

Such A Nice Girl

A Trick Molloy Mystery
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Part One

Suicides are the worst. Even when they try to be considerate, they aren't. I remember one time, back when I was still on the force, a guy had tried to be helpful. He'd gotten plastic drop cloths and taped them up all over the ceiling and walls in his bedroom. Covered the apartment floor with them, too, then had laid down all his sheets and blankets. Even wrapped his head in a thick towel. Looked like some Swami ready to do a card trick.

He then tucked a hunting rifle up under his chin and worked the trigger with a toe. Blew most of his head clean off, spraying the plastic with blood, brains and bone—the three Bs, as my friend Cate Chase is fond of calling them. The fourth B—Bullet—caused the big problem. Not only did it cruise through his skull, but it blasted through the ceiling. Killed his upstairs neighbor, much to the consternation of the woman riding the guy at that particular moment.

Lexie had come as close to considerate as suicides get. She'd rented a motel room so her roommate wouldn't have to clean things up. She'd drawn a bath—presumably hot, though the water was cold by the time I got there. She drank some wine, using it wash down a handful of pills, then slit her wrists. She bled out into the water. The ring running around the tub and just below her soft breasts spoiled the image of peace.

I looked over at Cate, a large woman who shared Lexie's red hair and fair complexion. "Yeah, she's one of mine. Danced under Lexie. Real name is Sarah Brown. With an H, I think."

Cate rose from one knee, looked at the digital thermometer, and made a note on her PDA. "Her ID has her as Sarah Brown. She's a student at Coast College."

I nodded. "From back east somewhere. She wasn't a talker, more of a listener."

"Talented?"

"Yeah." I frowned. Every woman who worked at Club Flesh had talent—it was as much a part of what they did as g-strings and sincere smiles. The magick they wove made them even more appealing to the customers. Most of their marks didn't even know they were being enchanted, and those who did really didn't care.

"I don't know her trigger, and she wasn't that powerful. I could feel it in her, but not irritating, you know?" I thought for a moment as Cate stripped off her latex gloves. "I think it was an empathic thing. She'd get customers talking to her, then they'd buy dances. She was as much a shrink as she was a dancer."

"She seem depressed?"

I shook my head. "Not that I noticed. Of course, other girls spilled their guts to her, so that might have gotten her down."

Cate used a laser pointer to tag something at the base of the sink's pedestal. I crouched. The green beam illuminated a small yellow pill with the legend "sk18? in black. "I'm going to guess there are several more of these in her system."

I straightened up. "Anti-depressant?"

"New generation, in clinical trials through the college."

"You think they made her kill herself?"

"No indication of that from what I've read."

I glanced at Lexie again, waiting for her to wake up and smile. “Need something more than an ID out of me?”

Cate’s eyes tightened. “How well did you know her?”

“Know? As in Biblically? Not at all. Why?”

Cate beckoned and I followed out into the hotel room. Lexie’s clothes had been laid out neatly, folded precisely, with her shoes at the foot of the bed. Next to them lay a small, bound notebook with a black cover. The number Twenty-nine had been written in Roman numerals on it in silver in a very neat hand. I couldn’t identify the writing as Lexie’s, but it wouldn’t surprise me if it was.

The notebook had been bagged and labeled as evidence.

“I didn’t find a suicide note, only that notebook. It’s got a lot of little stories and anecdotes about Club Flesh in it. There are a bunch mentioning you. So, let me ask you again. How well did you know her?”

The edge in Cate’s voice rubbed me the wrong way. “I wasn’t sleeping with her, Cate. I barely knew her. I’m a bouncer. I’ve walked her to her car. I’ve escorted her to VIP. I picked her up once when she got a flat. I’ve told a couple of guys to leave when they got to pawing her. It’s nothing I’ve not done for most of the girls.”

“You sure?”

“Hello, Cate, this is me you’re talking to.” I folded my arms across my chest. “What the hell did she say in there?”

Cate sighed. “I know you pretty well—better than you probably think I do. This girl knew you, too. There’s insights in there that suggest a degree of intimacy...”

“Cate, I don’t shit where I eat.”

“And that explains Chrystale exactly how?”

“She was different.” My cheeks burned. “She was from before... when I had a life.”

She looked at me, then nodded. “At least you have the good graces to blush. Let me explain my problem.”

“Go ahead.”

“I have a suicide, all wrapped up nice and simple. We’ll sweep this place, come up with all sorts of trace evidence. These rooms rent by the hour. Housekeeping isn’t very diligent. I’ll have evidence of a hundred people in here. And without a note, and without the journal there indicating any sort of depression, I have to wonder if someone wanted her dead and staged everything.”

My eyes tightened. “And me, being an ex-homicide cop, would know how to stage it all?”

She nodded once.

“How long until you deliver a finding?”

“Three days. Tox screens, autopsy, the usual. She’s Jane Doe until then.”

“So I work out who offed her, or I have the cops up my butt?” Given my history with the force, if they targeted me, I’d be found guilty even if Lexie had slit her own wrists. “I thought you were my friend.”

“That’s why you’ve got three days.” Cate’s expression became impassive. “Find out who did her, and you’re in the clear.”

Part Two

I wouldn't have pegged Lexie for suicide. She hadn't seemed depressed—just the opposite, in fact. Far more squared away than the other girls who danced at Club Flesh. Still, her wrists had been slit and the coroner thought she might have been on anti-depressants, so suicide couldn't be ruled out.

She didn't leave a note, but Cate Chase had found a journal and sent me a photocopy of its contents. Everything had been dated properly, but wasn't arranged in a "dear diary" format. Kind of reminded me of case notes, but with less facts or at least a greater emphasis on feelings.

I gave things a quick read, trying to link dates with incidents. I found a little of that, but nothing so specific that it locked things in. One thing screamed at me almost immediately, however: journal Twenty-nine dealt exclusively with people and incidents from Club Flesh. The entries barely hinted at her life away from the club. This meant there had to be more journals that covered those other aspects.

The stuff that involved me came toward the end of journal—which was three-quarters full and covered six months time. It's weird reading what others say about you or choose to remember. I liked being described as ruggedly handsome—who wouldn't? But terms like "aloof" and "cold" grind a bit. Not that they're not true, but all the bullshit from growing up that makes you want to be liked is hard to escape.

I saw where the last couple of entries set alarms ringing in Cate's head. Lexie must have been watching me closely, times when I never noticed. She tagged my moods just right, especially around the beginning of the previous month. It had been two years since I'd been boosted off the force, and roughly three years since I'd almost died from a botched hit. Tax time, too. Triple witching hour.

Her observations about my moods bled down into some erotica involving her and me, a torrid night between the sheets, on top of them, and on any flat surface in my apartment. Pretty hot stuff. I read it over and tried to remember that happening. I mean, I would have remembered.

Hell, if it had happened, I could go home and find smudges in the dust.

But none of that had ever happened. Lexie had never seen the inside of my apartment. Aside from Chrystale, none of them had.

Except Nicole.

I pounded a hand against my forehead. Nicole had been there once. She'd told me about a customer who was stalking her, and she'd thought she'd seen him around her apartment. She needed a place to stay. I let her crash on my couch—and refused her offer of joining me in bed. The stalker had been a ruse; and once I refused her she found someone else to play with.

But Nicole shared an apartment with Lexie and, it appeared, shared some vivid recollections of things that had never happened.

Nicole let me into an apartment that was all Lexie—save for where Nicole's influence grew like mildew. The spare, cheap furnishings had survived a couple generations of student housing, but were clean and impeccably ordered. Bricks and boards made up shelving, and things had been arranged on them with precision. Nicole's contribution were some clothes tossed on a chair, and a couple of magazines left open on a beat up coffee table. Everything else was in keeping with the neatly-folded clothes in the hotel room.

"What can I do for you, Trick?"

"When did you last see Lexie?"

The little Latina frowned. "Yesterday. Breakfast maybe. I wasn't here last night. I figured she was out before I came in this morning. Is there a problem?"

"Tiny one." I debated breaking the news to her. Television puts a lot of weight on that sort of revelation. You

watch the reaction. That'll tell you if the suspect knows more than she should. If I said Lexie was dead, and Nicole came back with "I never thought she'd commit suicide," we might have a winner.

Television makes it all too simple. "Lexie didn't show up for work."

Her roommate shook her head. "I don't know."

"Was she seeing anyone?"

"She dumped Craig. You know him. White power tats, grommet earrings."

"Right. How long ago? Anyone new?"

"Three weeks. Might be someone new. She spent a lot of time at school." Nicole shrugged. "We didn't talk much."

I nodded. "You ever tell her about coming to my place that night?"

Nicole blushed. "No, never."

"Why the blush?"

"I haven't told anyone. I don't share humiliation."

"And the blush?"

The girl smiled coldly. "Well, I had this dream and in it..."

I held my hands up and stepped back. "Which bedroom is hers?"

"You'd like mine better."

"Probably, but I need to see hers." I moved deeper into the apartment and hooked a right down a short corridor. We had a winner. The room was neat as a pin, with clothes in the closet sorted by length and color. Over on the desk, beside a laptop computer, Lexie had amassed a small collection of the leather-bound journals, all numbered in sequence. Only Twenty-nine was missing.

I took a quick look through the last several. Twenty-eight covered family stuff. Her family didn't know what she was doing to make ends meet. They also didn't know her brother was gay and afraid to come out of the closet. If I read things right, he didn't know it, either. A lot of thought got put into Lexie seeing how she was becoming her mother. She admired her mom—once a talented artist who gave it all over to raise her kids. Lexie hoped she had the strength to make such a decision if she ever had to.

Twenty-four and Twenty-eight covered school stuff. Pretty banal stuff, most of impressions of other students rather than reflections on her studies. I got the name of her advisor from Twenty-eight.

I pointed to the journals. "Any more of these about?"

Nicole leaned in the doorway, toying with the top button on her blouse. "If they're not there, she has them on her. They're full of character sketches."

"Yeah? You peeked?"

"Duh!" Nicole yawned behind a hand. "Lexie is an English Major over at Coast, doing a creative writing thing. I read some of her stuff on her blog. Boring. All feelings, no sex. I mean, life's all about sex, right?"

"From a certain point of view, I guess." I smiled. "Certainly pays the bills."

"For the most part." She undid that first button. "But there can be other benefits you know, Trick."

“So I’ve been told.”

“You could find out.”

“Some lessons cost too much.” I squeezed past her and headed for the door. “Sweet dreams, darlin’, and try to keep them to yourself.”

Part Three

The two school journals had covered a year each of her college career. Twenty-eight was current and only half full. Lexie had been a Junior at Coast College and according to a journal entry, Doctor Natalia Heron was her advisor. Admin sent me to the Sociology building, which surprised me, since Nicole had said Lexie was majoring in English.

“She was majoring in English, yes, Mr. Molloy.” Natalia Heron cleared a chair of DVDs in jewel-cases and bade me sit with a nod. “She’s started out in sociology, which is how I got her. When she changed majors, she wanted to stay with me. I worked it with the English department. She’s a very special girl.”

“She is. That’s why I’m looking for her.”

Natalia smiled as she seated herself. She had to be my age, maybe five years younger. Looked ten younger—not much older than the co-eds wandering around on campus. Trim with sharp features that gave her a vulpine cast, and bright blue eyes that sparked with life, she could have been very popular at Club Flesh—even with her lack of talent. She wore her white-blond hair up, and I found myself itching to let it down.

“I’m gathering you work at Club Flesh, then?”

I blinked.

She laughed. “Sarah confided many things to me. She took the job there as a way to study the lower classes and what they have to do to make ends meet. Single mothers, girls with substance abuse problems and, yes, I know there are those who are business-women—they treat dancing as a job. Sarah made that all very clear in a paper she did for me last year. I have a copy, if it would help you.”

“I’d like that, thanks.” I tried to relax, and the state of the office made that possible. It wasn’t quite Nicoled out, but it had a lived-in feel. Things had been gathered into piles, pictures had been printed and tacked to the walls. While there were the few requisite bits of Coast College logo gear and pennants scattered about, most things seemed to have personal significance to Natalia.

“Doctor Heron, does anyone else know about Sarah’s job?”

“Talia, please. Not that I know of.”

“No one had seen her dancing, perhaps, and mentioned it to you?”

Again she shook her head. “It is possible that Doctor Larson knows. He was teaching her creative writing class. He’s big on creative visualization, other creativity exercises and writing what you know. Part of Sarah’s change from sociology to English was a desire to tell the stories of those she’d met on the job.”

“Is she any good?”

Talia nodded. “I think so. The paper she did for me was more than literate, which made it exceptional. I’ve not talked to Doctor Larson, but he had to read samples of her work before he let her into his program, so I assume she passed muster.”

“Her roommate said she’s been spending a lot of time on campus, and that she’d recently broken up with her boyfriend. Do you know if she’s seeing anyone here?”

"I don't. I know the boyfriend was escorted off campus a couple weeks ago. He'd followed her to the library and was disruptive."

"I have him on my list to talk to. I'll add Doctor Larson to that list. Could I get a copy of her schedule?"

She shook her head. "Not without a warrant, I'm afraid. The only reason I can turn over her paper is because you could pull it from the library. We do try to protect our students."

"I can understand that." I rose. "Thank you, Talia."

She stood and offered her hand. I took it. No spark. She had no talent, and that was okay. Her firm grip made up for it.

She held on to my hand. "Might I ask you a question?"

"I guess."

"What is it like to be there, at Club Flesh, watching people sink...? What?"

I shook my head. "That's not a game I play. Single mothers? Sure, there are plenty of them among dancers. Name another job where you can clear a grand a night chatting and dancing. Girls with substance abuse problems? Sure, but name me a business where that isn't the case. And folks sinking? Why is it that people who choose to indulge in carnal pursuits, who admit to being stimulated by the sight and touch of beautiful women—unattainable though they may be—are somehow beneath those who don't? I know, it's the Puritanical history of this country. It's Fundamentalism that criminalizes natural urges. That judgment is just a means of social control. It makes people into demons."

She smiled, squeezed my hand. "Bravo. Your point is well taken, and makes you the perfect man to answer the question I was going to ask."

I raised an eyebrow. "And that was?"

"How do you keep from going insane in that environment? Do you become so desensitized to sexuality that you don't notice? I should think you'd be in a constant state of arousal."

I laughed, let her hand go. "Someone working in a chocolate factory will eventually get sick and tired of chocolate."

"So you've sampled extensively and no longer have a taste for it?"

"No. I observe. I watch the patterns. Others are excited by the packages. I enjoy watching the byplay." I shrugged. "It's part of the job. If I get distracted, someone gets hurt. I've seen the games being played. I know how they end. A friend once told me, 'Never fall in love with a stripper because, at some point, they all lie.' Advice I've learned to cherish."

She smiled. "But, still, it can be a pleasure to work in the chocolate factory, can't it?"

"Just eye-candy to me, Doc." I returned her smile. "And playing shepherd so none of our lambs get lost."

Part Four

What I learned about Lexie on campus really put the crimp in the whole suicide thing. She was smart, had direction and purpose, and wasn't just playing like Nicole and some of the other girls. Talia Heron's take on her just confirmed what I'd been thinking, and provided me some leads to check out.

While on campus I hit the first one: the English department. I asked to talk to Kenneth Larson. He wasn't in. Department secretary look at me as if I was nuts expecting him to be. I headed to his office. He had "office hours"—thirty-minutes worth—once a week. I'd be back.

Locating the ex-boyfriend was going to take a bit more legwork. The time he spent in the library harassing Lexie would have been the closest he got to a book—at least one that wasn't *The Turner Diaries*. He'd been born Craig Firestein, but took on the "White Power" name of Lance Firestone when he joined Jesus' Aryan Command, or, as they liked to say, he got JACKed.

Something about loser-type movements that makes them revel in being clever. Take an acronym, make it into a verb that sounds tough, and somehow that makes you tougher. Problem is, when you need a gimmick to boost your movement, you're just gilding a turd.

There was about a billion places I could have looked for a skidmark like Craig. I started in the gutter. If I had to work my way up, it wouldn't be far.

In the city, most folks would have figured Club Flesh to be the bottom of the barrel, but it was a Salvation Army Mission compared to the Pussy Cat Palace. That name also produced an acronym—PCP. Long time ago it used to go by another name, then a retiring pornstar who called herself Angela Duste bought it. She had talent and her trigger was PCP. It never affected her the way it did others, but down through the years she had to do more and more to make her magick work. As for what she could do with it, well, if she was doing a live sex show under a tarp at second base, the guy orbiting the stadium in the blimp would get off. Someone played one of her videos in a hotel during a religious convention and nine months later there was a whole passel of squalling Baptists running around.

Rumor had it that the shoot for that film had burned up a dump-truck's worth of angel dust.

PCP featured in public what most clubs just hid in VIP rooms. A little Lesbian slap-and-tickle, dancers dry-humping customers. I'd heard of one dancer showing off the tricks she'd taught her pet python. All the girls had talent, but not as strong or direct as the dancers at Club Flesh. We'd had a few of our girls head to PCP, but none ever came the other way.

And JAC members, good Christian boys as they were, spent a lot of time at PCP.

I hit there about midday, stepped in and waited with my sunglasses on. All the talent was making me itch already, and I'd not had a drink all day. I let my eyes adjust to the darkness, walked past a group of business men there for the free Tex-Mex lunch buffet, and took a seat at the bar.

I ordered Irish whisky, a double, neat. The bartender reached for the well bottle.

"No, Berto. Mr. Molloy is a guest. Give him the twelve-year old."

I turned and smiled, though Angela was almost invisible in the darkness. "Sun's up. What are you doing out of your coffin?"

"I love you, too, Molloy." She took the seat next to me. Her black sequin gown ran a couple shades darker than her skin. She's painted her lips bright red, as if she'd just drunk some virgin dry, and had mirrored-contacts in that showed no pupil. "What brings you down into this Circle of Hell?"

"A Jac-off named Craig. Dated one of our girls. She's dropped out of sight. I'm hearing he didn't like her dumping him."

She turned. Fluidly, easily, with deliberate intent and immediate effect. She nodded to the far side of the show floor where several painfully white guys glowed under the blacklight. She glanced back over her shoulder at me and smiled slyly. "He'll be here for a while, Molloy. You have plenty of time to kill."

I drained the whisky glass. The burn filled me and the vapors cleared my head. The second the whisky hit my system it opened my access to magick. I wove some of it into an ethereal codpiece.

Angela had been looking at me through magick and laughed. "I'm not that easy to stop, Molloy."

"I know, but if I give in now, where's the challenge? You know it's the challenge you like."

Her eyes narrowed. "All that and brains, too."

"Is that why you let them in here? The challenge. You gotta know they hate you."

"I do. I make them pay very well to prove it." Her smile returned, but more predatory this time. "Jungle fever. Forbidden fruit, all that. They want to be superior, and prove themselves superior. That fantasy costs them dearly."

"And lets them perpetuate a myth."

She laughed and the codpiece almost melted. "You know better Molloy. Their desires eat at them. They undermine that sense of superiority. It rots them from inside. Aryan supermen with feet of clay, slaved to their 'nads. And if any of them were to rise to prominence in their little cesspool, there are security camera archives that will be a big hit with their rivals."

"I'm about to be a big hit with Craig. There going to be a problem?"

"He's strictly a firefly. The big one, Gunther, he'll be trouble."

"How much?"

She pointed to my empty glass. "Hit him again. Be generous. He's going to need it."

Part Five

Facing down three members of a white supremacist gang in a seedy strip club was not high on the list of the smartest things I'd ever done. It wasn't very high on the list of stupid things I'd done, either. Didn't even make it into the top ten. But if doing it would resolve Lexie's murder, it was worth doing.

The itch grew as I walked over to where the Jac-offs sat. Craig, my target, was skinny enough that if he ate a whole cheeseburger it woulda looked as if he wolfed down a bowling ball. He'd be bald if he lived another ten years, and he was never going to outgrow the Chicken Pox scars dotting his cheeks and forehead.

The guy next to him slopped all over his chair. His t-shirt summed up his life: I beat Anorexia. At least that's what I think it said—remains of the lunch buffet hid most of the words. He had bigger breasts than half the women undulating on the stage.

The third guy, Gunther, spent as much time with free-weights as his fat pal did eating bean burritos. Muscles rippled and twitched even though he wasn't doing anything more than breathing. Buzz-cut, full sleeves of white power tats showed off by a wife-beater, he'd have been a good casting choice for Terminator IX. Probably practiced the whole German accent thing at night, just waiting for Hollywood to call.

What they looked like on the outside didn't concern me. I shifted my vision and looked at them through magick. Firefly summed Craig up—couple spots of gold energy blinked on and off in a black silhouette. Gunther had power. Red highlights pulsed along his muscles as if molten lava ran beneath his skin.

The third guy—the one Angela hadn't warned me about—he was the dangerous one. Looking at Wideload through magick made his body into one of those vinyl sumo-suits folks wear for stupid sporting events. Inside he was all lean and blue and energy came off him in waves. I did see a couple black spots I could exploit, but taking him down would require me at the top of my game.

I glanced back at Angela laughing at the bar. I flipped her off.

She blew me a kiss.

I dodged it.

It nailed Wideload square on the kisser. His eyes fluttered. He developed very obvious and immediate turgidity. He shifted in his chair. Looked like he was going to slide to the floor.

I stopped him by stomping my heel into his groin.

Gunther started to get up. That's a mistake lots of guys make. They assume that a physical attack means I've got no magick. I flashed my right hand at him, snapping my fingers. A little spark shot off and clipped his hip. His sciatic nerve fired, which feel a lot like having a red hot wire running from knee up over your ass.

"Sit, Gunther."

I pointed my left hand at Craig. "You're going no where, either, little boy. You remember me?"

Craig gripped the arms of his chair and stared at my fingers as if they were the barrel of a gun. "Yeah. Club Flesh."

"Good. Lexie. When did you last see her?"

"That bitch?"

I snapped my fingers. The spark burned through his shoulder. Should have felt like he was having a heart attack.

"When?"

He clutched his left arm, gasping. "A week ago. God damn."

"She in good spirits? Not afraid of you coming back on her?"

"She did the dumping, not me." Craig gave me as cold a stare as he could muster. "Didn't matter to me. I was banging this other chick..."

"Uh huh, and so your visit to the library two weeks ago was for higher education?"

"No. She did a thing on her blog. It was me. Guys were laughing at me. I told her to stop."

I ground my heel, buying me a little more time. Craig could have been lying, but that wasn't the read I was getting. Her blog had wounded his pride. If he'd offed her I'd have been getting indignant vibes, or him telling me she'd gotten what she deserved. Instead he was just hurt that she made fun of him. It wasn't quite Lance Firestone behavior, but it suited Craig pretty damned well.

I stepped back. Wideload sagged to the ground and moaned. Gunther's hands bunched into fists. "You're a dead man."

"Take a good look, Gunther." I pulled on magick armor that was all glowing edges and spikes. "You want to dance some time, we'll dance. Pray you can keep up."

His eyes widened. Craig's closed, and he muttered a prayer. Wideload just kept moaning, though not so much soprano anymore.

I walked out of there, tossing Angela a wink.

She'd armored up, too. No edges. No spikes. All pink, soft and warm. Molten desire. Even if those boys had a mind to be following me, they'd never get past her.

At least, not until they'd paid everything they had and promised more.

Craig's mention of the blog sent me to Java-bytes. I bought coffee and rented time on a machine. Didn't take long to find her site. The entries read like slice of life stuff, all very anonymous. I mean, she had characters who showed up in tale after tale, but they weren't real world names. They'd been changed to protect the innocent.

Circumstances had, too. Club Flesh became a restaurant, with dancers being waitresses and cooks. Lots of them were composites. The most recent posts had been recorded in the journal, but rewritten for the blog. Reader speculation in the blog comments section made it pretty clear that she was talking about a strip club, and that women were on the menu.

Ultimately, however, the stories weren't about bump-and-grind, but about the people there, their backgrounds, hopes and dreams. She pushed passed the stereotypes of women working as dancers and made them real. She wove a bit of herself into the girls. The composite character based mostly on an airhead dancer named Adrienne talked about her mom the way Sarah did about her own.

She did a good job. I knew the girls she was describing. I felt ashamed I didn't know them better because, truth be told, lots of them were meat on the hoof and I was a cowboy just keeping the rustlers away. Sarah gave me a glimpse at who they were, bringing them to life

Most of all, reading the blog made me sad that I'd not known Lexie better. Maybe, if I had, she wouldn't be cold-cuts in a morgue refrigerator.

Nothing I could do about that. I could, however, find out who offed her and deposit him right beside her. Not a lofty goal, but attainable.

My phone rang. "Molloy. Make me happy."

"You sitting down?" It was Cate.

"Take your best shot."

She did. A beaut.

"Your girl was pregnant. DNA tests are preliminary, but going with what I got right now, I'd say the baby would have had your eyes."

Part Six

Cate was not happy. The look in her eyes left no doubt about that. Her face had become a steel mask, which betrayed her fury. She tried to hide it, but the effort just focused it. She was sure I'd lied to her about Lexie, and that the encounters in the diary were fact not fiction.

What pissed her off wasn't that I'd been with Lexie, but that I'd lied to her. Not only was that a violation of our friendship, but it made her job harder. Accepting me at my word meant she'd given me time to destroy evidence, such that if I had killed Lexie, I'd get away with it.

I held my hands up. "I swear I've never been with her. Never in life, never even in a dream."

"Then how do you explain this?" Cate lifted a small jar. A tissue sample floated in clear liquid. It wasn't much, barely the size of a pea. "I've checked. It's got your essence."

I ran a hand over my jaw. "How did you do the test?"

"Open your eyes."

I shifted vision. A golden aura surrounded Cate and bled over the jar. Her magick ran through one of the more common channels, earth. Since we're all carbon-based lifeforms, her training let her analyze and identify organic evidence with astonishing precision. It all had to be backed up with instrumentational evidence, but her preliminary tests eliminated a lot of investigational dead ends.

"The magick doesn't lie, Molloy."

I shivered. She didn't call me Molloy often, and when she did, it was never good. It wasn't the first time that it

struck me that Cate was probably the only individual in the city who could get away with a perfect murder. Quick cut with a scalpel, I bleed out. She slabs me, carves me, provides a John Doe death certificate, and ships me off to be cremated and dumped in a pauper's grave. No one would notice and the lack of delivery documentation would be put down to clerical error.

"What if it's confused, Cate?"

She shook her head. "Start making sense, or I call homicide."

"Okay, remember the Kramer case? You wanted to culture some bacteria for identification and I helped things along?"

She slowly nodded. She'd wanted to eliminate bacterial infection as a cause of death, but Susan Kramer's body had been in an advanced state of decomposition. My magick runs in a different channel than Cate's, so I was able to boost the metabolic rate for the culture. The problem was that each Petri dish had more than one bacterium in it. I had to learn to feel for their presence, then only allow the magick to affect the ones she wanted to grow.

She set the bottle down. "Keep talking."

"I've been learning a lot about Sarah. I don't know her trigger, but her channel was definitely emotional. Low power, but empathic, perhaps even telepathic. The description of my apartment, she pulled that from her roommate, Nicole. The sex was part of a dream."

"How do you know?"

"Picture's perfect for a year and a half ago, but I've changed things around. If Sarah had visited, she'd have seen the new stuff, not the old."

Cate's browed furrowed. "You're suggesting this tissue sample is picking up thoughts and feeding them back to me?"

I opened my hands. "You've heard the same stories I have, how being in the presence of a saint's relics can impart a sensation of peace. Could be residual magick there. You're a friend. You're concerned about me and my involvement. That might get fed back to you in terms of confirmation."

Her expression eased. "Emotional states have been showed to affect capabilities. Okay. Maybe. Tech tests results should be back in a couple days. If they come back positive..."

"They won't." I shook my head. "Get anything else on Sarah?"

"Tox screen was negative for anti-depressants. I called the lab. They wouldn't confirm she was part of the control group, but they did tell me she was in the study. Monthly monitoring, hundred bucks a session. They did tell me that there had been no up-tick in suicide among participants."

"But she had a belly-full of the placebos in her when she died?"

"The 'QF' cocktail. Merlot and meristol. "

"Explains why she didn't fight back." Meristol was the latest in designer date-rape drugs—tasteless, odorless and clear. All the girls knew never to drink anything they'd not watched go from bar to their hand, and never to finish a drink that a patron had touched. Some guys aren't content to leave a fantasy at a lap dance.

"So who did this, Trick?"

I shrugged. "Ex-boyfriend is possible, but unlikely. Could be she had a new beau. I'll check that. There's a chance that there's a journal missing from her home. She recorded different parts of her life in different journals, but I can't tell what this would have covered. Either she lost it, or the killer wanted it since it identified him. Outside shot she happened to pick up the wrong guy and he did her, but it doesn't read like a serial killer to me."

"No, it was personal." Cate placed the tissue sample into a refrigerator. "The killer knew her well. She trusted him. She drank his drink, got into his car, and he brought her to the motel room she'd already rented. Could have been they played a game—random pick-up, seedy motel room. My money is on the baby-daddy."

I frowned. "He planned it, but why? Did she tell him she was pregnant and wanted him to do the right thing? I don't see her as a blackmailer."

"She may not have even known she was pregnant yet."

"I'll find out." I sighed. "Who ever it was, he saw Sarah as a threat. He must have had a lot to lose."

"And he hasn't lost anything. Yet." Cate pressed her hand against the drawer door behind which Sarah's body rested. "She did. Find him, Trick. Make him pay."

Part Seven

I headed home from the morgue and made a call along the way. I asked Nicole if Lexie had purchased any of those home pregnancy tests, or had talked about being pregnant. She offered to let me come search the apartment again. I passed. She said Lexie hadn't used anything like that, to the best of her knowledge, and that the girl was scrupulous about using condoms. She asked if I knew what those were and offered to enlighten me if I didn't.

Another pass.

So Lexie let her guard down with someone, or they'd had an accident. If she tested herself, it hadn't been at home or while Nicole was around. I suspected Lexie didn't know. Least ways I wanted that to be the case since it really eliminated the whole extortion possibility.

I crawled into a cold bed and tried not to think about Lexie—making it impossible, of course. She'd been a cute kid; always full of smiles and helpful. Aside from Craig, she'd really not been associated with trouble. She was one of the "good girls." Much too nice for the business, and it cost her.

I caught myself. I was making the assumption that her death was tied to Club Flesh, but there was nothing to indicate that was true. Heck, Ted Bundy used to cruise college campuses to pick out his victims. He'd wear a fake cast, struggle carrying a stack of books, and offer any helpful coed a ride in his car. His weakness made him harmless, so she'd accept.

And that would be her last ride ever.

While I agreed with Cate that she knew her killer, her diaries proved she moved in many circles in her life. Journal Twenty-nine had only been three-quarters full, and had picked up from Twenty-two. If the killer had snagged the mythical Thirty, it suggested he existed in another part of her life.

That idea gave me a direction and a chance to sleep. I think I did dream. I watched Lexie up on stage, dancing, with a legion of anonymous shadowy figures studying her. One of them had done her, and finding that would keep me busy.

I woke up all muzzy-headed. A shower and Java-bytes helped there. I shaved, pulled on a shirt and found a tie to match. I used to wear a tie when I was still on the force. Though it felt like a noose, it took me back to when I was a detective and good at finding needles in haystacks.

This particular haystack was Coast College's English Department. I remember hearing once about how long you're supposed to wait for an instructor. Five minutes for a teaching assistant, ten for an associate professor and so on. Kenneth Larson had a doctorate and an endowed chair. That meant you waited as long as it took.

He finally arrived at his office, but was halfway through the door before I realized it was him. I'd expected a much older man—one who actually needed the walking stick he carried. If he was five years my senior I'd have been surprised. Slender, tall, athletic, he had a strong gait and moved quickly. That's how he got halfway through the door before I'd risen from the chair across the hall.

I'm quick, too. My foot stopped his door from closing.

He spun, the walking stick coming up. "You surprised me. May I help you?"

"You don't know me, doc; but I need to ask you about one of your students. Sarah Brown."

He hesitated for a moment, then nodded. He had a longish face, but not so out of proportion to make him ugly. More aristocratic, with just hint of white coming in at his temples. His nose had never been broken, and his jaw came to a sharpish point. Brown eyes, but bright and quick.

"We are restricted in giving out information Mr..."

"Molloy. I know that. Thing is, she's gone missing. Friends asked me to ask around. They just want to make sure she's okay."

He nodded, then sat. He laid the walking stick on the edge of his mahogany desk, then pointed to the nearest of the leather chairs opposite himself. "Please, be seated."

It wasn't until I sank into the chair that I got the itch. He had talent. Felt like low-grade, but I'd not had anything to drink, so I might not have been getting a clean read.

It didn't take magick to get a read on him, however. His office said it all. Impeccable. Not only could you have eaten off the floor, there wasn't a chef in the city who wouldn't have been proud to have had his food plopped right there. All of his publications were lined up on shelves, grouped by type, organized by date. One wall had a series of framed photographs of Larson with a variety of celebrities, or receiving awards. All the same size, all the same frames, gridded out exactly as if he was a geometry professor.

And then there was the trophy case. All glass, save for the walnut base, the top two shelves contained medals and other literary prizes. Below that sat a staggering array of medals and trophies from martial arts competitions. Most of them were for bojitsu, which explained the walking stick. For him it was a lethal weapon.

He folded his hands on the desk—the top of which was remarkably clear of clutter. "I'll help you as much as I can. Sarah is a very talented writer."

"Good enough to be published?"

"Good enough that the Nobel committee will be taking a hard look at her work in another thirty years." He smiled confidently. "When she came over from Sociology, she was a gift from God."

Something passed over his face, but I didn't catch it fully. Still I got what he meant by the gift remark. He'd discovered her. She was his. He felt proprietary.

And way too smug for my taste.

That needed handling.

"Impressive." I nodded. "So, Doc, when you did her, would it be here in your office, or would you go somewhere else?"

Part Eight

Kenneth Larson, Piled-Higher-and-Deeper, really didn't like my asking if he'd been sleeping with Sarah

Brown. His head came up and nostrils flared. He didn't go for the walking stick, however. I wanted him to, really, but he didn't give me an excuse to wipe smug from his face.

"I am certain, Mr. Molloy, that your fantasies are rife with sex with young coeds. It is a common myth that sexual favors are exchanged for grades, or that coeds far from home seek validation through sexual congress with authority figures. I find the implications of your statement abhorrent."

"Thanks for the vocabulary lesson, doc. Nice if you answered the question, though." I looked toward the window. "I'm sure, if I go out there and ask, someone will know someone who has slept with you. No wedding ring, no picture of a sweetheart on your desk, you've been tempted."

He exhaled slowly, calming himself. "When I was younger, I... well, let us say that I learned my lesson. I am human, and enjoy carnal pleasure as much as the next person, but I was not sleeping with Sarah Brown."

"Do you know who is?"

"She has a boyfriend. To be quite frank, he and his associates frighten me, so I have begun to distance myself from Sarah. Our meetings are in public places, no longer late at night. This has upset her. She told her boyfriend to back off. I don't know how that went."

"He was escorted off campus after a row in the library."

"Yes, that, I mean since."

"You don't know of anyone else she's seeing?"

"No, why?"

"Her roommate says she bought a home pregnancy kit. Came up positive. She thinks Sarah ran off with the baby-daddy."

Larson's expression soured. "I find that phrase repugnant."

"Paramour? Lover? I do crosswords, doc. I can come up with more."

"Understand something, Mr. Molloy. What you do with language, what I can do with language, is but a fraction of what Sarah's skill affords her. She's incredibly talented. I considered it a sacred duty to be able to help her develop her skills. When you find her, tell her I am willing to continue mentoring her. Her gift should not be denied to the world."

I didn't like Larson and I knew exactly why. Lots of guys, when they learn that I'm a strip-club bouncer, figure I nail every woman who walks into the joint, singly and in groups. They're envious, and never believe that I don't.

Not that the desire isn't there. I'll have to be dead before I'm not interested. The problem is that my job is to keep them safe. Larson's job is to teach them, but he goes beyond. He alluded to an incident, but I was willing to bet a bunch of extra-credit had been earned in that office. It was all too neat and orderly. He was wound tight, and guys like that always need an outlet. Put him, an Angela Duste video and a sorority house together and his freak flag would fly high and proud.

And the bojitsu thing? Don't need a psych degree to read that as overcompensation.

As happens when I don't like someone, I became determined to learn more about him. Not really obsession, not yet, anyway. Upon leaving the English building, I pulled out my phone and searched the net for the latest and greatest on Larson. The most current cite was for some literary journal boasting of his newest story. I snagged that and bookmarked a couple other sites to check at Java-bytes.

"If only my students concentrated half that hard."

I looked up and smiled. "They don't because they find you distracting, I'm sure, Talia."

She liked the comment, but had the good graces to blush. "Thank you. Just up talking to Ken Larson?"

"Yeah, his Holiness gave me an audience."

She laughed, her blue eyes flashing as she grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the English building. "You want to get out of range of his lightning bolts."

For a half-second I thought she was referring to magick, but like most un-talented people, magick didn't really exist. Hollywood films would put it on-screen, but their special effects put what any of us could do to shame. If you couldn't see in magick—and not even all the talented people could do that—you'd miss even the most savage fight.

I glanced back up at the building but didn't so much as see a silhouette in Larson's window. We slowed, but she didn't let go of my hand. "Larson did not take well my asking if he was sleeping with Sarah."

"You didn't."

"I did."

"And he didn't beat you with a stick?"

I laughed. "He was probably tempted."

I started across the street, to the campus green, but Talia's hand tightened on mine. She pulled me back on the curb. A Toyota whizzed past a second after she dragged me to safety.

"Thanks."

"They drive insanely here." She smiled. "I saved your life. You owe me."

"I guess I do."

Her smile broadened for a second, then shrank. "Just so you know, pretty much any faculty member would be insulted by the question you hit Larson with. Professor-student liaisons are the dirty little secrets that make campus life interesting." Talia grinned. "I don't indulge, but many do."

"And you remain chaste because?"

She composed herself. "When people come into contact with authority figures, they often default to coping strategies that have worked for them in the past. The most common model is parent-child. The dynamic is familiar and easy to abuse. I have no sexual desire or taste for children, either chronological or behavioral. I choose not to do it because of that."

Then she smiled. "As for being chaste..."

I narrowed my eyes. "Your finding me outside the English department wasn't an accident, was it?"

She pursed her lips for a moment. "I won't lie to you. I figured you'd be back to see Doctor Larson. Today was your best chance of catching him. I stalked you."

"And if I hadn't come back?"

"I know where Club Flesh is."

I raised an eyebrow. "So you're practiced at stalking?"

"I said I wouldn't lie. You intrigue me. I find you attractive. I figured I needed to seek you out because you wouldn't come back to find me."

“You don’t think so?”

“I know so.” Talia gave my hand a squeeze. “White Knight Syndrome. You ride off to save the damsel in distress. It’s a strong motif, but one with a dark side. It’s like all the westerns and samurai stories. The White Knight can save the day, but he’s never worthy of love. He’s always alone. He seeks an idealized woman, and no one ever measures up.”

Her words, delivered frankly, sank into me with claws. It wasn’t a bad read. In fact, it was a very good one. I’d even joked about it back in the days when I joked about things like that. It was all about redemption, and not feeling you’re worthy of happiness or love. At least, that’s how department shrinks had described it during those mandated counseling sessions.

“And you’re my idealized woman?”

“That, sir, is a subject we should discuss over lunch.”

“Can’t, gotta work. Dinner?”

“It’ll have to be late. I have a yoga class.” She stretched. “I like to remain flexible.”

“Nine? Call me and tell me where to pick you up.”

“I’ll do that.” She stepped back, smiling shyly. “Until tonight, Mr. Molloy.”

Part Nine

I really didn’t find it annoying that I was thinking more about Talia than Lexie as I drove to Club Flesh. Lexie had found a world beyond the club. I really didn’t have one—unless you counted the time I spent with Cate at crime scenes or in the morgue. Hell, that made Club Flesh look good.

As much as I wanted to see past the stereotypes, the simple fact was that I really did associate with a lot of bottom-feeders and zombies. Drug dealers, gangbangers, Jac-offs and lost little girls were my closest associates. It wasn’t like I didn’t have an education or brains or manners—just too often I wasn’t called upon to use them.

Talia had the power to change that. She could draw me out. She could take me to other places. She could open doors I’d forgotten even existed.

I must have wanted that. That’s why I’d shaved and put on a tie. I was hoping I’d see her. I might have even stopped by her office to see if she’d remembered anything else. Sure, any White Knight would do that.

I might have even asked her out.

Who are you kidding?

She was all the things the women at Club Flesh did their best not to be. Certainly not obvious. And she would open doors in me that I didn’t even know if I wanted opened. Seeing her would be a risk.

But not to see her would be a tragedy.

I clocked in at the club by one and arranged with Phillippe to pick up my late shift in return for his Friday night. Tips were better on Friday, but that was the night for fights. He’d just shucked a cast from a broken ankle and wanted to stay clear of action for a little while longer.

Nicole came in, played with my tie, told me she’d done the Sherlock Holmes bit around the apartment. She’d not found any pregnancy test. She figured there should be some kind of reward for her having been helpful. I laughed-off the opening. I couldn’t help but remember what Talia had said about coping strategies.

Nicole took my refusal with all the grace of a five years old.

The day went pretty quick, but that's because it was daytime. Guys who come into a club during the day are figuring out how to expense lap-dances as lunch or got a bonus day off and don't have anything better to do than drool. Two sides of a pathetic coin, but they're quiet and pay my rent. Happy Hour remained quiet, too, letting me nurse my whisky in peace. A few guys with bulges in their jeans came in and spread some cash around, which meant some of the girls could go home early, having made their nut.

Sun had set by the time I escorted Adrienne out to her car. Up on stage she had the wanton librarian act down pat, even though she didn't know what a library was, and was pretty sketchy on the concept of books. Off stage, and off those seven-inch platforms, wearing old sweats and a t-shirt, most folks wouldn't have given her a second glance. When she wasn't using her talent to enflame, she pretty much sank into the background.

I got her to her car, watched her start it and head off. I waited to see if anyone was following her. I'd already taught her how to check her backtrail and what to do if she was followed.

Everything looked to be clear, which is when the first Jac-off caught me in the shoulder with a tire iron.

He had been trying to take my head off, but clipped my shoulder instead. Instant pain down the length of my arm. I reeled away to the left, ducking instinctively. A baseball bat whistled over my head. I spun to face my attackers, and caught movement in the shadows all around.

Wideload stepped into the light, wiping several of his chins with a paper napkin, brushing the remains of a burrito from his shirt. "You went after the wrong people, Molloy. You're surrounded. You're going to get what's coming to you."

"Yeah, what's that?"

The fat man chuckled, his whole body rippling. "What you did to me will seem like a pleasant dream, you stupid bastard."

I shook my head. Not out of fear, but pain. Pain at his stupidity. He had me, he really did. Eight guys. Four snuffs, two fireflies including Craig, Gunther and himself. They knew I was strong, so they overwhelmed me, gave me too many targets to take out easily. On top of that, one snuff had already connected. He hit me when I wasn't looking and the pain made concentration impossible.

Or had when it occurred.

Now, not so much.

"Gonna beg for mercy, Molloy?"

"Here's the deal, Wideload. You get your asses out of here now, I pound out the dent in my shoulder, and we're even." I growled my words. Some of his boys tightened their hands on bats and tire irons. Nervous. I liked that.

Wideload laughed even louder.

I liked that more. It bought me more time. I worked my right arm around, then hovered both hands near my hips, like a gunfighter. My vision changed. Wideload glowed blue and I suddenly realized why he was so enormously fat. His trigger had to be food, maybe even just Mexican food. He never dared let his guard down, so he was eating constantly. And the PCP buffet usually came from Cantina Chupacabra just up the street.

I dropped to a knee and summoned a round shield. Azure beams poured from his eyes. They smashed the shield. The shock staggered me. His gaze shifted. I lowered the shield, then angled it. One of the snuffs took a glancing shot. He went down screaming.

I opened my right fist. A handful of glowing silver disks coalesced. I whipped them out from behind the shield,

backhanding them as if they were dime-sized Frisbees. They spread in an arc linking Gunther on the right to Craig and the other firefly on the left. The Nameless Wonder mistook one for a coin, so he stomped on it. Two hit Wideload in the gut—like I could miss. Gunther and Craig caught them in the torso, and all four of them stopped for a second, waiting and wondering what I'd done.

The snuffs didn't stop. All they'd seen was Wideload give me a dirty glance that shook me. One of their pals reeled away, and I moved like Johnny Appleseed trying to sow an orchard on asphalt. Our magick pantomime might have puzzled them, but their lack of higher brain functions meant that wasn't much of a problem for them.

A baseball bat snapped my right forearm. A booted foot caught me upside the head. I pitched forward, landing on the broken arm. I yelped. Couldn't help it. The snuffs took encouragement from that. They closed in, letting me become personally acquainted with their Doc Martens.

Under normal circumstances, dispatching them wouldn't have been tough. They'd go down faster than Gunther had at PCP. Problem was getting the spell off. With my arm throbbing angrily and pain erupting with every kick and stomp, thinking wasn't happening.

No thinking, no magick.

No magick, no Trick.

Part Ten

They were beating me like a Mike Tyson piñata at a Klan rally. Worse. No blindfolds, and they were ganging up. Kicks landed hard and heavy. Try to protect one part and something else would open up. Odds of my surviving were dropping faster than Congress' approval rating. There wasn't much I could do about it.

At least not now.

Luckily, I'd already done all I could.

The spells I'd worked earlier finally ignited.

Nameless Wonder showed the first signs. He started dancing as if his boots were on fire. He cried out every time his feet hit the ground, then fell and tore at his boots. They came off and blood dripped from his socks. He threw his head back and howled.

Craig wasn't much better off. His left arm hung limp, his face contorted in agony. A red rash spread up his neck and along the arm. He reached his right hand back, trying to scratch, trying to sooth, but his body tightened. He went down, too, writhing on the pavement.

Gunther had taken two steps toward me, then he jackknifed forward. He hugged his belly and dropped to his knees. Moaning inhumanly, he vomited. His last meal came up dark with blood. That shocked him. As he gasped, he breathed vomitus back in, pitching him into a coughing fit.

But for Wideload, the magick worked the best.

Cate, maybe a couple other people, knew the truth about my magick. Most folks have simple channels: earth, air, fire, water. Some get more obscure: love, hate, desire. Mine? It's rare, well outside two standard deviations beyond the mean. One in a billion. Maybe even more rare.

My channel is life.

Cate taught me how to use spells to identify and culture bugs.

I weaponized that magick.

Those little coins each sought a specific bug. They just filled it with life. They started bacteria, fungi and viruses humping like bunnies.

Nameless Wonder caught himself a nasty case of Athlete's foot. The flesh blistered as fungi colonized his feet. If he pulled those socks off, most of his toes would go with them. And Craig, those Chicken Pox scars had been his undoing. The same herpes virus that caused the pox also triggered shingles. It's seriously painful. Probably felt like a thousand cats clawing his flesh into ribbons then braiding them up tight. For Gunther, H. pylori, the bug that causes ulcers. He'd have a huge one. Right now his gut felt as if he'd swallowed an oxy-acetylene torch burning full blast.

Despite feet pounding me, I had to laugh at Wideload.

The human gut is home to countless bacteria. Most are incredibly friendly. Without them to digest food, it wouldn't get broken down into the nutrients we need. But there are some foods that don't digest right. They ferment. They produce all sorts of interesting results—much like the bubbles that fermentation produces in beer.

Food like beans.

Wideload's belly became even more distended. Gas roared as it shifted within. Eyes widened, his jaw dropped. I think he was trying to burp—anything to get rid of that bloated feeling.

But burps, no matter how prodigious, just weren't going to cut it.

Another kick to the head made me a bit hazy on what happened next. I know it involved Wideload spinning around. He farted loudly, as if someone had stuffed an assault rifle up his ass and was busy burning clips. All of that accompanied a complete intestinal track core-dump.

In about ten seconds he ended up emptier than someone chasing a ten day fast with a high-colonic.

Which, when you're in a leadership position, makes it really tough to maintain dignity and control your minions.

Two of the snuffs stopped beating on me. The third kept working, dearly trying to pick up the slack for his friends. He'd have finished me, too, with a bat to the head, but Adrienne roared into the parking lot. Poor girl drove bad enough to be a Coast College student. I told the cops she tried to stop, despite what the lack of skidmarks would indicate.

The snuff she clipped landed in the salvage yard connected to the tire-shop across the street. He cleared the concertina wire easily. Could be he broke something when she hit him, and something else when he landed. He made really piteous sounds.

They changed in pitch when the shop's Dobies found him.

Adrienne leaped out of her car. "Trick, are you okay?"

"Sure, darlin'." I had to say that. If my bleeding from the ears, nose and split lips didn't clue her in—and she missed that funny divot in my arm—she really didn't want to know how much I hurt.

With her help, I staggered to my feet and braved the toxic cloud enveloping the Jac-off leaders. I ignored Wideload and rested a foot on Craig's chest. I leaned, pressing his back into the ground.

He screamed.

"I can make it stop, Craig."

His eyes wide, he nodded. "Yesyesyesyes."

"Was Lexie's baby yours?"

I actually think the news that she'd been pregnant hurt him more than the shingles. He blinked away a tear. "No. She wouldn't. Never went bareback with her."

"No accidents?"

"No, I swear."

"Okay." I stepped back and forced the pain away. I held my left fist above his chest and squeezed. Golden light surrounded it, and a droplet fell. It splashed against his flesh. His body spasmed once, then he lay there gasping.

Adrienne had retreated back into Club Flesh. Eddie, behind the bar, called the cops. McGetty caught the call and the uniforms followed his lead. I'd actually supervised McGetty when he was a rookie, so he took me at my word, rounded up the Jac-offs and hauled them down to lock-up.

Paramedics checked me out, but by the time they'd arrived, I'd fixed my arm and most of the cuts. I let one of the techs clean up the blood and put a butterfly bandage on my right ear—she was cute, after all, and didn't look askance at me taking a nip from the pint bottle Eddie had slipped me.

Finally they all left, leaving me and Adrienne alone in the parking lot. "Thanks a lot, Adrienne. You saved my life."

"I couldn't let them hurt you, Trick." She smiled, and had we been inside, I'd have tucked a Reagan into her g-string.

"Why'd you come back?"

"I was being followed. Same as last month." Her face slackened as her hands rose. "It was that big glowing ball, again. You know, one of those UFO things. I was afraid I'd be kidnapped, so I came back here."

I nodded. "It stopped following you when you turned around, right?"

"How did you know?"

"Just a hunch, darlin'." No one had ever accused Adrienne of being a rocket scientist. Right now I was okay with that. Up beyond her head hung a full moon—the same full moon that had followed her home this time last month.

"Is it going to be okay, Trick?"

"Yeah. Just go north to Emerson, then head west through the hills. They'll leave you alone."

She gave me a peck on the cheek. "You're the best, Trick Molloy."

She backed out of the lot and her fading headlights left me in the darkness. I couldn't help remembering the month before, standing in the same spot, laughing with Lexie about Adrienne's UFO experience. Lexie had even promised not to get kidnapped by aliens, then wrote the whole thing down in her journal.

Had she been pregnant then? Probably. Had she known she was? No way of knowing. Was it the baby that got her killed?

I shook my head. So many questions. So few answers. I needed more, and I was pretty sure I knew right where to start.

Part Eleven

I called Talia and rainchecked the evening's entertainment. I explained, in general terms, what had happened. She offered to come over and nursemaid me. She even hinted that she had a seductive little nurse's outfit. My resolve almost wavered, but a breeze wafting up from the puddle that had been Wideload's ground zero killed my libido. I thanked her and promised to make it up to her.

The fact was that magick had closed all my wounds and fixed my arm, but I'd not wanted to push things too far. I left some of the bruises. I'm not a masochist. I'd be hurting the next morning, but I didn't want to burn myself out. There was a murderer out there somewhere, and I needed to tag him. Having the magick reservoir bone dry just wasn't going to work.

A night's sleep would help a lot, but before I headed off to bed, I started in on my research. I went back over the journals and compared them to Lexie's blog. I made a key, deciphering who was what. For Club Flesh that was pretty easy. Lexie had a way of creating characters and explaining their situations that brought the actual circumstances to mind in a snap.

I tried doing the same thing for her school and family journals, but with not as high a degree of success. She did more to hide her family members, like dividing her mom up into a mom for several of the girls. Even though I didn't know the people involved, the patterns Lexie had established in her writing about the club held true. I was able to link people back and forth. Again, no one emerged as a viable candidate for either an enemy, or the father of her child, but I was getting a better grasp on Lexie.

Which made painfully obvious what must have been in that missing journal.

Larson.

Nothing about Larson. Zero. Not in the blog, not in the school journals. I was willing to bet he'd been a journal unto himself—an honor she'd not bestowed on anyone else.

Back when I'd been a rookie detective assigned to homicide, one of the old bulls closing in on retirement told me the secret of catching murderers. He said that only the stupid or the really smart get caught. The dumb ones answer the door, covered in blood, knife in hand. The smart ones, though, they make sure every clue is covered. Making it look like a suicide is a favorite and there's where we hit snag with Lexie.

She wrote volumes. Why no note? Was it conceivable that someone who expressed herself so well through words would go out without explaining why? Lexie regularly interacted with her blog's readers. Would she leave them in the dark?

I didn't think so.

Which led me to kick my Kenneth Larson research into high gear. Graduated in the middle of the pack from Middlebury College's writing program, Arizona State for his MFA, Iowa for his doctorate. Nothing of note as an undergrad, but once he was earning those higher degrees he began to get notices. Never married, focuses on students, and when he got to Coast College he built a creative writing program from scratch. He got endowments for it and the college had broken ground on a center earlier this year.

I grabbed my phone and found his story in that journal I'd snagged. I'm no literary critic. The only creative writing I've done is in some crime scene reports. He wasn't bad, Larson. Though I didn't want to, I found myself sympathizing with the main character in his story. The guy was a broken-down salesman, all old-school, who got scapegoated for the loss of a big account. He was battling back, but was his own worst enemy. He drank too much, worked a dead-end job that was sucking his soul out.

They say literature is meant to hold a mirror up to the human condition. I knew this guy. I could feel for him. Larson made it easy to get inside his head and his flesh.

For me it would be easier than most, though, since the character was me.

And it had been easy for Larson. He'd had help.

That same portrait of me appeared in journal Twenty-nine. Different circumstances, but same turns of phrase. Didn't appear in the blog. No place else, least not that I could find. Which meant Larson had pulled it from her

journal.

Check that.

I went back over articles I'd read about him—and not just the college-connected ones. I looked for reports on tournaments and found more than enough references. A couple of his opponents had their own blogs, praising him for his skill and his ability to react. His attacks came as unexpected, his defense was impenetrable.

It seemed to many of his foes that he knew what they were going to do before they did it.

I was pretty sure that was right.

It all made sense. Lexie's channel had been empathy which, for all intents and purposes, is surface-telepathy. She picked up on those things that concerned people in the moment. Coupled with some common sense and a writer's attention to detail, she pulled vivid images from the minds of her friends. She got the description of my apartment from Nicole's dream; the various other tales from her co-workers. She still had to translate their memories into words—there was a true talent—but she was able to do her research in the minds of others.

Larson, though, could go deeper and work past defenses. I'd once heard of an aikido sensei who dodged bullets. When asked how he did it, he said he didn't dodge the bullet itself. He dodged when the image of a bullet appeared in the shooter's mind. He dodged the intent to shoot, not the hot metal.

Larson's career all fell into place. Like many people he may have been late in discovering his trigger or channel. Looks like he did that in graduate school. He started leeching off talented students. His ability to pull endowments also made sense. It's pretty easy to talk someone into giving you something when you can look into his head, learn what his conditions for the gift are, then agree to meet them.

I shook my head. Lexie's got writing talent. He feeds off her. Finds her very potent, because she's feeding things back to him. He doesn't want her to get away, so they have an affair. He thinks it'll be temporary maybe, but then he looks inside her and finds she's pregnant.

Why would he kill her for that? All he had to do was to marry her and have his muse at his side for all time. It made no sense, at least not in my skull. But my skull didn't count. As long as it made sense in his, he would make his move.

Kenneth Larson, murderer.

Okay, I had my target. Now I had to go after him.

A quote from a guy he'd beaten in a national bojitsu tournament blasted into my head. "There's no surprising this guy."

Maybe not, but I'd have to try.

And somehow hope I'd survive the encounter.

Part Twelve

You're not surprised to see me, are you, doc?

Larson smiled, resting both hands on his walking stick. Students moved around us in a stream. "Mr. Molloy. I had expected to see you again. Would like to come to my office?"

I glanced up at the English Department's gray façade, then shook my head. "I'll pass." I wanted him in the open, in a crowd. All these young minds would keep him overwhelmed and distracted, pretty much as I'd been dealing with the jac-offs the night before.

"It will make our conversation less constrained."

"Oh, I'm not likely to be constrained at all, Doc. In fact, I like being in a crowd with you. Gives you more to listen in on."

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Do you know, or are you guessing?"

I thought for a half-second and could feel him pushing at me. It was the itch, but hotter now, clawing. I'd drunk my breakfast, so I was able to push him back. I didn't push hard, though. Didn't mind if he came in, just didn't want him in deep.

"That how you do it, doc? You ask a question you know the answer to, then you pick up on their thought pattern? That becomes the key to unlocking their minds?"

He raised an eyebrow. "A surprisingly adroit deduction, Molloy."

"I got more. Walk with me." I pointed off across the green toward where his creative writing center was being built. "You learned to do that in grad school."

"Working as a TA. You try to make a student understand something complex, and you start by asking questions he already knows the answer to. You lead him to the conclusions you want drawn." The man walked with me, but kept a distance between us. "I began to notice I could tell what they were going to say, and then I was able to go deeper."

"Depending on how well you knew them?"

"Depending on the depth of connection."

He said it in a way that made me immediately think of sex, which is what he wanted. He pushed again. I gave a little ground, then held him off. "You're not going to get to know me that well, Doc."

"You've nothing I want."

"Been reading my journal, doc?"

His head came up. "Touché."

I laughed. "I've done my reading. You stole things from Sarah's mind, used them in one of your stories. You were able to read her thoughts on the matter. It wasn't threatening. She wouldn't have turned you in."

"You, on the other hand, Molloy?"

"Oh, I could ruin you, doctor. Probably will. Bug in the right ear, some computer analysis of your stories and her journals, you're done. You didn't realize Sarah was keeping journals, did you?"

He hesitated, and I read it on his face. "You didn't know she kept multiple journals. Why not, doc? That should have been easy to pick up."

He composed himself. "I found her, one night after we had lain together, writing in a journal with three Xs on the cover. I thought she meant it as triple-X, and she was recording details of our tryst. It wasn't until later I learned that was a number."

"By later you mean after you killed her, right?"

"I didn't know of the other journals because Sarah was a remarkable young lady. She had a great facility for compartmentalization. While she was easy to read, navigating inside her head wasn't simple."

I nodded. "I heard about your teaching methods. You take students through 'creativity exercises'—guided visualizations and the like. They let the ideas flow and you just harvest them."

Larson's nostrils flared. "It's far more complex than that. I work with them, evaluate their skills..."

“And then you rape their minds.”

He stared at me, pushing hard. I gave a bit more, then gave him a full dose of what I thought of him. The image had him all bloated and covered in boils that oozed. His nose grew long, he hunched over and his flaccid pecker dragged on the ground—not because it was long, but because his legs were stubby and infantile.

He recoiled.

I smiled. “I still don’t get why you killed her. Did she know she was carrying your child?”

“I sensed a second life in her. Sarah’s abilities would have let her know, too, soon. I asked her what she thought about having children, and how she would balance motherhood and a career. She said she wouldn’t. Children were more important than her writing. She’d quit and just raise them, just like her mother had.”

“She’d rob you of your muse.”

Larson laughed and spread his arms wide. “Take a look where we are, Molloy. We are in the midst of muses.”

“No sale, doc. Sarah was one of a kind. It wasn’t that she’d someday win a Nobel, it was that she was the way you could win your Nobel.” I scratched my throat. “She was determined to follow in her mother’s footsteps. You decide to convince her otherwise, so you invite her to a tryst, slip her a mickey. You found date-rape drugs made your victims more suggestible? You managed to use it and magick to erase memories from others? Nice. You start suggesting, she reads your thoughts on the matter and tries to resist. She was going to expose you. You had no choice but to make it look like suicide.”

“Nice fairy-tale, Molloy, but she was taking anti-depressants.”

“Placebo.”

“So she was unmedicated for her depression. Learned she was pregnant and that I would not marry her, so she killed herself. I’m so sorry. I never imagined.”

I nodded. “Works, save that you have journal thirty.”

“She mailed it to me before she killed herself. In fact, she had the motel clerk do it for her. He’ll remember that, and he won’t remember seeing me there.” Larson paused at the curb. “Any evidence you have will only convict me of the poor judgment of sleeping with a student. Other than that, Molloy, you have nothing.”

It was actually worse. As an active telepath, he could read the reaction of any jury. He’d pick out where they had doubts, and his counsel would be able to exploit them. I could have caught him with a razor in hand, covered in her blood, and he’d never be convicted.

Tired of waiting, I started across the street through a tight break in traffic. “You’re right, doc, all I’ve got is circumstantial. So I have one choice left.”

I gave him the bullet. Gave it to him hard. Big push, then a pull as he shoved back. Got him in and hooked. I imagined myself whirling through a roundhouse kick that would take his head clean off. I even began the turn.

That’s how I got to watch.

Larson, in fine form, dropped back into a defensive stance. His walking stick came up and started spinning. He’d block the kick and then beat the crap out of me.

He would have, too, except that Coast College really does have horrible drivers. His defensive backstep put him smack dab in front of a speeding Impala. A bloody halo marked where his head hit the hood. He didn’t fly as far as the snuff had last night, but he flew. His body twisted up. Impact pulverized his left leg so it wrapped around the right like ivy. He bounced a couple times, then rolled to a stop.

He stared at me. I don't know if he was alive. He wasn't trying to get into my head anymore, so maybe not.

I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I crouched over him, peered into those dulling eyes, and smiled. They'll never remember you. I'll see to it. You killed Lexie. I'll kill your memory. It's as close to even as things will get.

Cate confirmed that Larson was the father of Sarah's child. Cops found Thirty among his effects. The affair had been torrid. Partners are easy to please when you really know what they want. Nicole helped box everything up and we shipped it off to Sarah's mother.

Coast College originally announced plans to name the creative writing center after Larson, being as how he'd died in its shadow. Problem for Larson was that he'd been too overtly political in dealing with colleagues. A whispering campaign began about how he'd carried on affairs with undergrads, how one had committed suicide because she was pregnant. I'd have thought that would be enough, but when indignation stalled, I unleashed the big guns.

That being evidence of plagiarism.

Didn't matter to folks that Larson was taking advantage of students and that one had killed herself. But, let him steal someone else's work and all hell broke loose. Donors started to back off their pledges and former students started crawling out of the woodwork with "me, too" stories that kicked Coast College's reputation square in the 'nads.

In the end the Center and program went ahead, but Kenneth Larson's contributions to the whole project got tossed into the "and too many other people to mention them individually" category. Another ten years and the campus newssite would resurrect the story of Larson and create a scandal. Gotta love student muckrakers just for the chaos.

A week after Larson's funeral, Cate met me in the Irish pub a block down from the Morgue. As she sat down at the bar, I slid an envelope to her. "The copy of the journal and a report on everything. Just so we both know how the records should have read."

She nodded, then pointed to my empty glass and indicated two more. "We okay, you and me, on this?"

I gave her a sidelong glance, then nodded. "You had to suspect me."

"I didn't want to."

I smiled and turned to face her. "Here's the deal, Cate. You're the kind of friend I need. You'll tell me what I need to be told. You have in the past."

"I'll do so in the future."

"You didn't have to say that so fast."

"But I'll be saying it so often, Trick, I wanted to get the first one out of the way quick."

She raised her glass. "In wine, truth; in friends, trust."

I drank, letting it burn all the way down. I ordered two more, then looked at her. "So, ask me again."

"I know you weren't the child's father."

"I didn't sleep with her."

"Did you want to?"

I thought for a moment, then patted the envelope. "Not Lexie, nope. After what I've learned, maybe Sarah."

Cate grinned, watching the bartender pour. "Maybe even figure out how to love her?"

"Love's strictly for suckers."

"You think?"

"I know."

Talia's hand slipped onto my shoulder. "Let's hope, Mr. Molloy, you're open to being convinced otherwise."