

The Secret Lives of Librarians

a novel by 44

The Secret Lives of Librarians: a novel by 44
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For the empire of Dusk
and a sexy little schoolmarm,
right from the start.

Thou art the book,
The library wherzon I look.
- Henry King, *The Exequy* [1657]

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1.

Sol Isistrato

“I remember when the librarian was a much older woman;
kindly, discreet, unattractive.
We didn’t know anything about her private life. We didn’t want to know
anything about her private life. She didn’t *have* a private life!”
- Officer Bookman, “Seinfeld” television show
Larry Charles, writer (“The Library” episode) 2003

“‘Librarian’ might be a dirty word.
Use ‘information professional’ to be on the safe side.”
- Karen Elliot, ‘What I Really Learned At Library School’
Papers on Library and Information Studies Education
Congress on Professional Education, July 26, 2006
American Library Association

He had hoped so long, once even found himself praying to a god he didn’t believe in, for an orderly, peaceful and quiet life. And for three months in the spring of 2003, he had almost known it.

After all those years of personal struggle, of competition, forbearance, sacrifice, and, ultimately, disillusion, he had come to realize that all he really wanted was to be left alone, to continue his studies undisturbed. He still believed in the *principles* of Law, at least, and so when he was offered the desk of county law librarian he’d been more than glad to accede.

A schedule set in stone, a noiseless office, a decent (and guaranteed) salary, an unbeatable three-block walk from home, health benefits, paid vacations, and a pension, no less; normalcy at last. The visitors to the law library were almost invariably paralegals, lawyers, or judge’s assistants. They knew what they were looking for and how to find it and how to use any of the machines or software. Thus, Sol was rarely put upon to actually assist anyone or to perform any real work aside from keeping the

holdings in their proper places and the occasional purchase order or expense report. It was perfect; it left him free to spend the workdays reading or transcribing his personal notes on the office computer, conspicuously busy behind two glass walls overlooking the entire small library, humming along until closing time. There was some kind of contentment in a daily routine, an easy rhythm he'd let himself slip into.

That didn't last long. The day he convinced himself he might have finally secured the beginnings of an ordinary life was the day the real trouble began.

* * * *

Calisthenics and cardiovascular early that morning and he walked out of the ex-cop's low budget gym on Newark Avenue with something on his face that was dangerously close to becoming a smile. It was mid-June daybreak in the northeast, the air was delicious mist, the sun met him at the door for a race. He bolted toward the waterfront and the financial district, cooled as he ran by the vain satisfaction of not being one of those he saw already commuting to work.

He mused that even the journey to your day's work should be a pleasure, as he took in the shining new skyscrapers exclaiming a brand-new downtown. He sprinted past the light rail cars toward one of the oldest neighborhoods in the country, cut away, rounded past the block of City Hall and going west along Montgomery Street began the slow climb up the eastern slope of the long, giant humpback hill that is Jersey City.

By the time he reached Summit Avenue he was dripping sweat and laughing softly to himself with runner's high. A right onto tercentenary Bergen Avenue took him to Journal Square, after what used to be a world-class newspaper, where hundreds of people from hundreds of countries buzzed toward the trains and buses that would take them to other Jersey towns or across the river to Manhattan. Once a sparkling theater district of a bright metropolis, the vibrant colors here had faded to pale yellows and

awkward browns. But there were some in town, locals, who were working toward a restoration of a former vividness.

Four blocks from his place and the second half of breakfast, the notion occurred to him that he was in a good mood. He was a sharp-looking bachelor at a prime age, owned his home, called his own shots now. At last, his future was in his own hands and that future was broad and gleaming. He thought he might even find it inside him today to be pleasant to those around him. He'd completely forgotten the evil inherent in Monday mornings.

During the week Sol wore thick-framed black eyeglasses of a light prescription and what amounted to a uniform: black jackets and slacks, white button down (sometimes grey), black ties with minimal other colors, if at all, and officer's shoes. This arrangement worked to create enough space between him and others that he was immediately rendered neutral.

It was as he crossed the street approaching his office building that he started feeling the descent of a fine day, a submersion of some kind. Maybe he just hadn't noticed it before, but there it was: a droning intensification of the regular cacophony of car horns, occasional shouted complaints from drivers; the line-up of glum and irritated faces at the bus stop; the slowness with which everyone seemed to be moving today. Suddenly there was gloom without even rain clouds. He stepped onto the curb between two parked cars and the guy on roller blades gliding sleepily toward him dropped his take-out cup coffee right by Sol's right foot, splashing him from the knee down. The skater was already crossing at the corner, shouted behind him, "Sorry!" and kept going.

Sol cursed some and stormed up the pale stone stairs to the entrance of the green-grey Sixties box of glass and steel of the County Administration Building, hurried through the security gate and straight to the nearest restroom, on the first floor, to try to clean up a bit. This delayed him enough that he was already three minutes late in opening the library. He always arrived five minutes early.

When he got to the fifth floor he saw his boss, David Vendi, leaning against the wall outside the law library entrance reading

from an open manila file folder cradled in his left hand. The bald, humorless Israeli American smiled with a frown and absentmindedly took Sol's proffered handshake. Pale with deep blue eyes and circumstantial evidence of hair at the base of his skull, the County Administrator only visited the library when it was absolutely necessary. After the greeting his superior ordered him present in a conference room on the third floor at start of the next hour.

At ten o'clock Sol walked into a small meeting room where his boss was seated at a long, thin lacquered teak table along with County Executive Steven Riley and two men who Sol pegged for law enforcement types. The two strangers were dressed too similarly casual and plainly to be anything else. The jackets were, of course, large enough to conceal weapons. There was a small tape recorder on the tabletop. *Curious...* thought Sol.

Vendi spoke first. "Sol, you know Mr. Riley..." (winning blue eyes, magnanimous smile)

"Of course, good to see you, Steve."

"Nice to see you again, Sol." (Sol, the black-haired former legal hound)

"This is Special Agent Robert Pines and Special Agent Al Macy," Vendi continued, "of the F.B.I."

Now what? thought Sol. He had figured law, just not Feds.

"They have something they want to discuss with you after I finish what I have to tell you." Vendi explained gravely.

Okay... "Alright..."

"We have to record this by the way." Vendi switched on the recorder and made the protocol opening statement of persons present, date, authority, etcetera. "As I'm sure you're aware, Mr. Isistrato, [this was getting formal now] the court system in Hudson County operates on a much lighter schedule during the summer months. This building, in particular, is practically empty in summertime and the Board of Freeholders has decided that it simply isn't cost-efficient to keep it open during that time. Accordingly, we'll be opening a satellite unit for the law library at the main library building downtown."

"The PUBLIC library?!" Sol blurted out.

"Yes, Sol, the public library. Is that going to be a problem for you?"

Aw, no, no, no! Please, no! "No... No, of course not. But would such a setting be adequate?" A feeble attempt at objection, visions of uncontrollable, noisy children and too many indignant, uniquely scented half-crazy homeless people flooding Sol's mindscape. It felt as though he were being punished for something he didn't even do.

"We're expecting you'll make sure that it is adequate. The decision's been made. You can choose to work with the situation or, if you find the setting disagreeable, you can take an eight-week layoff. There are student interns available right now to cover for you for the duration. Either way, we'll need your answer by this time tomorrow. I do apologize for the short notice, but the Board is under extreme budgetary pressure from all around. We'll need to make the necessary arrangements and transition by the end of the week. Your schedule would remain the same except that you'd have the option of substituting Saturday for a weekday."

That's supposed to be an option? He was stunned.

"I'll be available throughout the day to answer any questions you might have, Sol, but that's the way it's going to be. Gentlemen..." Vendi rose and excused himself, taking the recorder with him..

Riley stood and jumped right into his pitch without giving Sol a chance to think.

"Mr. Isistrato, what may seem an inconvenience right now might actually turn out to be an unexpected opportunity." Here he flashed the wide politician's smile. "You see, Mr. Pines and Mr. Macy are with a unit of the FBI that investigates art crime."

"Art crime..." repeated Sol.

"Thefts, mostly, you know..." the young blonde man, possibly late thirties and obviously the agent in charge, explained amiably. "Like what we're here to talk to you about today, Mr. Isistrato."

Sol simply looked at the man, allowing him to continue.

“As it happens, the fourth floor location of the library where the annex is to be set up was, until recently-”

“-A museum.”

“You’re familiar with it.”

“Somewhat. I used to visit from time to time. I haven’t been to the new building, yet.”

“It’s only been open eight months. What concerns us, though, is that at some point during the relocation there occurred a theft of some rather valuable artwork. We have strong reason to believe that there is a librarian involved. If not the actual thief, then acting as an intermediary between the thieves and potential buyers of the stolen items. Right now there’s an ongoing investigation in which you could play a vital role, if you chose to. We’re able to offer you the equivalent of your regular salary in addition to your normal county pay. But we would be asking for a small amount of your time apart from your normal duties.”

Macy, the curly brown-haired other agent, chimed in.

“Mr. Isistrato, as in your previous line of work, what we would require of you is basically just the recording of observations and interviews with the subjects. Except that in this particular case you would be working specifically in an undercover capacity.”

They had been poking around in his background. Sol mulled, slowly growing irritated. “So, you want me... to spy... on a bunch of *librarians*...?”

“Well, there’s not a whole lot of surveillance work required by yourself,” quick parry by Macy, “we’ll take care of most of that. Plus, you’ll be partnered with a member of local law enforcement if there is any cover work requiring movement outside the library.”

Why would I need that?! Closing his eyes, his hand drawn to his head, Sol let escape an involuntary chuckle. He opened his eyes and looked at all of them, the two wholesome Middle Americans, the usually jovial East Coast Irish American, and asked in disbelief, “You’ve got to be kidding me...” He chuckled again.

Riley reached his hands a few inches outward on the table. “Sol, we’re being sued by the Royal Dutch government for the loss of what they’re claiming belongs to them. For a whole lotta money.

We'd have to make some serious cuts if we lost the suit." A pause. "You're a county employee now, you know, and we're counting on you to take one for the team. And the royals have even offered a reward for recovery, Sol."

"How gracious. How much?"

"Twenty-five thousand. Supposedly only a drop of what it's worth."

Sol did the math in his head and wondered why they couldn't just get a regular investigator for this job. "And it's just a coincidence that I'm being shuffled downtown?"

Pines answered. "Your availability is coincidental, but our investigation has been in operation for three months now. You're a local and legit all around. You wouldn't raise any eyebrows or tip anyone off. We're just asking you to be an observer for a couple of months, ten weeks or so, make some easy money and you're out at the end of summer. And yes, we could have gotten someone else."

Sol wondered if he really needed the money and if he shouldn't just take a long vacation. Then he remembered his newly purchased building and its mortgage, the plans he had for it, and the things he could do with a windfall like what was being offered. But his calm life was being interrupted... And yet, it was just some boring librarians, wasn't it? One or two had gone bad with the taste of real money and Sol could round them up quickly enough and maybe even collect the reward. No long nights, no violence. How terribly difficult could that be? He'd hang out on the fourth floor that nobody ever visited, wrap this thing up early and take a vacation anyway. Screw 'em all. But then, what was to say they wouldn't just impose on him whenever they felt like it?

"Let me guess. You need my answer by tomorrow."

"We're under some time constraints, yes. Also, the general briefing is scheduled for Wednesday." Again answered Pines.

His last weak objection: "But, I'm a librarian myself, now..." delivered with just the slightest less conviction than he probably should have mustered.

Macy smiled sympathetically. "We've renewed all your licenses and permits and paid the fees, as a courtesy."

“Oh, you did, huh?” Now, at last, he was completely pissed off. “I’m that easy, am I? Well, how ‘bout I just let you know if I *feel* like doing this? As a courtesy, of course. I’m actually thinking of taking that vacation.” And between gritted teeth, “You gentlemen have a good day.”

And he stood up, firmly closed the door behind him and walked somewhat stiffly to the stairwell and down to the street. As he walked around the corner, he called the main receptionist to inform her that the law library was closed for the day and that signage needed to be posted.

He cut through a small Italian neighborhood, past Little India and along JFK Boulevard for almost an hour ruminating over his situation, the hassle of it all with impromptu inconveniences, a change of schedule, annoying co-workers and once again having to report to someone. After some time, he felt hungry and paused to take a better look around. He realized he’d wandered all the way into the Heights neighborhood almost as far as Union City and that he’d have to take a cab or a bus back home. Nearby he recognized an old tavern taken over by a Spanish couple. He had an exceptionally large plate of paella and even cake for dessert. Sol normally had a healthy appetite but also took to food when he was tense or nervous. He’d even had two large glasses of burgundy. By one o’clock he was at home via taxi, pacing around for another hour until he sat to rest on a lounge chair and promptly fell asleep, his hands clasped on his enlarged lunch hour belly.

It was almost six when he awoke, a little disoriented, as he was unaccustomed to napping or wine in the daytime. The afternoon rush hour din was winding down and the sun was shining blindingly through the west windows. He noticed he still had his tie on, loosened it and undid the top two buttons of his shirt. He lowered the blinds halfway and took a cursory glance at the street below. After five-thirty the neighborhood became a lot quieter; there’d be some stragglers leaving work in the judicial district, a few local kids playing sometimes. The area had a nice mix of long-timers and immigrants. Sol liked it because it was usually calm by seven or eight.

Except tonight; tonight he noticed a big young black dude hanging out about twelve feet away from Sol's building casually making drug sales. Sol became amply annoyed.

Sol was a fair-minded man, he felt. He made a point of not being too quick to judge, of not being blind to all the aspects of modern reality, especially in cities. He had a deep loathing of these street powders which ultimately only destroyed people, but if some people wanted to destroy themselves it was none of his business. The danger was to those around them and that's where it concerned him. There was always too much violence involved. Any violence was too much. People were always fighting over the drugs themselves, or the money involved, or they were influenced by whichever particular drug to act violently. And that was aside from the wicked internal bodily damage that those drugs cause.

In any case, Sol figured, naively enough, it was a momentary thing and the dealer would simply move along elsewhere while Sol busied himself with some chore or other.

That didn't happen. Instead, it seemed the corner entrepreneur was actually setting up shop basically in front of Sol's door.

This, Sol knew, he couldn't allow to happen. *This is my home*, he said to himself, *and I will defend it*.

He had to act calmly, now, and with reason. The man didn't appear to have a gun, but Sol would be ready for that nonetheless. This guy was large, but out of shape and looked lazy. Moreover, he would never anticipate Sol's approach.

He took off his glasses and his shirt, leaving an undershirt like the guy outside. From his bedroom he retrieved a 9mm pistol and prepped it as he walked slowly downstairs. From the storage closet under the stairs he pulled out a nightstick and set it against the wall by the front door. The gun he placed on the exit shelf near the doorjamb and covered it with one of the newspapers he had everywhere. He checked for wallet, keys, and phone and took a deep breath. Making sure the door was unlocked, he stepped outside and let his anger flood him.

The dealer had a customer. No matter, any buyers would also have to know that this was no drug spot. The shriveled junkie hurried away at seeing Sol's menacing gait. The dealer turned to face him and visibly stiffened. Sol came within two feet of the guy's face and stood for a second.

"I don't care what you do, it's none of my business. But you are NOT gonna do it here... You understand me?"

The guy just stood still, staring.

"Or do you think you can beat me?" Sol added.

Naturally there was adrenaline rushing through Sol's veins; you never know what your opponent will do...

The man just turned away and started walking slowly. He looked halfway behind him and casually shouted. "E'rybody know yo' shit up and yo' back wide..."

And he kept strolling away defiantly until he turned the corner.

What did that mean? That Sol was built? It wasn't like he was trying to keep it a secret. Whatever, the important thing was whether or not this guy was coming back with weapons and/or friends. If it were going to happen, it would be within the first hour or some incalculable hour in the night.

Sol quickly looked up and down the street, at all the nearby windows and into the closest parked cars to see who might have witnessed the encounter but aside from the crackhead no one had seen him come out of his building. He casually walked back to his door, still checking around him.

Once inside he immediately retrieved a hunting rifle from his basement, checked and loaded it, collected the house phone, a magazine, some leftover pasta and a bottled water and headed all the way upstairs to the roof. On the roof he had set a few patio chairs and a table for himself and occasional visitors. He pulled the table and a chair close to the ledge and settled in to wait.

* * * *

The sun fell, it became dark, and no thugs arrived to shoot at him or his place. At this point, the only damage they could inflict would be to his building or they'd have to wait until they saw Sol on the street. That was assuming there even was a "they" to worry about. Since the dealer had initially arrived alone there was a strong possibility that he mainly operated alone. Chances were good that the hood would assume Sol was some kind of cop and this guy, at least, would think twice before coming around there again. Still, Sol would have to be on watch for the next few hours. No relaxing tonight and he had to stay in motion. Now this began to bother him as well.

Could it be that unless one is wholly isolated from other humans we are never truly in control of our own lives?

Perhaps music would help, as it often did. Something mellow was called for. Cool jazz? Some form of folk music? Classical? He settled on a CD of Indian flutes and tablas. It was rare that he was truly in the mood, or need in this case, for this eclectic pleasure. But it always calmed him down. It was music from the other side of the world and Sol found himself wondering if there wasn't some poor schlep somewhere over in Asia, perhaps even a librarian like himself, who was also wishing he were somewhere else, like New York or some other American city. And then the phone rang.

It was his lawyer friend Paul calling to ask if Sol wanted to come out to a Manhattan nightclub party that night to help him celebrate a victory in court. What he really meant was that he wanted Sol to be the designated driver for him and his fellow lawyer friends while they got drunk and acted like fools. He knew Sol didn't mind since it always meant a free gourmet dinner and being around plenty of attractive women. Once in a while Sol would even meet someone halfway interesting. It was Monday night, but he wanted to get out for a while anyway. This time though, he didn't want to take his own car into the city, so he told Paul he needed to be picked up.

He changed into black jeans, casual shoes and a long-sleeved navy-blue pullover and returned to the roof, this time with

the guns back in their storage spaces. He was still somewhat tense after having had to pull them out.

A waste of his time, he thought, but better than having had to *really* pull them out. Now he had all this unused energy that would keep him wired for hours. He paced back and forth along the ledges looking for either of Paul's cars (as well as keeping an eye out for thug life). It was a clear, warm night and a half-moon was rising over Central Avenue.

After a long hour he saw the familiar black SUV crawl around the corner on Cook Street and his cell phone began buzzing in his pocket. He walked downstairs and grabbed a light blazer.

In the truck were the usual suspects: Dan Grainger, Andrew 'Andy' Philips and Tommy Zhào. They were all hotshot attorneys, all corporate. All except Paul, who worked for the District Attorney's office and who was already out of the driver's seat, motioning for Sol to take over.

"I have to make some calls," Paul said, smiling mischievously. His green eyes were already celebrating. His light brown hair was carefully smoothed and he was dressed as if he were in Miami. They shook hands and Paul thanked him for coming out.

"What're we having tonight, Sol? Italian? Middle Eastern?"

"Chilean. There's a place right across from Christ Hospital I've been meaning to check out. I heard they give big portions."

Sol had met Paul at Columbia law school eight years ago, Paul having originally come from Long Island before moving to Jersey City in ninety-eight. The others were Paul's friends mainly, whom he'd met at the lawyer hangouts here and in next-door Hoboken. They accepted Sol as one of their own inasmuch as he had a law degree and could keep up with the jargon of court life. Sol didn't talk that much anyway, and it was just left at that. The routine was usually that they fed Sol first at a place of his choosing so long as it had a bar or at least served alcohol. The others might order light fare but that was only to line their stomachs. The driver duly prepared, the revelers abandoned themselves to a carefree night of imbibing and imbecility. It wasn't that Sol disliked Paul's

friends, it was just that one gets to see how silly people can be when you're the only one sober in a group of drunken partiers.

These guys were sowing their oats and it's a natural thing so more power to them. But Sol had gotten all of that out of the way early and these days simply adopted a bemused observation of human behavior. Besides, Paul was one of a small number of people he still counted as friends, so he hung out with him when he felt so inclined.

When they got to the club, an old theatre building in Tribeca, the alpha male group found the party people just too freaky for their liking. Wacked out club kids, drag queens and downtown hipsters made the Jersey boys nervous. The woman that Paul had been hoping to meet there, and who had invited him, had changed plans and headed to Brooklyn with her friends. He wasn't about to go chasing after her. There were a good number of pretty and stylish women around, but they immediately made it clear that they weren't "into lawyers or suits". It being a Monday, none of the guys could think of anywhere else in the city to go. Declaring the night a bust, the men decided to trawl the Jersey City bars before going home. Sol took the Holland Tunnel again and by eleven o'clock they were downtown. They speed-surveyed the regular circuit, The Sand Lot, AJ Dooley's on Marin Boulevard, but everything was dead. Andy Philips suggested a place he had just heard about, The White Spur, off Mercer Street, which was supposed to be popular with the hospitality industry crowd, waitresses and bartenders. And that's where they hit the jackpot.

The place had a cattle ranch theme, ala Coyote Ugly, but with a sepia-toned self-mockery. Local artists hung on the walls and there were candles on the café-style tables. But most importantly, there were chicks *everywhere*; in groups at tables, at the bar, smoking cigarettes outside. There were a handful of other men present but of the four, two worked for the bar and one of two in a group near the door was definitely queer. All were quickly disregarded, as there were so many women to choose from. The guys felt like they were giddy fourteen-year-olds again, raiding a slumber party. Here the women weren't objecting to free drinks

and there was an air of casual mingling throughout the room. Paul's group commandeered two tables in a corner and made themselves comfortable.

After a half hour of macho posturing and distance-flirting they connected with a group of women on the other side of the bar and it became a party. Booze flowed, the CD jukebox greedily sucked in dollars and grew louder right along with the crowd. These women were from out of town, here for a marketing convention. They were staying at a nearby hotel and had ditched their male co-workers to raise hell in a new town.

Sol was as sociable as his personality allowed, which in truth wasn't all that much, but when it became apparent to the women that he wasn't drinking he was largely, if politely, ignored. While looking around the bar he noticed a raven-haired woman at a nearby table casting not-so-furtive glances in his direction. She was with two other women but seemed aloof of their animated conversation.

He was sure of it: she was checking him out. She was very pretty, too, beyond the gothic girl look she wore. It wasn't heavily done, like with the New Wave vampire makeup, but she was dressed in all black with subtle Victorian touches. Sol sensed her attraction yet wasn't quite sure what to make of it. He certainly didn't look like the tattooed and pierced rocker someone like her might favor. Or maybe he was stereotyping her and selling himself short.

She met his eyes and demurely looked away again. He began to think of how to make contact and couldn't decide on anything. The only thing that was certain was that now he was turned on.

She got up from her table and walked toward the bar, affording Sol a long look at a deliciously curved body in a short skirt and black stockings. He nearly knocked over his own table getting up to follow her. No one in his area noticed him leaving.

"You look like you're having about as much fun as I am," he said when he reached the bar. She turned toward him and smiled perfect wine-red lips. Eyes like blue flames seized him.

"I really didn't feel like coming out tonight. My best friend's sister is visiting and I'm helping her entertain. Barely." She laughed unselfconsciously.

"I'm baby-sitting," he told her.

"I knew there had to be something decent about you if none of those airheads is paying attention to you."

"You noticed."

"You know that I did."

The noise had increased in the place, and they had to raise their voices accordingly. He introduced himself and she told him her name was Rebecca. He asked her to linger at the bar with him for a bit as he was in no rush to return to his non-party. She gamely agreed on the condition that they talk about anything except what they did for a living.

"Believe me," he said, "work is the very last thing I want to talk about."

"Steller's Jay songs," she offered.

"Pardon? Never heard of him."

"Not a person, it's a bird. Steller's Jay, or *Cyanocittastelleri*. It's a western bird, related to our eastern Blue Jays. Your friends reminded me of them. Their songs aren't very melodic and include a jumble of low gurgles, pops, snaps, whistles, and other harsh sounds. Sorry, not to be mean, but that's what they sounded like."

She smiled beautifully. He grinned and turned to look at his company.

"Wow. You're right."

They shared a small laugh.

"Ulrich Schnauss!" he volleyed dramatically with a sitcom European accent.

She'd had a couple drinks already and guffawed slightly. "Who?!"

"German ambient composer I heard for the first time yesterday. He's worked with Robin Guthrie of Cocteau Twins."

"I love Cocteau Twins!"

"His music stayed in my head all day and what you said made me think of his song 'Monday - Paracetamil'. If it's melody

you want you might like his work, though you might find it a bit strange."

"I like strange. What's a paracetamil?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a pharmaceutical drug, exactly which I don't know but I'd bet a relaxant. For Mondays. Something I could have used today... Anyway, ..."

"Why don't you have a real drink?" she said neutrally.

"You know what? I think I will. Just to be wild and crazy," he deadpanned.

She smiled again and he ordered a vodka cranberry along with hers. They went on joking and talking of random things for a good half hour until Paul came swaggering over. It was so noisy now everyone was nearly shouting.

"Hey! You're Rebecca, right? I'm Paul, Sol's friend. Your friends told me your name. They're hanging out with us now, as you can see...," and he swept his arm grandly. "Guess what, Sol? You're fired!" Paul was having a good time now. "The girls from the convention have a hotel shuttle van and a driver *at their complete disposal!* Party bus, dude! You don't have to drive! Go ahead and let yourself chill out for a change, man! Live a little! We're all headed to the hotel bar in about a half-hour, they're open all night. Rebecca, your friends are coming, too. That's what I came over to tell you guys. They've got a karaoke stage!" And he strolled away bopping to some Smashmouth song that was playing.

Rebecca and Sol looked at each other with mutual apprehension and then shared gestures of mock dread and a laugh.

"I'm having a much better time just talking to you," he told her. "Would you like to go somewhere quieter?"

She looked at him for a long moment but didn't speak.

"I'm definitely not staying out all night," he said. "I have work in the morning unlike these rock stars."

Still, she only stared into his eyes as if looking for something.

He smiled at her reassuringly. "We're just talking, Rebecca. I know this cool little lounge nearby and I was on chauffeur duty

anyway. I'd be glad to drop you at home, or wherever, if you're not driving."

She turned and looked at the rowdy bunch of people who were already collectively belting out Top 40 songs. She returned her gaze to Sol, a serious and responsible man, it seemed to her.

"Let's get out of here," she said. And they discreetly made their way out the back door.

* * * *

The Side Bar on Newark Avenue had originally been planned by its owners as a draw for the attorney crowd, but it was just that much too far from both the corporate environs of downtown and the courts buildings on the hill that their vision never manifested itself to reality. Instead, it became popular with the area's recent young arrivals who couldn't afford the fashionable "loft-style" condos which had mushroomed around town and who also had little or no interest in exploring any of the city's other, less trendy neighborhoods. Some six months earlier, a popular neighborhood woman had been hired as the manager and she'd brought in all of her female friends as bartenders. They'd begun low-key promotions with themed nights, local DJ's and artsy events. When it wasn't too crowded, it was one of the few places that Sol might stop into occasionally on the weekend. And that was mostly because it was close to home for him. By now he was a familiar face.

When he and Rebecca walked in, he was greeted by name and one of the bartenders even reached across the bar to give him a kiss hello. This friendliness was not lost on Rebecca, and she was now even more comfortable with her new acquaintance.

They sat at the bar for a while sipping their drinks and conversing until about one o'clock when a sort of bohemian crowd started drifting in. The music changed from a downbeat thread to livelier trip-hop. When it became slightly crowded up front, they moved to an area in the back sectioned off by translucent white curtains.

By now the first two drinks had taken their effect on Sol and he'd loosened up considerably. She was at ease as well and their dialogue was fluid, moving easily from one topic to another. Their knees met often, and their hands conspired to frequent touches. People had started dancing casually throughout the lounge, not limiting themselves to the area provided in the center although there were some there.

She had started swaying to the music as well and he could tell she was enjoying herself. Subtle looks toward the dance floor told him she wanted to move around some. He was no dancer by any stretch of the imagination, but he wasn't afraid to serve as accompaniment, either. At some point he stood, took hold of her hand and led her to an area between their table and the dancers.

They let the beats rock their bodies together in sultry undulation. Neither cared about perfect moves.

Almost imperceptibly the songs slid into deep house, drawing the couple closer to each other in increasing arousal.

She allowed herself a sensual freedom. He wasn't pawing at her. He wasn't giving her the googly eyes. He wasn't trying to talk while dancing.

She pressed her body against his and felt a solid form of muscles. He inhaled her scent of lilac and womanhood.

The two didn't even realize they had been joined in dancing by a small throng of others.

The music intensified and so did the heat between them. Pheromones were flying and they were both perspiring slightly. She wanted him completely. He was raging with desire.

She led him back to the seats they'd left, their drinks mostly ice now. They slaked their thirst and then they started kissing in the corner.

She whispered his name. He had never really liked it until then.

"Come home with me," he said, "I live nearby. You can hold my keys."

She took his hand and walked him out to the car.

"Alright if I drive?" she asked.

“This is Paul’s car. But, here, you can open my door while I park this thing around back.” He escorted her through the front door and returned to the truck.

Upstairs, she had taken off her shoes and played Cat Power on the stereo. She seemed to know and enjoy that there were no neighbors. She prowled his living room. Everything was neat and minimal.

He stepped in, she walked up to him and grabbed him by his hair and they started kissing again.

They pressed and they kissed and they tore at each other. They slammed into walls and fell onto the floor. She bit at him gently in places and he tried to devour her.

They were naked in the hallway. She pinned him against the wall. They started having sex upright.

They pulled each other into his bedroom. She said everything, she said it all. He gave his all to please her, the most fascinating woman he’d met yet.

They banged and kissed and howled. They pushed each other to their limits and then pushed more. They kept at each other until a silent truce was understood and they fell to rest. Curiously enough, she was actually a blonde.

* * * *

They lay in bed purring and cooing. They murmured half-phrases to one another. She whispered something about the sheer ecstasy of sex without details. He laughed a little but when he opened his pulsating eyes some four hours later, shocked awake by a violent storm of nausea and throbbing pain in his head and limbs, she was gone. He was able to move his neck a little and if he only used one eye at a time he could look around and see that she’d left nothing whatsoever to indicate she was ever there. For a second, he thought he might have dreamt it all, but he knew he hadn’t. He’d just had too much to drink. The one clear thought that flitted across his blurred mindscape was that while love may be fleeting, lust is eternal.

The glowing symbols on the alarm clock slowly solidified and showed that the time was 8:19. That would mean he had to be at work in half an hour. He told his body to rise but nothing happened. He strained mentally to will motion but only physical anguish was the response.

Somehow his left hand completed the journey to the phone on the nightstand. Dialing by feel, he called his department's reception number for the second time in twenty-four hours.

Explaining that he'd had some dubious seafood last night and couldn't even make it past his bathroom door, he said he'd be taking a sick day, and someone would have to cover for him. Sol never took any days off, so he absolved himself of the guilt of the lie. His boss would be suspicious but so what? Oh yeah, him. One last thing, he told the receptionist. He asked her to leave a message for Vendi: that he would be taking care of the annex project on schedule starting the next day. To himself he told he would call the FBI offices in Newark later on and agree to the other thing, too. And he retreated back into oblivion, to wait for his body's return.

2.

Lorelei McSherman

“If she intends to remain fully feminine,
it is implied that she also intends to meet the other sex
with the odds as favorable as possible.”
- Simone DeBeauvoir, The Second Sex, 1952

“Turn yourself around, you weren’t invited.
Turn yourself around, you weren’t invited.
Good, good things happen in bad towns.
Good, good things happen in bad towns.
Runaway! Runaway! You want it.
Runaway! Runaway! You want it.”
- Yeah Yeah Yeahs, ‘Honeybear’,
Show Your Bones, 2003

She had started wondering, quite unexpectedly, about the meaningfulness of her life, wondered if maybe she hadn’t settled for safety and surety instead of striving for something more important, somehow, something more dynamic, maybe. She wasn’t so sure of herself now, she was restless, and it was beginning to show.

Things were more serious these days, not like the playful decade that had just passed. And though she tried not to be, she was cockier now, too, almost as if she had something to prove again. She couldn’t help it; she was a tough girl, tough daddy, big brothers, and so on. Dad and just about everyone else in the family had been in local law enforcement since forever it seemed, and she’d never really thought twice about it until recently. It had come naturally to her, being a sheriff’s deputy, even if she was the only woman in the family to do it since her aunt Helen in the seventies. Her father had objected but he knew better than to try to change her mind. She was a pretty woman, too, Lorelei; all Irish red and athletic. She could have just done pretty stuff, but she never really

believed it or spent too much time thinking about it. She was aware that men were obviously attracted to her, yet she was just fine with the guy she was with.

He was a cop, too, city, very handsome and moving up swiftly. They made a good couple, and both had strong local ties so this was where they might make a life together. She had just made detective two months ago and would work in that capacity for the sheriff's department until, probably, about the time they would be having their second child if things proceeded well. She'd felt happy with the way they had talked and spent so much time together through the winter but now something had changed with them since then. Maybe it was just her, maybe she was going through a phase or something, but lately she questioned the direction her life was taking, how *everything* was going, actually.

She couldn't help feeling, knowing, really, that she was getting passed over on assignments, and yet the town seemed to be getting more and more violent every single day. It was enough to investigate the occasional industrial burglaries, once in a while assist on inter-agency drug busts, transport prisoners to court, maintain the local peace and all, but now there were a lot more murders, shootings, gangs evident, an influx of all kinds of new people, even terrorists among them as was recently revealed. There was that and all the other law enforcement pains that came with a growing city.

It was that day she considered quitting the sheriff's office that things got interesting.

* * * *

There are those mercifully rare days when you feel like hell and people around you insist on telling you that you look great. Irrelevant compliments, flirtations, offered time to share when there's none to spare. Are you graceful, smiling, or do you bark like a sleepless dog? You love your fellow humans, just not this morning, nothing personal. It is one of those days. A long, uneasy

night due to someone else's problems and it would be nice to have a day of rest.

No such luck. Yesterday was the usual Monday chaos, today it's picking up a wife-beater who's violated a restraining order and, thusly, parole by swinging by to pick on his two children's mother, yet again. As an officer of the court enforcing a court order she was accompanying two state parole officers, females, by the way, to escort one mister Michael Crandon (age 30, 5'9", 165 lbs., medium slight build, Caucasian, dark brown hair, brown eyes, multiple tattoos on arms and neck, 2-inch scar on left shoulder) back to his favored lodgings at one of the state prisons.

Her own man had canceled on her last night, said he had a family situation to attend to. What was so terrible about waking up alone? One becomes accustomed to some bodies.

This other man, the one she was here to arrest, came by yesterday to punish his soon-to-be ex-wife for not wanting to have to wake up to his misery anymore. The woman had called the sheriff's office when she first sought out the restraining order and did so again early this morning after Mr. Crandon had gotten drunk last night and invited himself to stay over. Because his mailing address was constantly changing, he still did not know there was a restraining order against him. The woman was too scared to tell him.

Lorelei had met these other officers and been briefed at the state parole offices on Summit at Sip Ave. Though the call and initial action was through the sheriff's office the state assumed authority and she was coming along as interdepartmental cooperation aside from her role as an officer of the court. Whereas she was in uniform, stiff navy blue and black, very similar to city police, the parole officers were plainclothes: jeans and the oversized, gun-concealing tops. The season's warmth was hinting at its arrival.

It was routine, or supposed to be... nothing more than an escort. The other women were friendly enough, much more accustomed to constant daily interaction with the criminal kind. One was a bit butch but nice. Lorelei didn't have a regular partner

at the moment, as her position was currently undefined. Basically, she was a floater until she joined a detective squad and, in the meantime, remained a detective-grade general duty deputy.

Even if stretched out this whole thing would only take an hour or two. Usually the subject was cooperative, very familiar with the process. Lorelei would serve him with the violation of the restraining order, his parole officer would state his violation of parole and they would take him into custody. All four would proceed to the county jail, where Crandon would be placed in a holding cell until the paperwork and other reception procedures were completed and he was transferred to the general population to wait a few weeks for transport to a prison. Most of the time, when nothing violent is happening, the jail is a social place where cops and criminals all catch up with associates they haven't seen in a while. But today Mr. Crandon wasn't feeling very sociable, and he went rabbit.

The three women walked up the wooden steps of the old house in an everyday fashion. From his file they knew he had no weapons offenses and that he tended to direct his violence against females. His parole officer, a tall shorthaired and healthy brunette with ocean blue eyes, rang the doorbell with an air of Southern style relax. Less than a minute later Mr. Crandon pulled aside a yellowed white lace curtain to look out the small glass window on the wooden door. It took him an instant to process the blue uniform and his parole officer's accompanied presence in his mind's program and he jerked into a reaction.

There wasn't a second to lose and he went running for the back door. The way he dropped the curtain and turned made the women realize he wasn't going to open the door. Instinctively, Lorelei dropped over the side of the porch banister and called out, "I've got him!" and started for the back of the house. Crandon's parole officer, a Ms. Kersh, had to call it in and her partner, the butch beauty, bounded down the stairs to join the pursuit.

Hurtling the usual alley obstacles, the sheriff's deputy swore to herself as she set her mind to the task at hand. Men are often excused for being eluded or bested but a woman is usually

blamed for her being a woman in any failure. It made Lorelei try harder. She knew this and she always made sure it was her pushing herself first. It was always that way, no matter what people say. But this one, this one was all hers as she was the first to move and everyone knew what he was; another scumbag abuser that had to be put down again. And she was just the one to do it.

Crandon jumped the back fence and cut through the opposing yard, tearing off north on Hoboken Avenue with Lorelei behind him at thirty yards or so.

This was his neighborhood and Lorelei lost a few seconds coming out of the alleys and figuring out what direction he'd taken. Generally ignored in this city is a massive, raised railroad embankment, long abandoned and greatly overgrown, and which cuts a great swath a full city-block wide and a half-mile long west to east at the northernmost quarter of the town. It was through this urban thicket that Mr. Crandon thought he could lose his pursuers. But Lorelei was only getting warmed up.

She found the stone staircase entrance he'd taken and followed. At the top she had him in her sights and radioed her position. There was a wide path parallel to where the tracks lay nearly buried. While Crandon imagined he was moving fast he was actually a heavy smoker incapable of any real speed and Lorelei would soon overtake him. He looked behind him and saw her barreling down on him. So, he started considering his options. He had no weapon on him, and this she-cop seemed to sense that.

Lorelei eased into position alongside him to his left. He was already starting to wheeze.

"I can make you stop, but it's gonna hurt!" she shouted at him as they ran in tandem.

He gave her the finger and poured forth the last reserve of breath he had to sprint forward. She sped up as well. He stopped abruptly and swung his right elbow around and square into Lorelei's mouth knocking her feet out from under her.

"Now, bitch, what?!" He slouched forward, panting to catch his breath and then started running again.

It took Lorelei almost a whole minute to come out of the clanging and blur in her head. Luckily, she hadn't landed too badly and she was able to shake off the blow and the fall. There was Crandon ahead at twenty yards. So much for showing him mercy...

She went at him full steam, fueled by a hot rage. She caught up to him even quicker this time. He could hear her approaching behind him and tried speeding up again. But she was already next to him.

She spiked her right heel into his left ankle and he tumbled, sliding forward on his face for at least twelve feet. This time Lorelei stopped to regulate her breathing. Crandon grabbed his ankle and howled in pain. She started walking purposefully toward him. He hobbled up on one leg, threw his hands up as if to fight her and hurled all the filthiest insults he could think of. She could have drawn her gun at this point and procedure dictated that she should. But she had already decided to teach this guy a lesson. Without breaking stride, she drove a straight jab onto the bridge of his nose. There was a spurt of blood and a yelp from Crandon. He fell back a few feet, almost stumbling to the ground.

She spoke loudly, "Michael Crandon, you are under arrest for violating a restraining order and parole. We'll add assault on a police officer and eluding. Go ahead and kneel down with your hands on your head. Please..."

He lunged and swung at her, just as she had hoped. She merely leaned back to her left and threw her right knee deep into his abdomen and he dropped like a rock. That did stop him. He flailed a little but could scarcely take in air. With him on the ground, she placed herself over him, her left knee on his back to hold him down. Then she easily pulled his arms together and handcuffed his wrists. He began cursing at her again and even tried to spit behind him at her. She gave him a swift slap on the back of his head.

"That'll be enough. You've got resisting arrest now, too," she said. She read him his rights and waited for the others to get there.

The parole officers caught up to them within a couple minutes and they quickly assessed the situation. Crandon began

crying out about his rights having been violated. Disgusted, his parole officer assured him he would get his one phone call. As they were walking him down a different stairwell, she couldn't restrain herself and added that she wondered how all his buddies in jail would react when they found out he got beat up by a girl.

When asked down on the street, Lorelei insisted she needed no medical attention but only wanted to fill out the paperwork necessary to get this guy out of her sight. Her hair was a wild mess, she had a busted lip, and the entire back of her uniform was dirt-covered. She was in a truly foul mood now.

Then the back-up arrived, both hers and the parole officers'. Out of the Sheriff's Department car jumped Deputies Mitnaul and Carlotti. Mitnaul was a very large African American man who had appointed himself Lorelei's keeper, a Northern Baptist's chauvinist but benevolent disapproval of women on police forces. His partner was a diminutive second-generation Italian, fierce as a wild animal but with the mellowest exterior. Mitnaul was shouting before his door had even opened.

"Laura! Where the hell have you been, girl?! Why do we have to find out where you are from the parole office? The boss is going ballistic looking for you! Do you have any idea what kind of drama he's giving us? Why do I have to get all the crap?..." He saw her lip. "Damn! What happened to *you*?! Did this little?... I will..."

Lorelei rushed toward her friend and raised her hand against his chest.

"Relax, Mit. It's all over. What does the boss want?"

The hulking deputy looked quickly back and forth between Crandon and Lorelei's reassuring glare and decided to calm down.

"You weren't at roll call."

"I was pre-assigned! I had to meet State at 7:30."

"You had a half-hour to stop in."

"I don't have to check in when I'm already scheduled. That's not procedure..."

"C'mon, Laura..." He gave her a knowing look. "You know better than that. You know he likes to see everybody's face in the

morning. Ain't nothin' changed. You're not even in a regular unit yet."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious, and he's pissed. Says he wants you in front of him *right now*. We'll take this guy in with State."

"But I still have to fill out the reports."

"Now, Laura, please. I don't want to listen to any more of his nonsense today and you can do all that later. Okay? Byeeee!..."

Lorelei walked to her patrol vehicle feeling like a scolded child. Her boss, the sheriff, was a good guy. He cared about people greatly and treated her with the utmost respect. But he could also be overbearing and far too fatherly. That was because he actually knew her father, of course. She chalked it up to 'the way it works'.

She dusted herself off, smoothed her hair and checked herself in the mirror in the car. A disaster she was. She wiped and brushed herself as best she could, but it was still obvious to anyone that she'd just been in some kind of scuffle. And now her wannabe uncle boss was about to unload some completely disconnected frustration on her yessing, lower-rank self.

The radio crackled. "This is headquarters. Deputy McSherman, are you out there? Repeat, this is base."

"Yes, Donna, this is Laura. I just got back to the car and I'm headed over there. Five -ten minutes, okay?"

"Copy, Deputy. Sheriff Cottington is looking for you."

"Yes, I know, dispatch. Thank you."

"Hurry up, Laura, please. He's driving us crazy."

"I'm...on...my...way, Donna. Out."

She took a deep breath and started the engine.

* * * *

She hurried across the little plaza in front of headquarters, aware that her boss's office looked out directly over it and he was probably watching her arrive. He really was like family to her, but he never hesitated to remind her that he was her superior first. Him and his bushy pushy eyebrows.

"Where have you been?!" he immediately asked crossly.

"You already know where," she replied.

"You know what I mean! Why didn't you check in with me this morning?" He must have been rehearsing this in his head.

"I had my assignment already."

"Oh. I see. So, at this point, you're able to tell your station and your commanding officers where you'll be..."

Something was wrong. She knew this man well and right now he was acting like a complete jerk. Smaller than average height but with an immense spirit, he had seen plenty, good and bad. And now his gray hair was ruffled and his pointy face more pinched than usual.

"Sheriff, what is this really about? What's the matter, Dan?"

"I have bosses and so do you. I'm your boss, right? So try to show a little respect."

"Yes, sir. I apologize if I sound disrespectful and for breaking protocol. I went straight to the State Parole offices. Now please tell me what you needed to see me about that is so urgent."

"I have a regular assignment for you for the next two months. It's short notice and I don't have anyone with, uh, more seniority to fill the spot. I've got the County stressing me on this and I most *definitely* don't want to hear anything from you about me trying to keep you out of the action. I'm serious, Lorelei. I'm not going to lie to you and say that I'm not pleased that this assignment will get you off the streets for a while, but you know very well that I don't like to be pushed around. They want a single detective from us for county jurisdiction."

"What is it?"

"Security guard at the public library, but you'll be undercover at the same time."

"What?"

"There's a theft investigation being conducted over there by the F.B.I. You'll be the security guard on the surface but simultaneously working the case for them and the county."

"Really? Well, that sounds like fun!" *A working vacation!* she thought.

“Glad you think so. Anyway, I’m out of the loop. You’ll be reporting to a federal agent, Pines is his name, since the sheriff’s office is too small for you these days.”

“Aw, stop it, Dan. You made your point, and you know I love you. When do I start?”

“Your briefing is tomorrow morning at six, fourth floor of the library. You’re being partnered with some kind of P.I. That’s all I know. Here, this is for you: preliminary letter of hire. You’re getting some federal money for this on top of your salary. Feel free to thank me with some tickets to Shea Stadium. And maybe you can find it within your busy schedule to let us know you’re okay once in a while. Now go clean up whatever you have here, including yourself, and take the rest of the day off.”

“Yes, sir. Thanks, Dan. I’ll call you tomorrow to let you know how it goes.”

* * * *

It didn’t take long for Lorelei to close out all the details she had pending at headquarters. She had no unfinished casework, a few court dates that had to be reassigned and the reports for the morning fight took about an hour.

Sitting in the parking garage in her own car, a maroon Wrangler, she allowed herself a tired smile. She was excited about the job she’d just been given. Any change of pace was welcome at this moment. She tore open the envelope Cottingham had given her. It didn’t have her name on it nor did the letter inside. It was addressed: Officer of the Law. And it read like a conscription to military service, replete with twenty-first century galgese.

Whatever, she had the basic information already. Tomorrow she could get it all in English. Right now, the only thing she wanted was a hot shower. Dirty, sweaty, tired, hungry and grouchy, she just wanted to be home.

Her little apartment on the first floor of a colonial house off West Side Avenue seemed like Paradise at the moment. The

neighbors upstairs, who were also the owners of the house, were an adorable elderly Polish couple who cherished her presence and were nothing if not respectful of her privacy. Both yards, front and back, were large enough and perfectly foliated to allow her to find peace in them when she wanted to sit outside. The neighborhood was just that, a place where people knew and looked after one another. She would miss it if she moved. Her boyfriend, Anthony, fiancé now, had already been talking about moving in together to a larger place. She'd been single so long that it had become difficult to consider giving up her independence, but he really did seem like the right man.

There was no bread at home and the dog food was running low. She figured she would make a quick run to the supermarket and get some take-out as well. There was a Philippine place on the same block as the A&P where the owners let Lorelei mix and match entrees and appetizers if it wasn't too busy. She figured she'd also pick up a bag of snacks for her black Labrador, Mister.

She found a parking space near the restaurant and walked down the street to the supermarket, where she strolled along the aisles finding more items than she had planned to get. As she walked out with a number of bags, she noticed a couple right outside the restaurant arguing. Young Filipinos, late teens, early twenties, maybe. When she got closer, she saw the man grab the woman's arm and her trying to pull away. She was considerably taller than him, but he was obviously the dominant. Lorelei was within fifteen feet of them when the man noticed her and muttered something in Tagalog to his girlfriend.

"Are you alright, miss?" Lorelei asked.

"She okay," the man replied.

"I was asking her!" Lorelei snapped.

The girl looked nervously at her boyfriend's scowl and then at Lorelei and smiled saggingly. "I'm okay," she said with sad clown lipstick.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, yes, I mean. Thank you, though. We're just gonna go home now. Thank you." And she hurried to open the passenger

side door of a silver Mitsubishi Eclipse parked in front of them. The man pointedly looked at Lorelei's lip, met her eye and turned and walked around to his side of the car. He looked at Lorelei smugly again as he opened the driver's door. They glared at each other for a second and he got in. As they drove off Lorelei made a mental note of the license plate and immediately wrote it down once she'd set her bags down in the restaurant.

She was greeted boisterously by the couple behind the counter and Lorelei asked them if they knew who the young man was that had just left. They immediately negated, which made her suspect that they did know him. In these small ethnic communities, everyone usually knows everyone else. Lorelei let it go and turned her attention to picking out her lunch. Every once in a while, she caught an urge for this salty fare.

As she neared her house, she saw the Wielwowskis out front pruning and clipping. Mister, the dog, was lazing on the porch when he saw her approach and jumped up with two hearty barks in greeting then ran around back to the garage to meet her. She parked halfway down the driveway, gathered all the bags from the car and walked to the front to say hello to her friends. Mister lavished her with attention, as he knew she was home early and could smell food all over her.

They were in full gardening gear and since they hardly saw Lorelei lately, they dropped their tools to receive her. They were among the few who called her by her full name.

"Lorelei! What a wonderful surprise! How are you? We never see you anymore!" Mrs. Wielwowski exclaimed mildly.

"Hello, Deputy!" Mr. Wielwowski beamed.

"Hiya! Only a half-day today! Gotta grab 'em when you can..." she answered with a smile.

"Oh, no! What happened to your lip, hawny?!" Mrs. Wielwowski missed nothing.

"Well, I had to beat up a boy today. You know how it is, Elena...", she winked at the elder woman.

Mrs. Wielwowski huffed sharply and turned to her husband. "You see what savages and despicable creatures you men are?!"

"Savages," he repeated.

"Why aren't you helping her with her groceries, then, Frederick?"

He immediately moved to take Lorelei's bags, but she stopped him. "No, Mr. Wielwowski, thank you. I've got them. I'm just going inside to pig out on some take-out. I already know you guys don't like the salty stuff or I'd offer you some. Let me get Mister inside before he has a conniption, okay?"

"Of course, hawny, of course! We were just getting ready to go out ourselves," lied Elena. Her husband's surprised eyebrows gave it away.

From inside, she could hear them bickering lightly in Polish. They only pretended to argue to keep themselves amused and you never saw one without the other. Lorelei had lived with them long enough to discern that they were once again debating who was going to drive.

It always made Lorelei smile when she thought of their marriage. They were young lovers with no one but each other when they escaped the German and Russian invasions at the onset of World War II. Fiercely devoted to one another, they survived the hardships of immigrant life to raise two children through college and now lived off savings, his pension and the rent from the first floor of the house. Lorelei once again found herself wondering if she and Anthony would reflect that devotion at that age and mentally brushed away the thought. Mister was haranguing her for his payoff.

The dog lay at her feet punishing a large piece of rawhide as Lorelei picked at her food at the kitchen table, washing it down with a kind of ginger soda the restaurant imported from the Philippines. In repose she began identifying certain points of pain around her body, developed from the earlier conflict. She decided she would run a hot bath instead of taking a shower.

She located a mix tape a friend had made for her of a slew of Lorelei's favorite bands and popped it into the waterproof player in the bathroom. Picking out a rose scented bubble lotion, she drew out all the hot water in the tub. Mister asked to be let out to the yard again and she gladly liberated him. She lit one of the large candles on the bath stand and settled in for at least an hour of complete relaxation.

* * * *

She opened her eyes to find her fiancé, Anthony, sitting across from her with a bouquet of flowers along his arm. He had a subdued look on his face and smiled gently as her mind focused. He was still in uniform.

"Hello, beautiful." His dirty blonde hair was tossed from wearing his cap all day.

"Hi, babe," she said drowsily. "How long have you been there?"

"I lost track," he teased.

"What time is it?"

"Couldn't tell you."

She started to say something but just smiled instead. She blushed when she realized the bubbles had dissipated and she felt a sudden warm tinge all over her body.

"Get out," she told him. "I'm going to dry off before you see my wrinkles."

"I saw you had lunch already, but I'll be right back with dessert." He knew where all the Italian bakeries were in the area and which were closest to her apartment.

By the time she'd finished changing into shorts and a t-shirt and had dried her hair, he was back with an assortment of pastries and a bottle of Sauternes. He was spoiling her; Mitnaul had probably called him immediately to tattletale, as he did with everything else. Anthony walked over to her and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Mitnaul's got a big mouth, doesn't he?" she complained.

"He sure does, but I like that about him," he replied.

"I'll bet you do. He's like your nanny for me."

"He's just tending to his flock, Lorelei," he smiled at her beatifically, pressed his palms together in a gesture of prayer and looked up at the ceiling. Mitnaul was an ordained minister and preached in his church on Sundays. "Don't worry, I got mine, too. You know, how I *allow* you to do such dangerous work, and how I should have you at home making babies, and so on. But anyway, do you want to talk about what happened?"

"No. I was sucker punched." She paused. "And I took him down, that's all."

"Good for you. Listen, I'm all sweaty from work. Gonna take a quick shower, okay? You go ahead and treat yourself. I'll be out in a few minutes." She had set aside a closet for him in the hallway near her bedroom and he kept some basic items of clothing there.

He was back in less than ten minutes but obviously refreshed. She was contemplating a frosted biscotto as she nibbled on it and he kissed her again lightly as he helped himself to a glass of the dessert wine. He stood behind her and started to massage her neck and shoulders.

"Oh, my god, I think I'm going to melt off this stool," she moaned gently.

"Well, melt onto the couch because you're getting the full treatment." He nudged her toward the sofa. He rubbed her back, her arms, legs and her feet. She felt she was beginning to dream when he suddenly stopped. Delicately, he coaxed her to turn around. He finished his attentions with the front of her arms and legs. She tugged on his shirt and drew him close to her.

"You awful, awful man," she whispered. And she began kissing his face, then his neck and his chest. Slowly, leisurely, they rubbed against each other with small wet kisses. They petted and caressed each other. He slid to the floor, knelt, took her in his arms, rose and carried her into the bedroom.

They undressed each other leisurely, lovingly, moving over each other's bodies with the freedom of a summer afternoon. They made love on a desert island.

* * * *

He lay beside her sleeping quietly as she gently stroked his hair. She found herself thinking about the future again and, despite reminding herself to appreciate the present moment, she was wondering where she would be in that nagging standard prognosis of five years. An hour passed and he awoke. They talked for a while and she told him of her new assignment. He laughed in genuine amusement and, speaking of which, why don't they see what movies are on cable tonight? She told him not to make fun of her and that if he wasn't careful, she'd make him watch a chick flick with her. They settled on a sci-fi thriller and ordered a Chinese food delivery.

3.

Generalities

“Every artist undresses his subject, whether human or still life.

It is his business to find essences in surfaces,
and what more attractive and challenging surface
than the skin around a soul?”

- Richard Corliss, On Andrew Wyeth’s studies of Helga Testorf, Time 18 August
1986

“Card, stocking, and drink
Cause many to sink;
But right use of the same
Has never brought shame.”

- Dutch proverb

The Jersey City Free Public Library, on Jersey Avenue between Montgomery and Mercer Streets, was a latecomer to the American library movement of the mid 1800’s. It was founded at the start of the twentieth century (really 1889, when they first began discussing it) by a group of local businessmen and professionals forming a library company, inspired and led primarily by one Doctor Leonard J. Gordon at a time when the city was at the forefront of American industry and culture.

Designed by the premier team of architects Henry Bright and James Bacon in the Beaux-Arts Classicism style (all solid stolid Greek temple-like on the outside, the inside full of walnut-and-brass rails, marble walls, columns and floors) the building, cornerstone laid August 16th of 1899, was completed in December of 1900 and the opening ceremony was on January 14th of 1901, when still mostly only men were librarians.

It might have interested Sol to know that it was the second largest library in the country at that time, after the New York Public Library, of course, and that the city’s first law library was in fact originally at the main public library. But at this time, he would not

have been able to care less. He was consumed by the feeling that he'd already served the general public to a good extent and that he was now entitled to some private time and any other rewards for his efforts. He'd paid his dues, and it was all about him now; number one. After all, if you don't take care of yourself first, how can you ever possibly help anyone else?

And yet, he'd rented himself out again just the same. Only for a little while, anyway, he reasoned. It seemed not even his revered librarians were above naming a price for themselves so why should he be any different? It felt like a punishment to have to work with the public again but Sol would complete this assignment and collect his just desserts. Why not?

* * * *

The briefing that Wednesday had had to be held sufficiently before opening hours that no one would notice. Both Laura and Sol had had to skip their morning workouts and report to the fourth floor of the library at sunrise, right around six that day. The only person on the street was some slight guy on Newark Avenue who looked like he'd been out all night, still in button-down shirt and tie, and who was now waiting for the first bus anywhere. At 575 Jersey Avenue a discreet federal security officer was at the front door to receive them when each arrived, Sol a few minutes early and Lorelei right on time.

At the top of the stairs Sol noted that the two former art galleries had been altered into the Historical Projects/New Jersey Room and into the Government Documents Room, the latter of which he presumed would now become or incorporate the new satellite law library. The meeting was in the New Jersey Room, the walls covered with old maps and pictures. Only Special Agent Pines was there.

When Lorelei arrived, dressed in a dark burgundy business suit, she opened the old wooden door to find a mid-thirtyish blonde man in casual business attire leaning against a desk and facing a seated man in his late twenties or early thirties who seemed to have

been plucked out of a 1950's newspaper photo, but somewhat bulky under his jacket and with a very serious demeanor.

"Good morning," she smiled at them. Agent Pines came over to her lightly returning a smile and extended his hand. The stranger with the glasses stood but remained where he was. Agent Pines introduced himself and then Sol.

"Laura, this is Sol Isistrato. Sol is currently the county law librarian as well as a former legal investigator. Sol, this is Detective Lorelei McSherman of the Hudson County Sheriff's Office."

Sol reached out for Lorelei's hand but did not smile. She was gorgeous and he had to remind himself to maintain a professional stance. "Hello, Ms. McSherman. Miss?" *She seems rather young to already be a detective*, he thought.

"Hi, Sol. Yes, it's Miss, but I'm engaged. And everyone calls me Laura, by the way." *He's kinda stiff*, she thought.

Pleased to meet you." *Is that a fat lip she's got?*

"I'm giving each of you a folder with the other's dossier," began Agent Pines. "I suggest you discuss them with one another as soon after this briefing as possible. We need to be out of here before seven so you'll have to forgive me if I get right to it. Please, take notes and I'll answer any questions as soon as I'm done."

"You are both county employees and while you'll be working with that authority you are also acting as temporary employees of the federal government because of the jurisdiction and international factors involved. To that extent, I strongly encourage you, and officially instruct you as much, to conduct yourselves according to the guidelines for temporary agency laid out on the second page of this next set of papers I'm handing you. You are being partnered only for this one case assignment, meeting at least twice weekly to gather your information, and reporting to me directly as needed, at a minimum of once per week. Sol's had plenty of interaction with federal offices but he's never actually worked for us before. Also in these folders are a number of other forms, including disclosure and confidentiality agreements, which will all need to be completed before we leave here this morning. Sorry 'bout all the legal formalities and paperwork but I'm sure you

can understand why it's necessary. Any questions so far?... Okay, on to the case history."

As young as he might be, Agent Pines gave the impression that he'd held hundreds of these briefings, probably always with the same fresh-faced efficiency that bordered on zeal.

"The Jersey City Museum, now at 350 Montgomery Street, originally occupied this fourth floor of the library. It was part of the library from 1901, when they both first opened, until 1987, when they became separate fiscal entities. During the fifties, the city suffered from sharp economic declines and the museum was forced to store its Permanent Collection and severely limit its operations. In 1993, the Jersey City Redevelopment Agency donated the current building to the museum but it was in such a state of disrepair that it wouldn't be ready for occupancy for another seven years. The renovation was completed in December of 2000, and in January of 2001 the museum organization began the slow work of moving into its new home. The grand opening for the new museum was on October 19th, 2001, but because of the terrorist attacks the previous month it went largely unnoticed.

"In February of this year, the Dutch Royal family of Queen Beatrix, House of Orange-Nassau, received a letter of offer by an unidentified party to sell an oil painting by Jan Steen, a Dutch painter of the mid-seventeenth century. The seller claims the piece is actually of Dutch Royal property and 'improperly obtained' by entities in the United States, further claiming to be able to prove as much. As a quick side note, American law, unlike the majority of other countries, dictates that you can't sell what was never yours. That and the old rule of *caveat emptor*, or buyer beware, provide redress for an individual to reclaim any property they can prove belongs to them. So the royals immediately contacted the American government through their embassy, demanding that we conduct an investigation or pay the ransom for the stolen painting. On top of that, they got their own bureaucratic machine riled up to file suit against Hudson County for damages.

"The fact of the matter is that art crime has always been an increasingly lucrative enterprise. One might think diamonds or

bank heists, but the organized theft of artifacts and fine art is now third in place behind drugs and guns, and the FBI has had to keep up with its practitioners. My unit at the Bureau is a prototype for an art theft program currently in development. We were assigned the case in March and at this point in the investigation we needed to hire a couple of locals. I'll be your liaison and handler for the duration of your involvement, available at all times and meeting with you on a regular basis, just not in this same manner. I cannot stress enough that we will no longer have these exposed meetings in this area and you are never to call me at the FBI offices unless it's an absolute emergency. You'll have a dedicated mobile number that is always within my reach and available for any particular needs. Equally important is that the two of you are never seen together outside near this building, either, for obvious reasons. Inside, your contact should be limited to Laura's security patrols and normal passing. And, if you feel the need to surveil any of the subjects it will be coordinated through me. There will of course, come the time when you're ready to conduct the formal interviews. All clear still?"

The recruits both nodded.

"So now to the make-pretend part: It's pretty simple and easily confirmed in case anyone feels the need to go snooping around behind either of you. My partner and I have already interviewed all the subjects. They'll remember our faces and know what we're doing here. As far as they all know the case has moved into the courts. However, we've had a minor break recently and we're anticipating some serious activity in this building in the very near future. We need eyes and ears moving around in here from top to bottom and from open to close. We'll also have active surveillance of the building outside at any and all times if and when we feel it becomes necessary.

"The library employs both city police and the county sheriff's office for its security guards and you, Laura, will be taking a varying forty-hour schedule here plus some overtime, if necessary. A cakewalk: mostly sitting at the desk at the entrance and occasional patrols to stretch your legs, say hello to your partner

when you get to the fourth floor. The gaps in your post will be parsed among officers looking for extra work and who have no knowledge whatsoever of our investigation. Ordinarily these positions are assigned to officers approaching retirement or as the aforementioned random supplemental income. In your case, you're a graduate student with an erratic schedule and you've been given this detail as part of your training with the Sheriff's office. Fortunately for all of us, you had already decided to seek out the detective grade as soon as you entered the department. Since you haven't actually worked any cases yet, though, no one outside your department and your circle of family and friends actually knows that you're a detective. Congratulations on your first case, by the way."

Sol groaned internally at this. *Wonderful. They're giving me a complete amateur for this. Does it get any richer?*

"Sol, being the actual law librarian, will be taking charge of the newly opening law library annex. Since the Courts Administration and not the library system employ him, he didn't have to apply for the job or submit any information to the personnel director, who is also the head librarian. Nor does he have to report to anyone here and he is completely autonomous in the law library, which includes the cleaning schedule by the building's maintenance staff. The law library will have forty set hours that Sol will determine and the two of you will be the only ones with keys to his door.

"I just want to point out that there won't be any immediate gratification here so you'll have to be patient and think in the long term. So that we're completely clear and there's no undue pressure, the Bureau is not expecting you two to break this case alone. Not that you couldn't, either, and by all means we would not have specifically approached both of you if we didn't feel you were entirely capable of doing just that. But for the most part and the time being you're mainly observers taking notes as part of a larger investigation. As such, you're not to take any direct actions before clearing them with me first. Understood?"

Yes, they said.

"Right now, the most important objective involves an upcoming meet. We just need to know who, when and where. We want the meet to take place smoothly so we can find out how to recover the artwork most efficiently. You'll be looking for anything out of the ordinary: unusual patrons, maybe one of these librarians has a peculiar visitor, that sort of thing. We estimate it will take two to three weeks for you to get a grasp on the general daily workings of this place. As a precaution, I won't tell you who our leading suspects are so that you can achieve impartiality. The last item I'll give you now is a folder with data sheets for each of the twelve librarians. I don't think I have to tell you not to bring any of these papers with you when you're scheduled to be here. Get familiar with these files so you know who you're dealing with.

"There are a few more specifics I need to get out of the way today, I'll answer your questions and then we'll do the paperwork.

"The perpetrators of the theft are trying to unload a single piece to the Dutch royals but they've alluded to other paintings being available. To be precise, there was no indication they were referring to works by the same artist but paintings, quoting, of a 'similar nature'.

"And so now I have to tell you exactly what that nature is... Do either of you know anything about erotic art?"

"I barely know anything about art in general," answered Sol.

"I'd have to say the same, Agent Pines," said Lorelei.

"You can call me Robert, Laura. And Sol, I know for a fact that you've work a few cases involving stolen art."

"Only a few."

"Alright then, the basics. In this third folder you'll find a photo print copy of a picture sent to the royals with the ransom letter. As you can see, it's a sexually oriented painting but we'll concentrate on the composition and coloring in the event we have to identify the piece.

"Broadly speaking, even inside the art world the subject of erotic art is rather hush-hush. A great many famous artists have produced countless sensual works either for profit or pleasure but

it's not widely discussed, much less very well documented. In the ancient world, Chinese, Greco-Roman, and such, there are countless examples. In modern history, however, it's been widely regarded as pornography and illegal in most countries. European countries have much laxer definitions on what qualifies as pornography but the U.S. has always been a bit stricter. Technically, this painting we're looking for is still restricted material. And aside from the base criminal aspects of the theft, there are more delicate details which you'll both be able to appreciate.

"The second most important aspect is that of provenance. Because we've been dealing with the preliminaries of the case we haven't been able to dedicate much time or effort toward establishing the line of ownership for this painting. Sol, you can see this is right down your alley. Not only are we conducting a theft investigation but we also have to build a legal defense against the suit by the Dutch government. We have to trace the movements of this piece and make absolutely sure that the Dutch actually have a case to bring forth. And then, of course, we have to determine how the work was removed from the museum in the first place, who took it, where it is now, and how we can get it back. Hence, your assigned partnership. So, questions..."

"How do you know it's a librarian involved?" asked Lorelei.

"The letter of solicitation I mentioned is signed 'Keeper of the Books', the method of response is directed through actual books in the library. It doesn't get any more obvious than that. Again, you'll see all of the evidence very soon. We just want a blind reconnaissance from the two of you right now."

"Is there an actual timeframe for the meet?" Lorelei again.

"The suggestion was Bastille Day, the French holiday of independence. Don't ask me why, it was specified in the letter and falls on July fourteenth. Yeah, Sol..."

"Not to be crass about it, but what exactly will be my payment schedule?" Sol asked. "I budget myself."

"Of course... I, uh, I guess it would be bi-weekly. I'm not really sure. I'll check with accounting and get right back to you on that, okay? Anything else?"

Neither Lorelei nor Sol had any more questions.

"Alright, then. Let's... um.... fill out the paperwork, shall we? Oh, I almost forgot. The nephew of the queen wants to meet the investigators. He's invited you for lunch at his penthouse at Harborside, twelve sharp. Just remember it's business, not social. And be discreet, please."

The forms completed, Special Agent Pines began to wrap up the meeting. He gathered all his papers, slid them into a dark tan leather briefcase. He saw that his two new hires were also ready to go.

"Well, welcome aboard. Thank you both for taking this on and joining our team. You're on duty now, but it won't be as strict as next week when you're in place here. Work your schedules out and get them to me by Friday. I'm going to walk you out to a rear exit closer to where I asked you to park."

A delivery area in the back of the library had a small bay door and a side entrance for personnel. Pines reminded them to contact him in a couple days and ushered them out, closing the door behind them.

There was a shy moment on the street as they knew they had to move away from the building quickly but didn't know where they were to go.

Pines knew this would happen and had directed it as though a brief scene in a short play. Sol truly resented being handled. He liked Pines somewhat, easily enough a good guy, just not the circumstances under which they'd met. He knew the man was just doing his job, but that job was to tell Sol what to do and what not to do. And to not tell him certain things that Sol felt he might want to know. Such as what the big rush was. Apparently there hadn't even been enough time for a formal introduction between their two supposedly select investigators. They'd been thrown together like a pair of dice. Lorelei took the lead.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Always," he replied.

"There's this great diner in Secaucus on Route 7, it's in an industrial zone and out of the way, if you want."

"I think I know it. I'll follow you, I'm in that black four-door over there."

"That's my Jeep."

* * * *

At the diner, the coffee was strong and rich. The morning customers were only now trickling in. Sol noted that the kitchen looked especially well kept and indulged himself with a stack of pancakes. Lorelei said she loved the place's egg-white omelet rancheros.

"So you used to be an investigator?" she asked.

"Mm hmmm..."

"What was that like?"

"Most people usually mistook me for a cop."

"What kind of cases did you work?"

"Everything from insurance claims to criminal negligence."

"Did you like it?"

"At first. Then I noticed it was the same conclusion over and over."

"Which is...?"

"People will rob their own mothers for money."

"I'll bet."

He ventured a guess. "You've got family in law enforcement."

"Yes, I do. How did you know?"

"Just a hunch. You look like you've got it in your blood."

"Really?..."

"Sure." He took a few forkfuls so he wouldn't have to elaborate and she probably wouldn't ask further. Then he looked around for the waitress. There was bebop playing on a transistor radio next to the toasters at the back counter. Sounded like Dizzy or Bird, you couldn't hear it too well.

She was studying his face and his movements. Economic motion, like a cat. Handsome, but almost without facial expression. Features of some vague European stock. The glasses obscured his eyes.

He turned to her and asked if she wanted to order anything else. One more coffee she answered.

"What's your take on all this, Laura? From what you can tell so far, really, right now. Because I'll be up front with you and tell you I feel like we were invited to the party at the last minute just to help clean up the mess afterwards."

"What do you mean? It's just a stolen property investigation with a damages claim. You must have done this kind of thing before..."

"Yeah, but usually the stuff has a halfway decent chance of being recovered. These high price items very rarely get returned. That much I know."

"So you're saying we shouldn't even bother trying?"

"No, not that. We have to try. I just have this nagging suspicion that maybe they're just using us and our job titles to close out the case and a settlement, sort of fill the blanks and we sign off on the last lines on the last day."

Her lightly auburn eyebrows furrowed the tiniest bit, her bright green eyes became a little darker and he could tell he'd just taken some of the joy out of all this for her. Her lower, half-swollen lip rose up.

"That's kind of a pessimistic way to start off, isn't it? What about the meeting Pines was talking about?"

"How are we supposed to know what we're looking for without having seen that letter? I don't like walking into anything blindly."

"Maybe you're just being impatient."

"Maybe. Or maybe I know the Feds are always playing chess, making moves weeks and months ahead of time. They've got these little scripts for us to play out, so I'll play it out. Sounds like free money to me."

"Uh, huh... So you're saying you're just going to be going through the paces on this?"

"Look, I'm a professional and I'll do everything required of me in this case, as with any work I do. But I'm not going to delude myself that we're going to crack an international stolen art ring and collect a reward in the span of eight weeks. It takes years to do that."

Moreover, to do my job properly I need all the information at the start of things and I resent it when it's withheld. So, until I do get that information, I'm not gonna work myself up over it. Besides, I have to somehow magically squeeze two large rooms of books, files, periodicals and equipment into some corner of one room on the fourth floor within forty-eight hours and then sit in that corner eight hours a day twiddling my thumbs and *afterwards* have to work on this thing in my private time. So you'll forgive me if I'm not exactly overjoyed. I assure you, Laura, I will do everything I know how to the best of my ability. I didn't want this job but I do need the money. And if they want me shuffling papers for two months that's what they'll get. I'll just be happily collecting the paychecks."

How callous! She didn't know exactly how or why but she felt offended. What kind of attitude was that? How could she work with someone like him? And was there any substance to what he was saying?

"Okay, well," she replied, "we all have our personal styles. You know this is my first case and I'm going to take it completely seriously and objectively, despite your view of it. I appreciate your opinion and I hope I can count on your assistance, if I should need it."

"Fair enough. You have my complete and unconditional cooperation. Where do we start?"

The waitress walked over with Sol's order of eggs over easy, sausage, toast and home fries and Lorelei's coffee.

"Review the files."

How about tomorrow night?"

"What?!"

"I missed my workout this morning. I don't feel right when that happens. Plus we still have that lunch with Prince Frou Frou later. That by itself should count as a day's work."

"That's four hours from now."

"Three. We should reconnoiter an hour beforehand to go over what you learn from the files."

She started to give him a piece of her mind and stopped herself. There are all kinds of people out there, she reminded herself, and once in a while you find yourself forced to work with one of the difficult ones. If there was a personality clash, there was still a job to be done.

“Alright, Sol. I can see where you’re coming from. Here’s my card. Call me around eleven, whenever you’re ready.” She finished her coffee, put a ten-dollar bill on the table and left.

* * * *

Harborside is what it sounds like, except that in Jersey City it’s surrounded not by quaint seashore shacks but by towering steel office and luxury residence towers which reductively mirror the older skyscrapers of Manhattan that they gaze across the river at. This and Exchange Place was where a large number of financial companies had relocated in the early nineteen-nineties to save money off New York rents. There are no actual docks or marinas in this neighborhood; all the boat slips and launches are a quarter mile north at Pavonia-Newport.

Knowing the scarcity of parking in the area, they’d agreed to take one car and he picked her up at home. He couldn’t help admiring how lovely she was in a classy white skirt ensemble. She noticed he had changed his tie for one with tiny blue diamonds. While they were driving Sol mentioned that he’d taken a cursory glance at the case history and noticed that the ‘Prince’, as he’d referred to him, was actually a Duke, as well as the person who’d taken charge of the matter on behalf of his aunt, the Dutch Queen. She’d seen that as well, said Lorelei.

They had a half hour to kill when they got to the waterfront and sat on a bench at the piers below the duke’s building. There was a yacht lazing in the river and a ferry farther south approaching Ellis Island but otherwise no water traffic. Even the clouds were taking their time crossing the sky.

She asked if he’d taken a look at the profiles of the suspects and he answered ‘no’, that in this case he preferred to meet them in

person first, and then review the collected data. She mentally checked it off to methodologies.

"Well, they're definitely a... uh... I guess a wide assortment would be the best way to put it."

"Good. So we know they're not clones."

"I read your file, too, Sol. But you probably figured I would."

"And?"

"Not bad for someone with no family."

"Do what you can with what you get."

"Exactly. Lotta huge gaps, though..."

No reply. They sat in silence until it was time to head upstairs. In the lobby the doorman was waiting for them. By name, he asked each of them their shoe sizes. He explained that the housekeeping staff maintained a supply of velvet slippers for the Duke's visitors, at his royal behest. The slippers were discarded after each use, he assured them. A security guard escorted Lorelei and Sol to the elevator and up to the penthouse.

Inside they were led by a sturdy fortyish East Asian man to an expansive great room in the center of which was an assortment of priceless-looking chairs and lounges all facing a gigantic wall-ensconced television screen. The majordomo disappeared. There in front of the TV was a twenty-something man sprawled along a large chaise, dressed only in dark red silk pajama bottoms and robe, with a big bag of potato chips munching away happily. Good looks but somewhat doughy, he was completely engrossed by whatever he was watching and didn't notice them until they were standing directly in front of him.

"Oh, hello! Is it twelve already?" he wondered aloud.

"'Fraid so, sir," Lorelei answered him. "Must be a good show," she added.

"I record all the reality TV shows. I can't seem to get enough of them. Or these salt and vinegar chips. Would you like some?" He extended the bag and then immediately withdrew it. "No, no, of course, you don't. Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll go get dressed."

"Of course," said Sol.

The duke shouted out into the open: "Harold! Harold, why the hell didn't you tell me they were here already?! You think that's funny, do you? We'll see how funny you think it is later. Get out here and show my guests to the terrace, you witless clod!"

He smiled at them and spread his hands out in a gesture of helplessness.

"I'll meet you on the terrace in a few moments," he said and hurried off.

Harold walked in smiling and asked them out to the terrace, the entrance to which was only one room away. He sat them at a wrought iron patio table set where three places had been set. He handed them each a sheet of cream stationery paper on which was printed a daily household lunch menu. An old grayed man appeared with a tray of water and cut lemons and Harold told them that his name was Edgar and that he'd be bringing them whatever they desired. Edgar spoke English fairly well, just in case, he explained. Edgar stood attendant and Harold removed himself somewhere again.

Lorelei asked for a salad and an iced tea and that was all. But Sol, naturally, had a field day giving Edgar a variety of instructions on a full-course luncheon.

The Duke emerged after some ten minutes and soon after was followed by Edgar and their food.

"Thank you for meeting me on such short notice," he said to them.

"Not at all, this is great, your Highness," Sol said irreverently, and leaned back in his chair.

"Actually, I'm not so high on the royal ladder, so please just call me Chase." He turned to Lorelei and extended his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Detective McSherman."

"An honor, Chase," she replied.

The Duke then looked at Sol and smiled ambiguously. "And you must be Mr. Isistrato, the librarian." And again extended his royal hand.

Sol became serious again and said "Yes," receiving the Duke's gesture.

After they had some bites and niceties about the food, the Duke turned to the business at hand. "Perhaps you're wondering why I wanted to meet with you right away," he said.

"We would have had to meet eventually," Sol answered. "But the sooner the better."

"Definitely! But I also wanted to personally express a sense of urgency. You see, my aunt, the Queen, has entrusted me with representing our interest in this matter until some resolution is achieved. Unfortunately, that seems to be taking quite a bit longer than we'd originally anticipated and, frankly, it's starting to make me impatient."

"Special Agent Pines and his partner, Agent Macy, are obviously very capable individuals but neither they nor the venerable FBI are getting anywhere with this. Contrary to what anyone may think, our family is not interested in money damages. We simply want the piece back in our possession."

"But, Chase," Lorelei began, "if you'll forgive me, it seems to me that no one in your family noticed this piece missing in the first place. At least not for a long time, anyway. Why is it so important to retrieve it now?"

"Well, Detective, it's a matter of national pride, now. I don't know how much you know about Dutch history, but I'm sure you're aware that we were the first Europeans to explore and settle this area of America. The Oranges of your neighboring Essex County still bear our family name, even.

"I mention this because if, as the thief claims, this painting was originally our property and it was stolen here in Jersey City, which we essentially founded, it's imperative that such a valuable work by one of our national treasures be restored to its rightful place. Despite the fact that it most likely won't ever be displayed in public, it nonetheless remains an important part of Dutch heritage. But, of course, we obviously have no jurisdiction here and so must rely on your government's actions and resources to achieve its recovery."

"So you sued Hudson County to give us an incentive..." Sol said.

"It was the only recourse our attorneys could suggest. The FBI agents out of the Newark office are not locals and their art theft program is only in its inception. What was needed was an investigation by persons who know this terrain and its people as well as someone who can find their way around such archaic records as that of a hundred year-old library. And so here we are," he smiled boyishly.

"Well, that would explain a lot," remarked Lorelei.

"Wouldn't it, Sol?" She gave him a pointed look.

"It's a start," he muttered. "But just out of curiosity, let's say we do get this painting back for you. Are you still going to seek damages?"

"We're not short of money, Mr. Isistrato. The suit would be dropped once we have the work in our possession."

"And what do you have besides the thief's assertion to prove that this piece really is originally property of your family and country?" Sol continued.

"I'm glad you asked. We have our archivists digging for the appropriate documents as we speak. Between what they find, what your offices will produce and what the thief claims to have, it should all balance out. We already hold a good number of Jan Steen's works. One more won't come as a surprise."

Lorelei interposed. "Whatever the outcome, I assure you we'll be doing our best to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion for everyone. Lunch was wonderful but we really should be getting back to work."

"You're more than welcome, Detective. Feel free to stop by whenever you like. Half the time I'm bored to death around here. You, as well, Mr. Isistrato. If I can be of any assistance at all, please don't hesitate to ask. You can always leave a message for me through the lobby staff."

* * * *

Descending in the elevator they didn't speak until they were halfway down.

“So what do you think now, Sol? Still think the Feds are pawning us?”

“Absolutely. They’re giving the royals exactly what they asked for to cover themselves.”

There was some sense to this, she thought, but it didn’t change the fact that there was a stolen painting out there that she’d been ordered to help find, whatever people’s personal motivations were.

“Everything is politics, you know. I just know I have a job to do.”

“Me, too, Laura. And for the next three days it means being a mover. So I’m going uptown to start packing. Where can I drop you off?”

“The museum. I’ll immerse myself in art for a while then get a list of the staff. I can take a taxi home.”