

Honors Program

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One Last Lead Kiss Goodbye

Creative and Professional Writing

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By

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Artist Statement

I have been trying to write this story, in one form or another, since the fourth grade. One of my oldest pieces of writing, a scant three paragraph thing saved from my elementary school days, is an early attempt to write about the character who eventually became PI Calvin DeMarc. He wasn't named that back then; in truth he didn't have a name at all other than Purposely Generic Detective, but the heart of his personality—the sarcastic wit, the love of overly elaborate metaphors, even his status as a meta comment on the hardboiled detective fiction genre (apparently he spends his nights sleeping behind his desk with a lit cigar in his mouth and a fedora strapped to his head)—was there, as primitive and undeveloped as it might be.

In the elementary school piece it's been raining (a curious habit of mine when writing about my detective is starting with a description of the weather—even my thesis begins with DeMarc describing the cold and the snow just outside his office) for the past few days, and the proto DeMarc says it's like “The lord almighty himself is taking one hell of a piss. It even looks yellow when I look out the window thanks to the streetlight right next to my building.” It's not good writing by any means—it bears all the hallmarks of an elementary school student taking his first stabs at fiction, including equating swearing with seriousness—but when I look at my other surviving pieces from that era, it is markedly better than the rest: more developed with a better sense of character and place, with a hint of an actual plot instead of just a bunch of rambling on a cool idea.

As far back as the fourth grade, right around the time when I made the decision that I wanted to be a writer when I grew up instead of my other boyhood dreams of being an astronomer or a cowboy, I knew I wanted to craft a universe full of dangerous dames and gun toting goons. Already I wanted to explore the world of a hardnosed PI who's got more than a few scars on him. Already I wanted to ape Raymond Chandler's style.

The really amazing thing is that I didn't even know who Raymond Chandler was back then.

No, in spite of my desire to write that kind of story, I had exactly zero knowledge of the genre. I didn't even end up actually reading Chandler until freshman year of college, when I listened to the audiobook version of *The Big Sleep* (as read by Elliott Gould, who had played Philip Marlowe in Robert Altman's 1973 adaptation of *The Long Goodbye*). Since then I've read everything of Chandler's that I can get my hands on, but that was after I had already made about thirty million failed attempts to write about a clichéd private dick living in a somewhat farcical world. (Those early attempts were little more than parody, something I have consciously tried to avoid in my thesis. I want it to be humorous, but also a genuine entry into the genre.)

Where did the inspiration for these pieces come from then? While I'm sure I must have had some exposure to the real McCoy at some point—perhaps just catching the end of Humphrey Bogart in *The Big Sleep* at PBS, it was actually a comic strip that first got me going on writing what has ended up my senior thesis.

I read a lot of the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes as a kid and one of the character Calvin's alter egos was Tracer Bullet, who the writer Bill Watterson used to make fun of film noir. The character didn't appear much—apparently he was hard to draw and Watterson wasn't all that familiar with the stuff he was parodying—but when he did, it was always a treat. The strips were beautifully drawn in black and white but what really caught my attention was the dialogue. "I've got eight slugs in me. One's lead and the rest are bourbon. The drink packs a wallop and I pack a revolver," Tracer Bullet would say, and the nine year old me thought that was just about the coolest thing in the world. I knew I wanted to write something even half as clever as that.

So in fact, all those false starts and failed stories were actually Tracer Bullet fan fiction. And no matter how much older I've gotten, or how much Chandler or Hammett I read, there will always be a touch of Tracer Bullet in the character of Calvin DeMarc (as he came to be known). His first name serves as a constant reminder to me of his true secret origin. (The name DeMarc, incidentally, has nothing to do with hardboiled detective fiction, parody or otherwise, and is actually a sideways reference to a character in the film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex DeLarge. I realized only halfway through that this made him Calvin the mark, which turned out very fitting for how people treat him in the story. The line, "Calvin is not the mark everyone seems to take him for," became my mission statement while writing the rest of the thesis.)

It is fitting then that as this thesis is the end result of a million failed stories it should be comprised of two of those stories smushed together. The first half of the thesis, those chapters directly related to the death of Melinda Dansen and its fallout, were originally a story entitled "Snowshoe"—a pun on the term gumshoe, as I wanted it set during winter as opposed to Chandler's pleasant weathered LA—that I wrote from a prompt in my Fiction II course. The prompt was simple, just, "a character goes on a quest," but the writing came very easily and I was quickly able to plot out the full mystery. The problem was that I was stuck in the hospital—while I knew the beats of the mystery, I didn't know where to take DeMarc next. I found the writing promising, but I figured it was just another in a long line of false starts.

But I continued to play around with the character, occasionally writing different pieces with him, most of them centered on that most clichéd of beginnings: a beautiful woman walking into DeMarc's office. I was writing one of these attempts, "One Last Lead Kiss Goodbye," right around the time I was taking the pre-thesis course. Since "Lead Kiss" was already twice the length of anything else I had written, I submitted it as my proposal to the Honors Council.

Work ended up stalling on “Lead Kiss” however, as I had committed the cardinal sin of mystery writing: I started the story without knowing the details of the mystery. Without this knowledge, progress drew to a standstill—nothing could move forward without me figuring it out and I couldn’t. None of my solutions seemed to fit. I even spent an entire chapter trying to force my characters to tell me—DeMarc’s frustration with Voon’s refusal to tell him what kind of danger she’s in was very much my own, and because of this inability to make progress, “Lead Kiss” collected dust in my notebook.

A breakthrough finally came when I found out that *Farwell, My Lovely*, one of my favorite novels and a big inspiration for “Lead Kiss”—Veronica Voon shares more than just initials with *Farewell’s* Velma Valento—was actually written by Chandler forcing together three previously unrelated short stories. This is obvious when reading the book—Marlowe falls into three different cases, almost by accident—but it works because Chandler is sure to connect them all in the end, and he keeps the style and characterization consistent.

I knew this was something I could do with “Snowshoe” and “Lead Kiss”. I experimented with putting the two of them together and found that they fit perfectly. While it would require heavy rewrites, the mystery of “Snowshoe” *was* the mystery of “Lead Kiss”; I just didn’t realize it. An offhanded comment Melinda Dansen makes about his husband’s mistresses was actually me introducing Veronica Voon to the readers before Veronica Voon ever even existed. While the initial transition between the two stories was a bit rocky, as the process went along I found them working together in ways that seemed that it almost had to be intentional. While Veronica Voon remained elusive on the topic of her tormentors, it said more about her character than my own confusion. I was able to show more of her dangerousness rather than just talk about it.

The thesis is still not completed though. While the forty four pages represent a good chunk to the story, with the main mystery finally coming to light, there is still a long way to go before the climax. While I do not foresee the completed work being novel length at this time, I will continue working on, developing both the plot and the character of DeMarc. While at this time I intend to go to law school instead of further advancing my writing education, I do intend to finish this work someday, more for my own purposes than any desire to publish it. .

I got much more from reading Chandler and Hammett than simply the idea too smush two stories together. For the very beginning “Lead Kiss” was an attempt to reinvigorate a genre that I felt had been unfairly maligned as simple pulp. Nobody writes hardboiled detective fiction anymore—James Elroy tales of violence in Southern California may appear to be working within the genre, but I found his work to be too bleak and sexually explicit, lacking any of the simple charm of Chandler and Hammett. If a writer does try to write in this sort of style, it’s to parody it, to mock it, no matter how affectionately that mocking may be.

Simply put writers have accepted that the basic components of a hardboiled detective novel—the grizzled wisecracking PI, the dangerous femme fatale—are so clichéd that nothing new can come from it, at least not while maintaining the style Chandler and Hammett pioneered. A novel like Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* plays with noir elements, but the end result looks nothing like what would have been published in the pulp magazines in the 1940s and 50s.

But I love Chandler’s style so much, have been playing around with it for so long, that I felt I had to try to find a way to preserve it in its original form. I knew that I could not deny the clichés; I couldn’t run away from them. If I ran away from them I would in fact be running away from Chandler. I knew I had to face them dead on and the best way I felt I could do this while staying close to the original favor of the genre, was to have the characters themselves pointing

the clichés out. They wouldn't be so aware of them to break the fourth wall and become a parody, but the character of DeMarc would be a detective who had read detective novels. He could reference the adventures of Philip Marlowe and make decisions accordingly.

I felt this would make it feel more contemporary, more modern. It wouldn't be so bogged down in the past. This is also why I set it in the modern day. Part of what made hardboiled detective fiction feel stagnant I felt was that there was a sense that it was the product of a time and place that had passed. Could Sam Spade exist outside of 1940s? It didn't feel like he could. Whenever such a temporal experiment was attempted, like Robert Altman's 1973 adaptation of *The Long Goodbye*, the point seemed to be that characters like Marlowe were a relic, a thing of the past that had no place in modern society. In Altman's *Long Goodbye* Terry Lennox plays Marlowe for an absolute fool—a stark contrast from the friendship between the two in the book. I didn't think this had to be, so long as the characters were, again, aware of their seemingly anachronistic status. I thought making the characters self-aware, making the piece not a humorous copy of Chandler but also not a parody, could give the genre new life.

I'm not entirely sure how successful I was in my effort. While I think I was successful in stepping out of my personal writing style and into Chandler's, I don't think my attempts to insert self-awareness came through enough. I felt very uncomfortable referencing other works at first, like I was breaking some of literally rule. I felt especially hesitant to name specific Chandler titles, lest my reader think I was directly comparing my work to the master's. As I went on I started getting more used to, and including more references, but I do not think there's enough within these pages to claim it a full success. I also felt that, despite my better efforts, I did fall into parody at times—my humor did go too over the top. I have done my best to remove these incidents from the final draft; I fear that some farcical incidents still remain.

That is not to say I think the thesis to be a failure. I learned some much from writing it, so much about my bad habits as a writer (I tend to include too much superficial witty banter, most of the editing process was just cutting these parts out) and my greatest strengths (ironically, these same witty interludes.) Even if the final product was an absolute disaster it would have been a mistake worth making, just for the learning experience. I found I could adopt another writer's style as my own, a skill I'm will come in handy in my future.

My thesis represents the culmination of a near lifelong dream, and I can think of no project more fitting than this to mark my exit from college. It serves as a reminder of how far I have come as a writer and indeed, how far I have yet to go as well. I don't believe this is the last I will ever see of Calvin DeMarc. He is a character who has grown up with me; from a humble beginning as a cartoon character to the reluctant war hero he is today. And while I still owe a great debt to Watterson, Chandler, and Hammett, I think I've made at least a little bit of the genre my own.

Still, I don't think I've ever written a line as good as Tracer Bullet's, "I keep two magnums in my desk. One's a gun, and I keep it loaded. The other's a bottle and it keeps ME loaded."

But I'll keep trying.

One Last Lead Kiss Goodbye

Chapter I

It's cold out there. Not just any low temperature or those regular wintery woes that set in every November round these parts and that don't give up the ghost till the last thaw in April. No, it's the nasty brand of cold that goes right up your nose, finally settling deep inside the chambers of your heart. Through the bones, freezing the marrow, making them ache, inside the nerve endings in your teeth, setting them on edge. I've lived in more than a few places in my time—including army tents in Iraq where cold's a word as foreign as French—and in places that like that, winter is forgotten. Marginalized. Surely, it couldn't have been that bad, they all say. But nights like tonight—cold—cold like this you never forget. And it doesn't forget you either.

It's snowing too, just as forecast. Got the whole town all hunkered down for what's being called the "Blizzard of the Century." Yeah, sure it is, 'til next year's "Blizzard of the Century." I watch it all fall from the long tall windows of my office. Wind's blowing enough that from my vantage point at the top of my converted hotel office building it almost looks like the snow is falling up. And the city has been turned upside down: all the snow leaves it looking white, clean, and pure, giving the town an innocence it neither wants nor deserves. It also makes the sidewalks slippery, and god, is that a hazard. But it sure makes a pretty picture with all the snow as I light a cigarette.

I'll be sleeping here tonight. Not fit for man or beast out there and while my Oldsmobile consumes more than enough gasoline to qualify as a some sort of monster, it doesn't run so good on the best of days. Should be home already like everyone else—the business section is as abandoned as a costume store the day after Halloween, and with just as many ghosts hanging around—and I was all set to be, until Dorrie, secretary extraordinaire, got a call and set up an

appointment for tonight. A woman, she said, who sounded like she was in trouble. My specialty. Doubt the dame'll make it through this storm, but she needs help and, well, I got a conscience.

And a deep desire to eat breakfast tomorrow and a rapidly shrinking bank account. You don't pass up any chance for a job, not in this economy.

The appointment's scheduled for 8:00pm, and the storm takes out the building's power at 7:30. Street lamps are fine, still bathing the street in orange light and making everything look like a clown's nightmare, and across the street there's a room with the lights on. So citywide must be fine, it must just be the building's antiquated electrical system. But that's a real cold comfort to little old me who's gonna freeze to death tonight behind this desk. I'll meet my appointment sure, but not with this girl. Instead it'll be with St Paul at the Gates, and I have trouble picturing him having many kind words for me.

I'm about ready to hit the couch in the back office and wrap myself in one of the heavy duty homemade quilts Dorrie's stocked up on for just such an occasion when I hear the soft pattering of snow boots on stairs that can only be leading to me. So that's my client, a real postman in spirit if she won't let rain, or snow, or sleet, or hell stop her. Didn't see her in the street but that makes sense—can't see anything out there but snow, piling up and falling down. So she's made it after all, the need to know carrying her through. People who seek my services are determined. They all gotta know and are willing to risk life and limb to get the truth. No matter the facts of the case, no matter what I find, they just gotta know.

She walks through my door, the one that reads Calvin DeMarc, P.I., and steps into the darkness of the office. It's hard to look attractive in a full snowsuit—a real one that is, not a ski bunny jumpsuit—and the broad don't pull it off. She may have legs that go all the way to the floor but all they go to now is into snow pants, and instead of a sexy sway of the hips as she

walks there's a waddle to the chair across from me. Once she removes the ski mask I can see she is pretty, or once was, before Father Time and "gotta know" got to her.

Her hair is dark as a mineshaft, and flaming eyes like burning coal remind me of industrial mining with all the environmental damage spelled out in wrinkles and chapped skin. She'd bleed oil I'm sure—it certainly looks like people have been sucking her dry for some time now. I feel a stab of guilt over being the brand new, high tech derrick that drills deeper than the rest, meant to finish it off for good. She's a wronged woman I'm sure. She has the air of one, and I'm gonna get paid to tell her what she already knows.

Before, in better days and lighter hours, I could turn some of these jobs away—part of the pitch was the question, "Are you sure you want to know?" Sometimes the answer was no. Wasn't just morals—a man with strong morals can't survive this day job—but because sometimes people aren't ready. Sometimes they get angry, maybe at their partner who's done them wrong, maybe at the private dick who's selling a truth they don't want to believe in. The broad across from me, still struggling with a dog musher jacket, she's not the kind to turn it on others, no; she's the type to turn the knife around on herself. Sign that last paycheck to me in her own blood.

But you can't turn 'em down, not in days like these.

"Sorry about this Mr. DeMarc. The weather is dreadful and I had to be prepared."

"Don't worry Miss...?"

"Mrs. Malone."

"Well Mrs. Malone, I'm shocked you even made it here. Figured you'd give up, give me the night off."

I light another cigarette and offer her one, but she doesn't bite. She doesn't even spare a glance at the bottle of bourbon on the table and the empty and inviting glass right next to it.

"From the looks of it, Mr. DeMarc, you've had plenty of nights off recently," she waves her hands around the room, "Forget to pay the electric bill?"

So maybe the dame's tougher than I thought, maybe she ain't a candidate for morgue block captain. Good. Pleasant surprises are a rarity. Bit of a mouth on her, though.

"Not exactly, old buildings like this, the power's a bit funny. But she'll come through when you need it, much like myself. What can I help you with, Mrs. Malone?"

"Guy next door seems fine." She points towards the building across the street at the room I saw earlier. It's dimmer than before though, and the light slightly flickers. I can tell this woman would be trouble if she kept up the Don Rickles routine. Being spirited is one thing, but being a standup comedian is a whole different ball game. That acid wit tends to burn through the rest of the case.

"Guy next door got a lantern or something. You want to pay me my rate to find out what exactly, that's jake. Going 'cross the street and knocking on some doors is sure to be a lot simpler then whatever it is that drives a lady to my door in this sort of weather. But you have to tell me 'cause I don't play games and I'm not here to banter. Look, you're Lucy, I'm Ricky, and you got some explaining to do. What can I help you with?"

"Mr. DeMarc, may I call you Calvin?"

"You can call me Jesus of Nazareth, call me Billy, call me anything you like but unemployed or late to dinner—so long as you put up the cash. But before you ponder my next name—I suggest Carl by the way as it was my uncle's and he was a good guy—you have to tell

me what's happening. Think your hubby's been running around on you? That it? I'm not usually so blunt but any gal who survives that blizzard can survive my lack of tact."

Nothing, not a blip on the broad's radar screen. Yeah, she's much tougher than I expected.

"Not at all. Nothing like that. I'm well aware of my husband's dalliances—I'll give you their names, you should talk to them at some point—but that was just our system. I forgave his cheating and he forgave...my failing. I suppose I'll have to let you in on that too...but not tonight. Tonight, shamus, concerns my beloved John. He—"

Three loud pops and all of a sudden there's glass everywhere. Guy next door must be a lip reader he's got timing so perfect, not to mention being the best shooter since Annie Oakley. That length, these conditions, those shots, Jesus. He coulda killed me if he wanted to, Mrs. Malone can attest to that. First shot grazed her, second shot was dead on, and the third shot clipped me right in the side, right after going straight through that bottle of booze. Couldn't have been aiming for it—no one's that good—but God's got his own little ironies in this world and me dying from a cut from a shot of bourbon after giving up the stuff cause it'd kill me, is one hell of an example.

The bullet's in my stomach, and I've got no way to stem the wound or elevate it above my heart. No power, no telephone, and no cell (never had one, looks like I never will) neither, so no fancy ambulance coming to save my skin. Got to go my own way, make it to the streets, claw my way to help. I take one last look toward the departed Mrs. Malone. Guess she'll be morgue block captain after all.

But hey, I got no intention of being her lieutenant tonight. Can't walk straight, can't hardly make it down the stairs safely without passing out. I get down a few flights by leaning

heavily on the railing, but before I can make it all the way down I crumple over within sight of the entrance. I'm too close to touchdown though to give up, so I fling myself down the last set of stairs to conserve my energy and let momentum take me where I gotta go.

There's a painful-sounding snap before I hit the landing. My left wrist has been rendered useless for the next few weeks. If there's a next few weeks. If I don't die from blood loss or from my landlord murdering me for all the red mess I left in the stairwell. But hell, in for a penny, in for a pound, literally considering my damage deposit and no coroner will be too concerned over such a petty wound.

I'm able to drag myself up—no easy feat—I deserve a gold medal in the near death Olympics—and push myself through the big glass entrance. I also pull out my piece with my right hand, got to be ready for the guy next door. Enid's the gun's name, after my first ex-girlfriend, a crazy gal who plenty liked hurting people. She won't get too much use, the guy's probably long gone by now—I hear a snowmobile in the distance—and I don't have the strength to pull the trigger. Maybe if he doubles back around I can point it at him and say bang. Maybe he'll fall over in shock. My best hope is somebody calls the cops at the sight of me, or I somehow make it to the apartment complex a couple blocks away.

The only thing keeping me going is the memory of Mrs. Malone, decked out in her winter finest, bleeding into the hardwood of my office. She must have had some clue what was about to happen, perhaps thought the storm would protect her. But you saw the light, old girl, you saw the window. One request, not even an odd one—shut the blinds—and you'd be alive and I'd have one less hole in my gut.

Or maybe an extra one in my skull.

I'm less than a block away when I see a patch of red snow and I can't make it no more. I'm on a quest for a killer and there he is—some literally faceless goon. Somebody got him right in the temple, looks like, and then sped off on the snowmobile I heard before if the quickly disappearing tracks are any indication. Left Annie Oakley his gun though—a high class hunting rifle fitted with the most expensive scope on the market. This tells me something—whoever backed Annie Oakley has money sure, but isn't connected. Give me some cash and half a day and I'll get you Russian military equipment, ten times better for half the price, so long as you don't mind the stink of vodka and failed communism.

But I'm not giving anyone anything now 'cept what's in the will that's kept at First Financial. Whole damn shirt's crimson and my skin is as white as the snow falling on me. That's it, say goodnight Calvin, say goodnight.

Chapter II

Heaven doesn't smell of cheap aftershave and anesthetic, so I'm either in Hell or I'm recovering in a hospital room being watched over by Detective Kenneth Naughton. Neither would surprise me now, and either way I'm about to converse with the Devil.

"You coming to, DeMarc? Your eyes are a 'fluttering like a flirtatious high school harlot. You about to ask me out or something?"

Ah, the warm embrace of the city's finest, I know you well. It's amazing they don't get the respect they think they deserve.

"I had to wake up, got to see your smiling mug, Naughton. Though all things considered I strongly thought about the alternative. Dying's a pretty good excuse to not have to put up with you."

"Yeah, well, you biting the big one would have made things a whole lot easier on my end and you couldn't do that could you? I should just smother you right here."

"Making your life hell is my business. Says so right on my business cards. 'Course to know that you'd have to know how to read first."

My vision starts to clear with my last crack, my brain telling my eyes that I need to get a good look of the reaction on the pig's face. Naughton's a big Irish goon with the red hair and drunkard's cheeks to prove it and the faces he makes when you go a few rounds with him justifies his existence in a way that his police work fails to. But he's stone faced today and I don't like that look. It only comes when he's got the axe to my neck. Maybe the crazy bastard really will smother me. My uninjured hand inches toward the pillows.

"No, your business is dogging cheating husbands, DeMarc, and its real honest work too. Heroic even."

“You scared of my line of work Kenny? Little miss back home starting to wonder? I’ll give her my card.”

Ah, there’s the face I wanted to see. All red and puffy, like a cruise ship passenger stuck on the john after some bad buffet food.

“Show some respect. Who do you think dragged your ass into this fancy hospital bed?”

Me and the popo don’t exactly get along. It goes back to when I first put out my shingle in this town, not long after my tour in Iraq ended. I was starting the firm up and got this tiny runaway job. Some kid had run away from home and I was supposed to find him: check all the friends’ houses, hotels, that sort of thing. No police—it wasn’t that big of a deal. Hell, the kid would probably be back before I even got out the door.

But he wasn’t. And it was a big deal. From that small seed I ended up blowing the lid off a child drug syndicate that the fuzz didn’t know a damn thing about. Big huge press event, headlines like, “Returning Veteran Ends Drug Ring,” that sort of thing. It even hit the A.P. wires. And not one lick of it made the local black and whites look good. I got a dirty word thrown at me and a jab to the gut from one Kenneth Naughton, then just anonymous uniformed muscle. He should thank me, that punch did more to advance his career than his less than stellar scores on the detective exams. And he’s not once sent me flowers or chocolates.

“Alright, enough out of the both of you. Naughton, act like a Police Detective for Christ sake and DeMarc, start acting like somebody who got saved by two men wearing badges.”

That voice is familiar, but it sounds about as safe as the shots I heard last night. I expected to get yelled at by the fuzz. That’s the best you can expect when you’ve been placed at the site of two murders. They can’t pin either one on me and they should know it, but it don’t look so good. So yeah, I expected to be given the word to the wise routine. And if they wanted to

send that message to me they'd send just Kenny. Or maybe, if it was really hitting the fan, they'd send Fillmore, the only man on the force I respect. But standing in the doorway is a 6'11 black behemoth with biceps larger than my head and hands bigger than my torso.

"Hey, Commissioner Danning, long time no see. I wasn't aware that health inspectors did search and rescue."

By all measures "Curious" George Danning should have been just another thug on the vice squad, a skull breaker, meant to strike fear in the hearts of perps, built to hit people who needed hitting. That was his destiny—few dozen years as a cop lion, retire as a lamb with police pension. But he was too damn smart. Sure the man couldn't walk through a crime scene without breaking three lamps, a glass coffee table, and a chair or two, but he would always break the case in the process. Highest solve record in the whole state. Stats like that—not to mention a heartwarming story of street kid done good—gets you noticed, gets you a nifty office and a plaque that reads Commissioner.

But it also gets you a gut and ulcer. He's gone soft with the seat. They all do.

"Cut the cutesy pie stuff, DeMarc. This is big; surely even you can understand that. You know whose body got cold on your carpet last night?"

"Can't say I do, Commissioner. See, I got pretty cold myself."

I get a glare meant to scare the piss out of me but I'm wearing a catheter so the joke's on him. Saline solution makes for lousy urine anyway.

"You know, Naughton here wants to rough you up a bit, thinks you deserve a good beating, take you behind the woodshed. We can do it too; you're not exactly in a position to file a complaint as you'll soon find out. Me, I figured that hole in your stomach would be enough.

Now I'm not so sure. We brought you back from the brink last night. Unless I'm confused, that's a good thing. Maybe you start acting grateful."

Maybe I start acting grateful. Maybe I fall down to my knees and anoint their feet with oil. Maybe I shoot myself in the head. All three would be about as fun.

"Get the doctor who patched me up in here and I'll kiss him right on the mouth. But I ain't going to thank you for using all that effort it must have taken to carry a person from a snow bank to an ambulance. Seems to me if "To Serve and Protect" is gonna be right on the side of your doors then you should have some sort of obligation to live up to it. So you want some thanks? I'll keep paying my taxes. That sound square? Now, as you've reminded me I got shot a few hours ago and am very tired for the effort. You want to spin me a story, do it tomorrow. I need some sleep."

Only a certain brand of idiot hits a hospital patient. Naughton is that brand of idiot. He takes a few angry steps towards the bed and unless I want to lose a couple teeth I gotta pull the ace from my sleeve and hope it can stand up to his fury's flush.

"You want to hit a guy who nearly bled to death a few hours ago, Ken? Way I see it, the public likes me a whole lot. Think of the story: I'm a working class stiff, making a go of it in a bad economy, doing police work better than the badges. I got the public on my side."

"You got nothing!"

I've overstepped my bounds and if I weren't hooked up to an IV and a heart rate monitor it would be highway time. Naughton is going to hit me, and hit me good, and then Danning will throw my ass in jail for suspicion in the Annie Oakley case. I'd get released; no real charges would ever be filed. It'd all be an effort to show me who's the boss. But it'd be all over the papers that I got arrested, word would spread. A man's reputation is coin of the realm to him, and

if this all goes down like that, mine will be worth about as much as the yen. The peso if I'm lucky.

Oh well. I've taken a punch before and I've found the best thing to do when it's unavoidable is to throw your face at them, meet the fist halfway. Sometimes they whiff.

"Enough. Naughton, get out of the room. DeMarc, for once you're going to shut your mouth and listen. You don't like us, fine; we aren't exactly wild about you either. But you don't seem to realize the gravity of the situation you're in. You think I'm here just to make sure Naughton doesn't make an incident? I couldn't care less about him hitting the wrong guy and getting sent to the streets. People won't like it, the department will take a hit but we're a public utility—we'll be here tomorrow and most people's memories don't last that long.

"But two people died last night and you were at both scenes. And what's more this isn't a couple of winos or gangbangers. This isn't the sort of crime that can get swept under the rug. Do you have any idea who the woman was?"

"She said her name was Malone."

"Yeah? That's funny. Cause her real name was Dansen."

The cold from outside takes a permanent residency in my spine after hearing that.

"Dansen? Surely not the same..."

"As our recently deceased Governor Dansen? Melinda Dansen, newly minted widow and sweetheart of the state is spending her morning in a refrigerator drawer. You think you got the public? No, she had the public and she bought the farm in your office. As far as the papers as considered you killed her. Now we know that's not what happened and we know you didn't plug the shooter either. Whatever low opinion you have of our skills, we are capable of putting two and two together and getting four most of the time.

“So that puts us in the not exactly enviable position of wanting to help you out. But the only way we can do that is if you play our game and start working with us. You don’t, you keep making cracks, start making us look bad and we’ll have to feed you to the wolves. Give you to the DA’s office—he’s an ambitious man, he can make a career out of hanging you.”

There’s another comment in the back of mouth, something about ethics and a real lack of them but I’ve got enough sense in me to let it die an unmourned death. I thought I could survive any wrap they threw on me but people loved Melinda Dansen. I was never all that keen on her—that and the snowsuit explain why I didn’t recognize her. That’s it, that’s the ball game. Nobody’s gonna hire a private dick who gets governor’s wives killed. I’ll be lucky to get missing pet cases after this. I’m getting punched again, this time a real haymaker.

Best thing to do is stick out your neck and meet it halfway.

“What do you want me to do?”

Chapter III

That turns out to be sitting down and saying nothing. After a few days I'm discharged from the hospital and told in no uncertain terms that if I ever open my mouth about the case I can expect an arrest warrant to be shoved right in it. Even after they pin it all on Annie Oakley—or William Czolgosz as his real name turns out to be—I'm supposed to not raise the question of the impossibility of his so called suicide. After a while I'm even allowed to reopen business, so long as I make about as much noise as a mime.

They needn't have warned me. Business is as dead as Melinda Dansen and I spend most days learning how to throw cards into my hat. Dorrie's gone, left me for a cashier's position at the local grocery store. Some greener pastures. I spend the last of my nest egg on nicotine patches—ever since the shot I haven't had the stomach for smoking.

Then, one morning two months after the shooting, I'm awaked from a nap by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

I meet her cigar smoke before I meet her, and it makes for the world's worst first impression. It whiffs from up the stairs, through my open door, and into my office where it lingers in the air of a mid-January day still too cold to crack a window and shoo it out. This girl, whoever she is and whoever she'll be pretending to be, may walk like a woman—soft steps from heeled feet—but she smokes like a man, and that's got me worried. It's been my experience with girls who smoke cigars that, even with the increased risk of lung cancer, bronchitis, and tracheal tubes, the smoke makes for better company than the girl. A woman who smokes cigars equals trouble like two plus two equals four, or like a visit to the bars before I quit drinking equaled a beating from a bouncer for an unpaid tab.

But still, call me crazy, call me sexist or childish or crude—they all probably qualify, along with a few that are four letters long—I do enjoy the slight of a beautiful lady with a long cylindrical object sticking from her mouth. This girl is going to be trouble, no doubt about it, but, it's my brand of trouble. And as all the items in my office purchased with Pepsi Points prove, I've always been very brand loyal.

The dame's wearing gray, but it might as well be red, because that's the color she's making me by wearing that dress. It's made up of all the thread you'd find in a child size packet of floss, and not a hair more.

But floss is pretty transparent, and so are her motives. She's trying to get me all hot and bothered, but all she got was the bothered. I'm a PI, and it takes more than a pretty girl in a slinky dress to make me lose my head.

Because that dress is a recipe for frost burn in some real uncomfortable places, so she's crazy, stupid, or trying to manipulate me, and all three lead to bad places. So instead I'm angry at somebody trying to play me, maybe this girl, maybe somebody else, trying to use the sweetie to soften me up. Not a bad play—clearly she has experience—but any play is a bad one where the defense can read your calls, and instead of me watching the girl as she makes her way to my desk, I'm watching the door.

And what's more is I think I recognize this one.

“Well Mr. DeMarc, aren't you going to introduce yourself? Not that I don't already know from the news.”

“The monogramed door's my introduction, hot stuff. What's yours? I can guess, but I'd like to hear you say it.”

“I’m Veronica Voon, of course, and if this is the way you treat all of your clients, it’s no wonder that those monogrammed letters are all starting to peel. Or do you prefer to be called DeMa?”

I was right about recognizing her—the name had been all over the papers this past week. Her story was the one that replaced mine, but it grants me no comfort. Instead, my hand starts to reach for the revolver I keep tucked away in a holster in the front drawer of the desk.

“I’ve heard it both ways. In my business it pays to have more than one name.”

“You know Mr. DeMar, you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.”

“There’s an exterminator two floors down, maybe you should run that little piece of info down to him. I’ll sure he’ll appreciate it, along with the rest of your getup.”

“You’re cute.”

“Yeah, well, you’re subtle. Now I assume, Miss Voon, that you have some sort of business with me. Take a seat and put out that cigar. I don’t like the smoke.”

She just smirks at this, though it’s pretty clear that she just smirks at most everything. But she does as she’s told, sitting in the chair across from my desk, leaving enough distance that I still get a good look at her legs. She puts the cigar in the empty ashtray on the desk, but doesn’t rub it out, leaving it smoldering for just a little while longer. Yeah, this girl is trouble.

“A PI that doesn’t smoke. Very strange. What else don’t you do?”

“I don’t go spilling my guts to gangster’s girlfriends, which is exactly what you are. Or so it says in the past edition of the Post.”

“Oh that’s just talk. Surely you don’t believe everything you hear?”

“All communication is just talk, Miss Voon, sometimes it just so happens to be true.”

“Like the talk about you killing Melinda Dansen? I seem to recall reading that in the Post too.”

“You must not read too closely then. They printed a retraction on page 14 a couple weeks ago.”

She’s just playing with me now, trying to turn my brain all fuzzy. She knows there’s no way to deny what she is: Righty Rigotti’s girl, who sat by his side while he united all the muscle in this town. And now she’s the one who has to sit and watch as the coppers close down every avenue of his operation. That’s my first clue as to why she’s here—I have some old friends at the heart of the whole operation.

She makes her first move and strategically leans forward. There’s not a drop of blood left above my belt. My mouth is all full of cotton, and all of a sudden my collar is way too tight.

What keeps me sane is remembering the last dame that sat across from me. The Late Melinda Dansen. I’m not one to believe in fate, but I’ve had this job for too long to believe that its coincidence that as one girl exited another girl entered. Maybe this is a shot at redemption, or maybe somebody wants me thinking it is.

I can’t trust her though. Her body might be screaming take me, but her eyes are telling me she’d kill me just as quick. She’s here for information.

But she’s barking up the wrong tree. I’m not even a branch on the one she’s looking for. I may have been once—a couple of my buddies from basic are the point men of the FBI taskforce here to shut Righty down, but I haven’t talked to them in years, not since I rejected their offer to join the firm. They all thought it patriotic to join up, the natural next step in enlistment. I thought I had just been almost killed in the desert by a ten year old wearing a vest full of C4. I was done with the government.

And anyway, my recent trouble with politician's wives doesn't give them much incentive to get back in touch. I got a small nod of acknowledge when passing one of them on the street and that was about it.

Miss Voon leans back in her seat and shows no sign that she's disappointed that I wasn't swayed by my first taste of the show. She keeps that smirk, welding it like I wield my pistol. Just a tiny reminder about who's really in control here.

"This little chat has been fun, Miss Voon, but I ain't buying what you're selling, and even if I were I don't have your preferred currency. Tell Righty I don't know anything about the Hoovers. I haven't exactly kept in touch, and if I tried buddying up now, it would be suspicious. He must be really on the ropes if he's using you to tap me though."

She lets out a brief bitter laugh.

"Is that really what you think this is all about? No, Righty's going down. Whatever that taskforce has on him is enough to sink him and no amount of old army buddies feeding him lousy intel is going to save him.

"No, Righty's finished, a shame too, he was a real nice guy. But he's kaput and that means there's no one left to protect me anymore. I can't go to the cops—Righty would see it as betrayal and he's dying, not dead, he still has plenty of power left to give me one last lead kiss goodnight. The "Hoovers" as you call them, they want me to go down like the rest of Righty's empire, just to show other pretty young girls the folly of falling in with that crowd.

"But you? Righty won't mind—he'll see it as the smart play it is, moving from one boss to another—and the taskforce will quit breathing down my neck and looking up my skirt for more evidence."

I feel for the pack of cigarettes in my pocket that aren't there anymore. More than anything I want a smoke, want to blow it in her face and see if her story falls over. But so far the foundations don't look to be made of straw. I don't think they're the most solid either maybe she's used some of that discount concrete the construction companies Righty controlled were infamous for, but she's got my interest piqued. Enough at least to keep on huffing and puffing and see if it's made of brick after all.

“What makes you think I capable of chasing them off your tail? I just told you I don't carry much weight with them anymore.”

“I've heard them speak. You got more weight than you think you do.”

“Doesn't mean I'm heavy enough to stand in front of the FBI train and still be upright when it passes.”

“This is my life, Mr. DeMarc, trust me when I tell you have I am fully informed on the subject at hand. I wouldn't have come to you if I wasn't sure you were the only one who could help. They may still give me a slap on the wrist, but they won't break my neck. Not with you around.”

Throughout the whole discussion she was as cool as a cucumber. They must teach that kind of coolness in moll charm school. You want to earn the arm of a gangster you better be able to handle anything. I can respect that.

But they must also teach you how to lie there too.

“That's great, I'll hire you on as a secretary—I've need a new one. Is that what you want?”

“You know what I want. I want your word. I want your gun and your finger around its trigger when it's necessary.”

My hand grips the pistol even tighter, all the while still hidden in the desk drawer. It's nothing special, just a little thing with six shots in it in that I got at a pawn shop for a song. But it's not the gun she's wanting. What she's really asking is for me to go to war with somebody, who exactly I'm not quite sure yet. Well maybe I believe she might be worth pulling out the old fatigues—something in her eyes tells me there's real fear behind that permanent smirk—but I'm not doing it without being properly compensated.

“And in exchange for all that I get you in my bed?”

“That's how it works, yes.”

Flattering. Maybe if her dress was red I would bite.

“Well, you see my problem is that's a little hard to store at First Financial. And I don't make for much of a sleeping mate anyway. See, I tend to hog all the covers.”

“I won't mind.”

She damn nears purrs this last line, trying to make my legs go jelly. It doesn't work, but only because they've been grape-favored since she walked through the door. But now she's making me so hot that I gotta keep cool or I'll lose my head. Maybe both of them.

The best thing to do when somebody's got you hot and bothered is to focus on the bothered.

“That's all well and good, but just who else would I be getting in bed with? There's obviously a third man here, and I don't think its Harry Lime. Is it Righty? Some other mobster?”

“It's nobody, I'm on my own. I need protection.”

Veronica says this two times too fast to be the truth. That almost makes me believe it—she's far too good a liar to start committing tells that even first day police academy pukers could pick up. This girl is going to keep me guessing until she finally sticks the knife in my back.

“Protection from whom? Who you running from if it ain’t the mob? Who is it that might have to see the business end of my pistol? You tell me, you give me the full straight, and I’ll help you. You won’t even have to take your clothes off. If you can’t tell me I show you the door. My gun’s no good against phantoms, and even if it was, I’ve got plenty of my own to fight off. But you tell me and I’ve got a couch that folds out to a bed in the back office that has your name on it.”

“They might not come back. Righty kept them at bay; they didn’t make so much as a peep so long as I was his girl too. I’m hoping I shack up with you and things stay status quo.”

“I don’t control an army of pipe wielding thugs. I’m one man with one gun with six bullets. Now I can make those six count for an awful lot, but either way it’s a new world. You got any skeletons in your closet? They’re coming out.”

Voon’s put away the cigars in exchange for a brand of cigarettes specifically marketed to women—“You’ve come a long way baby.” Yeah, Veronica Voon has certainly come a long way, but over the course of the night it’s been in the wrong direction. She’s started going through the pack like a freight train, taking a couple long drags, then dumping the only half spent cigarette in the ashtray and lighting a new one. This pretty quickly fills up the small plastic tray I stole from a hotel in Paris with ash and long white filters.

Long white filters like the long white fingers holding them. Long white fingers with sharp red nails at the end—might as well be tiger claws those nails. Fifty-fifty odds this is all a play, a new way to manipulate me. Sex kitten didn’t work, but little girl lost just might. She can act scared. She can waste cigarettes in a feint at pathos; she can have her eye twitch to lure in a shamus that falls for every fallen woman he comes across.

Doesn't mean what she's saying ain't true though. I doubt this girl could do something so simple as ask for a glass of water without putting on some sort song and dance. Either way—she's telling me the truth or she's playing me like a violin—either way it's clear that my reputation has proceeded me. I wish that my reputation wasn't so fast, wish I could catch up to it and correct it, but then if I really wanted that I'd stop giving it running shoes for Christmas.

“I told you I didn't want you smoking in here Miss Voon.”

“You have an ashtray. I just figured.”

“You have a mouth, capable of telling me what kind of trouble you're in. Guess we both got things we don't mean to use.”

“Most people don't talk to me like this.”

The ice queen is back. Guess that answers my question about whether or not she was faking earlier. If only it were so easy to tell with all women.

“I'm dumber than most people.”

“Of that I have little doubt Mr. DeMarc.”

“Thanks for the honey.”

She gives me a look as sour as a milk jug full of lemon juice. I don't doubt for one second that no one has talked to her this way, not since she took that phony Voon name..

“All you've got in you is vinegar, Mr. DeMarc. Why should I do anything but send it right back at you?”

She slumps down in her chair, her anger giving away to bitter resignation. All that cool from earlier worn away. This is her third song, the sad and sorrowful one that makes all the girls cry and all the men melt.

Or maybe not. I want to believe her. I always want to believe the women who walk through my door, want to believe I can save them all.

But some of them don't need a life preserver. Sometimes all they want is for someone to drown in their place. Whoever Veronica Voon is running from must want her blood bad, and they'll accept mine as a brief substitute. Somebody ends up dead here, no way to avoid it. But I can walk away. Ride out the storm and start working real cases again. Danning wasn't lying when he said most people got the memories of goldfish. I can walk away; leave Voon to a fate she probably deserves. Or maybe I give her up to my friends from Quantico. They'll keep her safe enough.

I want to believe her though. So I guess I do.

I pull out an ancient cigar I've been keeping in the humidifier on the shelf behind my desk, cut it, and hand it to her, holding out my lighter with my other hand. She accepts it, and for a little while we just sit in silence while she smokes. She doesn't knock the ash into the tray, just lets it get longer and longer until finally almost the whole damn thing is grey. When she finally does speak a little bit of the ice queen in back in her voice.

"What was that?"

"That was my little taste of honey. I'll help you. Maybe just because I'm dumb, maybe just because I read too much Chandler growing up, but I'll help you."

I leave out that maybe it's just because she reminds me of the last person who sat in that chair.

"You'll have to tell me what exactly it is that's got you spooked but it doesn't have to be tonight. It's getting late and if this is all as serious as I think it could be, we could use all the

shuteye we can get. The couch in the back folds out if you want it. Just be sure to crack open a window if you're going to smoke."

She stands up from her chair and in one swift move removes her dress, revealing her naked flesh to the soft lamp light of the office.

"This is my drop of honey. Come to bed with me."

And with that she slinks away to the back office with a seductive sway of her hips that is the very definition of gilding the lily. But hey, gilded lilies are an underrated luxury, and if there was a picture of Veronica Voon's backside in the dictionary then there wouldn't be a literacy problem in this country.

I know I shouldn't follow. I'm already stretching my neck out for this girl. If I follow I'm putting my whole head in the lion's mouth and praying it's a vegetarian. Hell, even if it is, that's a good way to get scars. I'll hunker down behind the desk tonight, maybe reread *Farewell, My Lovely* just to remind myself the dangers of a woman like this.

But before I can reach for my book shelf I hear her say something from the doorway.

"You should know Mr. DeMarc, that the people after me? They might just be the ones who shot out your windows too."

The words jumble what's left of my brain and I can feel myself locking the door, shutting off all the lights, and walking into the back office.

Chapter IV

Walking up on a couch bed is never a fun experience—any mattress that can fold itself up has no business calling itself a mattress—and the metal bar that sticks in the middle of your back has always felt too much like the barrel of a gun to me. Waking up on a couch bed alone, after spending the night in the company of a beautiful woman, however, is even worse.

There's not a trace of Veronica anywhere in the office. Even the ashtray is empty. Maybe I dreamed it. Maybe she was some angel come down to heaven to reward me for my years of faithful service—I open the front desk drawer to find an empty holster and a single cigarette stub—yeah, or maybe she's a demon straight from hell about to punish me for being so stupid as to jump in bed with a strange woman.

God could certainly create no prettier angel, and the Devil could create no sexier temptress. But right now I'll give her the benefit of the doubt and assume that no one had a hand in her creation but her parents and maybe a Barry White album.

Because if she wanted me dead I'd be a red stain seeping into the couch right now. That doesn't mean she has an interest in keeping me among the living, just that whatever it is that she truly wants me for hasn't happened yet. Or maybe the gun was the whole point—one bang for another as it were—but I don't know. There are better guns to be had for prices much cheaper. And if this is supposed to be some frame job this ain't the way to do it—they'd trace the pistol back to me sure, and it's not as if I have the strongest alibi or the love of the police at the moment, but I've been in business long enough to be wearing armor on my back for whenever somebody tries to stab me there.

There are cameras of course, a few set up and maintained by the building, a few that I've hidden. There's the doorman, who's 43 and gay and happily married to boot, so he wouldn't

exactly be inclined to bend over backwards for Voon just to catch a glimpse under her skirt while he's down there. And even if all the cameras were avoided, even if the doorman was somehow paid off, I got plenty of other fail-safes, including the hidden tape recorder which makes an MP3 of every conversation in this office

Add that to a lack of motive—I've got no cause to kill anyone the likes of her could put down (my friends from the firm might be her target in an effort to slow down the investigation, but those guys are old pros. She wouldn't be able to so much as lift the pistol before catching two bullets to the brainstem)—and the lack of forensic evidence, all I'd have to do is give her name to the cops. Oh Danning would come down on me hard again, might even shut down my business for good this time, but as little as the popo like me, they like Righty Rigotti even less. They resent the fact that the FBI is here to finally be the ones who collar him, and would jump at the chance to lock up his girl. From there all the DA has to do is stack the jury with women and it's a one way ticket to the big house for one Veronica Voon.

So I'm not too worried. Instead I make frozen waffles.

There are three left in the box I keep in the mini fridge in the back office, and the third one is just popping out of the toaster when there's a hard knock on my door.

"We ain't open."

"Website says you open at 10:00."

Veronica's voice. I'm disappointed in myself about how relieved I am. Maybe I really am concerned about her. Maybe she was right in guessing that I'd fall for her as soon as I saw her. Maybe I'm head over heels for her pretty feet that look great in heels.

Or it could just be I wanted my gun back.

“Perhaps I should clarify. We’re not open to young things who steal PI’s pistols. It’s a specific policy and it doesn’t come up much, but my hands are tied on the matter.”

“I could tie your hands if you like. I think you’ll find that they explore the most...interesting places that way.”

Well. That settles that. I unlock the door, ready to use it as a shield. I’m a little turned on, but my brain isn’t turned off and I’m not about to come face to face with the barrel of my own gun. But all that steps through the door is a very changed Veronica Voon. Gone is the revealing dress and the done up hair—replaced by jeans and a sweatshirt. This is a Veronica Voon that looks very much like she just spent the night on a pull out bed. She looks like a real person, not just arm candy for the Mafioso.

Now she’s really dangerous.

“Want a waffle?”

“Are you offering me an Eggo, Mr. DeMarc? Boy, you sure do now how to show a girl a good time.”

“An Eggo? No. So long as I take on cases like yours on, shall we say, pro bono terms, I can’t afford the brand names. Hell, right now I’m actually in the hole on this case considering that just yesterday I owned a pistol and today all I got is an empty holster. You know something about that?”

She’s eating the waffle so all she can do is point to the tiny red purse—the only item that’s the same as last night—she put on the table. Inside it is my gun, one shot from a full clip, just as I left it. I put in a new clip, and put the gun into the shoulder holster I’m wearing. Boy Scouts and privates dicks must always be prepared.

“Don’t do that again.”

“Sorry. I needed to clean up and change my clothes. Or would you rather I stay in that ridiculous dress all day?”

Honestly, yeah, I would. People would stare at her in that dress—men out of lust, women out of jealousy. They wouldn’t notice the guy in the crumpled suit and long tan trench coat standing a few feet behind her. My greatest weapon isn’t my pistol, its anonymity. The dress gets dirty, she starts to smell, anything to keep eyes on her and off me.

“That fine. But you head out in the world, you feel like you need a little extra protection? Wake me up. If you seriously want my help like you said last night, if the people after you are really the ones who killed Dansen, then I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe. But I can’t keep two eyes out if I have to have one trained on you at all times.”

“You do better than most men. They usually have both on me.”

“They haven’t seen you with talk with the last remains of a waffle stuck in your teeth.”

“You’re mean.”

I can’t debate that. But I never knew a man who could pull a trigger and really mean it who wasn’t some stripe of bastard. The nice guys, the ones who could kill and then treat everybody to a steak dinner—those were the real psychos. So at least I’m not one of them, not that I could afford a single steak at this point.

“Maybe I am. But whatever job you’ve got me in mind for isn’t something Mr. Rodgers could do. So now that you’ve changed and got some food in your belly, it’s questions and answers time.”

“How bout we go tit for tat?”

“I’m tired of your body right now, though that’s a nice try. Worked pretty damn well last night I must admit, made sure that you were always the one with the power, but if the danger is

so immediate that you've borrow my pistol just to cross the street, then you can strip right down to your birthday suit again—I'll still keep asking until you answer."

This is a bluff.

"You're bluffing—"

Goddamn it.

"—but that's not what I meant anyways. I'll answer all of your questions Mr. DeMarc, but I want the same from you in return. You seem to forget you're not the only one in this room who can't trust the person sitting across from them. These men killed Melinda Dansen right under your nose after all.

"And anyway, it's only fair."

Fair. Fair is a word best saved for things that involve cotton candy and Ferris wheels. Fair has no place in a business like this one. Fair gets people hurt, gets them killed. The men in the black hats don't play fair, so neither should the guys in the white. They don't fight the war on our terms and we'll always be at a disadvantage so long as we don't fight on theirs.

Only problem is that I didn't get into this professional just because my local library had a healthy collection of Mike Hammer books when I was growing up, and I'm not a good guy just because black doesn't go well with my hair. I might wish I could believe in all that, but I don't.

"Fair enough. But you can't hide one thing from me. Complete honesty. If I think you're hiding even one thing from me I'll kick your pretty little ass out the door quicker than you can blink."

"Same with you. You leave one little thing out and I start losing my clothes."

I'd advise her to check under the dryer for those clothes—I looked down there once and found three and a half socks and a pair of boxers, but she looks plenty serious. The cool from last

night has returned with a vengeance and it's all the more scary now because she's wearing a sweatshirt with a syrup stain on it. It's easy to be steel when you can control a room with a slight sway of the hips, it's damn more impressive when you can do it in the light of day when man's more rational head takes over. I really better watch my step; this dame knows how to survive with bigger men than the likes of me.

Better men though? That remains to be seen.

"Alright, sounds like a deal then. Tit for tat. Though I won't lie, I may start leaving stuff out by the end, just to call your bluff."

I say this about three times too sly for polite company. A saucy wink wouldn't have been any less inappropriate. That's my part one of my play, let her keep thinking she can lead me around, let her think my belt might as well be ^{be}leash. It'll leave me looking pretty stupid, but eventually she won't take me as serious as she should, and that's when I'll really learn something.

She laughs. Good. That's my usual response from women. All these come-ons had gotten me worried.

"Let's start. How was your relationship with yours?"

"Is that really what you want to know?"

"It's one of the things I want to know. It's a way to warm you up—you stick a frog in a pot of boiling water and it jumps right out. You increase the temperature gradually and you'll be having boiled frog for dinner that night."

"And I'm the frog in this metaphor?"

"Why not, you got the legs for it."

"Hardly the most flattering of comparisons. Are you going to kill and eat me as well?"

“No, but somebody is and if I ask you who straight up you’ll just keep dancing around it and well, my tap shoes are in the shop and I don’t know the Charleston. So let’s start smaller. Tell me about your parents, your childhood. Your real name would be a nice opening line.”

The laughter is gone again, and I’m looking at the chameleon from last night. I feel like I’ve been down this path before with her and I’m getting pretty tired of it. It was wrong of me to banter back, to be the Abbot to her Costello. Sure, it might fit my play and make her think she’s still in control, but I’d think a lot clearer if I wasn’t so dizzy from going around in circles again and again.

“I don’t understand you DeMarc. You’re mean, you’re nice. You’re giving me come-ons right before you force me before the House Un-American Activities Committee and demanding I name names. You’re grilling waffles for me one moment, and grilling me the next.”

“You don’t grill waffles.”

“Thanks for the tip. I know a few chefs; maybe you could run that little piece of info to them. I’m sure they’ll appreciate it.”

Clever girl.

“Well, whoever you really are Mr. Calvin DeMarc, P.I., you should know that anyone who thinks those sorts of things are small can’t be very big themselves.”

So she’s sniffed me out, just as quickly I caught her. We’re a match made in Dashiell Hammett’s notebook. But it’s still working. It’s all about getting her off balance, trying to get it so she doesn’t know whether she’s coming or going. There’s just about two miles of crust between me and the real facts of this case, and while she’s shown me one or two fissures so far, I know from experience that the best results come from shaking things up so badly that a couple of volcanos pop up and start erupting the red hot magma of truth.

Of course this method can lead to some serious burns on my part, some metaphorical, some painfully real. There are a couple different reasons I threw out that ashtray, and not all of them involve my fear of bronchitis.

“You can be big enough for the both of us sweetheart. All I want is the truth, and I was always taught in grade school that to read a book you got to start with the very first chapter.

“But you can’t give me that? Even after all my threats to kick you out, even with all the different nooses that are tightening around your neck? Fine. You got me curious when you mentioned Dansen’s name, so I’m willing to play your game for just a little bit longer. Not much longer mind you, so speak up.

“If the first chapter is too much, too big, let’s start with just the first word then: some twenty odd years ago a little girl was welcomed into the world. This girl would eventually grow up to be Righty Rigotti’s girl. This little would eventually frustrate a hard worn PI who’s just trying to help out. This little girl would eventually come to call herself Veronica Voon of all things. But tell me, what was this little girl’s name when the doctor first slapped her on the ass?”

For a moment she’s silent again, sending me another one of those looks that’s supposed to indicate that if Righty’s empire wasn’t falling, I’d be two words to a gun-toting high school dropout away from being killed. They say that looks can’t kill, but there must be exceptions made for Superman and offended gangster’s girlfriends. But Righty’s going up to country soon enough, so no heat vision for her. It’s a little funny just how well acquainted I am with that kind of looks in the brief period I’ve known this girl.

But maybe she can start feeling those rope burns around her neck, because eventually she spills.

“Valeska Vorobiev. That satisfy you properly?”

Well no, but this is like pulling teeth with a pair of safety scissors, so I'll take what I can get.

"Until the next time I get unsatisfied, yeah. That should be sometime real soon though, so if you want to get your question in I'd ask it real quick."

To this she pulls off one of her socks. Like I said, clever girl.

"DeMarc," she draws out, somehow extending it an extra fourteen syllables. This girl presses so many of my buttons that I'm a little afraid I left one of my owner's manuals lying around. Perhaps they teach a whole semester on clueless PIs in Moll University. "That's French isn't it? Your family immigrate from there?"

"Maybe. Maybe France, maybe Belgium, maybe Neptune. I've never cared enough to really find out. I've found that people who overly concern themselves with where they've been don't pay enough attention as to where they're going.

"If I'm not mistaken it's my turn again."

"You ask for my whole life story, and all I get is lazy genealogist? I think I'm getting the fuzzy end of this lollipop. Must I file a formal complaint to your union?"

"That'll be fine. I know in your line of work you must have plenty of experience dealing with those."

I don't get to hear whatever witty retort Veronica had next because the sound of two slugs flying past my head fills my eardrums. I've been shot at a lot of times in my life. Hell, it's only been a few months since Annie Oakley, and that's hardly a record. I accept it as an occupational hazard. But what bothers me most aren't the bullets themselves. Oh sure, the lead hurts plenty, don't get me wrong, but since I've been 18 it's been my sworn duty to jump in front

of them, so I've gotten pretty good at taking the pain. Gotten pretty good at avoiding it too. But what I haven't exactly gotten used to is the sound. It's always much louder than you expect.

There's a man in the doorway with a serious look on his face and an even more serious looking piece in his meaty paws. What was Chandler's bit of advice? When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand? Whoever's in charge up there must have realized I was finally starting to get somewhere in this investigation and sent another goon to screw things up again.

The first slug hits the plaster wall behind me, while the other embeds itself in my desk—the desk I just got all the blood stains off—sending wood chips everywhere. Even a blind man couldn't have missed from his range, so whoever hired this guy must have wanted to put a little fear of god in me before sending me to meet his holiness. Jokes on him though—I'm a lapsed Catholic, so I already fear God plenty.

I flip the desk over the best I can with my good hand—my broken wrist is healed, but still a bit sore—and pull Veronica over the top. The guy doesn't take a shot while I do so, but it's too early to know if that means something. It makes sense to take out the rook before going for the queen. Kill the guy who can shoot back first, then squeeze the girl to find out what's she's spilled and who all to.

Or this is one of Righty's men, and she really didn't appreciate the frog legs line.

But whatever his allegiance, I don't care to re-plaster any more bullet holes in my wall, and I like this desk, so he's walking up in a morgue drawer tomorrow. He's still standing by the door, not shooting, so that leaves probably four shots for him before reload. That's enough shots to shoot right through a desk—it's not like in the movies where an overturned table creates some

sort of force field. He must not want to hurt the girl—maybe it's morals, maybe it's an order, but there's no maybe that it's his death.

I pull out Enid and thank god I already inserted the full clip. She isn't much in terms of firepower and isn't the quickest on the reload, especially when compared to the hand cannon the goon's wielding, but she's never let me down, and hell, if I'm ever in a fight where I need more than six shots, well, then, I'm in a fight that I'm destined to lose.

I'm no quick draw, but I know where to shoot, and that's always worth a lot more. Doesn't matter how fast you can pull it out if all you end up hitting is air. Case in point: I pop up from the desk and get off two shots, both of which hit directly in the chest—one in the left peck, the other just above the belly button—while the guy empties his clip but is only able to hit my newly installed windows before going down. He's still with the living, but not for long—he's bleeding like a stuck pig and it wouldn't surprise me if that first shot nicked a lung.

I wait until he gives off one last gurgle before taking his gun off him along with the extra clip he was trying to pull out before he finally shuffled off the mortal coil. I think about doing the same with his wallet, just to get some idea of the trouble I'm in, but picking a dead man's pocket is a dirty business best left until the body's cooled off a bit. Let the police do it.

The police. No sirens. Doesn't make sense. I got a lot of noisy neighbors after the Dansen affair, and it's still pretty early in the morning. Gun shots are too loud to be ignored especially when everybody else in the building has sensitive hearing and they walk pass the private investigator's office. There should be enough sirens coming this way to block out any sounds like the footsteps I'm hearing running up the stairs. Footsteps that don't sound at all like they could belong to the cosmetics salespeople a floor down.

Damn. I look to Veronica but she's still behind the desk, looking pretty pale. Well you needed a guy with a gun baby, and now I can see exactly why, but I sure wish we hadn't danced around so long because then I'd at least have a some idea who I'm sending to hell.

"Veronica?"

"Yeah?" Her voice doesn't sound like it ever had any of the cool I've previously associated it with. She's scarred. I would be too if it weren't my job to protect her.

"I need you to get to the back office and push two on the speed dial. It'll connect you with a man named Oscar Fillmore. Tell him there's a situation going down at DeMarc's office. He'll know what to do."

"Shouldn't I call the police?"

"You are. He's the only cop I trust."

Trust enough to believe that he'll do me the honor of waiting 'til I'm cold to pick my pocket anyway, and my last friend on the force. If things go sideways here—and I'm feeling like they might, considering my ten shots between two guns versus a team of men isn't exactly great odds—all Fillmore will be able to do for me is put the pennies over my eyes so I can pay the ferryman. Not much, but hey, it's a necessary thing—they're pretty serious about taxes down there, so the IRS tells me.

And anyway, if he gets here in time he'll help Veronica. I trust him to do that, and that's what really matters.

I want to move some things around, set up a chokepoint or dig a few Vietcong tunnels but I got two seconds before they come, so all I end up doing is abandoning my upturned desk beachhead and taking a position behind the door, hoping that gives me enough of a jump on them to make it a fair fight. This is why we have kids play hide and seek.

There are only two of them. From my position I can't get a good look, but I can hear them wheezing from the long run up. They're out of shape and their steps are sloppy—these are thugs, not assassins. If these really are the people after Veronica I can breathe a small sigh, because they're clearly dumb and that makes my life a whole lot easier.

I push the door away from the wall—not much, just enough to get a little peak at my foes. They're investigating the corpse and I can't really tell if they're mourning a colleague or just enjoying the novelty of poking a dead body with a stick. I have the chance to plug both of them in the back of the head, drop them before they even know I'm here. That's the smart move, the safe move, the one that guarantees I exit from this room in something other than a body bag. Sure, it means even more blood on my carpet, but it probably needs to get replaced anyway.

But I don't shoot what I can't see, and to me it's always been better to die than to kill a friend, and it's not like there aren't any thugs on the police payrolls. So instead I step from behind the door and clear my throat.

“Welcome to DeMarc Investigations. Normally I'd ask to take your hats, but as you can see, we're having a bit of a day here.”

They spin around, startled, and my finger itches to pull the trigger. But the thugs have no triggers of their own—the taller one has a bat, but it looks so fresh it could have been shipped from Louisville just this morning and the short guy's got nothing but his fists. That throws me for one hell of a loop and I'm thrown for another when the tall one swings the bat right for my head. In my surprise I forget to duck and it connects and sends my head into the door. Things go fuzzy for a second, and then they go black, but before I pass out I swear I hear Veronica say, “Johnny, stop.”

Chapter V

I'm sure I come to before I really come to—people who get knocked out cold and stay that way for a while are either dead or brain damaged. And while some might call me stupid, hell, *I'd* call me stupid for letting my head be used as a baseball, but stupid isn't brain damage, at least not in my case. No, I earned my stupid the good old fashioned American way, with poor public schools. So I'm sure I come around at some point, if only to roll my eyes around and recite name, rank and serial number.

But by the time the phone operator finally reconnects me with full consciousness, all the lights outside have gone orange—sunsets and streetlights, one going off, the other going on. I've slept the day away. All and all a rather pleasant Saturday if only I spent it sleeping on a pillow instead of a nasty looking bruise on the side of my head. Still better than staying in a Holiday Inn.

Veronica's still here, sitting in the doorway to the back office, smoking one of her cigars and tipping the ash into my fedora. Her presence is a pleasant surprise, so long as her next move isn't to give me the old Bond villain speech explaining her dastardly plot and how I played right into it. Considering the two thugs are still here with the tall one with the bat—Johnny as I suppose I should start calling him—staring out the window with a look of boredom on his face, it's too early to say the Blofeld option is off the table.

But sitting in my chair with feet propped on what really did used to be a very nice desk, is my cavalry.

“The police paying you to watch me nap Fillmore?”

“Once Danning heard that you got yourself in trouble again, knocked out even, he sent me to make sure you really died this time. And a good day to you too.”

Fillmore's got a smile on his face, though it's noticeably grimmer than usual. His bald head shows every wrinkle and he's wearing more today than he ever has. I may still be breathing, but Fillmore's face tells me I'm not out of the woods. So I decide to bite the bullet and ask the scary question.

"Where's the body?"

"There is no body."

This is Johnny speaking up.

"Really because that nasty red spot there would seem to indicate otherwise," I say, pointing towards where I dispatched the first guy. The corpse is nowhere to be found, but it seems they didn't have enough time to break out the rag and soap before I woke up.

Fillmore is the one to answer, "See, now that's what I thought too DeMarc, but Miss Voon here and her associates are quite insistent, and well, it's hard to trust your account. You're a man with head trauma."

"Always honest eh, Fillmore?"

"As the day is long my friend, as the day is long." He gives me a very pointed look, "When there's reason to be. Right now, I should think you'd count yourself lucky that I got caught in traffic on my way over here."

Fair enough. If there's no body, there is no police report. There doesn't have to be a crime and I don't have to get hauled before a judge trying to explain it was self-defense. I get to keep my license, keep my office, and keep on the trail of Veronica's pursuers.

Still, there is one piece of unfinished business. I direct my gaze to the one with the bat and ask, "That's all well and good, but call me crazy, I don't think one symptom of a concussion

is the smell of gun powder on your hand. And I'm pretty sure that's what I got. What do you say Johnny boy, care to check?"

Happy birthday, Christmas, and Kwanzaa to me, the dumb lug actually moves to do it and I get to sock him hard on the jaw.

"This is the best Righty can offer as protection for you, Veronica? No wonder you came running to me. I didn't know it was so bad he was turning to the junior varsity."

"Big talk for a guy who just spent the last six hours thinking the floor was the Hilton."

This is the shorter one, with his voice sounding as weaselly as a third rate hoodlum. If these two really are all the muscle Righty could afford to lend then he must really be almost under, drowning badly and not being helped by the flood of stupidity offered by guys like these who stayed loyal. Score one for the American justice system. Next time I see them I must buy my friends in the firm a drink.

"Considering your height I'm surprised you don't think all talk to be "big". Yeah, you two put me down—blind squirrels and acorns are right twice a day. And anyway, I've checked out of that particular hotel now and since I stole a few towels and a bathrobe while I was there I figure I'm in the black for the exchange. I got information, I got a brand new bat, and I got a police detective if you so much as open your mouth again. I'm willing to bet your record is about as clean as my carpet right now. So why don't you two leave. Now. You stink up the joint worse than the corpse you don't seem to remember."

Shorty's pretty miffed at this, and if his brain had a few more cells and could properly process my insult I'm sure he'd start showing me his knife collection, displaying the amazing sharpness of the ginzo blade by cutting through a tin can and my lower intestines, but the big guy

looks over to Veronica who quietly nods her head, and he starts to pull short stuff towards the door.

“Hey, we don’t have to put up with this prick. Johnny, you could have shoved that bat right up his ass!”

“Get the hell out of here, Phil. I’ll call you if there’s any more trouble.”

Veronica’s first words since I woke up and they send the message. Johnny and Phil get the hell out of here.

She’s not looking much worse for the wear, but then she’s had six hours to reapply that ice queen persona. But she’s scared. She may still be trying to play me, but now I know she has a vested interest in keeping me breathing until the storm passes. Because she needs a guy with a guy, one who knows how to use it properly, and all Righty has left is a guy with brand new bat.

“Alright Veronica, I’m really committed to you now but the time for fun and games is over. I ain’t going to throw you out but I’m not going to be playing twenty questions with you anymore either. So you’re going to tell me a story now, all about who exactly sent that guy up here, and you’re going to tell it now. Cause they know where you sleep now and the black and white out front is going to stall them for only so long.”

She points to Fillmore and shakes her head.

“Not with the cop sitting right there. You made my muscle leave; you got to send yours out too. Have him wait in his car, playing the siren from time to time.”

Fillmore starts to get up—he’s a good friend, but I sure he’s not exactly happy to be caught up in this. He’s got a wife, two kids, and is making his way through *Hill Street Blues* on DVD. He knows just as much as me that in these types of stories there’s usually a sacrificial

lamb. In *The Big Sleep* it was a guy named Harry Jones. And I can't guarantee that it won't be one named Oscar Fillmore this time round.

But I meet his eyes and shake my head no. I need him for this, at least for now. I can tell he wants to fight—he's gained a few more extra head wrinkles and his ever present smile has been demoted to a simple grin—but he understands and sits down, first picking up my fedora from the floor. He puts it on the desk and lights a cigarette of his own. I don't blame him.

Still, new rug, new hat, new windows (again). I knew this girl would be trouble.

“No dice Veronica. This is too serious to be operating without police involvement, if only when this is all over and they try to take away my license I can say I fulfilled my legal requirement. You might not care much for that, but in case you forgot I killed a man earlier today, and while your boys can make the body disappear, that isn't something that just goes away. The popo aren't going to take point here, but I need to know I'm square with the law.

She's pissed about this, but she doesn't have any ammunition on this one. A PI can work outside of the law, but not above it. Not in the 21st century. Not outside of the pages of a pulp novel.

“So for the time being, consider Fillmore here to be DeMarc Investigation's silent partner. So spill. And whenever you feel like leaving something out, remember how you felt when that guy burst through the door. Think of that and tell us the tale of Valeska Vorobiev.”

She takes a few deep breaths, gives one last dirty look in Fillmore's direction, and begins.

“There once was a girl named Valeska Vorobiev. Her parents were first generation Russian immigrants, coming over soon after the fall of Soviet Union. Not that the girl knew those people very well, or at all really. From there it's a sad story of a father killed in an industrial accident—common among undocumented workers—and a mother who crawled into a

bottle until she had to be put in a different kind of container, one made of wood. Seems that mother didn't think her three year old child was much worth living for, at least not in a country where she didn't speak the language, and where some hush money could buy so much cheap booze.

“Then the little girl gets shipped off to various relatives, none of who were exactly clamoring for yet another mouth to feed. Inappropriate touching by drunken uncles and perverse cousins you are free to make your own assumptions, I won't say it was Colonel Mustard in the bedroom with the candlestick. Just take comfort in knowing that Veronica Voon was in a very strong position to deal with all that, and she did not sleep on the opportunity.

“Finally the little girl grows up and finds out her only asset in this crummy world is her body. She's traded around from man to man and finally ends up in the arms of a young mafia lieutenant nicknamed Righty and she watches as he unites all the gangs in towns, even the Blacks ones, even the Hispanics, unites them all under his banner and then she has to watch him loose it all because this is the new millennium and the age of Dons is over.

“But Righty isn't the not-so-little-anymore girl's only beau, for the girl has learned to never count on only one person, because one might die in an industrial accident, and one might drink themselves to death. No, she has many suitors among the powerful. And then one day, she finds out a secret about one of them. Turns out this boyfriend of hers had other affairs, had a son from one affair, and had this son killed. And then this powerful man dies, and people who have an interest in keeping the powerful man's legacy alive decide that no one can ever find out about this terrible thing, and so they decide the girl must die. They even decide the powerful man's poor mourning wife must die—all because she knows too much.

“So before the girl can end up like the poor wife she runs to the last person in town that can protect her now that Righty has gone under. A private detective who’s had his livelihood ruined by the mess all without knowing a single thing about it.

“That, Mr. DeMarc, is the very sad story of Valeska Vorobiev, and maybe now you are beginning to realize why it’s you I’m running to.”

My head is spinning again and I can barely hear myself ask, “So what you’re saying exactly is that this whole thing, the assassination of Melinda Dansen, the chasing after you, all of it was orchestrated from the governor’s mansion? From the very seat of power in this state?”

“Precisely.”

“Well,” Fillmore—his smile finally completely gone from his face—says as he slides up to me and lights me a cigarette, my first since getting shot, “That’s a whole new kettle of fish.”