. Nothing in a book or movie says to me, "Hey, you can stop paying attention for five minutes," more than a dream sequence does. It's an author saying, "Here, let me tell you about something that didn't happen but is going to be either A) foreshadowing, B) symbolically significant or C) revealing of the inner workings of a character's mind." Yawn. For real, that shit just doesn't do it for me.

That said, I really gotta tell you about the dream I had when I fell asleep talking to my cat. Shit, that right there sounds pretty weird. But you know what I mean -- I was just talking to myself with my cat there. It's like when Swearengen talks to the severed head in *Deadwood*. He's not really talking to the head it's just there for him to use as a sounding board. Or better yet - when Ellsworth would talk to his dog. You remember that? Man, I was pissed when they shot him. Anyway -- that's like me. Talking to my cat. But not really.

So I'm going to tell you about this dream, and if you don't want to read about it, you're welcome to skip ahead to the next chapter. It's going to have bits about heading to the office to find information about the case I'm working on and some pretty good music in it as well. You're not going to miss much and if it turns out, through some strange twist of fate, that the information presented in my dream *is* important, I'll come get you. I promise.

Okay.

I'm lying on the floor -- I seem to be doing a whole lot of that these days -- and I'm asleep, only I'm not really asleep. It's hard to explain, but I'll give it a shot. My eyes are closed and I can't open them and I'm thinking I should head to the bathroom to splash my face with water but I can't really get up either. I'm struggling to open my eyes but I just can't. I try to sit up but I can't. My frustration level is rising and I'm about to yell out a whole flurry of curses for the world when I hear two gunshots very close to me. I stop trying to open my eyes because now I know I don't want to see what's going on but now it's a struggle to keep them closed.

Finally, I stop struggling altogether and my eyes open. It's the darkness again. That old, ever present darkness and I'm starting to realize that I just can't win for losing.

There's nothing quite like the silence that follows immediately after a gun is fired. It's a heavy silence, thick with tension and consequences. It doesn't last very long though. Quite soon, the moaning and the yelling and the screaming kick in. But, even in dreams, the silence has a weight to it. Add to it the perceived hypersensitivity that darkness brings and you have one magnificent silence indeed.

It is in this silence that I finally hear the voice. It is whispering, again and again the same phrase:

"Seek out Illinoir."

"Hey, don't you mean Illinois?" I ask. "I know the 's' is silent and it's a weird word, but it's Native American. It's from the Illinwek tribe that once lived here. Though the word seems like it has some French influence, doesn't it? What with the silent 's' and all, I mean."

The voice comes again; this time it is louder, a little more insistent. "Seek out Illinoir."

"Okay, I'm really confused. If you mean Illinois, I've got to say, that's where we are. Or at least, I think that's where we are. That's where I live. Illinois. Chicago, really. Nobody in Chicago really thinks much about being in the State of Illinois. On a daily basis, we just kind of think of Chicago as the state we're in and Illinois is a place that's kinda, you know, somewhere else. 'Downstate.' It's not the way that I imagine people who live in Ohio or Kansas feel. They're definitely Ohioans or Kansas...ians. What are they called, anyway? Kansasites? Kansasters? Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yeah--"

"Seek out Illinoir!" And I swear to God I can hear frustration verging on anger coming from the voice.

"Look, I love a good quest as much as the next guy. And I love a vague lead-in to a quest more than most. But this doesn't make any sense. How do you spell that?"

"I-L-L-I-N-O-I-R."

"Great. Now we're getting somewhere. Is that supposed to be Illinois but like... I don't know. Noir-y?"

"Yes!" says the voice. "I mean. Seek out Illinoir!"

"Well okay. Will do, Mister Mysterious Voice. Is that all?"

The voice returns to its previously dramatic tone and timbre, whispering, "Seek out Illinoir." It gets quieter and quieter, as if fading away, but it's quite apparent that the source of the voice is attempting to stealthily shuffle out of the room and is having trouble doing so.

"Oh, I know," I say sympathetically. "These rooms are dark, aren't they? I was having the exact same problem earlier. Here, let me help."

My lighter is in my hand and I am turning the wheel against the flint and the spark is igniting the gas. The little flame seems to illuminate the entire room but all I can see, directly in front of me is the body of a woman, blood streaming from two bullet wounds. Her entire body is blurred and all that is clear is her face.

I have another dream as well. It involves chickens. The glasses-wearing, coffee-drinking dinosaur named Ellery took care of them, however, so it was okay. The relevance of this dream is even less readily apparent.

Chapter 9: Hi Ho, Hi Ho

(In which I ride the rails, depreciate some assets, wear a hole in the carpet and get some excellent dim sum.)

Morning comes, or at least a more decent hour arrives. I am awakened, hunched over in a corner of the study by Beckett slapping at my nose and the deep thumping sound of a bass guitar being poorly played. I am shivering and damp, with the weight of last night's events thick in my neck and spine. I give Beckett a gentle shove.

"Okay, buddy. Sorry I kept you locked in here." I stand and stretch my legs. "Thanks

for not shitting on the floor."

I open the door and the cat sprints from the room, making a beeline for his litter box. Good kitty.

The wife still doesn't appear to be home. I check my phone for missed calls and find none. Check my email for anything interesting and find nothing. It's 10 AM and it already feels like midnight. Maybe some coffee will help.

It does, marginally. It makes me feel a little more alive. I feed Beckett and get dressed. Now to go see about that bass.

We moved to this building, loving the neighborhood but knowing nothing of the neighbors. Over time, we got to know a few of the people around us but we never met the folks directly behind us. One of these people is in a band and they practice in the garage behind our building. I'm not sure what they call themselves, nor do I much care. All I do know is that they seem to practice incessantly and that their incessant practicing has done them no good, whatsoever. I'm not quite sure what makes them so bad. Is it the clumsy bass guitar work; the drummer who couldn't keep time if you shoved a metronome up his ass, the singer who sounds like a cross between Eddie Vedder and Ethel Merman; or the guitarist who thinks he's Stevie Ray Vaughn but plays like Stevie Ray Crap? What I do know is that in this garage, these separate elements combine to form a musical group so powerfully bad that they can not be stopped. They are The World's Worst Rock Band – a force to be reckoned with.

I have seen the band members only briefly. At various times, they take breaks for cigarettes and cheap domestic beers in the yard outside the garage. They're a real strange group; they're all in their mid-twenties, but that's about where the similarities end. They are like a cross-section of high school cliques: a nerd, a jock, a stoner, a goth and a prep. I have no idea how they came together to form a band.

As I step out onto my back porch, coffee cup in hand, the band takes five. The stoner archetype emerges from the garage. I figure him to be the drummer: He is tall and thin, has grotesque drummer's arms and ill-advised facial hair and drives the kind of van that is inevitably used in a kidnapping.

I walk through the kitchen and grab the garbage bag from the trashcan. Using it as a pretense to exit through the back, I walk across the back porch and down the stairs. When I reach the bottom, I can hear the other band members inside the garage, discussing the intricacies of one of their songs. Moustache-man lights a cigarette, leans against the wall, and studies the ground in front of him.

"Morning, buddy," I say amiably as I swing the garbage into the dumpster. It lands with the sound of shattering glass. I peer into the container and see a number of empty Smirnoff Black Cherry bottles. Are those all mine?

Moustache-man looks up at the sound of breaking glass and squints at me.

"Ey." He half-grunts and half-says this word. It is certainly vocalization but I'm not sure if it can be counted as speech.

"My name's Charlie," I say, extending my hand.

There is a full five second pause while he looks at my outstretched hand like it's a threat. Finally he remembers how the ritual of introduction goes and grabs it and shakes. "Dustin," he says.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Dustin. I really enjoy your band's work."

"Yeah?" He takes a drag off his cigarette, exhales through his nostrils, nodding his head like it's a foregone conclusion. "Ey." I guess this means "Thank you."

"I really appreciate the opportunity to hear you guys while you're still working it all out, still ironing out the kinks and whatnot."

"Sure," he says, still nodding, though less assuredly so. "Yeah."

"You're the drummer, right?" I ask.

The nodding continues, but no speech accompanies the gesture this time. Either I'm correct, or I've triggered some sort of never-ending tic.

"Yeah, you can always tell who the drummer is," I say. I point at his cigarette. "You have an extra one of those?" Maybe he and I can bond over a smoke.

The nodding turns into a shaking of his head accompanied by a tapping of the foot.

"Is that a no?" I ask.

He resumes nodding, tapping and is now slapping his thigh, attempting to attain some sort of rhythm.

"Right on. Look, I was wondering if you guys could do me a favor," I say. There is no change in his mannerisms or gestures at all, so I simply press on. "We -- me and my wife, I mean --" He looks up at the mention of a woman, sees nobody else around, and resumes his previous stance. "Well, we've been hoping that maybe you could turn down the instruments when you're playing. Don't get me wrong; we're both really big fans. She even talks about being a groupie --" Again, Dustin looks up, remembers that the female being discussed isn't around and looks back down. "But we both work from home and it's really distracting to have you guys playing so loud. I mean, you guys rock. Er... You *fucking* rock, man. But you know. Just rock a little quieter, if you could. That'd be great."

No response at all. Dustin is oblivious.

"Dustin? Seriously, if I could just get--" I am interrupted by the arrival of one of the other members of the band. It's the punk. He's wearing bad clothes, has bad skin and has a feral look about him. His grimy tank top reveals his scrawny, tattoo-covered arms. Among other things, he's got some Japanese kanji (I recognize it as the symbol for "Liposuction aquarium" -- either that's the name of the band or someone told him it was "strength") on one arm and an image of a chess piece (I think it's a king, although the work is sub-par and it's tough to be sure) on the other.

"Yo, Dustin, dude, come on, we figured out how to go from the verse to the chorus in 'Rats Belch Neon'," he says. His voice has the quality of rodents leaving a sinking ship; a plague of locusts in a field that hasn't been worked for years; evil and futility and stupidity all rolled into one. He must be the singer. He notices me and asks "Wait, who's the old dude?"

Dustin shrugs and flicks his cigarette butt into the alley. The singer retreats into the garage and Dustin follows him inside. Moments later, the musical diarrhea begins again.

It's time to head into the city.

The day turned out to be nicer than the morning was. The heat has ebbed a little, the sun is shining brightly, and there's actually a breeze bringing some cool Lake Michigan air with it. Thanks to the lake, you never know what you're going to get with Chicago weather -- past results are no indication of future performance. It's another thing that I actually love about this city. As much as I hate change in my life, wild and violent change in the weather always makes me happy.

I hop on a Red Line train at the Berwyn station. It is marginally crowded and I am forced to stand. There must be a Cubs game at noon -- all the passengers seem to be wearing white with blue pinstripes as if I'm riding on a train with an entire baseball team.

They are nervous-looking families from the suburbs riding the train for the first time this year and drunk fraternity brothers ready to perpetuate the stereotypes of the typical Cubs fan. I watch the crowd, keeping my back to the side of the car.

The train empties out at Addison and I am left in a car littered with empty beer cans, fast-food burger wrappers and newspapers. I grab a seat and a stray copy of the Sun-Times and scan it for any pertinent news.

There's nothing of much interest in the paper. No mention of the murder Law spoke of last night. It's not too surprising, considering the late hour and the high murder rate. Over the past few years, Chicago has gotten more and more dangerous and the number of homicides has increased to rival that of other cities. Just a few years ago, Chicago was ranked as the 8th safest large city in the country but we're slipping. This leads to there being just too much crime for the papers to print each and every mugging or murder. I put down the paper having learned nothing, which is about all I get from this rag.

I figure I'll head to the office, but before I do, I've got a stop to make. I transfer to a brown line train at Fullerton and take it into the River North neighborhood. As I walk down the stairs, I manage to gain my bearings and figure out which way I need to go to get to the building of last night. It is just a few blocks away and I get there quickly.

In the light of day, it looks much like it did last night: average, ordinary, run-of-the-mill. I circle around to the alley and find the door I exited from. It's locked from the inside so I decide that I'll go in the front.

The front door is locked, but I find a directory and dial up to a company on the fourth floor. When the receptionist answers, I just say, "UPS" and hear the door buzz. I pull it open and enter

The lobby looks as if it's recently been remodeled: There is brand new floor tile, frosted glass doors, potted palm trees. Down a short hallway are the elevators in an atrium that goes the height of the building. A skylight at the top lets in the late morning sun. Looks like a nice place to work.

I press the button for the elevator and wait for its arrival with a couple businessmen in suits. We exchange polite nods and they continue a conversation that matches the vague and complicated language from Lobranches' website. They speak of cross-valued silo platform pollenation or some such thing. Business speak has always eluded me. It might as well be an unbreakable cipher. I like playing along, though, so I nod like I know what they're talking about, as if contemplating my own issues with cross-ventilated value-added self-leveraged synergistic nodes. God bless these people for being on the frontlines, down in the trenches, getting the work of America done.

My destination is on level three. Lobranches takes up the entire floor. The two business clones precede me off the elevator. To our left is a receptionist's desk which sits at the center of several branching corridors. Down one, I see the large desk-filled room I emerged into last night. The receptionist greets the businessmen cordially.

"You must be the gentlemen from Banner Clothes," she says. They confirm her assumption. "The meeting has already started. I was told to bring you to the conference room right away."

She stands up and leads them down another hallway and says she'll be right back to help me. Perfect.

As casually as I can – and I can be pretty casual – I walk into the large, open room. Company employees sit at their desks, doing whatever it is that cross-solution,

eDetailing, fully market functional office drones do. Few look up at my presence and those that do seem to be used to having unfamiliar people strolling through the building. Undoubtedly, they've had years of suits coming in and checking out the place, looking to invest in, buy, or destroy their company. I am just another banker or venture capitalist or market analyst to them. My everyday look serves as an effective disguise.

I see the door to the room in which I awoke last night. I walk purposefully (yet still casually) over to it and turn the knob. It is locked. I try a couple more times and then notice a black plastic square with a red LED blinking on its face placed on the wall next to the door. I've seen these before – they're proximity card scanners: A very effective and secure method of locking a door. All entries can be logged on a computer. I wonder if I can get my hands on that file.

One of the employees – a young woman who couldn't be more than 21 or 22 – sitting near the door looks up as I rattle the door.

"Need something from storage?" she asks.

"Oh, hi," I say. "Yes. Mr. Warmasher said I could make a call in here. I guess he didn't know it would be locked."

"In there?" she asks. "It's not the nicest room."

"It's okay – there's the meeting in the conference room and I didn't like the acoustics in the bathroom."

She chuckles and smiles at me. "There's still the Fishbowl right over there." She points at a room with a large window.

"He suggested that as well, but this phone call – well, I just didn't want to be on display."

She stands up from her desk and produces a prox card. "I know what you mean. I come in here sometimes when I don't want to be on display too. These open floor plan offices are great in theory and they're so trendy and all that but there's not a whole lot of privacy."

She presses the card against the reader. The box emits a beep, the light turns green and the door clicks. I turn the handle and the door opens.

"Thank you so much, Miss...."

"Nestor," she says, holding out her hand. "Blanche Nestor."

"A pleasure, Miss Nestor," I say, shaking her hand. I give her one of my many aliases. "My name's Anthony David."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. David," she says. "I'm sure I'll still be here when you're done in there."

"I'll be sure to say hello again on my way out."

She smiles again, "Be sure you do."

I turn away and push open the door. It is, again, completely dark in the room, but the light from the office behind me reveals the shadowy outlines of many more obstacles than were present earlier today. I flip on the light switch and let the door close behind me.

The room, which was completely empty nine hours ago, is now full. There are old desks, old computers, filing cabinets, and dozens and dozens of boxes. The floor, which was bare wood last night, is covered in the same carpet as the rest of the office. I lift up a desk and see that it has made deep impressions in the carpet.

It's nearly impossible to get through all the clutter to the middle of the room. There's not a trace that I'd been here, or that there'd been any blood, or anything. The message on the door is gone.

A lesser man might have been unnerved by this discovery, but I think I would have been surprised if this hadn't happened. In fact, I don't think I'd have been surprised to find that the entire company had disappeared between my visits to this building. It was just turning into that kind of *Spanish Prisoner*-esque con job where every turn is met by some shocking and unexpected twist. Something's there, something's not there, big deal. It just means that I am dealing with some rather thorough professionals and that they are, without a doubt, fucking with me. I've been fucked with before. It's never been on a level quite of this magnitude – they got every detail right, down to a layer of dust on everything – but I have been fucked with before. I know that the only thing to do is to fuck with the people right back. To do that, I'm just going to have to figure out who the hell they are.

I squeeze through the desks and back out the door. As promised, Blanche is still sitting at her desk. She looks up at me and smiles that smile of hers.

"All done?" she asks. "That was quick."

"Nobody answered," I said sadly. "Now I won't be able to discuss the finer points of my company's ability to leverage pre-distributed supply chain PRE scenarios in a Greenwich-based upscale lossless market."

She doesn't miss a beat. "Oh, that sucks. I'm working on a project right now about that stuff. It's pretty complicated but I've found that isolating the cross-generational instances of fledgling consumer index plateaued indices really clears everything up."

"I will keep that in mind, Miss Nestor," I say. "You've been a great help. Thank you so much."

"It was my pleasure," she says, all smiles.

"I'd better get to the conference room. I don't want to miss out on all the fun."

"Okay, well.... Maybe I'll see you when you're done?" she says hopefully.

"That would be lovely," I say somewhat uncomfortably. Things like this don't happen to me. Ever. Definitely not when I was single and could do something about it. This girl is adorable, but she's not Livvy.

And so, I walk out of the office. I take the stairs down like I did last night, and exit onto the street. I walk to the corner and hail a cab and tell the driver the address.

I keep an office just for the sake of seeing my clients somewhere that's not the apartment. More often than not, however, I do my work at home. Like I said, most of a detective's work can be done sitting at a computer and one of the advantages of working from home is that there's absolutely no dress code at all. There's nothing quite like rolling out of bed and right into work in your pajamas while enjoying all the creature comforts that home has to offer. Plus, the commute is perfect.

But, clients like to see an office. They like to see a glass door with your name on it and they like to sit in a waiting room and read outdated *Field and Stream* magazines. They like being offered tepid coffee by a receptionist, but I haven't had one of those since I had to fire Mary when it turned out she was the culprit on three of my most recent cases. It was a shame, too. That girl had spunk. I like girls with spunk.

The driver cruises through downtown all the affluent and nicer areas of the city. Midday traffic is pretty light and we make good time. My office is near 22nd and Wabash, just up the ways from Chinatown, where the streets stop getting names and start getting numbers. Many a lunch has consisted of the excellent dim sum at Chang's Dynasty Restaurant, another spot where everyone knows my name. The shrimp toast is excellent. Office space is cheaper down here -- I could never afford to rent in the heart

of downtown or anywhere nearby -- and it adds an air of mystery to my business. Few of my clients have ever been this far south and I think it does them some good to push their boundaries. Plus, it tends to weed out the wheat from the chaff. Only the truly serious folks in need of a good detective are willing to head down this far. Parking's a bitch. Still, it might be nice to get a place up on the 30th floor of the Hancock Building. Somewhere a bit further removed from the dirt and noise of the street. Somewhere where I can see the sun.

The neighborhood is deserted this time of day, another nice thing about working down here. The Loop and the Mag Mile are packed with business people and tourists pretty much constantly and the idea of fighting through a crowd of shoppers -- parents and kids lined up to get into American Girl Place or throngs of Mac geeks oohing and ahing over the latest iWhatever at the Apple store -- just to get to work does not appeal to me.

I walk up to the second floor of the building. I stand at the door, admiring the name on the glass -- "Bonnet Detective Agency" -- remembering when I had it applied. I pull out my key ring and flip through my keys. I can never remember which one is the right one and I end up trying most of them before I am able to unlock the door. One of these days, I'll figure it out. The waiting room is dark and quiet. Two rooms branch off from here -- one is my office, the other I keep for Livvy. As a freelance writer, she's able to do her work from anywhere as well so sometimes she'll accompany me down to the office.

There is some mail on the floor, just inside the door. I lean down to pick it up. It's mostly junk mail -- missing person flyers and the like. One piece catches my eye. The envelope boasts that it's an application to the best 6-week fingerprinting correspondence class. It is addressed to Livvy. Her name must have gotten on some list associated with the business. I toss the mail onto the front desk.

Like the waiting room, my wife's office appears dark but behind the door to my office, it seems that a desk lamp is on. Since we're not here on a regular schedule, I'm always certain to close and lock everything and that includes turning off all the lights. Someone has been here.

"Livvy?" I call out softly. "Is that you?"

There is no reply, but I hear a faint rustling, as if someone is shuffling through papers. I call her name again, a little louder this time, approaching the door. The events of the last day have made me more than a little cautious. Unconsciously, my hand goes to my armpit, inside my jacket, and then I remember that I don't make a habit of carrying a gun. It just never seemed like a good idea to me. Right now, I wish I had one.

I sneak to the door and put my hand to it. It's not closed all the way. Slowly, I open it and peek inside. The room is empty. The lamp is on. The window is open. The pleasant Lake Michigan breeze rustles the papers on my desk like so many leaves. Not wanting to take any chances, I cross the room to the window and check the fire escape. There is nobody above or below. I shut the window, turn off the lamp and go to leave the room, but stop short when I hear a clanging noise on the fire escape. Sounds like someone's running up it.

I rush to the window, throw it open and pull myself through. Looking up, I can see a figure making a mad dash up the stairs four stories above me. I start up the stairs, all the while trying to catch any possible glimpse of the mysterious person. I'm not able to make out any details, and I'm also not able to gain any ground. Whoever this person is, he's certainly in good shape. I'm out of breath by the time I hit the second set of stairs and nearly dead when I reach the roof.

I just barely manage to pull myself up the last few steps, but I'm too late. There's nobody there. I sprawl out on the roof, trying to catch my breath. What's going on here? Am I chasing shadows? Figments? The demons that live in the corners of my mind? Amy? The bravado and unflappable calm I'd felt earlier at the Lobranches office were gone and I doubted I was going to get them back anytime soon.

I lie on the roof for a while, soaking in the sun before I decide to go back down to the office. When I return, I find that the breeze has scattered my papers around the room. Sighing, I set to work putting them back in order. One sheaf of papers catches my eye. It's a stack of notebook paper, stapled together, fringes hanging off. The notes contain details about an old case, from about three years ago. Apparently, the agency was hired to follow one Alan Kimp.

"6/19: Followed subject to motel. Liaison already there. Curtains drawn. Photos of Kimp in file. Identity of other party unknown.

6/22: Kimp arrived at hotel as usual. Carrying flowers. Identity of other party still unascertained. Photos in file.

6/25: Kimp's girlfriend is incredibly elusive. Attempted trailing her instead of Kimp. Unsuccessful. Photos of kitten on memory card."

And so on. There is nothing terribly revealing or interesting in the notes. It seems a pretty typical track-and-follow case, and one that was finished years ago. I've done dozens of these in the interim, so it's no surprise that the details don't immediately come to mind. Still, I feel like they should be more familiar to me than they are.

I sit down at my desk and login to the computer. I keep all case related files and documents on a central server (a six-year-old computer located centrally in the closet between the two offices.) I quickly locate the Kimp directory and open the photos subdirectory. Within, there are 204 photos. I open them all, and like the notes, they are pretty standard. Pictures of Kimp getting out of his car, entering a motel room, sometimes carrying flowers, sometimes bringing takeout food. There is nothing remarkable whatsoever about the pictures but each one gives me a sense of reverse *deja vu*, like I've never seen these scenes before and yet it's obvious that I took the pictures: They're mentioned in the case file and they're on my server. With all the weirdness that's been going on the last day, though, I'm not surprised that I'm having an odd reaction. I chalk it up to a case of frayed nerves and let it go.

I close the photos and open my calendar. Without this program, I'd be completely lost and I'm certain it will help me figure out what I'd been out doing last night. The last entry in the calendar, however, is from three years ago. June 25th reads, "Trail Kimp." I scroll through prior entries and they're all more or less the same leading back to a note from two weeks prior to that that says, "Meet Mrs. Kimp to discuss details of job." I don't remember any catastrophic computer failure that would have selectively wiped out my calendar data. I've had computer issues before and lost months worth of data but never anything so specific. Anyway, I thought I'd gotten it all figured out. I wonder if maybe Livvy had been in here, using my computer and messed something up. She's somewhat of a technophobe owing to a bad experience with an old Macintosh II, a soldering iron and a pint of strawberries back when she was a kid. It translates into her having something of a malignant effect on machinery. Regardless, there are no clues to be found on this computer. I make note of Mrs. Kimp's phone number and log out of the system.

I pick up the phone and dial her number and let it ring several dozen times. There is no answer, no voicemail, nothing. I hang up and program her number into my cell. I'll call

her later. While I'm at it, I try my wife again but there's still no answer. I leave another voicemail -- she'll get to hear me saying, "Hi honey, just checking in, love you, bye," three or four times when she checks it.

Livvy had been right about Seward making his claim. He didn't come down to Allrock personally, of course, but I happened to be there when his lawyer and accountant marched in. They met with the CEO himself, a testament to his power and influence.

Their meeting didn't last long. They were in and out of the office in less than ten minutes. Busy men have efficient meetings, I guess.

Livvy was right about my boss coming to me to investigate the claim as well. He asked me, as a favor to him, and to the CEO, to look into the matter. It was all unofficial, off the record, on the side. I readily agreed, more because Livvy asked me than because I gave a rat's ass about the CEO or the company. I was going to do anything I could to keep seeing that woman.

And we ended up seeing a lot of each other. We'd get together nightly to compare our notes. She was poking into things on her end, with her connections in various institutions. I was doing the same -- talking to doctors, and to cops that I trusted. We weren't turning up very much. Seward wasn't exactly an amateur when it came to making murder look like an accident. He'd covered his tracks extremely well to the point of having a fall guy from the rival gang who copped to the murder. Livvy paid a visit to the guy in jail and after interviewing him for ten minutes discovered that his wife had needed an expensive operation and had suddenly come into the money to get it done. There was no way he'd testify to that though -- undoubtedly that story would end with him and his wife and his family all in the same place that Alicia Seward had ended up. The crook with the heart of gold story touched us both very deeply for all of five minutes. After that, we doubled our resolve.

It wasn't long before I fell in love with her. I don't usually fall in love all that easily, but with Livvy it happened quickly. Spending so much time with her, with her refusing to give up, we became very close, very fast. There was just something about her. Hard times rolled off her. She could handle herself in any situation. Our professional meetings became more and more about spending time together rather than trying to prove Seward had defrauded my company. Things other women would run screaming from -- sporting events, camping trips, insurance claims investigator conventions -- she'd manage to get through with a smile on her face.

Not that she was afraid to speak her mind when things weren't to her liking. Before we were actually dating, she'd let me know what she was thinking without regard to its relation to me. After we started dating and after we got married, she didn't change. She wasn't harsh or insensitive. She just knew that, in the long run, it was best if she was just as honest as she could be. And she always was.

Meanwhile, my boss was getting frustrated with my lack of results. He knew it wasn't for a lack of trying, but he hinted that the company might be looking for a fall guy of its own and that the name Charles Bonnet was at the top of that list. I argued with him that this wasn't me slacking off on the job or being incompetent but that we were dealing with someone who actually knew what he was doing. A lot of insurance fraud was guys who were faking back pain or memory loss just to get a few extra bucks out of worker's comp. We didn't deal with reputed mob bosses every day of the week.

They weren't having any of my explanations, however. There was pressure straight from the top all the way down and I've always said that shit rolls downhill. It always ends

up landing right on me. I assured him that I'd redouble my efforts.

But really, I had stopped caring about the outcome of the Seward case long before. Livvy became the center of my world and my boss could go scratch for all I cared. The only reason I stuck with it was because it was important to her. Anything that was important to her became important to me.

I close up my office and peek into my wife's. It looks completely different from mine. Where my office is cluttered and messy, hers is organized and neat. Not a thing is out of place. There is a fine layer of dust on everything though, and I wonder when she was last here. Like I said, we don't spend a whole lot of time here, but we're usually here enough to keep the dust from forming like this. I poke around a bit, run my fingers along the books on her shelves. Nothing appears out of order.

I sit at her desk, and turn on her computer. I realize it's even older than the ancient server sitting in the closet. I should really get her a new one -- maybe it'll keep her from messing with mine. The startup process is agonizingly slow. While I wait for the system to boot, I look around at her desk. Nothing's been moved in a long time. No fingerprints in the dust, no telltale clean spots where a document might have been. So many opportunities for a startling clue and yet there are none.

The computer beeps several times and is finally available for use. The operating system appears to be two versions old and full of viruses. Popup windows advising me of spyware and adware immediately spring onto the screen. After navigating through a maze of Trojan horses, I eventually am able to open a window of my own. Opening every directory is an exercise in patience and trust. Unable to find anything more than a few documents related to Livvy's writing, I shut down the computer. Even the shutdown process takes forever and is hijacked several times by malicious programs. If Livvy's been using my computer, I certainly can't blame her. Salvation for this machine is probably only going to be found after a 5 story drop. I contemplate taking it up to the rooftop but the prospect of climbing back up there changes my mind.

Dejected, and honestly, feeling quite lonely, I turn out the light and leave the room. I pace back and forth in the waiting room, contemplating various plans. While I pace, I try Mrs. Kimp again with the same results as before. Doesn't anybody answer their phone anymore?

I guess I'm done here. I decide it's time to pay that visit to Johnny Law. Maybe he can help.

I lock up the office and head down the stairs. I see one of the other tenants of the building – a dentist. I know him only vaguely and wave. He offers a sympathetic looking smile. I must still appear pretty worn out, especially after running up the fire escape. I shrug and smile back and exit to the street.

It's still a beautiful afternoon and my stomach is rumbling so I figure I can afford to stop in at Chang's for some lunch. I climb the stairs to his second-story restaurant and open the opulent gilded doors. Chang himself is in the foyer and he greets me warmly.

"Ah, Mr. Charlie," he says. "It is very good to see you."

"You too, Mr. Chang," I say. "Just one for lunch, please."

"Right this way," Chang says, leading me to a table. "Something to drink?"

I take a seat a glance over the beer list. "I'll take a Tsingtao."

"Right away, sir."

The great thing about Chang's is that none of the tourists have found it yet. The sign

on the front of the building is so small that it's barely more than a note card taped to the door. This keeps the every day rabble out – not that the joint is empty by any means. Most of the tables are full of chain-smoking Asian gentlemen of the sort that you know not to mess with. I don't think Chang is necessarily tied to the Chinese mafia or the Triads or anything, but it sure does seem like he knows a whole bunch of them. I've sent more than a few of them to prison but they don't seem to mind. They tolerate my presence out of what I imagine is a grudging respect. Chang's is sort of hallowed ground for us. It is sanctuary. I'm not going to bust them while we're all enjoying our shumai.

Speaking of which, one of the dim sum girls approaches my table with a wheeled cart full of shumai, shrimp rolls and steamed buns. It is Chang's youngest daughter, Chia-Su. She smiles shyly and starts placing plates of food on my table as I point to them. She stamps my bill several times, indicating my choices, and then leaves, giving me a cute little wave.

Chang appears at my shoulder with my beer and a glass.

"Chia-Su sure is growing up," I say. "How old is she now?"

"She has just turned 19 last month, Mr. Charlie," Chang says, pouring my beer. "She is working here on break from college."

"Oh yeah? What school is she going to?"

Chang sets the glass on the table. "She is at Loyola University. Her mother and I wish she would study English or music, but she insists that she is going to go to law school."

I wonder if the many conversations she and I have had about law and criminology had any influence on that decision. I wonder if Chang knows and if he'd have one of his less-reputable patrons teach me a lesson if he found out.

"Kids these days, huh?" I say, throwing up my hands. "They just don't listen."

"No, they do not," Chang laments. "She is very smart, though. And very dedicated. We are very proud."

"You should be. She's a good kid."

"But come. Here I talk while your food gets cold. Please, eat!" Chang bows slightly and walks off to speak with another customer.

The food is delicious. They sure know how to do the dim sum here. As I finish off dishes, other girls wheel their carts by and offer more. I eat my fill and sit back, sated from the excellent food.

Chang approaches with another beer. "I hope everything was satisfactory," he says.

"More than satisfactory, Chang," I say, patting my stomach. "I don't know how you do it, but it's always just perfect."

"I am glad you think so." Chang bows again. "This beer is sent to you by the gentleman over at that table. He somberly pays his respects." Chang points to a middle-aged Chinese man sitting with a large group of other men across the restaurant. He looks familiar but I don't remember if he was a client or a criminal. It doesn't matter though: a beer's a beer.

"Please send him my thanks, Chang. I don't wish to disturb their meal." I take the bottle and raise it in salute to the man. He returns the gesture with his own drink.

When we were first dating, Livvy loved coming to Chang's. She adored the atmosphere – she said it felt "dangerous" and "old world." She said I felt that way too, and I guess that's why she fell in love with me. Back then, Chang's would be packed on a Saturday night – full of in-the-know locals and minor celebrities. The floor show which featured authentic Chinese dancers and some of the best jazz singers of the time was

top notch. We would swing in around ten or eleven at night, after the party had already started, but Chang would always have held a table for us. All the men's' eyes would follow her as we walked across the restaurant. She was always the most popular girl in the room. I was no slouch either, mind you – the other ladies didn't ignore me. But I think it had a lot to do with the fact that I had a real stunner on my arm.

We would dance – Livvy and I spent our Sundays with her teaching me how. I got to be pretty good. The guys in the place would line up asking her to dance with them and I always let her. You'd think I'd be jealous what with the way they looked at her and the amount of money that was in the room, but it never bothered me. She always saved the last dance for me.

Besides, while the guys would dance with my date, I'd get to dance with theirs, so it wasn't a bad trade. I know a lot of people who get bent out of shape about dancing, but it's not such a big deal. It's just dancing.

I'll admit, it did bug me a little the way they always whispered to each other, Livvy and some of her dance partners. I don't know what they were saying to each other and I never asked. I was – and am – a detective, but I never nosed into her business. I just never felt threatened. She was always writing some story or another and a lot of her contacts came into Chang's on the regular. I didn't mind her doing a little business while we were out on the town. Somehow, everything with Livvy was so free and easy that I didn't want to mess it up. I'd never managed that kind of atmosphere with any of my girlfriends before her and I treasured it.

One night at Chang's, though, that air of underworld danger became altogether too clear. We had gone out to dinner at another restaurant, but as our tradition dictated, we planned to end the evening at Chang's. I was actually hoping to end the evening for real at my apartment (and to start the morning as well, if you know what I mean, and I think you do.) We arrived, as usual, after the place had already started to rock. Chris Green, an amazing saxophonist from the area, was leading his quartet through a set. People were grooving to the scene, clapping, dancing, yelling, and having an uproarious good time. We were shown to a table near the stage and as I sat, I waved to Chris. He gave me a tip of the sax back. We weren't great friends, but we'd run into each other a few times at various clubs around the city and we said hello to each other whenever our paths crossed.

As the evening wore on, Livvy and I danced, and she danced with a few other guys while I danced with their girls. One time we both came back to our table and I noticed that her usual gaiety had disappeared. She looked downright scared, and that terrified me. I had never seen her scared.

"What is it, Livvy?" I asked, leaning close. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing, Charlie," she said, forcing strength into her words. "I'm just feeling a little ill. Don't let me ruin your night."

"No, baby. Let's blow this place. I'll take you home if you're not feeling well."

"It's nothing," she repeated. "Don't let it worry you."

She turned back to look up at the band and started clapping along with the music, a smile on her face. I could tell it was her fake smile, though. Her forced smile. I really just wanted to get out of there. I knew she wasn't telling me everything and it got under my skin a little. But, I wanted her to be happy, and if that's how she wanted to play the night then I would play along too.

I put my arm around her shoulders and kissed her on the cheek, bringing an actual smile to her face which warmed my heart to see. As I looked up, I noticed three rather

large gentlemen that I'd never seen around Chang's before standing at the edge of the room. They were well-dressed and more or less ordinary looking. But they weren't smiling, and they weren't clapping, and they weren't watching the band. They were looking straight at us.

Now, this was some time ago, before my well-practiced and world-famous paranoia had had a chance to make itself known to me. I was young and I was in love and I just figured that these guys were just staring at the most beautiful girl in the room, and in turn, at the average-looking guy that she was with. Plus, I was soon distracted by several kisses (and a nibble or two) on my neck. I thought about the gentlemen no more.

I stood from the table, put my hand on Livvy's shoulder. "It's always hard to leave you," I said.

She looked up and asked "Where are you going?"

"Bathroom."

She laughed. "Well, it's hard to let you go. But go."

I smiled at her and walked to the bathroom. The three well-dressed gentlemen I'd noticed earlier followed me in. They waited until the room had emptied out of other men before one said gravely, "Charlie Bonnet," as if he were Santa, checking my name on the 'naughty' list.

"Howdy gents," I said. I smiled and walked to a sink to wash my hands. "What's the news?"

The man who spoke was the obvious leader of the bunch. He had that air about him, and he did all the talking. He also grabbed me by the shoulder and spun me around.

"Here's the news, Bonnet," he said. I knew a punch was coming. In retrospect it seems like it both happened in slow motion and also took no time at all. My brain was screaming at me that bad things were about to happen and my body responded with sheer panic. The punch landed square in my gut and doubled me over. I crumpled to the floor. I struggled for breath.

When I could speak, I said, "You have me at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"You don't gotta know nothing except this," he said. Again, my brain flashed a message of warning. This time, I was able to curl up and protect my stomach and head, but it didn't seem to help much. A kick to my ribs taught me new lessons in agony.

"That's.... very informative," I managed.

"I thought you might find it helpful," he said. He turned to one of his buddies and said, "Charlie, go stand outside and make sure we're going to be alone with Mr. Bonnet."

I looked up at the fellow he'd addressed. "Your name is Charlie? That's my name, too. Small world."

Charlie shrugged and left the bathroom. The other tough stood at the door. The man who'd been "educating" me turned back and landed another kick on my side. "Shut up, you."

"Mum's... the word," I gasped.

"That's better. Now we can talk."

I nodded, keeping my promise. I hoped he'd do more talking and less kicking.

"I don't want to have to hurt you, Bonnet," he said, kneeling down next to me. "But it was either you or that pretty lady of yours and I figured it'd be a shame to mess up her face."

"I appreciate that, sir," I said weakly.

He slapped me across the face. It was a light slap, but it sent a message. "Remember

what I said about shutting up?”

I nodded and he continued: “Good. Now, don’t be stupid. Like I was saying. I don’t want to have to hurt you. You think a punch to the gut and a couple of kicks is hurt, but it’s nothing compared to what we can do. You get my meaning? Don’t say anything, just nod your head if you understand.”

I nodded again.

“Very good, Bonnet. I think you know why we’re here. I know you’re a smart guy and I don’t mean to insult your intelligence, but I’m gonna lay it all out just so that everything’s clear, okay? I’m gonna talk kinda fast and I’m only gonna say everything once, so pay attention.” Another nod. “Okay. We work, as I’m sure you have guessed, for Mr. Seward. Mr. Seward has learned that you and Olivia Tweed have been looking into certain matters relating to the death of his wife. Mr. Seward was devastated by the tragedy and he would rather not have some two-bit insurance fraud investigator and his girlfriend trying to dig up dirt while he’s trying to grieve. Do you understand that? If your wife was murdered, you wouldn’t want some schmuck poking around accusing you of doing the deed, would you?” I shook my head.

“Of course you wouldn’t.” He stood up and went to the sink. He adjusted his tie and addressed me in the mirror. “Here’s the bottom line, Bonnet. You and Miss Tweed are going to stop this investigation. You are going to destroy any documents you have regarding this situation. You are not going to speak of it again. If you do not cease your snooping around, I will pay you another visit, and there will be no conversation like this. There will be no back and forth. But first, I’m going to visit Miss Tweed. Do you understand? I realize I’m being perhaps a bit vague, but I’d like to think I’m getting my point across about the consequences of your non-compliance. Do you understand?”

I nodded vigorously.

“I’m very glad, Bonnet,” he said. “It’s been a pleasure speaking with you. I’m sorry if I’ve caused you any excessive pain or inconvenience. You should probably take it easy for the next couple days. Maybe take a vacation. Go somewhere nice with that girl.”

“Thanks,” I said, risking a word. It’s always been tough for me to keep quiet for that long. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

“Alright, Bonnet.” He gestured to the tough by the entrance to open the door. As he left the bathroom he said, “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“I’ll try.”

I picked myself up off the floor. The decision to comply with the unnamed thug’s wishes was a no-brainer for me. I was no hero. I didn’t need to show these guys that I was so tough that I would go against the biggest crime lord in town. I definitely didn’t want to risk Livvy’s life or mine over a few million dollars.

I made myself look as decent as I could. Fortunately, he’d avoided my face so the only real visible damage was that my clothes were rumpled and I wasn’t able to stand fully upright. My pride was damaged too, and I was scared out of my mind, but I always seemed to look that way, so nobody would notice a difference.

I lurched my way out of the bathroom and back to the dining room. The thugs had made themselves scarce. At our table, I leaned over and whispered in Livvy’s ear, “We’ve got to get out of here.”

She looked up. “Charlie, I was worried about you. What took you so long?”

“I ran into some of Seward’s friends,” I said, urging her out of her seat. “We’ve got to go.”

“Okay, Charlie.” Livvy stood and grabbed her purse. I tossed some cash onto the

table and grabbed my hat. We beat a hasty retreat out of Chang's and hailed a cab. Livvy kept pressing me for details but I didn't want to talk about it with anyone around. I put her off the subject until we got back to my place.

Once inside, I told her the whole story. She was angry, but not particularly shocked, as if she'd been expecting something like this to happen.

"We've got to stop this investigation," I said.

She nodded, numb and scared. "Charlie, I'm so sorry I got you mixed up in all this."

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart," I said, holding her close. "I don't mind. After all, I got to meet you."

"That's sweet, Charlie," she said. "But I'm serious. It's too dangerous to be involved with me."

"Nonsense, dear. We'll just stop this investigation and go on with our lives."

"But who knows if they'll keep their word?"

"They've got no reason to come after us as long as we keep our end of the bargain. I wouldn't worry about seeing them again."

Chapter 10:

I'm a pretty frequent visitor to the Chicago Police 20th District Foster Station. I have several personal acquaintances on the force (many thanks to Livvy's freelance writing connections) and my business frequently takes me there. I'm often sharing information, artfully gathering information, or – the most satisfying visits – dropping off a criminal. A lot of people get nervous going to police stations because they feel like they're being watched, but you get used to it. I say if you've got nothing to hide, you've got nothing to fear. I never have gotten used to the smell of the place though.

I approach the day sergeant's desk and tell him I'm here to see Detective Law. He makes a call and receives the okay. I fill out a visitor sheet and am given a temporary pass. I tell the sergeant I know where I'm going and he waves me through.

As I take the walk to Law's desk in the homicide division, I pass some of my friends and exchange greetings with them. They're a friendly bunch and I don't understand why anybody would hate cops. They're just out there to help us.

I walk upstairs and find Law in a heated argument with his lieutenant. Law sees me and waves me over to his desk. I take a seat. While I wait I scan the files on his desk. One in particular is noticeably thick. I lean forward to take a closer look when Law suddenly appears and sweeps the files into a drawer.

"How's tricks, Charlie?" he says, sitting across from me.

"Not too bad," I say. I nod my head towards the Lieutenant. "What was that about?"

"It's just internal politics. He's trying to keep me off a case that I really want to be on. Plus, he's trying to give me a partner. I keep telling him that I work alone but he never listens."

"Sounds rough," I say sympathetically. I love when cops act like this. It's life imitating art and it's a beautiful thing. "Did he call you a loose cannon? A maverick?"

"No, he didn't," Law says. "He did tell me I was dangerous though."

"That's close enough."

Law seems to forget that I'm here and starts shuffling through some papers. Moments pass awkwardly until he looks up and says, "Bonnet. I thought you were going to call me."

"I decided to pay a visit. I wanted to ask you about that old case you mentioned last night."

"Which one?" Law asks. "You mean the one with the blurred face? What about it?"

"You know how I am: always interested in the weirder side of the world," I say. "If you don't mind, I'd like to see anything you have on it."

"You can't just walk in here and see evidence anytime you like, Bonnet."

"Come on, Law. Do me a favor here. I think it might be related to something I'm working on."

"What is it that you're working on, Bonnet?" Law asks.

"I can't really say."

"You can't say? Or you won't say?"

I shrug my shoulders. "The truth is that I'm not exactly sure what's going on. I went to my office today, like I said I was going to, and I only found more questions and no answers."

"Why don't you lay some of them on me?"

"I'd love to, Detective. I really would," I stand up to leave. "But I don't want to interrupt the work you're doing. I might just confuse the issue."

"Alright, Bonnet," Law growls. "I can show you some stuff, but I want a promise from you that if you turn anything up on this or if it relates to your case at all, that you'll tell me everything."

"I promise, Detective. I've always been straight with you, haven't I?"

"So far as I know you have been," Law agrees. "But you can be pretty evasive sometimes."

"Who me?" I ask. "Now, what have you got?"

Law leads me down into the basement and into a room containing shelves of records stacked and filed from floor to ceiling. He flashes his ID at the records clerk who barely looks up from the magazine he's studying. He doesn't look like he's used to visitors, but he doesn't look like he cares very much.

"Go on in," he grunts.

We pass the clerk's desk and I say, "Nice fellow," under my breath.

Law points me down an aisle. "How happy would you be if you joined the force on a conditional pass and got stuck in the basement sticking files on shelves?"

"They didn't even let me that far," I say.

"Oh yeah, crazy Charlie Bonnet. Couldn't even pass the psych test." Law laughs derisively. "That thing's easier than canned cheese, Charlie. Every answer is 'D'."

We walk down one of the rows and Law scans the stacks for a particular file. Finding what he's searching for, he pulls it down. It is thick, nearly overflowing with papers.

Before he opens it, he says, "Okay, Charlie. I can't show you everything in here. In fact, I can only show you one thing in here. Don't ask to see the rest of it because it's not going to happen, okay?"

I think it's the first time that Law has ever called me by my first name. It throws me off so much that I agree with his conditions without arguing them. "Fine. Bring it on."

Law flips through the file, keeping it turned so that I can not see the contents. I manage to sneak one peek, however and am rewarded only with the letters "O.T.B."

"Murder at an off-track betting facility?" I ask.

Law looks up. "What?" he asks. He looks down and sees what I see. "Oh. Uh, yeah." He looks back up at me and glares. "Stop snooping."

He turns his back to me and resumes his search. Finally he finds what he's looking for. "You sure you want to see this?" he asks.

"Sure I'm sure," I say. I'm starting to wonder about the caution and care that Law is exhibiting.

He hands me the picture. It's a photograph of a dead woman, apparently shot twice. She's dressed in a nice gown, nice shoes, nice jewelry. Her body is on a bare hardwood floor. Her features are blurred, making identification next to impossible.

I've seen this picture before. I have a copy of it in my wallet. There's only one rather large difference between the two prints of the photo. In this one, it is a woman on the floor in a building. The one in my wallet has a major addition in the form of my own rather sad-looking (though still alive) body. I hold the photo in my hands, scarcely believing my eyes.

"What's wrong, Bonnet?" Law asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I stumble for an explanation of my reaction. "... I just have a hard time looking at corpses," I say.

Law laughs. "I think you would have gotten used to it by now."

"Believe it or not, I haven't seen all that many. I've been lucky enough to get to them before they end up this way."

"That is lucky," Law says.

"Can I..." my eyes dart back and forth between Law and the photograph. "Can I keep this?"

"Look, I've broken some rules just by letting you see this. I can't just let you walk off with evidence from a file," Law responds. "What do you want it for anyway?"

"I think it might have something to do with my... situation," I say. "I'm not sure how, but I think this is another piece of the puzzle."

"Alright, I'll tell you what I'll do. I can scan this and email it to you tonight. You still Charlie@bonnetagency.com?" Law takes the picture back from me.

"That's me. You'll really get me a scan tonight? That would be a big help."

"Yeah, no problem," Law says. "Remember - if you figure anything out, you have to tell me about it."

"A promise is a promise, Detective."

"Alright. Now get out of here. I've got some work to do."

Law replaces the file on the shelf and we exit the records room. He escorts me back to the building entrance, we say our good byes and I walk out into the afternoon sun.

I stand on the front steps of the building wondering if my life could get any weirder. I have a sinking suspicion that that sort of question inevitably ends up leading towards more bizarre occurrences and is just me asking for trouble. Shaking a fist at fate, I ask anyway. I ain't scared.

Well, just a little.

Chapter 11: The Magnificent Lakeview Lounge (In which I get a drink.)

After all that, I need a drink. Good lord, I need a drink. I *deserve* a drink, yes I do. And I know just the spot. It's a bit of a dive, but it's got everything I need (stools, a bar,

booze and a friendly mixologist) and it's within stumbling distance of home. I blindly hail a taxi and tell the driver my destination. The trip goes by in a blur. I zone out until the cabbie snaps me out of it with a gruff, "We're here, bub."

It was at the Lakeview Lounge that I started to think about giving up on my job at the insurance agency. It was also here where Livvy proposed to me. She and I had quit snooping around into Seward's business and we hadn't had any more trouble with him or his goons. My boss had gone cold on me, throwing me work that was even duller than the stuff I'd been doing before. I knew he was just trying to bore me out of the job and it was working, but I'm a man of principles and I thought that as long as I could draw a paycheck, I might as well stick with it. Steady work is steady work.

One night, about six months after we met, at a table in a dark corner of the bar, Livvy and I sat, sipping beers, talking about the future.

"What do you want to be doing, Charlie?" she asked.

"I can think of a dozen things," I said, looking at her meaningfully.

She chucked me on the shoulder – how could you not love a woman who could chuck you on the shoulder like that? "You know what I mean."

"That's a tough question, sweetheart," I said. I stared into my beer, looking for answers. I'd looked for the answer to that question everywhere else, it had seemed.

"Well, I for one, am sick of hearing about you shuffling papers from point A to point B all the time and wasting away in that office. You're better than that."

"Am I really?" I asked honestly. I certainly wasn't sure. "What else can I do?"

"You're a hell of a detective."

"You don't seem to be such a good one," I said. "What evidence do you have to back that up?"

"Well, you always figure things out. You can always find any information that you need to find."

"All I know is how to go to google and how to type in a keyword or two."

"Sometimes," she said, "that's all you need."

"Maybe. Maybe not. It'd be a hell of a thing though, huh? Me, a private dick."

She made a face. "Don't ever call it that. It's just gross."

"Are you getting prudish all of a sudden? That's not like you," I joked.

"Don't tease me, Charlie," she complained.

"Hey, I'm just kidding you," I said. "What gives?"

"I just want this to be nice."

"This?" I swept my hands to indicate our current occupation of a total dive bar.

"Nice?"

She looked around and laughed. "It's nice enough."

"For what?"

"For this," she said, taking my hand in hers. "I want you to marry me."

I'm quite certain my jaw hit the floor. I'd never been close to asking anyone to marry me, and I'm sure that nobody had ever considered asking *me* to marry *them*.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"Are you going to?"

"Right now?" I asked.

"No, you're right. It can wait," she said, letting go of my hand.

"You're kidding."

"Of course I am, Charlie. Ask me now."

And just like that, we were engaged.

The Lakeview Lounge has been around since the 1920s and it shows. It is the very definition of a dive bar. There are holes in the walls, holes in the floors -- it's amazing the place hasn't fallen apart around its patrons. The sign out front which declares "Live entertainment" uses two Ns to make up the M. It's that kind of place. But it's friendly and cheap, and like I said before, it's got everything I need.

From the name, you might think that it was in Lakeview, or that it at the very least had a view of the lake. Neither of these things are true. The bar was opened by Jake and Sylvia Lakeview, the great-grandparents of the current owner, my good friend, Bart.

"Charlie!" Bart says as I walk in the door. "It's good to see ya. It's been too long!"

Bart is about my age, tall and rail-thin with a wild shock of white hair that he's had for as long as I've known him. I met him back when we were both in high school. Where I was the average, invisible kid, Bart was the exact opposite. With a build like his, it's impossible to go unnoticed. He has a personality to match: gregarious and friendly, good-natured and funny. He also had a darker side that was mostly quelled when he took over the family business, but still comes out from time to time when he's forced to remove an unruly customer. When we were kids, Bart was the one who got me into trouble. It was never anything serious, but it did cause my parents to worry from time to time. Bart was a natural leader though, and it was tough for me to ever say no to him, no matter what my better judgment told me. And we always had so much fun. We don't see each other that often anymore -- it's probably been several months -- but each time we do, it's like no time has passed at all.

"Howdy, Bart." I say, smiling. It's always nice to see a friendly face, and that song does have it right -- you do want to go somewhere where everybody knows your name. "It's good to be seen."

"That's the truth, that's the truth." Bart wipes down a section of the bar and gestures for me to sit. I pull out one of the sturdier looking stools and take a seat.

"What can I get you?"

"Know how to make a Gang Up?" I ask before I can even think about it.

"Never heard of it. What's in it?" Bart asks.

I toss the index card across the bar. Bart looks it over and shakes his head. "You think I stock strawberry brandy here? Come on, pal. Take a look around."

I don't need to -- I know what he means, but I take a glance around the place anyway. It's the same as it ever was. A few barflies huddle together at one end of the bar, looking about as bad as their surroundings. "Sorry, I'll just take a Scotch and soda."

Bart mixes my drink and says, "Still drinking like a detective, eh?"

"I figure I might as well. It's one of the few perks of the job. Salud!" I say, raising my glass to my friend.

"So, how's the detecting business?" Bart asks.

"Same old, same old. You know how it is. Dames, guns, murders, booze. Smoke-filled, poorly-lit rooms."

"Speaking of dames, how are things?"

"Not bad, not bad. I think we had a fight."

"You think? With my wife, I'm never unsure of whether or not we've had a fight. I always know about it. And I never hear the end of it."

"It's no big deal. It'll blow over. It always does with us," I explain.

"That's how love is," Bart says, washing a few glasses. "So, how about it? Are you

working on any cases? Anything exciting to report?"

"Actually," I say, pointing to the index card still on the bar, "I'm working on something related to this."

Bart looks puzzled. "You're working on a cherry-flavored vodka drink?"

"That's not the meat of the case, but it's related somehow. Someone knocked on my door and then knocked me out when I answered. When I came to, they'd left this."

"That's Effen weird!" Bart says, laughing hysterically.

"I don't get it."

"Sorry. Bartender humor."

"Right, okay. Anyway -- they left this, and an example of their mixology behind and didn't do a damn thing else."

"That *is* weird, and no joke about it."

"Yeah, can you make anything of that drink recipe?" I ask.

Bart picks up the card and looks it over, shaking his head. He then flips to the other side and says, "Oh, this looks like a good recipe for a pot roast."

"What? Let me see that," I say and grab for the card.

I look at the back of the card. He's right. It's my mother's easy foil pot roast recipe. I would swear that it said something else last night. But what was it? I need to start taking better notes. Something about suspects. Something Sal said.

I finish off my drink. "I should really get going, pal. It was great to see you. How much do I owe you for the booze?"

"Aw, Charlie. It's on the house, of course," Bart says. "Just come by more often. And remember to tell your woman that if anything happens to you, I'll be happy to take care of her," Bart says.

I laugh, "Oh, I'll be sure to let her know. I'm sure she'll be thrilled. But what if something happens to me?"

"Oh, nothing will ever happen to you, buddy. You're Charlie Bonnet." Summoned by a patron, Bart walks off to pour a beer. "I'll be seeing you!"

Yeah, that's me, I think to myself. Charlie Fucking Bonnet. Nothing happens to me except everything that's happening to me right now.

Chapter 12

I leave the bar and walk south on Broadway heading towards home. As I cut west towards my apartment, I notice some movement out of the corner of my eye and then I realize that the feeling I always have that someone is following me is absent meaning that someone must actually be following me. I quicken my pace and before my pursuer can turn the corner, I duck into the entryway of an apartment building.

Soon, I can hear the heavy footsteps of a man who has lost his quarry. He rushes past me and I step out of the doorway and grab him from behind.

"What the hell?" he cries and turns to face me.

I cock my right arm but as I'm about to take a swing at his face, I realize that I recognize him. I lower my arm.

I say, "Nick."

"Charles," he replies. He removes himself from my grasp, and brushes himself off as if my touch had dirtied him.

Nick Gossage is another private -- I'm sorry, "professional" -- detective in Chicago. He and I have crossed paths on many occasions and never has it been very pleasant. He's the president of the local chapter of the National Association of Professional Detectives and has stolen more than a few cases out from under my feet. I feel nothing but burning hatred for him -- I should have thrown that punch -- made even more intense by the fact that I've just caught him tailing me.

"Gossage, why the hell are you following me?" I ask.

"Wouldn't you like to know, bub?" he says, and starts to walk off.

"Of course I want to know. That's why I asked." I follow him now, hounding him at his heels. "What's the game? What are you playing at?"

He stops in a pool of light and turns on me, finger pointing. "Just back off, bub. I ain't telling you nothing."

"Good God, Nick. I just want to know why you've been following me." Something clicks in my mind. "And why you were at my office today. Hey, that's breaking and entering!"

"I wasn't nowhere near your office, Bonnet," he says, shaking his head. "Damn, you always was a paranoid parrot. That's why we never let you join the boys' club."

"You never let me join the boys' club because I have too much integrity," I protest. "Plus, I never asked to join."

Nick throws his head back and laughs. I'm tempted to punch him in the throat while it's exposed. "What are you talking about? You begged us to let you run with our crowd. What would we want to do with a wannabe detective? You're a laughing stock. Now leave me alone." He turns and begins walking again.

"You can't get rid of me that easily, Nick. You were the one trailing me. Why were you following me if I'm so undesirable?"

For the third time, Nick turns on me. This time there is anger, even hatred, in his eyes. He grabs me by the throat and shoves me against the front wall of an apartment building. He casts a quick glance to each side for potential witnesses -- a look that I've learned is never good. In my experience, it always seems to precede further violence.

"It's business, you shlub," he says, squeezing my throat, pinning my head against the wall. "I'm getting paid to spend time with you. It's the only way *anyone* ever spends time with you."

"Who?" I manage to gasp. He's not only cutting off my air supply, he's also very nearly clamping my mouth shut with his one hand. He doesn't look like he should be this strong. Or maybe I'm just that weak.

"You know better than to ask that, Charlie," he says, slapping me lightly across the face with his left hand. "Detective-client confidentiality and all that."

"You.... son... of.... a...." I'm starting to see stars, green at the fringes, haze. I blink to clear my vision.

"Son of a what, Charlie?" Nick asks, pressing harder. "Son of a what? Come on. Say it. Or can't you? Cat got your tongue, Charlie?"

"Guh," is all I can manage.

"That's what I thought."

Nick finally lets go and gives me a shove, sending me to the ground. I rub my sore neck tenderly and gasp for air, slumped against the wall. "Son of a bitch."

"Keep talking sweet, you louse. You'll find out where that gets you," Nick aims a kick at my side but pulls up short. "Ah, what's the use? You're gonna get what's comin to ya from someone else. I'll just be the messenger."

With that cryptic statement, Nick heads off down the street and disappears into the night.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I start crying here. I know I'm supposed to be playing the role of the tough, street smart, hardened detective who can laugh off anything that comes his way, but there comes a time when a man reaches his limit. A man can only take so much physical and mental abuse before he breaks down and sob. I hide my head in my hands and let go while trying to remain as quiet as I can. A couple walking down the street pauses in their conversation as they pass me but they don't stop. When the crying stops, I prepare myself to do something I'd long ago sworn I'd never do again: call my mother-in-law.

Mrs. Tweed is a decent enough woman. She's not your stereotypical evil mother-in-law by any means. I always thought we got along great but then at some point, all our conversations ended up with her hanging up on me. I can't tell you what changed, but I feel like I'm still the same person. I've talked to Livvy about it but she doesn't know what the problem is either. She says her mother still speaks highly of me. I imagine that Mrs. Tweed perceives that I slighted her in some way, but I can't even figure out why that might have happened. I've racked my brain a thousand times trying to think of something I might have said or done that may have upset her, but I come up with nothing. Eventually, I stopped worrying about it. Either she'd come around or she wouldn't. Nothing I tried had made things any better.

So, I wasn't in the habit of calling her, but as I said, I was at my wit's end and didn't know who else I could call. I steel myself and pull out my phone. I find her number in the contact list and press the send button.

Mrs. Tweed answers on the third ring. Her voice sounds tired and haggard. "Tweed residence," she says.

"Mrs. Tweed," I say. "It's Charlie."

"Charles," she says, curtly. Her voice is clipped, tight.

"Sorry to call you this late. I just...." I choke back a sob, take a deep breath. "I'm sorry I missed dinner last night."

"Well, we missed you." I wonder if she's just being polite or if she actually means it.

"That's nice of you to say. That means a lot to me, it really does."

"What do you want, Charlie?" she asks.

"It just that I.... I really need to talk to Livvy," I say. "I'm in kind of a bind here. I've had a really rough couple of days and I need to talk to her."

There is silence on the other end of the line. It is a twenty second pause that feels like five minutes. Finally, she says, "You need to stop calling here, Charles."

"Just for five minutes. Please."

"Charles, we've all had a rough couple days. This time of year always is. You're not helping anybody by calling. You may think that you are, but you're not. You need to stop."

"Mrs. Tweed.... Rachel...." I can't think of anything else to say. I merely attempt to reassert my presence on the phone and delay her from ending the call.

"Good bye, Charles." She hangs up.

I could use another drink.

I pull myself together, twist my neck back into place, shrug my jacket back on, dust myself off. I'm a little wobbly on my feet again, but it passes soon. I take some slow,

deep breaths to get the old system going properly again and except for the slight pain in my neck, I'm feeling fine.

I figure I deserve another drink, but I don't want to go back to the Lakeview Lounge. Bart might get it in his mind to go after Nick and I know he's not just your average ordinary thuggish detective. Nick's bent in ways I can't even begin to describe. The man has a long history of violent, aggressive behavior. Plus, while he was pinning me to the wall, his jacket fell open, revealing his shoulder holster and a black pistol contained within. I consider myself lucky I didn't have to face that down.

This time, I figure, a place where nobody knows my name is in order. I don't want to talk to anybody or answer any questions. I just need that drink. I enter a Clark Street tavern, not even looking to see what it's called, and take a seat on a stool at the bar.

The bartender approaches. She's a young woman, probably around 25, quite attractive in a "I don't give a shit what you think about me; I've seen and heard it all before" kind of way. That kind of confidence and ambivalence can be a real turn on. Livvy's confidence came from knowing that she was gorgeous and that her looks could get her out of any trouble she found herself in.

I order a shot of Jameson with a beer to wash it down and settle onto the stool. The whiskey burns my roughed-up throat but it hits my stomach just right. A swig of beer sends cool relief that I can feel as it goes down. I relax as much as I can and enjoy the drink as far as that goes.

When it's gone as far as it's going for now, I order another pair of drinks and take them over to a table in the corner. I pull out the stack of notes I'd taken from the office and give them the once over again. I still can't figure it out. They seem like a pretty straightforward account of a man cheating on his wife with another woman. I know there's something more to them that I'm not seeing, but I put it aside for now. I take the sheaf of papers and turn them over. Borrowing a pen from a passing server, I begin taking my own notes on the back of the pages. I figure if I can lay everything out on paper that maybe I'll be able to get a clearer view of the bigger picture and it will all start to make sense.

First there's the issue of my memory loss. It's pretty limited to the past day and while I probably haven't given this issue its due respect and attention, I'm not that worried. It's not the first time I've blocked something out and it's not the first time that I've lost time. I've had blows to the head before that have left me as little more than a semi-functional sleepwalker for days. Still, it's a concern. If I wasn't unconscious for the past couple days, what have I been doing? My last memory is of that argument about whether or not we were eating at her mother's last night. Or is it? Do I remember that, or do I just remember the story as Sal told it to me? I remember getting my detective's license. I remember meeting Livvy. I remember getting married, renting the office, specific cases. Right? Memory is such a touchy thing. Photos from my past bring to mind certain events and people: birthday parties, girlfriends, graduations. But do I remember those people and places? Do I just remember the story that the photos tell?

Speaking of photos, there are now two photos to deal with. They each show the same scene, the same place, and the same theme. One just has the minor detail of the addition of another subject. Hopefully Law will follow through with his promise to send me a scan and I can get a closer look at the pictures side by side. I leave it alone for now.

I decide to press on. There was the blood. I still don't know whose it was. If I was smart, or if I trusted the police -- or myself -- more than I do, I'd have gotten it tested or

checked. Hell, I should get myself tested what with all of that unknown blood that was all over. Shit -- I damn well could have gotten nearly any disease in the world what with the amount of blood that was on me. Great -- something else to worry about here. As if I don't already have enough to think about.

Third on my list is the issue of the ominous messages -- "Her blood is on your hands" and "It's always the person you least expect" -- left for me at various times. Actually, I think, I guess the second message never happened. I take out that drink recipe card again. It's definitely written on the obverse of the pot roast recipe. Tired and fading fast, I rub my eyes.

Finally I write down the issue that's bothering me the most, saved for last in hopes that I would never have to admit it: Where the hell is Livvy? She's disappeared before, but never without warning and she's never given me the cold shoulder for this long. Sure, we've had our ups and downs, but it has always blown over. Maybe I just haven't given her enough time. Usually I'm good about giving her space when she needs it. Maybe it's just my persistent loneliness or my need for a sympathetic ear after all this trauma, but her absence has an ominous weight in my chest that makes it hard to breathe.

I look over my list, with the notes that I've made. Even with it written down, I don't feel I'm making any headway against whatever's happening but it does feel good to have it on paper, broken down into these succinct elements. The only thing left to do is to figure out how all the pieces fit together. I finish my beer and decide to have another before heading for home. I gather up my things and walk back up to the bar. The bartender points at my empty glasses and I nod. She reaches behind the bar for the Jameson and two shot glasses. She pours a dose into each glass and says, "This one's taken care of."

"Well that's mighty nice," I say, and we tap our glasses together, tap them on the bar and drink them down.

"Don't mention it," she says, wiping off her mouth with the back of her hand. "My name's Katie, by the way." She goes to pour another beer.

When she returns, I say, "Katie, I'm Charlie. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." She smiles -- it's a spectacular smile, the way an unsmiling woman's rare flashes always are. People always think they should smile more but I know better. A little goes a long way.

She takes a little closer look at me. "Say," she says, "you don't look so good."

I make a mock frown. "Aw, Katie, we were doing so well. Then you have to go and insult me?"

She chuckles. "It's not an insult, Charlie; just an observation. You look like you've had a rough week."

"Just a rough couple nights."

"Musta been real rough," she says. Either this girl is real observant or else I must be getting old. Sure, this is above average stress I've been dealing with, but this kind of wear and tear didn't used to show on my face so readily. I'm not as resilient as I once was. These moments of revelation are absolute killers.

"Well, it hasn't been all bad," I say. "I mean, a pretty girl did buy me a drink."

She laughs politely -- it is the same "I've heard it all before" laugh that I saw on her face when I first entered the bar.

"I'm sorry," I say sincerely. "I suppose you hear that all the time."

"No, it's not that," she says. "It's just that this wasn't on me. The gentleman at the

end of the bar sent it down."

I turn to look. It's a somewhat portly man in an expensive-looking suit drinking a martini. He looks terribly familiar but I can't place his face. He sees me looking and throws me a friendly wave. Automatically, I throw one back to him and ask Katie, out of the side of my mouth, "You seen him before?" The man throws down the remainder of his drink, puts some cash on the bar and walks out.

"Sure," the bartender says, "he comes in here all the time."

I watch the man leave, knowing I know him from somewhere. I am sick of all these almost-familiar things going on lately. There has been too much *deja vu*.

"He in the habit of buying drinks for strangers?"

"Not really. Usually he's got a girl by his side. He hardly ever drinks alone."

"Know his name?" I ask hopefully.

"Yeah, it's Kuhn. Thomas Kuhn."

The name doesn't ring a bell, still I feel like I've seen him before. I have to figure it out. I pull a wad of crumpled bills from my pocket and toss it on the bar, grab my hat and make for the door. As I reach it, I hear squealing tires, a terrible impact and a scream. Through the glass, I see a car driving off in a hurry, leaving behind Kuhn's crumpled form.

Outside, it's pretty chaotic. Clark Street can get pretty crowded, so there were plenty of witnesses to the accident -- assuming it was an accident. A crowd is forming around Kuhn. I shoulder my way through.

"Please," I say. "I'm his friend. Let me through. Call 911."

I reach Kuhn and kneel beside him. He doesn't look like he's going to make it. I'm no doctor, but this doesn't look good.

"You're gonna be alright, Kuhn," I lie. "Don't worry."

He looks up at me, recognition in his eyes. He grabs my left arm -- more blood on my clothes -- and pulls me closer.

"Bonnet," he hisses with great effort. "Bonnet, listen to me."

How does he know me? I'm terrible with faces -- a poor skill deficiency for a detective. When they show high school photos of celebrities, and you have to guess who it is, I never get it right. I feel his identity sneaking around somewhere in the back of my mind. I keep reaching for it, but it darts back elusive. I know I'm just going to have to be still and let it come to me.

"I'm listening, Kuhn. What's the story?"

"They're playing you... for a fool... a sap... a sucker... a patsy...." He pauses for breath and then continues. "A dope... a chump... a ninny... a stooge... a fathead... a sucker..."

I interrupt: "You said sucker already."

"...a turkey... a dodo... a lamebrain."

"What are you, a walking thesaurus? Save your strength." Someone tries to help Kuhn. He steps in with intent to loosen his shirt, give him CPR, whatever. I wave him off. "He's not going to make it," I whisper.

"Bonnet!" Kuhn hisses again. "The answers are out there. I had them in my hands...."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, getting increasingly frustrated. "What are the answers? What are the goddamned questions?"

"But they played me too. I was... such a... fool... a chump...."

"I can't handle this anymore, Kuhn. I'm out of here," I stand up.

"Wait! Bonnet! Take this." He pushes his jacket into my arms. It is folded up around something and is heavier than I expect.

"What's this?" I ask and begin to unfold it.

"Not... here..." he chokes.

"What's the game, Kuhn? And who's playing it?" I ask, desperately. It doesn't seem like he has a lot of life left in him.

"Find.... Illinois," he says and somehow that triggers it for me. This is Alan Kimp, the man in the photos on my computer; the man that, according to my files, I trailed for several weeks a little over three years ago. I am overwhelmed with shock at the connection and reel back. With a last burst of strength, he rises up and grabs by shirt collar in both hands pulling me back to him. "See Illinois!" His grip on my shirt loosens, he falls back, and then he is gone, leaving me with little more to go on than I had before. I stand up, people around me casting dirty looks at me, like I kept them from saving this guy's life. Not really a life worth saving, as far as I could tell. Not that I knew that much about him, but I'm pretty sure he wasn't curing cancer. I quickly head around a corner as an ambulance shows up, sirens wailing.

In the light of a street lamp, I unfold Kimp's jacket. It's a nice one; an Armani. I wish the guy was my size. Inside, as I expected from the weight, is a gun. It's a Smith & Wesson Model 386. The silver titanium body glints in the streetlight. I open the cylinder and see that all 7 chambers are loaded but confirm that three of the shells have been fired. I flip the cylinder closed and slip the gun into my pocket.

In the inside pocket of the jacket, I find a train ticket. It's an open-ended ticket going from Chicago to Normal, Illinois. Normal is southwest of Chicago, about halfway between Chicago and St. Louis. Why would Kimp be going there, and why would he want to be sure I had the ticket? Or was it the gun he wanted me to hold onto? Either way -- I've got them both.

I fold the jacket over my bloodied sleeve and head back to the street. As I'm turning the corner, I feel a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Say, you trying to duck me, Bonnet?"

I turn. "Law, what are you doing up here?"

"Just happened to be walking by. Did you see anything?"

"Saw a man get hit by a car. Saw the car drive off."

"You get a license plate?"

"Dammit, I knew there was something I was forgetting to do."

"Don't get smart, Bonnet. You know better."

"Sorry, Law. It's just been a long day and this is one hell of a way to cap it off."

"Why do I feel like there's something you're not telling me?"

"Look, Johnny. You're a swell guy and all but I'm just not ready for a committed relationship. But, if you really want to know all of my hopes and dreams, I've always wanted to open a bar. Nothing fancy, mind you, just a place where a guy can get a decent drink and maybe watch a game."

He interrupts me. "Didn't I just tell you not to crack wise, Bonnet? Can't you focus on the situation at hand? What gives?"

"Like I said. It's been a long day. One thing after another. I kept getting sidetracked."

He gives me a once over. "It looks like you got sidetracked by another boxer. You wake up in another anonymous room downtown?"

"Nothing like that. Just ran into an old friend who wanted to make sure I was paying attention to what he said. You know how I can get," I say, absently rubbing my neck.

"Do I ever. I wouldn't mind cuffing you once in a while myself. But if that's how your friends treat you, I'd hate to see what your enemies do."

"It's not very pleasant, that's for sure."

Law nods his head back towards the street. "So, you know the mook that got run down?"

"I just know his name," I said. I figure I'll let Law figure out Kuhn's real identity on his own, if he decides to pursue it. "It's Thomas Kuhn. He just bought me a drink a couple minutes before he got splattered."

"Why'd he do that?" Law asks. He scratches his chin.

"How do I know? I was going to ask him, but he stepped in front of a car. I never met the guy before."

"Some folks said there was someone talking to him after he got hit. That wouldn't happen to have been you, would it?"

"Yeah, I caught up with him right before he bought it. We had a real nice chat. Didn't get to ask him why he bought me a shot, though," I lament.

"Oh yeah?" Law growls, his frustration with me growing stronger every second. I seem to have that effect on people. "What did you two chat about then?"

"Well, at that particular moment, he felt very strongly about getting a stop sign put in at that intersection." Law waves his hands at me dismissively but doesn't say anything so I continue. "I don't think it's a bad idea really. Might go to the next city council meeting myself. Kuhn's Stop Sign. Fine idea."

Law's had enough. I feel bad toying with him like this, but I don't like talking to cops. They'll take all the information you've got and won't give you anything in return. "You think this is a game, Bonnet. Give me a straight answer once in a while, will ya? And no more of your lies."

"Lies?" I ask. "I've never lied to you, Detective. I may have been evasive and deliberately obtuse, but I've never lied. Scout's honor."

"Oh sure, Bonnet. You've never lied to me. You've just been lying to yourself. You've been doing that ever since –"

I interrupt him before he can insult me further. "Hey, are we almost done here? I really could use some sleep already."

"Yeah. Just one more thing. Did you happen to see a heater on Kuhn? He had a shoulder holster but no gun. I'm worried someone ran off with it. Don't need any more guns out on the street in this city, you know?"

"Didn't see a thing," I say, suddenly hyperaware of the weight of the gun in my pocket.

"You know it's illegal to have a handgun in the city?"

"Can I go now?" I ask.

"G'wan. Get outta here."

I do exactly that. I all but run from the scene, Detective Law watching me the whole way. I finger the gun in my pocket. It makes me nervous, having it on me. I'm not a big fan of guns (though part of me has always wanted one.) I realize they're just tools and it's all about the person wielding it, but it seems like it's too much portable potential energy for one person to be responsible for. And they make killing too easy. At the same time, I haven't exactly been successfully intimidating anyone lately and things have been getting rough. If I'd had it on me when I ran into Gossage, maybe things would have turned out different. Maybe I wouldn't be nursing another bruise. Maybe I'd know more

about this case than my own name.

Chapter 13: Singing in the Rain

(In which I slip and fall farther, sing a Dinosaur, Jr. song, hang out with the band and take a nice, relaxing bath.)

It starts raining on me as I walk home. It is another one of those sudden storms that descend upon this city without warning and often without remorse. Wind whips through the trees, blowing stray newspapers around and kicking up dust until the rain soaks down the ground and it turns to mud. Huge drops of rain batter me as I struggle to make any progress down the street. It's the kind of rain you're scared to get caught out in. At any minute, you might get washed away.

Lightning arcs across the sky, each time lighting up the night briefly but intensely. The white flashes are a cruel reminder of each blow to head I've taken lately. Thunder cracks after each flare, closer and closer. Car alarms, almost inaudible above the noise of the storm, go off in response to the rumbling aftershocks.

I never know whether to run or to just keep on walking. If you run, you just run into raindrops you wouldn't have hit, but if you walk, you stay wetter longer. I figure I'm already as soaked as I can possibly get and my main goal now is to get inside as soon as possible. Gripping Kimp's jacket tightly in one hand and using the other to secure the gun in my pocket, I start jogging towards home. It feels good to be running to something. In the back of my head, there is a feeling that it's the first time I haven't been running away from something.

The good feeling doesn't last long, however. It is replaced by the feeling of cold, wet, hard concrete rushing up to meet the back of my head at a pace roughly equal to that of the speed of gravity. There is a flash of light that has nothing to do with the storm and then I see stars, odd for such a cloudy night. The constellations don't match any of the ones I know. I blink them out of my eyes. I must have hit a slick patch of sidewalk and my feet went out from under me, sending me to the ground. My head's taken so many blows over the last twenty-four hours, I'm surprised I can still put two and two together.

"It's four," I say to the sky, just to prove that I'm still able. I'm reasonably sure that's the correct answer. It's either four or twenty-two. I'll check on a calculator as soon as I can.

Looking up at the sky – or a ceiling – from the ground – or a floor -- is such a familiar vantage point to me now that it's starting to feel natural. Even though the sidewalk isn't all that comfortable and brand new pain is flashing through my body, I'm almost loathe to leave. Bad things seem to happen to me while I'm standing up. At least I'm safe here.

Sometimes, when things are really bad – as they are for me right now – I'll start babbling, making noises, spouting gibberish. It's never anything intelligent but my brain cuts off and my body still feels the need to vocalize. This time, however, I start singing:

I know you're somewhere, I'm Insane
It's your needs on my brain
Smack me out, Move on with change
To have the strength to stake my claim
I know you're somewhere, I'm Insane
To have the strength to stake my claim
I know you're somewhere, I'm Insane

To have the strength to stake my—“

“What the fuck?” I hear someone shout a second before I am struck in the head by a bicycle tire and witness a body fly over me to land feet away on the concrete. The bike falls on top of me.

“Sorry!” I say weakly, pushing the bike off me. “I fell.”

“Yeah, well, so did I,” says the angry bicyclist. “Thanks to you.”

I get to my feet and find that the biker has already gotten to his. He gets off a quick punch to my face before I can cover up. Flashes of light that have nothing to do with the storm streak through my vision.

“Hold on! Hold on!” It is all I can think to say. I raise my arms to protect my face and wait for another blow.

“Hey wait, you’re that old dude Dustin was talking to this morning,” he says.

I lower my arms and look. It’s the singer from the garage. He doesn’t seem to be about to throw another punch. He checks himself for broken bones.

“Are you alright? I’m really sorry,” I say. I bend down and pick up the messenger bag he dropped. “Here’s your bag.”

He grumbles and hangs the bag over one shoulder. “Yeah I’m fine. Thank God I was wearing my helmet. Just a few cuts and scrapes, I guess.”

“Wish I’d been wearing one,” I say. Maybe I should start. Definitely not part of the detective’s uniform, but it might reduce the number of times I get cold-cocked. At the very least, it would make it harder for these guys to sucker punch me.

“I gotta go,” says the singer, picking up his bike. “I’m late for band practice.”

“Something for me to look forward to when I get home,” I say under my breath.

The singer hops on his bicycle and rides down the street, tires spitting up water as he goes. I take a moment to collect myself yet again. It seems like all I do lately is try to collect myself. At least, I think to myself, I’m still capable. As long as I’m still able to stand up, straighten my tie, and brush myself off, I’ll be able to keep fighting the good fight, or at least I’ll be able to walk headlong into the next crushing blow. I pick up Kimp’s jacket, which is now looking much worse for the wear. At least it wasn’t my size.

The gun, however, is no longer in my pocket. It must have fallen out when I took my pratfall. I spend fruitless minutes looking for it, now wishing for some lightning to aid my search. It’s never around when you need it though. The rain obscures the streetlights and I’m unable to find the damn thing.

“Sorry, Law,” I say to myself. “I guess there’s gonna be another gun on your streets.”

The wind continues to blow against me as I struggle to make it the final few blocks to my house.

I reach my building and thank God I have my keys this time. Another run-in with Sal the Super Superintendent would be the final straw. In the foyer, I open the mailbox and find some bills for me and a Victoria’s Secret catalogue for Livvy. I always get the bills and she always gets the good stuff.

I take the mail upstairs and enter the apartment. Part of me wants to go through the same routine that I pulled last night, and that part of me can talk pretty loud and be pretty convincing, but the rest of me is too exhausted to make the effort.

Instead, I call out to the apartment, “If you’re here and you’re going to hit me, let’s just get it over with. I can’t take the waiting.”

I am greeted with silence and the deep meow of Beckett. He leaps down from the top of a bookcase and rubs against my ankles. I sigh a deep sigh and feel my whole body

relax. This lasts for about a second and a half as the silence is interrupted – let’s say it was destroyed – by the sound of deep thudding bass and a wailing guitar. The World’s Worst Rock Band has commenced their practice. That I can hear it above the rain and wind is a testament to the fact that their lack of musical talent has not made them at all shy about performing for the entire neighborhood. I wish I still had that gun.

I shuck my jacket and toss it, along with Kimp’s ruined Armani onto the back of a chair. I roll up my shirtsleeves and track wet, muddy footprints across my nice clean floors.

Exiting through the kitchen again, I am stunned by the wall of sound that hits me. The rain has died down to the point that outside travel is no longer life threatening. I walk down the back stairs leaning now not against the wind but against the noise. It has a physical presence out here. I picture it as a monster with a diabolically evil face. It rears up and takes a swipe at me, forcing me to cower back in fear. I gather my wits and will and cross the yard to the garage. Struggling against the cacophony, I open the door and face my nemeses.

The band is in the middle of a cover of a Portishead song that until I hear them murder it, I am quite fond of. They look up at my entrance but do not bother to stop or even to acknowledge my presence.

I try yelling for them to stop a couple times but it is no use. The music is even louder within the confines of the garage. The band members are all wearing earplugs – an idea I have contemplated of late. I wait for them to finish and then I speak again.

“Hey! Guys!” I yell, the ringing in my ears causing me to speak louder than usual.

“What?” yells the bassist. He’s the emo nerd, complete with black plastic framed glasses, shaggy haircut and a striped polo shirt. I could lay him out with half a punch.

“Can you take the earplugs out?”

“What?” he repeats.

I mime the act of removing earplugs. I never thought I’d have to do this. “Take. The. Earplugs. Out!”

They comply. “What do you want, dude?” asks the singer.

“Guys. It’s two in the morning. I’ve had a long day. I just want to go to bed. I’m sure the entire neighborhood just wants to go to bed. Do you think you could call it a night?”

“But we just got started,” complains the lead guitarist – the jock. He has a thick neck and beefy arms. His fat fingers look like they wouldn’t be real good for playing guitar, and come to think of it, that might explain why they suck so much.

“We don’t have to listen to this guy,” says the rhythm guitarist, the prep of the bunch. He’s actually wearing a sweater vest. In the middle of the summer. While playing guitar for a rock band.

“Actually, yes you do,” I say. “You are breaking so many noise ordinances right now I can’t even begin to name them. And you’re being incredibly bad neighbors.”

“You think we give a shit?” snarls the singer.

“I’m starting to think that you don’t.”

“Exactly. Now get the fuck out of here.”

I really wish I still had that gun. I don’t want to shoot the kid, but I would love to scare him a little.

Actually, I’d love to shoot him. I’ve never shot anyone before but this one seems like a prime candidate to start on.

“I don’t think so.”

“Fine then, we’ll just keep on practicing.” He turns to address his band mates. They

replace their earplugs. "Alright, let's do 'Two Carts Full of Crap.' Ready? 1...2...3...4...."

"FUCK YOU!" I scream at the top of my lungs. Unfortunately, my cry is drowned out by the beginning of the worst song ever written in the history of music. To place this song in the history of music is actually an insult to everything else that we call music. To even call this thing a song is....well, you get the picture.

And now I've really had it. The rhythm guitarist's amp is closest to me, so I do what comes naturally: I turn it off. The noise level is decreased by about one-fourth, making it still dangerously loud. They don't seem to notice. I walk over to the bassist's amp and switch it off. While I'm there, I flick the switch on the P.A. system. Now it is just Dustin, the drummer who keeps struggling with the rhythm. The rest of the band has figured it out and looks at me accusingly.

"There," I say. "Now we can talk."

"Yeah, let's talk," says the singer. I turn to face him and see that he is leveling a familiar-looking .38 revolver at my head. It's not the first time a pistol has been pointed at me, but it's the first time a pistol has been pointed at me by a 25-year-old punk-ass kid in a lame band. Maybe I should tell my mom so she can mark it on the calendar. Now I *really* wish I still had that gun. Law is going to be so pissed at me.

Instinctively, I put up my hands. The other guys in the band do the same, until the singer rolls his eyes and tells them they can put their hands down.

"So, what exactly did you want to say?" the singer asks.

All I can think of is: "That's my gun."

He looks at the revolver in his hand. "It's mine now. Nice piece," he says. "Thanks."

"Why don't you just hand it over and we can talk this out like reasonable men," I suggest.

"I don't think so," he says. "I think you should just get the fuck out like I said before."

"And about the noise?"

He gestures threateningly with the weapon. I back out of the garage and into the rain. As I close the door, the music starts again.

Aching and tired, I dejectedly climb the stairs to my apartment, wondering all the time why the rest of my neighbors aren't complaining about the music. Did everyone move out while I was gone today? Where's the community solidarity everyone raves about in this neighborhood? As I pass the second floor, I can clearly hear a woman sobbing inside her apartment. The sound of her cries tears at me; her pain is immediately added to my own. I know exactly how she is feeling; my empathy knows no bounds. I consider attempting to comfort her but know that taking on her agony in that way would ruin me.

I enter the apartment and after I close the door, I slam my body against it repeatedly out of sheer frustration. This intensifies the pain I am already feeling and does nothing to lower my stress. Fucking kids and their music, if you could call it that.

Before I retreat into the bathroom – the room farthest away from the back of the house and the noise – I put on a Thievery Corporation CD. It's not loud, but its got enough beats and bass to at least compete with the noise from outside. It's relatively quiet in the bathroom and I figure I may as well make myself comfortable. I draw a hot bath and pour in half a container of Epsom salts. A soak will probably do me some good.

I slide into the tub. The hot water scalds my skin but my muscles all say, "Thank you" at the same time. The Epsom salts go to work. I very nearly go to sleep. I submerge and close my eyes. In the dark, under water, I feel, for the first time in days, as if I am nothing and I am nowhere. I surface only to take a breath and then return to the calm

beneath the surface of the water.

Lying like this is almost as good as meditating for me. It's as close to a sensory deprivation tank as I can afford. Images and thoughts and splashes of color flash before my eyes – a meaningless jumble; an amalgamation of everything that's happened over the last thirty-six hours. I let my brain fire off all the messages it needs to while my body tries to mend. Eventually the messages subside and slow to a stop until there is a single image repeating itself again and again. It is a cornfield.

I haven't spent much time exploring the rest of Illinois. Downstate is merely a place to pass through on the way to somewhere else. If you're lucky, it's just somewhere to fly over. There was, however, a road trip that Livvy and I took, flying down Route 55 through the heart of the state.

We'd been married for a month or so and had been too busy to take a honeymoon. One day, Livvy came home from an appointment with a contact of hers about a story she was writing on a gold smuggling ring operating on Lake Michigan and said she was bored with the city.

"You don't want to move, do you?" I asked.

"No, baby," she said. I breathed a sigh of relief. "But we should take a trip."

"We haven't got time," I protested. I waved at the stack of files on my desk. "I've got all this and you've got.... Don't you have to write that story?"

"All done," she said. "They found the gold in the ballast of the *Yipper Skipper* and my copy is being edited as we speak. Come on, it'll be fun."

"Where are you thinking of going?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Let's just get in the car and drive somewhere."

"Let's see. A pal of mine has a cabin in Wisconsin—"

"No," she said firmly. "South. Let's go south."

"It sounds to me like you already have a destination in mind," I said.

"No, it's just that everyone always goes to Wisconsin. I'm *from* Wisconsin. Let's do something different."

I kidded her a little: "Everyone goes to Wisconsin because there's absolutely nothing to do down south."

She punched at me playfully. "Come on, Charlie! Where's your sense of adventure?"

"It's my sense of being bored out in the middle of nowhere that's taking over right now."

"We'll drive south," she said, and I knew then that the direction, if not the destination, was now locked in. "If there's nothing to do.... I'll make sure there's something for us to do." She winked at me.

She always could be so damn convincing.

So, a week later, we packed a couple bags and threw them into her car and hopped onto Lake Shore Drive. LSD took us to 55 and 55 took us to....well, it took us to nowhere. Between Chicago and St. Louis is Bloomington-Normal, home of Illinois State University and very little else. Even ISU is not all that much to speak of – a university out in the middle of a corn field and from what I can tell, not all that much of a university.

The Bloomington-Normal Area Convention & Visitors Bureau will tell you that the Bloomington-Normal area has endless amounts of attractions including historical and artistic sites, sporting and cultural events and boundless opportunities for small and large business alike. This is bullshit and should not be believed. Bloomington-Normal is a

shithole and like all metropolitan shitholes, it is attempting to pull the wool over your eyes with pretty talk of being the fastest growing area in Illinois and a wonderful place to live. They all say the same things – pick Parumph, Nevada; Aberdeen, Maryland; or Derby, Kansas. It doesn't matter much which one you choose, they'll all tell you that they're a wonderful place to be, a fast growing community, a safe haven away from the hustle and bustle of the big, mean cities. It's all crap. It's all marketing and deception. Don't believe their hype.

If I sound like I have a bone to pick with Normal, it's because we spent three days there at the Harmon Inn, a cheap little motel on the side of the highway. I kept telling Livvy that there were other boring places we could go to, or at the very least, better hotels we could stay in but she insisted on remaining where we were. Each morning, she awoke before I did and went out for a walk and let me sleep in. When she'd return, she'd wake with me a kiss and I'd say: "Did you know that Bloomington-Normal is the fastest growing metropolitan area in Illinois?" And she would smile and laugh and then we'd spend the day doing absolutely nothing – nothing that I'm going to tell you about, anyway.

It's not that I had a bad time because I really didn't. I loved spending time with her no matter what we were doing and so being stuck in the middle of nowhere with no telephones ringing or email to check wasn't really a terrible thing. We got to hang out and not have to worry about work and even though I would have preferred a tropical locale or even just a place with something more to offer than . I think it's probably the aspect of the Bloomington-Normal area (and all those other small towns) trying to be something that they're not in order to appeal to more people. It's duplicitous and deceptive and it makes me angry.

I guess I did fall asleep a little there. Water seeps into my mouth and I sit bolt upright in the tub, sputtering and splashing water onto the bathroom floor. Could our trip to Normal three years ago have something to do with Kimp's ticket there? Is this "Illinoir" in Normal? The time of our trip meshes with the time of the Kimp follow. There must have been more to that trip than just a desire to hole up in a hotel room for a little while. Kimp's train ticket and his urgent admonition to seek Illinoir all come together in my mind. I spring from my bath and grab a towel, wrapping it around my waist. I drain the tub.

Standing there, dripping water, I revel in my sudden resolve for action, my sudden direction in this life. Rarely do I feel this sure about something. I'm not talking about hunches or gut feelings – I get those all the time. But to feel so right about a direction to take is a new thing for me.

And like all good and new things in my life, it fades the second I turn the light on. I stare at myself in the mirror, and wonder why I even bother. Bruises have formed around my eyes, there's at least one large lump on the back of my head and I'm sore all over. Gossage called me a "wanna-be detective" and he was right. I'm no sleuth. I'm just a hack with an above-average ability to snoop out information. If I go down to Normal on Kimp's dime, I'm going to end up in more pain, or dead, or worse yet, with no more information than when I left. It could all be pure coincidence. I'd be better off driving up to Milwaukee and fixing things with Livvy and her mom.

"What are you thinking?" I asked myself in the mirror. "You don't know how to pick a lock or fire a gun. You don't even know how to take a punch. You're no Phillip Marlowe. You're no Inspector Clouseau. You're not even Inspector Sleigh."

I think about punching the mirror, taking a swipe at myself, then think about the further damage it would cause to my hand and the impact it would have on my security deposit. During these moments of near-total breakdown, my sense of responsibility is always the last to go. Even that makes me angrier – a real man would just let loose and break the mirror and his fist and damn everything else right to hell. Not me. Never me.

I drop the towel and put on my robe. There's no reason for me to go anywhere or do anything so I go into the living room and start to make a Gang Up for myself. Then I remember that I don't have the strawberry brandy, but just to be rebellious, I drink one without it. It's just as good, if not better. Who needs brandy? I make another drink and carry it into the study.

I sit at my computer and check my email. There's a message from long@rmofthelaw.com. Clever.

To: charlie@bonnetagency.com

From: long@rmofthelaw.com

Subject: Photo

Charlie: Here's the photo as promised. Didn't send it to you from my chicagopolice.org email address because I didn't want it to be traced to me or anything like that. Please keep this to yourself. I am trusting your discretion.

Jon

Attached is a file. It is a scan of the photo Law showed me at the police station. I almost just set it aside. Let it go. Forget about it. I could just delete the email and none of this would exist. I wouldn't have to talk to Law, sneak into the corporate offices of irrelevant, self-perpetuating eCompanies, or even answer the door. I could stop getting punched in the face, kicked in the side, thrown against the wall. It's not like I'm getting paid for any of this.

The cursor hovers over the delete button, my finger poised to click. I weigh my options, considering one side against the other. Fuck it. I delete the email.

And seconds later, I open the trash can and drag it back to my inbox. The mystery is just too great. It has too much pull on me to ignore it. I reopen the message and double click on the attachment. A full screen, high quality scan of the photograph opens in all its glory right on my computer monitor.

It draws me back in. I zoom in on the picture, on the spot where, in my copy of the photo, I am lying, posing while unconscious. I look for any signs of alterations trying to see if I had been stripped out of the picture by some highly-trained digital photography expert. I find nothing. There's nothing that looks like it's been brushed or blurred; no obvious repeating patterns that would indicate a copy and paste; not a single pixel out of place.

I go back to the bathroom and fish my wallet out of my pants. I retrieve the photo with me in it and take it back to the study. I flip on the scanner and digitize the image, hoping to take a look at it as well, trying to see if I'd been stripped into this one. Again, I come up with nothing.

I'm no Photoshop expert, but I've done my share of forging images. It's not what you think: I never doctored something to close a case; never falsified evidence. But sometimes clients want what they want and when money was tight, I was willing to give it to them. The point is that I've seen falsified pictures before and even those that are

very good at doing it will leave some trace that the picture isn't 100% legitimate.

Maybe the people who did this are better than very good. They certainly haven't pulled any punches or spared any expense when it has come to any other aspect of this drama. I sit back in my chair, looking at the pictures side by side and wonder what they could possibly mean. The woman in the photos is in the exact same pose in both pictures. The floors appear the same, though the lighting isn't good enough, even when I fiddle with the levels, to compare the grain of the wood.

I think about the cigarettes in the drawer, lean forward to grab them and that's when I see a shadow across the woman's face that doesn't continue onto the floor. I look closer and sure enough, there is just the faintest trace of a second light source being obscured by another presence in the room. In the photo that I'm in, the shadow continues uninterrupted. I wonder how much they paid whoever did the doctoring. Whatever it was, it was probably too much.

I think about the greater ramifications of this discovery. Someone thought enough of me to take a photograph of me with a dead body and strip me out of it and somehow get it submitted into police evidence. And someone else knows that I was there with that body, perhaps when it was still fresh. Does Law know? I fire back a quick reply:

To: long@rmofthelaw.com
From: charlie@bonnetagency.com
Subject: RE: Photo

Detective Law – Thanks for the favor. You can count on my discretion. It's my middle name (actually, it's not, but I'm not telling you my middle name. It's embarrassing. Though, I'm sure you could figure it out if you really wanted to. You are the police, after all.) I was just wondering where this picture came from. Was it found at the scene of the murder? It doesn't look like an official police department photo.

Yours,
Charles Bonnet
Bonnet Detective Agency
“Wherever there's trouble, we're there on the double.”
“No case too big. No case too small.”

I send the message into the ether. I wonder if Law is one of those guys (like me) who's constantly connected to the 'net and will get the message tonight. Regardless, I know that I'm going to get on the first train down to Normal. I quickly check the schedule and find that a train is leaving Union Station at 7AM and arriving in Normal at 9:14AM. I look at my watch. It's already 3:30AM. It's too late to sleep but too early to make a heroic dash down to the station to just barely catch the train which is usually how I like to travel. The next train is at 9:15AM which is much more my speed. I locate Kimp's jacket in the living room and extract the soggy mess of the ticket from its inner pocket. It looks to still be serviceable, which is a good thing because it's a business class ticket, and that's the kind of comfort I just can't afford. Kimp must have been loaded.

I throw a few clothes – I can't imagine being gone long – into a small duffel bag along with the notes on the Kimp follow and my own meager notes on my current situation. I consider calling Livvy again but I've found through experience that when someone's pissed off and not talking to you, the last thing they want is a phone call at three in the

morning.

I wonder if I've missed anything and am briefly amazed at the ability to think in complete sentences. Thankfully, the band has stopped their practice. The silence in the back alley is interrupted by the sound of an old car's engine idling roughly. I step out onto the back porch to have a look.

The rain has all but stopped, and what little is still coming down is dancing lightly in front of the headlights of a black van. I recognize it as Dustin's. It's parked at the entrance to the garage, the back doors flung wide open. The band members are loading their instruments and gear into the vehicle, silently going back and forth from the building, lugging their loads. The singer comes out with a couple duffel bags and throws them on top of some amps. So these guys are heading out of town as well? Why is it that when I'm gone, they're going to be gone too? It's almost enough to make me decide to stick around, just to enjoy some peace and quiet in my own home for a change.

Singer man decides to take a break from the work and stands in the center of the alley, looking up and down the way to make sure nobody is coming. He pulls a joint from his pocket, lights it and takes a large hit from it. A few seconds later, smoke pours from his mouth sending the distinct scent of marijuana wafting up to my balcony. Dustin sees him and pauses, holding his hand out for the joint.

"Let me get some of that, Seth." It is the first complete sentence I've heard Dustin utter.

"Get your own shit, Dustin," Seth says contemptuously. "And get your shit loaded first. We've got to get out of here."

Are they on the run or just on tour? I've never heard of a band starting a tour at 3AM, unless they were headed out somewhere far away. I can't imagine anybody booking these guys to play anywhere, but I guess if they were lucky enough to get a gig, it'd have to be somewhere where they'd never been heard before. I know for a fact that they'd never be able to play within a 2 mile radius of this block since everyone around knows exactly how awful they are.

"Fine," Dustin says. I note that even though Dustin has graduated to full sentences, he remains monosyllabic. Anything more would probably burst a vessel in his brain.

"Dumbass son of a...." Seth trails off, looking up. He sees me standing above him, watching and casts a withering glare at me. "Hey, asshole."

"Howdy, Seth." I make the name sound as disrespectful as I can. Likely, it comes across as childish and stupid, but I'm way past caring.

Seth takes another hit off his joint and then flicks it away into a bush. He starts to go back into the garage but stops and turns back to me. He extends his right hand and raises his middle finger at me. Only then does he go back inside.

Chapter 14

I wake up to the alarm at 7:30AM. I'm used to working on little sleep and the prospect of a journey and the potential to find some answers gets me to swing my legs out of bed at the first sound of the radio. I go into the kitchen to brew some coffee and find myself actually whistling as I do it. This surely won't last.

But, the lightness persists through shower, shave and dress. I leave the cat some extra food and assure him I won't be gone long. I contemplate writing a note for Livvy but a self-righteous anger overtakes me. She's been snubbing me for a couple days now

and over what? A missed dinner? I've left her enough messages. If she wants to know where I am she can call. I look up from the notepad on the table in the front hall and notice that the light mood has fled. Who needs it anyway?

I gulp down some coffee in the kitchen and look down on the backyard and the garage in the alley beyond. I still have some time to kill before I need to leave for the train station and snooping places where I don't belong has always been my weakness. I take the stairs down two at a time.

The hinge on the hasp is barely screwed into the doorframe and comes away from the weakened wood without much effort. The door squeals open into the dark and musty garage. Pooling water from a leaky roof sits in one corner. Those boys have to be very brave, or very stupid to have practiced in the middle of last night's storm. I'm voting on the latter.

I snoop around a bit, but without their gear, there's not much to snoop around in. The garage is actually pretty orderly when the band's not around. There's some standard garage stuff – motor oil, shelves full of rusty old tools, a lawn mower – and various half-assed attempts to soundproof the structure – cinderblocks stacked against one wall, a large rug tacked over the garage door. I find a stack of papers on one shelf. It's a collection of lyrics and chord progressions for the band's songs. Hope they won't need that on their tour.

I throw the papers down. I'm sorely tempted to set them on fire; to set the whole garage on fire. Let me worry about the arson charges and let them find somewhere else to practice. Just out of curiosity, I look for something flammable.

There's a metal gas can in a corner. I test its weight and find it to be empty of gas – judging by the state of their lawn, they're not doing much mowing – but heavy nonetheless. I give the can a shake and hear a metallic clanging from within. I unscrew the filling cap and even in the dark of the garage, I can make out the shape of the Smith & Wesson that Kimp bestowed upon me last night. I fish it out of the can.

So Seth was smart enough not to take the gun along with him in a van full of potheads that is inevitably going to be stopped and searched but he's not smart enough not to hide the thing in a can reeking of gasoline. I wasn't expecting much in the way of brains from him, but this eliminates any hope I might have had for his generation. Regardless, I'm happy to be able to disarm the little bastard.

Not expecting to get lucky and find anything else of interest in the garage, I exit. I fix the hasp on the door to look about as secure as it was before I entered and head back up the stairs to my apartment.

I check my email once more before leaving. There are no new messages from Law or from anyone else. Even the spammers have given up for the moment. I send Law another email letting him know I'm going out of town for a couple days.

I figure there's nothing else to be done in the apartment. I take one last look around. The ticket is in my pocket; the gun is in my bag. I'm ready to go. I scratch Beckett behind the ears like he likes and head out.

The ride on the Red Line tires me out. Haircuts and el trains often make me sleepy – not sure why, or if there's any common theme. I fight to keep my eyes open for the whole ride, but still, I very nearly miss the stop at Jackson and have to hurry to make it through the closing doors in time.

I hate buses so I walk the 8 blocks to Union Station and manage to get there a full 15 minutes before the train is scheduled to leave.

Union Station is a beautiful building. Walking through the main entrance is like stepping back in time to an era when people cared about how they looked and acted and paid more attention to their surroundings. Not that people at Union Station are like that now. They're still sloppy assholes. The building, however, evokes the feeling of that time, and I like it. I stand in the middle of the Great Hall and take it all in.

I'm not a big crowd person. It only takes a few minutes of being jostled about and fighting for personal space before I need to move on. I head down to the tracks, find the right one and board the train as the conductor is yelling, "All aboard!" I love that shit. I can't believe they still do it. It's like something out of a movie.

I also can't believe, as I find my way to a seat in the business section of the train, that train security is still so lax. With all the heightened security at the airports, the borders (and even the Barnes & Noble) you can still walk onto a train just as easy as you please. They don't even check my ticket when I walk into the business class car.

Just because the train is closer than a plane to the ground and can't be used anywhere except where there's a track so there's no danger of running it into something like, say for example, a building for a people, they feel like there's no need to search me. No need to search my bags. I could have brought a bottle of water onto the train for God's sake. As it is, I only have a mostly-loaded revolver.

The business class car isn't as impressive as I thought it would be, that's for sure. Whatever Kimp paid for the ticket, he was robbed. Yeah there's a little more legroom and a footrest and a copy of the morning paper on my seat, but I'm sitting there for ten minutes and nobody comes by to offer me champagne. The service leaves something to be desired.

But, I settle into my seat and kick it back as far as it will go. One nice thing about the train is you don't have to keep your seatback or tray table upright and or fully locked for departure. The train pulls out right on time – another benefit over air travel.

Soon after the train leaves, a conductor walks through the car and checks everyone's tickets. He takes a cursory glance at mine, punches it, and says he hopes I'll have a pleasant journey.

I'm only able to sit still for so long. The paper doesn't hold my interest. I've had enough of current events for the moment. I raise and lower my seatback several times, anxious to be done with the train ride and to get to Normal. It's more comfortable than a plane, but the trade off comes in terms of speed. I feel like we're not moving at all.

A woman's voice from across the aisle: "First time on a train?"

I look to my right. She is perhaps a little older than I am, attractive, dressed for business, probably suckered into one of the downstate towns' claims of being up and coming. Her face is half in shadows and she squints to look at me against the backdrop of the morning sun. "No," I say. "I'm just feeling pretty antsy."

She laughs. It's friendly; not derisive. "I've seen people act like that on airplanes, but never on a train. It's perfectly safe. Unless a plane falls on us."

I smile. "It's just that I don't like being cooped up for long periods of time."

"Nobody does," she says. "Some of us just cope with it a little better than others."

"I've not been coping well lately," I admit. I reach back for my standard-issue excuse. "I've had a rough week." My right foot is tapping a staccato on the floor.

"So have I. Why don't we stretch our legs? We can go back to the lounge car and get

a drink. You do drink, don't you?"

"There's a lounge car?" I ask. "I was wondering where they were hiding all the booze."

She laughs again. I'm starting to like that laugh. We stand, and she leads me through the train to a car with tables and a counter for a bar.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I ask.

"You certainly can."

I buy two little bottles of Smirnoff and two small cartons of orange juice. We sit at a table and mix our screwdrivers. There is an awkward silence as we take our first sips. I look out the window and watch the South side of Chicago speed by.

"So," she says, testing the water, "my name is Kat."

I turn back to face her. "Oh right. Introductions are good. I'm Charlie."

"It's nice to meet you, Charlie." She smiles. I like the smile too.

Fishing, I ask, "Is Kat short for Katherine?"

"Katerina, actually. Is Charlie short for Charlemagne?"

"No, it's..." I stop short and laugh. "Very clever."

"That's me. Clever as a kitten."

And that leads to more of that awkward silence. I don't usually mind the quiet times between moments, but these are uncomfortable. Heavy. Tense.

"I'm married," I blurt out.

"Congratulations. So am I," she says, looking at the sizable diamond on the left ring finger. I used to notice rings. A ring was always the first thing I'd look for when I met a woman. That was before I was married.

"Congratulations to you, as well," I say. My conversation bit must have been set to "awkward and stupid" this morning. There's nothing I can do but ride it out.

There is more silence, and more drinking. My brain is so nonfunctional that I can't even come up with the standard small-talk that we are all armed with. The "What do you do?" and "Where do you live?" questions are not available to me at the moment.

After a lengthy pause, she asks, "Would you like to talk about?"

"Talk about what?"

She grimaces. I can be very frustrating to people sometimes. "Would you like to talk about your rough week?" she asks. "Maybe it'll help."

"I've really done as much talking about it as I'm going to do, I think," I say. I hastily add, "No offense."

She takes it in stride. "None taken. I know how it is."

"Thanks," I say, and then, "Sorry about that. I just need to not think about things for a while."

She raises her glass to me and swallows the last bit of her drink. "Well, here's to not thinking about things." I return the toast. "Another?" she asks.

"Sure. I'll go get it."

"Let me," she says, and goes to the bar. She returns with another round.

We mix our drinks and I ask, "So what about your rough week?"

She starts to speak and then smiles to herself, shakes her head and says, "No. If you're not sharing, then neither am I."

"That's fair, I suppose," I say.

We fiddle with our straws. "So what does that leave us with?" she asks.

"Let's see. We covered that we're married, we both had rough weeks." I pretend to contemplate for a moment. "I think that's about it."

"You play pretty close to the vest, huh?"

"I'm not much of a talker."

"No, you're not, are you?" she says. "That's okay though. Most people talk too much."

"Don't they though?" I ask. "Except when you need them to."

"That's the truth. Then they just clam up and won't open up until you start pulling teeth."

"Are you a dentist?" I ask jokingly.

"No, no," she laughs. "I'm an attorney. I'm heading down to St. Louis for a deposition."

"Sounds exciting."

"It has its moments, but really it sounds more glamorous than it really is. It's mostly just pushing papers around."

"Sounds like my job sometimes."

"Oh? What is it that you do?" she asks.

I hesitate. Something tells me not to tell her that I'm a detective. I don't know what else to say so I tell her I'm between jobs.

"But I thought you just said you push papers as well," she says, a confused look on her face.

"I meant--" I stumble. "I'm such a bad liar. "I meant at my old job."

"So what did you used to do?"

"I was a claims investigator for an insurance company. It was all about transporting papers from one place to another. There was very little investigating involved." I started warming to the subject. "But the second you say 'investigator' to people they immediately think you're Sherlock Holmes."

"I know what you mean," she says. "Everyone thinks my life is like L.A. Law. Or worse yet, Ally McBeal."

"Do you enjoy it though?"

"I do. Do you?"

"It's alright. I don't know that it's what I want to be doing," I admit.

"What would you rather do?"

"That's always been the problem. I have no idea."

She smiles. "Maybe you should become Sherlock Holmes."

"What do you mean?"

She tosses her hands in the air dismissively. "I'm just kidding. I was saying maybe you should become a private investigator. Stop pushing papers, start solving cases. That sort of thing."

I attempt to make my chuckle casual and light. "Oh, I see. From what I hear, that's pretty much more of the same. There aren't any diabolical masterminds out there running jewelry thieving rings or anything like that. Cases consist of following some jerk who's cheating on his wife and boring stuff like that."

"You sound like you've looked into it," she says.

"I may have, once or twice," I allow. "But it's nothing I'm going to do."

This leads to more silence. I'm so damn good at killing subjects. Her cell phone rings. Saved by the bell. She answers the call, says a few terse words and then hangs up.

"Well, Charlie," she says. "It was nice to meet you. I just got the word that my business has gotten a bit more complicated than I thought and I need to go do some work before we reach St. Louis."

She stands. I stand with her. "Thanks for the drink," I say.

“Thank *you*,” she says.

We walk back to our seats. She sits and removes a laptop from her bag and begins typing and making quiet calls on her phone. I reach up for my bag and find that it’s been moved. And it appears to have been opened as well. Frantically, I pull it down from the rack and see that indeed, someone has gone through my belongings. Nothing is missing though. My notes are there, the Kimp notes are there. The gun is still there. But someone was looking. I glance over at Kat.

“You just happened to sit next to me, huh?” I ask.

She looks up at me, makes the universal “I’m on the phone” gesture and looks back at her screen.

“Sure, sure. Just happened to sit next to me and just happened to take me back to the lounge car for a drink during which time someone just happened to go through my bag.” I say all this more or less under my breath, more or less to myself, but she can see my anxiety and the anger that is just below the surface. She says a few more words into the phone and hangs up.

“What’s going on now?” she asks.

“While we were back in the lounge car, someone went through my bag.”

She is shocked. “That’s terrible,” she says. “Is anything missing?”

“That’s the thing. Everything seems to still be there.”

“Well, are you sure that someone was in your bag? It might have shifted—“

“During transit, yeah. No, I don’t think so.”

“At least they didn’t take anything.”

“I’ve been fucked with far too much over the last couple days. I’m getting sick of it.”

“The rough week, huh?”

“Yeah, people have been going through my stuff quite a bit. And now you take me back to the lounge car while they do it again.”

“You’re not suggesting that I was sitting here just to distract you, are you?” she asks. Her anger and surprise seem about as genuine as Pamela Anderson’s breasts.

“That’s just ridiculous!”

“It seems rather convenient, you just talking to me, distracting me from my seat. Too many coincidences point to a conspiracy.”

She shakes her head and this time her laugh is not friendly. “You go on thinking whatever you want, Charlie. I’ve got work to do.” She turns back to her computer.

“It’s always the person you least expect,” I say to myself. Or is it suspect? I can’t remember.

I’m not always this paranoid. I don’t think I am, anyway. I hug my bag to me and retreat into my own world, distracting myself with the view out the window. I consider apologizing to Kat but I’m mostly still convinced that she’s a part of it.

A part of what? Is there some conspiracy against me? People have been hitting me a lot, and leaving odd items on my person, going through my belongings, generally making my days more confusing. I have to believe everything’s connected. I have to assume that everyone’s a part of everything.

We’re still over an hour outside of Normal so I decide to take a look at my notes. Kat’s working and actively ignoring me, casting only furtive glances at me occasionally. I pull my papers from my bag and look back and forth between the two sets and suddenly the weird thing about the Kimp notes hits me.

They’re not in my handwriting. My printing is small, and tight. Compact. I attempt to get as much out of every page as I possibly can. These notes are written in a similar

hand, but there is more of a looping quality to the letters. They are less square than mine. They are looser, less cramped. More relaxed. Definitely not mine.

That would certainly explain why I don't recognize the notes, didn't recognize the photos and didn't recognize Kimp. It wasn't my tail. It wasn't my case. So whose handwriting is it? Sometimes Livvy transcribes my tape-recorded notes for me, but the writing doesn't look like Livvy's either. She always writes in script, says that printing is childish and uncivilized, that I might as well be drawing on the walls with crayons.

So if they're not mine and they're not Livvy's, then whose are they? What were they doing in my office and on my desk? They only appeared after I chased the intruder up the fire escape. Maybe whoever it was wasn't taking anything or looking for anything, but rather *leaving* something. I've been hit on the head and knocked out a few times this week and never was anything taken, but each time something was left. Maybe these papers were left for me as well.

That gets me thinking about the rummaging in my bag while I was back in the lounge car with Kat. Perhaps whoever it was wasn't looking to take something, but was rather looking to leave something. I search through my bag again, looking more carefully this time, and my hand finds something I hadn't noticed before. There is a key in the pocket of the pair of pants in my bag. I pull it out and look it over. It is from the Harmon Inn for room 123, the room Livvy and I stayed in when we visited Normal. The pants are just back from the dry cleaners, so unless they're in on all this, it must have just been placed in there. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kat watching me. She shakes her head again and goes back to work.

I wonder about this trip to Normal. I don't even know where I'm going or what I'll do when I get there. It seemed like such a sure thing when I made the connection. "Go see Illinoir," they said. So I go down there and see it and what will that do for me? That's been the problem with this whole thing. It's all happening in fits and starts. I'm not making any progress towards any goals. I figure out one thing and then six other things pop up and I'll never unravel them all. I make one connection at the cost of another.

I give up on my papers, stuff them back into my bag, feel the gun. Desperation's voice in the back of my head tells me just to put it in my mouth and pull the trigger. Rarely is that voice so dark and rarely does it sound so attractive. My hand closes around the grip inside the bag. I feel its weight and power. It'd be so much easier to stop this all right now, arrive in Normal as a corpse rather than a live human with all these questions and mysteries. Who needs them?

I sit like that, folded over in my seat, holding a gun hidden in my duffel, for several minutes and I'm not sure what brings me out of it; what causes me to lower the revolver back into the relative safety of my T-shirts. Perhaps it is my love of a mystery solved that makes me realize that I need to see this through to the end. Maybe it's the way Kat is staring at me from across the aisle. Disgusted with myself, I withdraw my hand from the bag.

I am weak to be thinking like this. My exhaustion from the events of the last 36 hours along with the alcohol and the stress have all combined to break down all my defenses. I need sleep.

And there is another dream, and I apologize again.

I am sitting on a train, racing through a shadowy night filled with fog and bleak shapes. The conductor will not tell me where we are going, though I ask him repeatedly.

The tickets stuck in the clips at the end of each row of seats are all blank. There are no landmarks visible through the window. We could be anywhere. A woman who might be Livvy leans in close to my ear and tells me she has a story I should hear.

“This is an ancient Chinese fable,” she begins. “It is older than everything you know, and it is also truer than any words you have spoken, and this is why it has lasted the ages. There was once a young man from the city who traveled to the country. There, he met a young peasant woman who was drawing water from a well. The young man fell in love with the woman immediately, but she did not return his affections. The man spent many days in the country in order to be near to the woman. He helped her with her work: getting the water, washing the clothes, tending the animals. She did not refuse his aid, but she did not change her mind about him. When the man was forced by his business to return to the city, he asked the woman to join him, but she denied his request. The young man began to walk away, but he stopped, and he turned, and he scratched her eyes out.”

The conductor shakes me awake. “We’re nearing your station stop.”

I blink sleep from my eyes. The curious disorientation that comes with a mid-morning nap clouds my thoughts. “We’re in Illinois, already?” I ask.

He gives me the kind of confused look I’m so used to seeing in people’s eyes and then shakes his head. “Normal,” he says.

Chapter 15

As the train slows down to stop in Normal, I gather my stuff together and stand. Kat is nowhere to be seen. It’s just as well. I hate long goodbyes. I move to the end of the car and wait near the doors for the train to pull in.

Before long, we’re there. The train station is small and decrepit. It’s nothing like Union Station – not that I was expecting as much. It is merely a concrete platform with an adjoining building. It’s as if by building four walls and a roof near some train tracks, Normal has somehow managed to successfully snare Amtrak trains that would otherwise race past, bound for bigger and better things.

I enter the building and find a map of the city on the wall in an attempt to get my bearings. I don’t remember much of the town from my last visit here, but some of the street names look vaguely familiar. I figure out the way to the Harmon Inn and set off on foot.

The route takes me through Illinois State University’s campus. Though school is not in session, there are still quite a few college kids roaming through the area. Mixed in with the older kids, a bunch of high school age kids, undoubtedly here for a summer program of some sort, also mill about, looking lost and confused. I make my way through the sparse crowds and to the other side of campus.

The Harmon Inn is on College Avenue which is (not surprisingly) the street that runs through campus. There is also a University Street, a School Street a Campus Drive and an Institute of Higher Education Boulevard. Okay, I’m kidding about the last one. It’s easy to see what the focus is on in this part of town.

I find the motel and check into a room. If the fates were watching over me or pulling each and every string attached to the events of my life, I would have been assigned to room 123. The fates are nowhere to be seen, however, and I am put in 237. I take a roundabout route to my room, walking past the outside stairs to the second floor. I can’t

tell if 123 is occupied or not, but the brief walk past it confirms my memories that I was once here. I finger the key in my pocket. It's been three years. I wonder if they've changed the locks.

I climb the stairs and open up the door to room 237 and enter as I've taken to entering rooms lately: quietly, carefully, stealthily. I no longer trust that rooms that should be empty actually are empty. The room appears still, an exact duplicate of the one I stayed in before. I make a quick check of the closet and bathroom and find that I am alone. I toss my bag onto the floor and collapse on the bed.

I stare up at the ceiling, my eyes following the swirling pattern in the plaster. I trace the maze from one side of the room and back to the other. In the midst of my third circuit, I am startled by a thudding noise directly above me. Bits of plaster dust fall onto my forehead. I brush them off and sit up.

The thudding sounds like someone walking; someone pacing back and forth over my head. Noises from above are always weird. Loud enough, heavy enough, they can shake the floor causing you to feel as if you are being attacked from all sides by the impact of giants. Even a small man can create quite a racket when he walks as one normally would on the floor above you. It can get to driving you crazy, having no control over your environment, being unable to ignore it no matter how many times you tell yourself that you will. I used to live on the first floor of a building, below a 300-pound man that was surprisingly active for someone his weight. As much as he walked around in his apartment, you'd think he'd be able to drop a few pounds. As it was, it seemed like the full force of all 300 pounds of him was behind each and every one of his footsteps and they rattled the pictures on the walls. Since then, I have always lived on the top floor of any building in which I've made my home and ask for an upper floor whenever I get a room.

There's no third floor at the Harmon Inn. Whoever is above me is on the roof. I duck outside and lean back over the railing trying to catch a glimpse, but there is nobody there that I can see. Back in the room, the thudding continues.

The last night we were in Normal, Livvy and I went to see a show. There were a bunch of different college bands whose names I can't remember, and I'm sure nobody else can remember them either. They were really bad, but the beer was cheap and Livvy was in a great mood, laughing, dancing, joking. College kids were trying to hit on her but she just dismissed them with a withering glance and kept on dancing with me. We danced and laughed at each of the bands in turn as they came up to play.

It was actually a really fun night and made me feel as if the trip down to Normal hadn't been such a bad idea after all. Even though the music was awful, we had a grand old time. By the time the last band came on, we were both exhausted and more than a little drunk.

I excused myself to go to the bathroom. I staggered to a urinal past kids smoking joints and doing God only knows what else in the bathroom stalls. I laughed at their little rebellions and was thankful that I'd grown through and past all that. I no longer felt the need to be something that I wasn't just in order to fit in and be part of the crowd. Those are potentially dangerous times, when you're letting someone else think for you and not using your own head.

I wake up with a piece of paper taped to my forehead. This is getting out of hand. I claw it off and look at it. It's a flyer for a rock show that's happening tonight: a battle of

the bands, featuring acts such as Tomogowo, Soup Isn't Food, Octopus 5, Wasslestein, and The Playground Weasels, along with a special surprise act that the flyer claims will blow me away.

I'm not going to go into the additional weirdness of someone breaking into my room yet again and leaving me with another mystery note. You've heard it all before – the shock, the surprise, the anger. A brief glance around tells me that nothing else has been disturbed and only the sticky residue of the tape on my forehead is any indication that something strange has happened. I get up and investigate the door – it, of course, is locked. And chained. The windows are secured. These guys are really very good. They're also really very frustrating, but there's not a whole lot I can do about that.

I look at the clock – it's 5:30. I was asleep for 4 hours. Long enough for someone (say the front desk clerk, for example) to call someone else (whoever has been leaving me these special notes) who could then come over, somehow gain entry to my room (I look for trap doors and secret entrances but find none) and leave me this flyer. It's not that far-fetched, especially considering everything else that's happened to me recently. It's perhaps also the most benign thing that's happened to me recently, just barely beating out the Gang Up drink recipe as that was accompanied by a punch in the mouth and this one, though creepy what with the Houdini-like aspects of gaining entry to a locked room, was relatively peaceful. But, nothing sounds more paranoid and off-base than a conspiracy theory that's as half-cocked as the one I'm working on.

I get up and decide to take a shower. I get the water so hot that I can think of nothing else. It takes all my concentration just to keep from being scalded to death. Otherwise, I might just be in here for hours wondering about this and that.

Nothing to focus on, though, once I'm done and my mind wanders the second I turn off the water. I'm losing focus. I'm jumping the shark. I usually don't get this way. I was always able to see things through to the very end, no matter what the outcome. I'd just take everything one step at a time and use what I had, what I could find and what was presented to me and get the job done.

I think my problem is that I don't know what the job is. I have these clues – if they could be called that – and I don't even know what they're trying to point me to. A couple photographs, a couple vague messages, and a train ticket have lead me to Normal and I have no idea what I'm doing here. I have no answers and haven't even figured out what questions to ask. Kimp couldn't – or wouldn't – tell me and I've done no better myself, and I'm still walking and talking. At least I'm still walking and talking. There I go, looking on the bright side again. I hate looking on the bright side.

I feel like I'm running out of time here. It is a gnawing sensation in the back of my mind. Not even knowing what I'm up against, nor what deadline there might be, I do not know how I could be running up against a time limit, but there it is. This feeling that if I do not act very soon, all will be lost. It will be game over. Time to go home. I just want to fast-forward to the time where Livvy and I are lying on the couch, flipping through bad television programs, casually being alive and together. I want to fast-forward to then because I don't know how I'm going to get back to that and I'm too tired to keep trying to figure it out anymore.

But there is this nagging feeling that there is a job to do. I've never left a case unfinished. There has always been a resolution, whether it was a satisfying one or not

I wonder about the battle of the bands. According to the flyer, the show starts at 9:30, which gives me another full four hours to kill. Of course I'm going to go – the invitation was so thoughtfully presented and besides, what the hell else am I going to do

while I'm here? I've gotten myself here by following the mysterious clues and vague coincidences I've found so far. Why stop now?

The show is at the same club Livvy and I went to when we were last here – The Toprock Lounge. The joint hasn't changed a bit in three years. It is still a college bar that is trying too hard to look like a legitimate Chicago dive bar. All of the wear and tear on the place looks as deliberate as a pair of jeans that cost \$50 extra for the benefit of having carefully placed, machine made holes in the knees. The Toprock could be a chain of bars across the country that each opens with the same holes in the walls and the same mismatched furniture. It's already packed and the first band hasn't even started yet. If the promotional street team was as aggressive with the rest of their flyers as with the one they gave me, I imagine everybody in the Twin Cities knows about the show. It seems like they're all already here. I pay the cover at the door and squeeze my way through the crowd towards the bar.

When I finally get the bartender's attention, I ask her if there are any drink specials tonight. She points, with a look of resigned aggravation, to a sign at the end of the bar and goes to help another customer. I wonder if the bad service is part of the Toprock employee manual. The sign tells me that tonight, they're featuring \$1 domestic beer bottles, \$3 Heineken pitchers and \$4 Gang Ups. Don't that just beat all? When she comes back and gives me a contemptuous nod to indicate that my turn at bat has come up again, I order a Gang Up.

She shakes her head and mutters, "Fucking pussy." She deserves a raise.

She makes the drink and I pay for it, leaving her the change on a ten-dollar bill. The look of gratitude on her face nearly breaks her company-mandated surliness but she quickly recovers and moves on down the bar to serve other customers. I think we have an understanding now though. Hopefully she knows that I'm not another one of these college assholes and that I mean business. Either that or she thinks I'm just some creepy older man trying to pick her up. Either way, that one crack in the façade was worth the six dollars.

I stand with my back to the bar and watch the crowd, sipping my drink. It is a typical college scene. The kids look exactly the same as they did when I was last here, all trying to be some perfect version of what they think everyone else wants to see. Whoever says that college is the place where people find their own identities is sadly mistaken. I don't think that happens until you're out in the real world, if it even happens then. The only thing different about these kids is that I have gotten older, so they look even younger than they once did. Eventually, looking at a college kid is going to be like looking at a toddler. Babies look like zygotes. I am a giant, stomping around the world, trying not to crush too much; trying not to leave too large a path of destruction in my wake.

Before long, a man steps up on stage. He introduces himself as the host of the battle of the bands and introduces the first act: Octopus 5. The band members -- all eight of them -- wear latex gloves and surgical masks. The music isn't bad; it's kind of a Garth Brooks meets Pig Destroyer kind of thing and I'm actually getting into it. The kids in the club don't seem to follow the idea of the music though and Octopus 5 gets only a tepid reaction. It doesn't look like they're going to win.

Between bands, I mill through the crowd. I am at a distinct disadvantage in terms of blending in with these 18 to 21-year-old kids. At 34-years-old, I stick out like a hitchhiker's worst nightmare. In my rumpled suit and my generally sick-of-it-all and tired demeanor, I attract more than my fair share of attention. As I make my rounds, I see

more than one nervous teenager whisper to another while pointing, not subtly at all, in my direction. I hear the word “narc” more than once.

That’s fine though. I’m not here to make friends. I wasn’t planning on being incognito. If there’s someone or something that wants me to be here, I want to be damn sure that it finds me so I can have my answers and get the hell home.

As the next band – Tomogowo, a four-piece Swedish pop-inspired noise-rock band, for those keeping score – starts their set I take a walk up the stairs to the balcony. The balcony is furnished with couches around the edges, chairs near the railing and a couple pool tables. It’s less crowded up here. There are some couples making out in various corners – an inevitability in any college bar – and a few people playing pool, but nobody paying much attention to the bands. I slide into one of the chairs by the railing and rest my head in my hands. No matter how much sleep I get lately, it is a struggle to stay awake. And whenever I fall asleep, it’s a struggle just to remain so. No wonder I’m so exhausted. I haven’t relaxed in days.

Livvy excused herself from the table where we were resting after a particularly extended period of dancing. She stood up and reached down and took my hand. I felt compelled to stand. She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me like she never had before. It was a hug that seemed to be trying to send a message, but I wasn’t capable of reading it.

She whispered, “It’s hard to leave you,” into my ear and then walked away.

I watched as she fought her way through the crowd and then disappeared from sight. I stood up to try to spot her – I’d developed a habit of paying close attention ever since my encounter with Seward’s thugs at Chang’s restaurant. I couldn’t see her anywhere and I felt my chest tighten. I knew I was being overprotective but I just couldn’t help it. I didn’t know what I’d do if anything happened to her.

Just as I was considering making my own way through the crowd in order to find her, I spotted her as she emerged from a large group of people near the bar to press in between larger, well-dressed man and a scrawny-looking college kid who’d just finished his set with his band. Though Livvy and the man both faced the bar and not each other, I could tell that they were talking to one another. It also seemed like the kid, who was overtly leering at my wife, was eavesdropping.

The older man was as out of place in the Toprock as we were. He must have been in his early 40s, and was dressed far too nicely to be a townie. He must have been from Chicago as well, or else passing through from another big city. He held his martini glass delicately, as if it might break at any second from his overwhelming strength. He was a man who was used to being clumsy, buffoonish.

Livvy ordered a drink and continued to talk to him, never looking directly at him, but even with all her subtlety, it was obvious to me, who knew her so well, that she was having a conversation. I found myself wondering what she might have to discuss with this guy. I grabbed my cigarettes from the table and shoved through the crowd, drawing dirty looks and angry exclamations. I paid attention to none of them. I tried to keep Livvy in sight but the mass of people between us made it hard. I kept losing track of her.

Halfway across the floor, I caught sight of her again. She had stood up and was looking furtively about, her eyes finally resting, staring at something by the front door. I turned to see what she was looking at and saw the a man, dressed in an overcoat, a hat, and an ugly expression. It was the same man who had worked me over at Chang’s. I looked back towards Livvy but she was gone, as was the man she’d been talking to. The

kid was still there at the bar, now leaning back against it, casual as can be. I looked back towards the door in time to see the thug stroll out of the club.

Suddenly, as if on cue, the crowd parted in front of me and swelled up behind me. The next band was starting up and waves of people were pushing closer to the stage. I found myself swept towards the empty seat at the bar where my wife had just been sitting.

“Where’d the woman go?” I asked the kid harshly.

He didn’t even bother to turn and look at me, just stared at the stage. “Who?”

“You know who I’m talking a bout: the woman who was sitting here next to you. I saw you staring at her.” I added, “That’s my wife.”

“She’s hot,” he said.

“Where the hell did she go? I know you would have seen her. Your head was practically inside her shirt you were staring so hard.”

“I didn’t see nothing, man,” he said. “Why don’t you go scratch?”

He finally turned and looked at me, an insolent glare on his face. There was a threat in his eyes but at that point I didn’t care. I hate confrontation but my wife just ran off with some man and a very dangerous thug was in town as well. I grabbed the kid by his shirt and pulled him close so he’d be sure to hear every word I said.

“Don’t fuck around with me, you son of a bitch,” I growled. “Tell me where she went or I’ll make you wish you had.”

The band finishes and the host steps out on stage and approaches the microphone.

“Alright ladies and gentlemen, give it up once more for Tomogowo,” he says. The crowd responds with applause and cheers. “Okay. All right. We promised you a surprise band and we know you’re going to love them. They haven’t been around for years, but they used to pack this place every Saturday night. Right now, they’re starting a tour of the East Coast but they were kind enough to drop in for a homecoming show right here at The Toprock. Ladies and gentlemen, let’s hear it for Illinoir!”

Illinoir. The word hits me in the gut. My stomach tightens and my pulse quickens. The crowd, incited by the host, starts cheering but it’s obvious that as popular as the band once was in this area, they have no more fans left who really know them. The applause is short lived and tapers off quickly.

The lights die. The club goes dark. Dark shadowy shapes emerge from back stage and take their places at their instruments. The drummer starts a slow beat that I instantly recognize. After being subjected to hearing it every day for months, the drum beat is ingrained in my body. Soon, I hear the familiar clumsy bass line and the screeching guitar. The lights come up on The World’s Worst Rock Band and all I can say is, “Of course.”

Of course I’ve traveled hundreds of miles with vague notions of solving a mystery and I end up paying to see the band I can hear every day for free whether I want to or not. Of course the idiots around me all get deeply involved in the music. Of course they have found a new generation of fans in this dump of a town. Of course, Illinoir is just the name of the fucking band and they’re the same fucking band I saw here three years ago and Seth, the singer, is the kid I tried to rough up at the bar. Of course they start with a song called “Rosebud”.

That’s just how life goes. Just when you think it can’t get any weirder, it slaps you across the face with one hell of a coincidence.

“Fucking hell,” I say to my empty glass. “Fucking fucking hell.”

The glass doesn’t answer, which is a good sign. I take that as evidence that I can

handle another drink. I go down the stairs and to the bar, which is relatively empty now that the hometown heroes are playing and everyone has crowded the stage to watch. The bartender recognizes me and gives me marginally better service this time.

“Another Gang Up?” she asks, almost sweetly.

“No, I’m done with this shit,” I say, realizing that I was sick of following through on slim connections and that cherry vodka didn’t agree with me too much. “Just give me a beer. Whatever’s good.”

“We don’t have good beer here,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, I noticed.” The careful selection of crappy beers was too perfect, too neat and orderly a list. “Give me a Black Label.”

“The worst of the worst,” she nods.

She brings back the beer can and I drink its contents in a matter of seconds. Everything gets swimmy. Indistinct. Fuzzy. I stagger into the bathroom.

I ignore the crowd in the room and carve out some personal space in front of the mirror. I look at myself – really look at myself – for the first time in ages. I look like hell. I feel worse than I should. I am barely recognizable. The bags under my eyes have grown to nearly-epic proportions, making my eyes look sunken and hollow. My eyelids are heavy and thick. Gummy. They scrape against my eyes like sandpaper and I try not to close them but my eyes are so dry that I blink rapid fire, matching time with the tic that has started under my right eye. It is a pulsing spasm of the muscle that I can see in the mirror.

I look scared, unsure, and terrifying. I stand and watch my reflection blink stupidly as if confused by a question I haven’t even asked. I feel dumb. The fuzz in my head is turning my brain into a mere showpiece, no longer functional for more than paranoid suppositions and blind rage. Do these actually come from the brain or from somewhere else? It must be my heart, currently the most active of all my internal organs. My heart finds all this very amusing and is pumping twice as hard as it needs to in order to get my water-thin blood through my veins. I think about coffee and I swear I can actually hear my heart laughing at me, daring me to thin out my blood even more while adding some stimulants.

My hands are shaking so badly that when I plant them on the counter in an attempt to feel some small amount of steadiness, the shakes travel up my arms to my shoulders. My stomach feels like it is rotating over a fire that is slowly boiling whatever is left inside. I stink like death. There is the taste of rot in my mouth – evil, like demons have crawled in there to die.

I ignore the stares of the kids in the bathroom with me, all of them not concerned, so much as looking for a freak show. They wonder what the old man in the ratty suit will do next. Is he going to lose his shit? I grip the sink tightly, the blue veins in my hands popping out in high relief against my pale skin.

The edges of my vision are blurry. Strobing. The flickering fluorescent lighting isn’t helping. Looking at myself is tiring as if everything I see is pulling at my eyes and dragging me down. Exhaustion overtakes me. I feel it everywhere in my body. It is both a weight and an emptiness; a physical presence that is both an absence and a burden.

I don’t think I’m going to make it through the night. Or through this life. My eyes are melting. My chest is burning. My mouth, my throat. If I still have a soul, it’s killing me too.

A voice behind me asks, “Dude?” In the mirror I see a kid, 18 or 19 years old. He is made-up in whiteface with black rings of mascara around his eyes. He looks like I feel. He

looks like I look. His costume is a slight exaggeration of my reality.

“What do you want?” I manage, still gripping the sink, still holding on for dear life though I can’t see the point.

“Are you alright?”

“No.” I stop myself. I am not confiding in this kid. I am not bringing myself down to the point where I am admitting that I don’t feel so hot – much less the rest of the story – to some goth kid in a rock club in some college town. “I mean.... I’m fine.”

I give myself one last glance in the mirror. A twisted smile crosses my face. It is a frightening smile and I see the kid take a step back behind me. I give myself a wink, the smile and the facial tic turning it into a leering look. “I’m Charlie Fucking Bonnet, right?” I turn from the mirror and leave the bathroom.

I turn back to alcohol for solace, for an anesthetic. I figure if anything can numb the entirety of the pain I’m feeling, that will be it. I’m not much of a drinker unless I want to be. Unless I need to be. When the darkness of this noir farce surrounds me – threatens to consume me – I am able to threaten, to consume. I am able to drink six beers and do two shots with the bartender who is now my new best friend.

The booze soothes me. It comforts me. It asks me no questions and it tells me no lies. It doesn’t let me care about anything more than I should. It doesn’t let me use my brain for anything; not even the omnipresent but useless rantings and ravings that usually occupy my time. It shuts off the voices. It keeps the murmuring madness that often drowns out the rest of the world from interfering. It doesn’t let the rest of the world interfere either. It keeps my cell phone from ringing. It leaves me alone.

It keeps me from asking questions of my own. Whose blood was that? How did it get there? How did I get there? Who was Kimp? Why Illinoir? Why anything? These things are farthest from my mind. I can barely stand up.

How could I worry about a case? What case? I don’t even know what I’m looking for. No, there is too much love. There is too much love and personality and happiness on this Earth for there to be strife, or controversy. Or *mystery*. There are no mysteries. Everything is open to me, free to me. Information is not king. It is everywhere, common, available. Free.

Sometime while I am drinking the seventh beer, I realize that Illinoir isn’t as bad as I’ve been making them out to be. A voice in my head, fighting through the haze of the alcohol, tells me that I actually quite like them. Another voice, one level up in my consciousness, tells me that that’s all kinds of fucked up and can only mean that I’ve had far too much to drink because they are, after all, The World’s Worst Rock Band. We deemed them that during our moments of deepest clarity and it is still true.

The first voice attempts to argue, saying that perhaps those weren’t moments of clarity, but were instead moments of self-denial and refusal to accept the truth. It says that actually Illinoir is the *greatest* rock band that ever was. That ever *will* be.

Meanwhile, I just sit back and listen to them bicker, my head going back and forth as if I’m at an invisible tennis match.

The second voice appeals to my deeper reason – of which I have little, but it tries and manages to find whatever small amount is left – saying that I should realize that any voice telling me that the World’s Worst Rock Band is the World’s Best Rock Band has got to be my crazy drunk voice and should probably be destroyed, or at the very least, ignored.

I am convinced, and although I am afraid to return to normalcy, to sobriety, and with

it the weight and meaning of worldly things, I know it's the right thing to do. I know it's not just as easy as making that decision, but I trust the voice of reason – the one that's watching from on high – to guide my actions and show me the way. I know they were arguing about more than just the quality of the band on stage. It was the same old argument about giving up and letting go. Liking the band would just lead me to accepting all that is awful in the world, admitting defeat and curling up in the corner.

That's just not the kind of guy I am. I put down the beer. The bartender asks if I want another. She is wary of me now. Her intuition tells her that I'm in a dangerous state, but she's not used to refusing service and she's not about to start now. It's against corporate policy. She seems relieved when I ask for a glass of water.

The water hits my stomach like a winter storm. I can feel the chill spread in my throat and chest on its way down. The cold freezes my veins, ices my brain. I snap to attention, the fuzz in my brain gone. This is the best fucking glass of water I have ever had. Drinking it was the best idea I have ever had. I am a genius. So is the man who invented water. Whoever that guy was, holy crap, he deserves a medal. I wonder if he's still alive. I'll have to look that up when I get a chance. I ask for more water and drink the glass as quickly as the first. I get another glass and yet another. I can feel the water sloshing around in my stomach. I jiggle and laugh, enjoying the sensation. The bartender is starting to get annoyed with the cessation of my spending and my childish antics, so I slap a twenty-dollar-bill onto the bar. It's tough to say with any certainty, but I'm pretty sure that that's when I black out.

Raymond Chandler said, "When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand." At the moment, I am nothing if not in doubt. Plus, I have a gun and am standing in front of a door. It's the door to room 123 at The Harmon Inn. I don't know how I got here, but with Chandler's words running through my head, I decide it's time to take control. I turn the key in the lock, and lean against the door with Kimp's revolver in my right hand. Slowly, I open the door and lean into the room.

It is dark in here. Pitch black. The kind of darkness you have to swim through, praying you don't sprain your ankle on some unseen obstacle. It is beyond the darkness that you find when you close your eyes. It is the essence of dark. What little light enters the room from the streetlights behind me forms a rectangle on the floor with my long shadow in its center – an ominous shape, even though it is mine.

I must make a neat target for anyone waiting inside as I stand here, silhouetted nicely against the backdrop of the streetlights and the highway. This thought enters my head and part of my mind waits for the flash of a gun, the report of the shot, the sting of a bullet, but I am unable to do anything about it. My mouth agape, I stare at the edges of my shadow, not paying any conscious attention to the danger in which I have placed myself. This is not the room we stayed in three years ago. It can't be. Where light reveals floor, it reveals polished hardwood, not the abstract pattern of industrial carpet

I snap out of the stupor, shaking my head free of implications. I try to take a step back from the doorway, but there is something forcing me to enter the room. It is more than my curiosity about what lays waiting inside. I have a healthy sense of self-preservation, but even that is unable to resist the pull of the room. As if in a dream and without control over my own actions, I step inside. My footsteps echo loudly in the room, the sounds finding nothing to bounce off of save for the opposite walls. I close the door behind me. It clicks as it shuts and then the room is almost unnaturally quiet, as if the cars rushing by on the interstate just a few hundred feet away are not there at all.

I stand just inside the door, my right arm rising of its own accord to find a light switch on the wall. I feel like I've done this recently. I debate with myself about the merits of just staying in the dark; just staying here forever. But the power, the force, once again draws me further inside. My arm drops down though. I don't need to see any more than I already have.

I step deeper into the room, the echoes giving me information about the size and shape of the room. It is large, larger than any room in my apartment, for sure. I walk without the caution I should, taking large steps, covering the distance quickly, suddenly eager to know.

I trip over a large object on the floor in the center of the room. I lose my balance and fall to the floor, next to whatever it is – large, dead weight, unmoving. I know immediately, in slow motion, as I tumble to the ground exactly what it is. And I land next to it – next to her – and the gun goes skittering across the floor, and I hit my head and there is the flash of light that is now my oldest and dearest friend and then the blackness becomes more absolute.

This is all happening now. This is all happening right now. I keep telling myself that, willing it to be true. I told myself that. I willed it to be true.

I'm not a liar. I have not been lying to you. I have not been lying to myself.

Law says differently. He stands next to a desk, looking down at the computer monitor. Seated at the computer is a young man with dark curly hair and a gleam in his eye. His name is Dan and he is an expert at making photos portray things that are not necessarily true. His right hand is busy with a mouse, guiding a cursor across the screen, using the clone tool in order to erase the image of a man from the floor of an anonymous hotel room. He gets it almost exactly right. There is one small sliver of shadow that he is unable to cover up, or that he doesn't notice.

Law says I've been lying and that he doesn't mind. That he understands. That he went through the same thing when he lost his wife. I still don't exactly know what he means.

Livvy's mother says differently. She sits in her daughter's old bedroom clutching a scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings. Stories written, not *by* Livvy, but *about* her. A kidnapping victim returned to his family; a load of stolen gold found in the steerage of a ship; the wife of a reputed mob boss and the suspicious circumstances surrounding her death. Tears stream down her face as she reads, remembering her daughter.

Mrs. Tweed says I am a liar as well, but she doesn't care whether or not I've been lying to myself. She thinks I have been lying to her. Lying about where her daughter is, lying about how she died. Lying about being a detective, and about the large life insurance plans that Livvy insisted we buy soon after we married. She refuses to talk to me in anything other than accusations and pointed questions. She refuses to listen to anything I have to say that is not an admission of guilt.

Alan Kimp says differently. He surprises me with his vocal abilities – amazing for a dead man, but then I know something about speaking with the departed and am not as shocked as I might. I am shocked by his keen insight into my situation. I suppose they share all the information they care to out there – wherever "there" is. It's disturbing to hear it laid out like he's laying it out, however. It's hard to take. The dead have little in

the way of tact or sensitivity. Once you get used to it though, it's refreshing.

Alan says I've been lying. That there is more that I'm not telling myself. That there is plenty that I'm not letting myself in on. He knows that I know who that woman was, and who I really am and what's happened to me. He also knows that what's happened to me is not nearly as important as what's happened to Livvy and to him. I'm still kicking, immobile and prostrate on yet another floor though I am. It's not such a bad position to be in, if you really think about it.

This is all happening right now. This is not another dream. There are no bizarre characters conjured up by my unconscious coming to save me from realization. There is nothing out there that is going to save me from knowing what I don't want to know.

Leaving Normal, I got the feeling that Livvy had changed somehow. I couldn't put my finger on it. Driving through central Illinois in the middle of the night, the road and cornfields racing by in the headlights, a heavy rain falling, she sat in the passenger seat, pressed tightly against the door. I could barely see her it was so dark and she seemed so far away, though just on the other side of the car. Her face was a shadow, her eyes dark.

"I had a funny dream about you," I said. She didn't respond, so I repeated myself, quieter, more to myself. "I had a funny dream."

She didn't say anything, or if she did she was so quiet that I couldn't hear her over the rain and the sound of the wet tires slicing through the water on the road.

I continued: "You were a private detective and I was a ... well, I was nobody."

She lifted her head slightly. At least I think I did – the weather forced me to keep my hands on the wheel and my eyes on the road – but I think, out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement.

"It was all in black and white," I said. "I usually dream in color. It was like a movie." I couldn't tell if she'd heard me. She might have been asleep. I told her the whole story, talking just to talk, to keep myself awake.