

Little Miracles

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

We found the cat just as we were about to seal off the house. Its throat had been slit, and its coat was matted with blood. Some instinct made me crouch down to touch it. Its skin was warm, and its body struggled with shallow breaths. Life among the carnage.

I snapped my fingers for the paramedics. They glanced at each other and didn't move.

"Gentlemen, kindly get your asses over here," I said.

"But, sir, it's a cat."

"And it's still breathing. Get over here."

They crouched over the cat, placed a bandage over its neck, and did something to ease its breathing. I directed them to a veterinarian down the street, then returned my attention to the bloodbath before me. In the kitchen, a woman's body, curled in a fetal hug, clutching a knife in what appeared to have been self-defense. In the bedroom, two children, slaughtered. And in the master bathroom, a man collapsed over the bathtub, also dead. In the living room, the TV stand was empty. The door to the empty stereo cabinet in the dining room stood open, and pictures were missing from the walls.

It looked like a desperate act of a startled burglar. But the cat was the clue. Sliced on the way out for the sheer pleasure of the act. Cats don't bark. They don't threaten killers. Cats hide from frightening circumstances. The killer flushed the cat and slit its throat just to see the blood.

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Wrote up the preliminary report and went home, washed the blood-stink off my skin. It was raining. Felt like it was always raining. Oregon: land of the nonexistent sun.

The house was a mess -- dishes in the sink, dirty clothes tumbling out of the closet. No time to clean, not even now, with another crazy on the loose. I opened the fridge, searching for a beer, and heard Delilah's voice: I don't know how you can come home and assume you lead a normal life, as if nothing happened to you all day. In the early days, she had liked that, the way I could leave my job behind me. But she never could. She always wanted to know the details, relishing the jargon as if it was a new language. Was there high velocity blood? she would have asked about this case.

All over the house, I would have replied. Especially the bathroom and the kitchen. The man must have gone first, but the woman put up quite a fight.

I would never have told her about the blood's odd trajectory, indicating that the killer used a sharp weapon, knife perhaps, but not a normal kitchen knife. I would never have trusted her that far.

I closed the refrigerator door without the beer. I never did leave the work at the office. It was always there, one corner of the brain assessing the evidence, searching for the clue that would lead us to the creep of the week. Maybe that was why Delilah left. Maybe her words had always been sarcasm, her questions medicine to draw out the poison.

Grabbed the car keys and let myself out the back door. The car, the only thing she left me, a 1988 Saab, drove itself. We stopped in the slanted parking lot at the vet's, a place I hadn't been since her dog nearly died chewing a steak bone. Pulled open the door, stepped into the scent of disinfectant, matted fur, and frightened animals. The woman behind the reception desk didn't recognize me, which was fine, since I

didn't remember seeing her before.

I flashed my badge. "Some of my paramedics brought a cat in earlier."

She shuddered delicately. Just once, but enough for me to notice. "What an awful thing to do to an animal," she said.

You should have seen what happened to the people, I nearly said, but since the paramedics had followed procedure and not said anything, I wouldn't either. "I was wondering if you folks had ever seen the cat before."

"I haven't, but let me check with the doctor." She got up, a tidy woman in a green dress, her age nearly impossible to determine. I glanced around the room. Empty now, but I had seen it filled with worried people hovering over their animals as if the animals were as precious as children. Something in the back set off the dogs, and one of them howled, followed by another. She returned with the vet, the man I remembered, a big-boned redhead with a touch that even the most skittish animal trusted.

"Frank," he said, and held out a well-scrubbed hand. I shook it.

"Doug." We have never socialized, only saw each other in this small building, but the familiarity put me at ease when I hadn't even realized I was uncomfortable. "Ever see the cat before?"

"No," the vet said. "And he's got distinctive markings. I would have remembered."

"Family named Torgenson, lived just down the block. Ever treat their animals?"

He nodded, looking thoughtful, too polite to ask why Torgenson. "They had a dog, died of old age about a month ago. He always brought the dog in. She was allergic to cats. They both came to put the dog down, and she was a mess by the time they left even though we keep this place as dander-free as modern technology allows."

The news startled me. The cat had been found beside her.

"He's awake. Want to see him?"

It took me a moment to realize that the vet was talking about the cat. "Sure," I said, feeling more than a bit uncomfortable. I'd lived through this scene a number of times in hospitals, seeing the survivor, asking preliminary questions. But I couldn't ask the cat why he'd been there, what he'd seen.

The vet led me through the narrow hallway into a large room filled with steel tables. In the back, rows of cages lined the walls. Cats, in various stages of distress, stared at me. I didn't see any dogs, figured they must be kept elsewhere.

The vet showed me a cage on the far side of the wall. A white cat with an orange mustache stared at us through the mesh. His eyes were still wide with the effect of the drug. A gauze bandage had been taped in place around his neck. He saw me and rolled on his back, paws kneading the empty air.

"Amazing, huh?" the vet said. "I've never seen such a friendly cat. Especially one drugged and wounded."

"He'll live?"

"He probably used up eight of his nine lives, but yeah, he'll make it." The vet opened the door, reached in, and scratched the cat's stomach. "What do you plan to do with him?"

I hadn't realized I had given the cat any thought. "Take him home," I said.

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The station was a dingy gray. The walls were made of steel and concrete, built during the Vietnam era when everything had to be bombproof. The ventilation was poor, and the place smelled of old cigarettes, stale coffee, and sweat. My desk was the only spotless one among the detectives, mostly because I shoved everything in drawers. When I arrived the morning after the killings, though, files were piled five inches high on the top.

I sat down and sorted through them. Autopsies, blood analyses, request forms for DNA scans, forensics results, photos of the house's contents ... amazing how much reading could be generated in one night. I pulled out the autopsy reports and the photographs of the crime scene.

All night I had been thinking about the cat. Hell, I even stopped at the grocery store and bought litter, a litter pan, and food dishes. The vet said he would give me food when Rip -- that's what they were calling the little guy -- was ready to go home.

But that wasn't all I was thinking about. I was thinking about the kind of person who would slit a cat's throat. I was thinking about the woman dead on the kitchen floor. I was thinking about the knife in her hand.

It would have been easy enough for her to surprise her husband in the bathroom. A bit of a struggle and he would be down, then attack the sleeping children. In the kitchen, a quick slash across the throat of a stray cat, and then the final act -- a knife to her own gut, enough times to bleed to death.

A domestic tragedy, something I had seen so often that it no longer turned my stomach. The papers would play it up, and the D.A.'s office would look into her life just enough to give her a motive before the case closed completely.

I pulled out the pictures, studied them, realized my theory was wrong. No wounds on Mrs. Torgenson's chest, face, or neck. All in the back. She had been stabbed in the back, surprised in her own kitchen, knife in hand. Not self-defense as I had earlier thought. Surprised chopping an onion for the family dinner.

And Rip, blood matted on his fur, running down his front as it should in a neck wound, but no pool beneath his body. Blood on his back, his tail, his ears. Someone else's blood. I picked up the pictures, turned them. Handprints. He had been moved.

I set the photos down, put my face in my hands. Amazing the details I had missed. I used to approach a crime scene as if it were a complete jigsaw puzzle. All the clues were there; I just had to notice them and arrange them in the correct order. That way each detail went into the brain, from the day-old cigarette stub on the driveway to the pattern of the bloodstains on the wall. In those days, I would have seen the onions on the sideboard, noticed her shredded back, commented on the handprints covering Rip.

Ceramic clanged against the metal surface of my desk, and the aroma of fresh coffee hit me. "Breakfast, Frank?"

Denny, one of the few men who have been in the station as long as I have. Fifteen years sounds like a long time, but I could remember the days when we were enthusiastic about our work, when we concentrated on catching the creeps and then having a few brews after a rough day. We hadn't spent time together in I couldn't remember how long.

I brought my hands down casually, as if I had been resting my eyes instead of berating myself. He had put a cup of coffee on one of my files. I took it, sipped.

"Tough case, huh?" He half-sat, half-leaned on my desk. "I hate seeing kids sliced up like that."

I stared at him, seeing instead the little girl clutching her stuffed bunny, eyes still closed as if she were asleep. Her older sister, eyes wide with terror...

Rip had bothered me more than they had. But Rip had been the anomaly at the crime scene.

"Yeah," I said.

Denny looked at me strangely. Once he pulled me off a perp who'd been caught molesting a five-year-old girl. The murder case I'd busted my ass working on because I knew the mother had tried to strangle her daughters and I didn't want her to regain custody of them.

"You okay?" he asked.

"No different than I've been."

He nodded once, as if my comment ended the conversation, and disappeared around the corner to his own desk. When Delilah left, he invited me over for dinner for weeks until it became clear that I would never go. I didn't want to see him and Sheila, perfect examples of conjugal bliss. I didn't want to socialize with anyone.

I sighed, pulled out my legal pad. Options: The killer was (1) someone they knew; (2) some sicko creep just starting; (3) some sicko creep with a pattern; (4) a burglar, caught in the act; (5) a family member.

I pushed the list aside, filled out the DNA forms, sent a notice of the killing across the wire to see if anyone else picked up a pattern. Then I read the files, crossed off the family member -- since, with that bloodbath, the entire family died -- and assigned one of my men to monitor the fences in town. I was preparing a list of interviews when McRooney stopped.

"Frank, my office."

I set my pen down and followed him through the maze of desks to the only walled-off office in the place. McRooney had a large glass door through which he saw damn near everything. Fake plants hung from the fluorescents, and filing cabinets stood like soldiers behind his desk.

He pulled the blinds on the door.

"Sit," he said.

I did as I was told. McRooney was an okay guy -- political, ambitious, people-savvy. I remember when he was a green kid, puking at the scene of his first murder. Long time ago.

"Hear you missed some things at the Torgenson house."

"Too damn much," I said. No use lying to the man. He knew.

"Crime lab boys caught some of it. Forensics more. You're usually ahead of the game, Frank."

"I know," I said.

"You've been slipping these past six months. You didn't take time when the wife left. You need to."

"When the case is wrapped."

"Now." McRooney sat behind his desk, looking like a politician in a thirties movie. "I'm going to reassign. This kind of thing is too important."

"To trust to a guy who's screwing up."

"Your words, Frank." He pulled out a sheet of paper, stamped it, and slid it toward me. "A leave with pay. As much time as you need. Your heart's gone."

I ignored the paper. "I'll just sit at home and get sloshed. Gimme a week. If I haven't got the case wrapped by then, I'll go."

"It'll be cold then."

"If I continue to screw up, you mean?"

"You never used to be so defensive." He leaned back in his chair. It groaned under his weight.

"I never used to notice my own mistakes, either." I sighed, adjusted my trouser legs. "I don't think staying home is the way for me. I got a glimmer in this case, first interest I've felt in a while. Let me try."

He pulled the paper back, looked at it, crumpled it. Missed the hook shot to the garbage can. "Three days. That way we don't lose too much ground."

Three days. As if he expected nothing from my work. I stood. I wouldn't expect much from my work, either. I grabbed the doorknob.

"Frank?"

Stopped, waited, head down, not turning.

"Is she worth all this?"

Friend. The comment of a concerned friend. I let my breath out slowly, feeling truth come with it. "I don't think it's her. I think it's been building for a long time. Her going was just a symptom."

"Studen is a good shrink."

Flush rose on my cheeks -- anger canceling truth. "You gave me three days," I said, and let myself out.

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Not so much as a half-formed fingerprint by five. Neighbors heard nothing. No, the family was quiet, kept to themselves. Dog was loud, but it died months ago.

Called the vet. Rip was doing better. Could go home in a few days. Quite the survivor, huh?, a comment I took to mean that the vet had seen the papers, understood what happened to the cat.

A little miracle, I replied as I hung up.

Closed the files, went down to the Steelhead for a beer and a burger. The inside was crowded, but not too, just enough so that I had to take a table instead of a booth. Three screens played the news, and the music blared country-western, unusual for a yuppie bar. Glanced at the menu, glanced at the microbrews being sipped at the tables around me. Three days. And day one nearly gone.

When the waitress showed, I ordered a bacon-cheddar burger, fries, and a coffee nudge without the

nudge. I'd get more work done with caffeine as the drug of choice.

Woman sat across from me, alone. Blonde, leggy, nail polish and lip gloss. Not usually my type. She smiled, I smiled back, and it felt good. But the burger arrived before I could pick myself up and sit beside her. Then the boyfriend showed, three-piece suit and silk tie, and I leaned back, outclassed.

Not that I was too disappointed. I'd picked up too many women in that bar, both before and after Delilah, never for conversation, always for exercise and sometimes not enough of that. Couldn't imagine bringing a woman to my place now, with its ancient dishes and unwashed sheets. Guess it had been a long time. I did the laundry just after Delilah left, months ago.

The burger settled me, the coffee buzzed me. I wandered back to the station, half wishing the cat had died so we could have sent his body to the lab to check for prints. Uncharitable thought -- remembering the little guy on his back, trusting paws kneading the air, the cat box at the house, waiting. We'd had cats at home, barn cats who sat on my shoulders while I milked the cows at five in the morning. Two cats, both killed one morning when they got loose in the cow pen. I cried until my momma shamed me.

Men don't cry, she said. They get mad.

Yeah, Momma, I thought. What happens when the anger goes, too, and you're just a big hulking shell?

She would have no answer for that. I squinted, wondered when we last spoke. Wasn't even sure if I'd told her Delilah was gone.

Opened the door to the station, stepped into the familiar noise and stink. Place never changed, day to night, always busy, always crazy. Problems everywhere, even in a small city like this one.

Three new files on my desk: fax-sent cases, one from Washington, one from California, one from Utah. Sat down and read. Perp never caught. One scene left a dog, thought to be a stray, throat slit. Another a cat, belonged to the neighbors, throat slit. Yet another cat, black, purchased from a pet store, throat slit.

California, skipped Nevada, Utah, skipped Idaho, Washington, and now Oregon. New pattern? Or getting sloppy? Hard to tell with a random crazy.

I put my head on my desk. A random crazy. The worst kind.

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Typed up a new report, flagged it for McRooney, and reminded him to notify the FBI. The case was theirs now, not that I couldn't work on it, too.

On the drive home, found myself wondering what the crazy would think if he knew the cat lived. First survivor. The thought gave me a pang, made me half-swerve to head for the vet's, then forced myself to continue the drive home. Silly idea. The cat was safe. As if it mattered.

Opened the door, turned on the lights, blared Tchaikovsky on the CD and dug into the dishes. Grunge work for relaxation. Had to get the case out of my mind. The best detecting happened in the subconscious -- comparing details, fitting pieces. The subconscious still worked, I knew that. The path to the conscious was blocked. I'd seen everything at the murder site but couldn't remember it until something jogged me. Not good. Not good at all.

Left the dishes to soak, went into the living room, and flopped on the couch. Closed my eyes and walked through the Torgenson house again.

First thing: stale-death reek of blood, even before we walked through the door. Into the sunken living room, done in modular white, with chrome lamps, decorative books. An unused room. And nothing, except a little mud leading up the stairs. Half-moon pattern. Man's shoe.

Den. Sloppy with toys, half read books, another stereo still there. Television cabinet empty, VCR gone. No evidence of search, of a mess other than the intentional one.

Into the formal dining. Stereo cabinet door open, equipment gone. Nothing else touched. No prints on the cabinet glass.

Kitchen. Blood-spattered. Woman on her side, fetal position, knife in her hand. Onions chopped on the sideboard, eggs unbeaten in a mixing bowl, meat burned on the stove. The smell of hamburger mixed with fresh blood. Cat left like a calling card beside the back door. Blood pattern on the carpeted steps -- dripping blood, spatters on the rug, not the wall.

Follow the stairs twisting to the second story. No handprints, no marks at all on the white walls. Odd for people with children. Fresh paint?

Blood trail leads to the bathroom. Man doubled over the tub, throat slit, blood pouring down the drain. (Drain cleaned? Something else hiding in there? Some missing evidence?) High velocity blood patterned on the mirror around the sink and onto the toilet. Why couldn't he see perp in mirror? Mirror has unusually high placement. Perp too short? Or too quick? With throat slit, man unable to scream. First victim, then. The children might have screamed, at least the second girl. Woman didn't hear -- why?

Back to the kitchen, searching, searching, realized the answer in the dining room, now missing. Stereo probably blaring. How, then, could the children sleep? And why was she cooking?

Onions, hamburger, eggs on the sideboard. She was making breakfast.

Back up stairs. Master bedroom, again in white. King-sized bed, made army style -- by him, retired colonel, probably his last act. More decorative books in wall cases. Television propped near headboard. Another VCR, more movies. Didn't have to look to guess the kind. Television still there, as is VCR. Half-moon footprints leading to the bathroom, mud plus blood leading out. Confirmed: killer stopped here first. Knew the morning routine well enough to avoid the woman, get the man, the children, and finally her in the kitchen, alone and terrified.

Followed prints to the girls' room. Took the youngest first, nearest the door. Quick slash, throat again, killed her before she could wake. Blood trickles off the bed onto the floor. No prints. Went around to kill her sister. Awake, eyes open, body curled. Sister tried to escape, got caught in the man's arms, watched him kill her....

Opened my eyes, took a deep sigh, body shaking. Relieved to be in my own living room, Marche Slav repeating over and over on the CD. Picked up the remote and shut the music off, deciding silence was more amenable than the noise.

He arrived early morning, interrupted the routine, just as he had in the other states. They thought he was a nighttime killer, but he wasn't. He had a set time for attack, and a set plan, and he carried it through. Letting Rip live was no accident. He was trying to get caught. Each set of deaths more dangerous than the last, as if he were searching for the final adrenaline rush, the final opportunity...

I leaned over the couch's arm, picked up the phone, and ordered the forensics squad to return to the house, check the drain, the prints. Hung up and remembered the details from the other reports. Each place he had taken something large, something different. Microwave from California, computer from

Utah, china and silver in Washington. He wasn't fencing, or even masquerading as a burglar. He was furnishing his home. Souvenirs.

And Rip. Not a calling card, but a clue. A stray dog, a neighbor's cat. Animals didn't belong to the perp, but were associated with him, somehow. A job, maybe, that took him into certain neighborhoods at particular times of the morning? Allowed him to travel, and to watch patterns. Not animal welfare. Those were city jobs, stable because they paid well, not likely to take a drifter. Vet? Perhaps, but again, stability was the key. Needing to build a practice, to get good references.

Vet. Finally the light bulb went off. I picked up the phone, called the station again, asked Vinnie to doublecheck the files. Yes, a vet close to each murdered family.

Thumbed through the phone book, found Doug the vet's home address, grabbed my coat and shield, and left. Ten o'clock might be too late to go visiting in some neighborhoods, but not in mine.

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Took five minutes after I knocked for him to come to the door. Out of his smock, he looked younger -- aided, I think, by his tousled hair. I half-expected a female voice to query, an admonition not to wake the kids. Instead got a shirtless, sleepy man clutching a beer, TV blaring in the background, cats emerging from all parts of the house, and a quiet dog padding its way to the door.

"Frank?" Doug -- he didn't seem like a vet any more to me -- ran his hand over his face. "You got a problem? There's an emergency vet on Walker."

"Need to talk to you about the Torgenson case. Got a minute?"

"Sure." Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, pushing back a cat with his foot. "Come on in."

The place smelled like home. Unwashed dishes piled in the kitchen, blanket on the couch. He tossed a cat off the recliner, bade me sit, used the remote to shut off the TV. "Sorry about the mess. Wife left a few weeks ago, and I can't bring myself to clean."

Vets have lives, too. "It's been six months for me, and I've been thinking about hiring a service."

"Thing is," Doug said, settling on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table, "I always thought I did a lot of the chores."

I nodded. Recognition that my situation was not unique warmed me. "Sorry to bother you so late. Just need a few questions answered. You hire anyone new in the last few months?"

He shook his head. "I haven't hired anyone for two years. Got college kids cleaning the cages -- they've been with me since they started school. One's a junior, the other'll graduate in spring. My receptionist has been there for nearly two years, and the lab techs since I started."

The air left me, as a feeling of failure grew. Somehow I'd assumed that his night attendants, cage cleaners, would be the ones. Transient, short-term jobs --

Then felt a flood of relief. If that were true, Rip would have died, the first night.

"Who else comes through?"

He closed his eyes. I liked his concentration. Most folks always wanted to know why I needed the information. "Medical supply people like any doctor's office, deliveries -- "

"Any in the morning?"

"Cat food, sometimes, about once a month. Arrives seven A.M. sharp, and gets annoyed if no one's at the door to let him in. But he's not new, either. Been servicing us as long as I can remember."

"But only once a month?"

"Sometimes not even that. Got quite a route. Heard him brag to Sally -- that's my receptionist. He can cover six states in thirty days if he has to, although he runs Oregon, Nevada, usually, picking up supplies in California as he drives through."

"Don't like him much." No need to make that a question. I could feel the animosity in Doug's every word.

Doug opened his eyes, looked at me, hand on a black cat that decided to stare at me from his lap. "No, I don't. He's odd. Animals don't like him, but they come because he smells like food. Animals always know."

Strays. The neighbor's cat. Food.

"Remember his name?"

Doug gently eased the cat away, got up. "No, but I've got his card around here, somewhere, if I can find my wallet." He walked barefoot over to a desk mounded with open envelopes, pushed them aside, and picked up a leather wallet, thumbed through it, and produced a card. I took it. Black lettering on white.

Jonathan Kivy.

Had him.

* * * *

I still sweated it. FBI wanted to make the collar -- allowed them to take him anywhere they needed to. They found him in Southern Oregon, TV, VCR, stereo, and paintings in the back of his truck, and radioed, promising to bring him in to me.

All night I'd dreamed about Rip walking up to him, trusting but nervous, hoping that a man who smelled like food would provide him with some. Saw the arm flash down, the quick throat slash, the one-handed bloody carry into the Torgensons' kitchen, dumped by the door like a single sack of cat food.

Woke up, tears on my cheeks, anger in my gut, repeating _it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter_. Remembered nights like that, Delilah's arms around me, soothing, dreams of dead children, bodies in the river, perps with guns, and perps with knives. She'd tell me it was over. I knew it would never be over, so all I could do was drown the tears, let the anger serve. Repeating _it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter_, until it didn't any more.

They showed up about eleven A.M., two men in black suits with regulation haircuts, leading a small man, hands in cuffs. I started shivering, anger running through my body, looking for an escape. One leap across the desk, fingers against his throat, showing him how it felt to be small and helpless and dying...

But I didn't move. Clasped my hands under my desktop, waited for them to stop. McRooney left his office, watched me. He said he'd abide by my decision.

They brought him to my desk. Stared at his hands, long slender fingers, strong. Pictured Rip in them, then the little girl, gripped by the hair, head pulled back --

It didn't matter.

But it did.

-- throat slashed, one quick movement, her sister screaming....

"He's yours, if you want him, detective," Adams, one of the FBI men, said. They had praised me the night before for saving them so much headache.

I looked at the perp's eyes. Cold, black, reflecting only my face. How close had I gotten to that empty stare?

"Extradite him. Utah. They have a death penalty there, and they're not afraid to use it. Tell them I'll cooperate in any way I can." The words came out angry, so forceful that I almost spit at him.

The perp's face didn't change. I didn't so much care about the death penalty as the trial. Oregon's prisons were overcrowded, good reason, sometimes, to opt for an insanity defense. I didn't want the perp's abusive childhood -- if he had one -- or an anti-social personality disorder, which he did have, to get in the way of his punishment.

They led him into McRooney's office to prepare the paperwork, perhaps allow him a phone call. I leaned back, wondering why he did it, and then realizing that it didn't matter. He would have some reason, some crazy rationale, but it would just mask the compulsion. I read a lot on serial killers in the early days. Random crazies, triggered by an unknown mechanism. Human, but not human, threatening us all.

I stood up, staggered, with the force of released emotion. Denny stopped by my desk, concern on his face. "You okay?"

Reached up, found wet cheeks. Odd that the tears would come now. "Fine," I said.

McRooney had left his office, coming to pat me on the back. I didn't want him to touch me, didn't want anyone to touch me just then. I swallowed, made the lump disappear. "I'm going to take that leave," I said. "Starting now."

McRooney watched, slight frown on his face. To his credit, he didn't comment on my appearance. "You deserve it, Frank. We'll set the details later. Good work on this."

"Thanks," I said. Grabbed my jacket, and half-ran from the station, knowing that on the leave, I would have to think about my future, too. Maybe homicide was no longer for me. Maybe being a cop was no longer for me.

The thought sobered the weird elation building in my gut. Doug said I could get Rip today, and I would. Funny. A cat started my emotional lockup, and a cat undid it. Because he was an anomaly, the only living thing I had not trained my emotions to hide from at a crime scene. I remembered him on his back, paws kneading the air. Like a little child. Delilah used to say pets brought out the parenting instinct. Fine. I needed something to mother, to take the attention from myself.

I got in the car, wondering how Rip would like the drive. Wondering if I could clean the house in an afternoon. Wondering if Doug would drop by after work for a brew. A man without a wife, without conjugal bliss. We could complain about women, get royally sloshed, laugh and cry until we were sure the emotions ran both hot and cold.

Had to clear the icewater from my veins.

Whoa, body, heat wave moving in.

I shivered one last time. The heat would feel good.