

I was the unlucky one to find the body.

Neville's apartment door was open and the light within illuminated the darkened top landing slightly. Loud opera music reached my ears before the light and I paused to listen to the Italian soprano, straining to recognize the aria. No clue. Shame on me for forgetting all those years of music appreciation class.

I stepped into the dimly lit foyer and rapped on the door even though I knew it was likely my knock couldn't be heard over the music. No one was in the kitchen. I placed my bottle of Pinot Noir on the counter and went into the living room. Neville sat with his back to me, slumped over his desk. My eyes slid over him and took in the disarray in the room, papers strewn from wall to wall, chairs pushed aside, and a curious odor wafting into my nose.

The crescendo ended. Before the next movement could begin, I said, "Neville." He did not respond.

"Are you sleeping?" I asked. A stirring of violins rose from the speakers. I was reluctant to walk across the room. Later, I'd think, I knew something was wrong. Why didn't I just walk over to the desk in the first place, and shake him, or check on him? Much, much later, I'd think, oh, maybe this was what Neville meant when he said my writing was timid.

Where was the music coming from? I grumbled, now that the volume was approaching screech again. And that smell, it was not the usual aroma that engulfed a person upon arriving at the Charles Street apartment. Neville had his pugs, Bess and Harry, and then he and his partner adopted Amantha, the baby-from-hell whose constant state of agitation wore out everyone around her. A general smell of wet dog and diaper ammonia pervaded the small apartment, sometimes combined with the curries that Kenneth liked to whip up for dinner, but this smell was...earthier, and my hand pinched my nose as I ventured further into the living room.

One inner wall of the room, on my left, was covered in bookcases, ornate and polished and filled to the brim with dusty volumes of fiction and poetry. On the opposite side, the front wall featured a bow window with a delightful cushioned seat that was never used because it was the preferred domain of the pugs. The wall nearest the kitchen, on my right, was rough plaster, painted a lush salmon color and broken up by several nude portraits of young men who'd posed for Kenneth when he was actively pursuing his painting career. And the far wall, where Neville's desk was tucked, was red brick surrounding a marble fireplace, fenced off by a hideous plastic igloo since the baby had started crawling.

Under the all the sheets of paper, I knew there was a couch, some careworn upholstered chairs, a coffee table scarred with rings from years of abuse, and an Oriental carpet that may have been valuable at one time, perhaps twenty years ago. Hoping to disrupt the least amount of detritus, I took large steps to cross the room, paused to hit the "off" button when I saw the small iTunes Music Box on the hearth, and ended up at Neville's left side.

Here, the smell was strong. Feces. I tried to breathe shallowly. There was something else. A brown stain ran down his right arm, so I stepped behind him to see more clearly.

“Neville?” My voice echoed in the now-quiet room. I watched him for a moment and realized that he wasn’t breathing. I bent forward to look at his face, forehead flat against the desk. His eyes were open. His mouth was open. Blood had bubbled onto the papers on the blotter.

“I have to leave,” I said. “I’ve got to get out of here.”

Icy tendrils clutched my throat. I closed my eyes, and put my left hand on something to steady myself as I felt the room spin. Oh no, I thought, I’m going to be sick. I opened my eyes and looked around for the waste basket, just in time to vomit my Happy Burger into it. I wiped my mouth with my sleeve, and stood up straight. Time rushed like water — some flowing quickly around me, whispering “He’s dead. You’re in trouble. Run, run, run!” — and another current slid lazily at my feet, where things moved in slow motion. “How long have I been standing here? I should call the police. I wonder how long he’s been dead.”

I realized I was holding onto Neville’s shoulder. Blood...I yanked my hand back and wiped it on the side of my pants. At that moment something caught my eye — and almost simultaneously I heard sirens approaching the building. In his neck, a short handled knife stuck awkwardly out to the side. Its jewels sparkled in the deep patina of old gold.

In its handle several small, dark stones, rubies and sapphires, were inlaid around a pear-shaped diamond. Its size was diminutive, like the pocket knife one might give a child. The width of the entire knife was not more than an inch, its length perhaps four or five inches. I knew the blade was long enough to slice through the flesh and tendons of the neck and to sever the jugular — the evidence of that had spilled into Neville’s lap, which was dark and metallic with blood.

I blinked, still breathing shallowly. I found myself reaching for it. I knew without a doubt what that piece of metal would feel like in my hand, how its curve would fit along my palm, and how the gems warmed the gold until it practically glowed there. Yes, it fit perfectly in a woman’s hand, slid neatly inside a boot, and lay warmly in a pocket. I had known this knife a long, long time before, in a place far from New York City. I knew what it felt like to plunge it into something solid and twist... I quickly moved my clenched fist back over my mouth as another wave of nausea rippled through my gut.

When I lifted my head, I heard a sound at the door, where I saw two officers standing with their guns trained on me. I raised my hands in the air slowly and followed their directions to step away from the body in the chair.

I am nothing if not obliging when I see weapons, I moved as instructed. I tried not to vomit again. My second spew fouled the papers on the floor and none of the evidence the officers were intent on preserving.

“Did you touch him?” the female officer asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I thought he was asleep when I first came in, and then I saw...”

“What did you touch? Where?” the male demanded. “Point to it.”

I did.

“Okay, move to the wall — keep your hands in the air. Is that blood on your hand? Did you kill this man, miss?”

“We better pat her down, Larry,” the female said. “Just in case.”

“Yeah, you do that. I’ll call this in. And cuff her until we get some back-up over here.” He started talking into a shoulder mic, while the smaller officer poked me in the back until we were in the doorway.

My hands still in the air, I felt her smoothly run her gloved hands over my entire body. She pulled my wrists back into handcuffs and sat me in a chair. “Name?”

“Cassie Thornton,” I said. She had pulled out a pad and started writing. “That’s Professor Cassie Thornton,” I amended. “I was coming here to meet with Neville about a book I’m writing.” I might as well get in some credentials, maybe they’d take off the cuffs. They’d only been on a minute but they were damned uncomfortable.

“We had an appointment, you see, and the door was open, so I just walked in and found him like this. It’s just horrid. Shocking, really,” I said. *Should I cry?* I thought. Yes, that would be good. I conjured some dead kittens and tears filled my eyes. “Officer, can you get me a tissue? And perhaps loosen these handcuffs a bit?”

“Just sit here for a minute, lady.” She scowled. “What’s the name of the victim? Neville, you said?”

“Yes, Neville Carstairs. He’s a pretty well-known poet. At least he used to be.”

“Who else lives here? Anyone else in the apartment?” she asked.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone else at home right now,” I said. “His partner and their daughter are probably out to dinner. They usually go out on Tuesday nights when the writing group comes in.”

“So you’re part of a group? I thought you said you had a meeting with him, this Neville?”

“Yes, I did, I was meeting with him privately, before the group, so we could talk about my project. Sometimes we did that. Have private meetings. It wasn’t unusual.” *Shut up, Cassie*, I told myself.

“Uh-huh. So, who called the police?” she asked.

“I didn’t, not yet, I mean. I just realized he was dead and then I was sick and, you know, you two showed up, so I hadn’t even had time to process things...”

There was a racket behind me as a crowd of officers barreled up the stairs and into the apartment. Obvious medical personnel were yet to appear, but many feet trampled the paper-covered floor to take a look at the “stiff” and make a comment about his demise as well as the little pile of vomit I’d left behind. Let me just say that police humor leaves a lot to be desired.

Officer Orlosky, my interrogator, turned to give a summary to someone from Homicide whose eyes never stopped taking in the room. When she was finished, he nodded and said, “Canvas the building.”

His cold blue eyes locked onto me. “I’m Detective Friday, from Homicide. You do this?”

I shook my head.

“Know who did?” Another shake. “See anybody coming or going?” he asked.

“No, but the lights in the stairwell were all out when I came into the building, and that was odd.”

“Okay, we’ll look at the lights. Anything else you have to say?” He looked down at the notes. “Phone number?”

I recited my contact numbers to him. “All right. Jerry here is going to take you over to the station and print you, just so we can rule out your prints, since you say you touched things when you came into the apartment, and then we’ll have a little chat.” He turned to the cop. “Got that? Don’t talk to her until I get there.”

“Am I being charged with something?” I said. “Should I call an attorney?”

“Why, did you do something?” he asked.

“No, of course not. I just happened to be the unlucky one who found the body,” I said. “So, if I’m not being charged, can you take these handcuffs off me?” I asked, trying a little smile. “I’d appreciate that very much.”

“Certainly. Jerry — uncuff the lady here and take her in for some prints, all right?” He turned to me, pinched my shoulder between his fingers. “You’re not going to make a run for it, are you? Pull a fast one on us and knock ol’ Jerry out with your purse?” He looked deep into my eyes while I shook my head. “Okay, you can go — And if she cooperates, give her something to drink while she waits for me. Do we have a deal, Miss Thornton?”

“Oh, it’s doctor,” I said. He glared at me. “Yes, that sounds fine. But there is one other thing. There are going to be about fifteen people coming here for a meeting in a few minutes, so you might want to wait downstairs, you know, to let them know what’s happened.”

“Sure, *doctor*, we’ll get right on that. Jerry? Why don’t you put up a little note on your way out?”

He reeked of sarcasm, but I wasn’t done with Detective Friday. “Sorry, sir, I don’t mean to tell you how to do your job...”

“Then don’t.” He turned away.

I took a step towards his back. “If I were you, I’d be downstairs to break the news to the group myself, and see their reactions. There’s a pretty good chance your killer is one of them.”

“Fortunately for all of us, you are not me,” he said, stopping to face me again from the middle of the room. “If you have some information about a possible suspect or motive for this murder, you can share it with me when we have our discussion at the station. Later. Jerry? I thought I told you to get her out of here.”

“You’re making a mistake...” I began. Jerry pulled my arm and I stumbled backwards toward the door. “Hey, what about taking off the cuffs?” I protested.

Jerry cast a look back at his superior. “Leave ‘em on,” Friday said. “Nobody likes a smart-ass.”

I sat in the back of the patrol car while Officer Jerry had a gab session with his buddies. I could see some of my colleagues from the writing group gathered on the opposite side of the street, but no one dared to approach the car to speak with me. I thought I saw Gabe in the middle of a group of onlookers, but I couldn’t be sure. He was the only real friend I had in the group, but then I remembered he’d quit abruptly a couple of weeks ago, so he wasn’t likely to be congregating on the street. A group of photographers did appear, however, and while I tried to look dignified, I’m certain dignity probably wasn’t the prevailing image that they captured.

Eventually Jerry decided we should mosey along to the precinct, and several hours later, Detective Friday appeared opposite me in the interrogation room. It was well past midnight, my stomach was growling and ice picks tapped into my head from a migraine brought on by the fluorescent lights that buzzed and flickered like a sputtering kerosene lantern.

“We have a problem,” he said, sitting heavily in a wooden chair that creaked under his weight.

I looked at him under the shade of my hand.

“What’s with you?” he asked. “Cat got your tongue?”

I squinted at him, waiting to hear what his problem might be.

“All right, I’ll do the talking then. It seems that your fingerprints are not readable...legible...whatever. How exactly do you explain that? A person with no fingerprints is a person that raises suspicions.”

I waited. He waited. The lights flickered. I closed my eyes.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Migraine.”

“What? You have a headache?” He leaned back in his chair. “Well, lah-di-dah. When you answer some questions, you can go home and take some aspirin. But until then, too freaking bad.”

I waited for a spike of pain in my left eye to ease, then opened the right eye and said, “Lawyer.”

“Son of a bitch.” He got up and left.

I slid under the table to get away from the light, my jacket rolled into a pillow. The constant noise from outside — shouting, scraping of chairs, sirens, and objects banging the walls — as well as the buzzing of the fluorescent lights conspired against getting rest, but I focused on my recent yoga instruction to concentrate on breathing and was able to achieve some degree of relief before the door crashed open again.

“Where the hell are you?” he shouted. Looking under the table, he poked me with his size thirteen foot.

“Hey, if you don’t cooperate, we’re prepared to charge you with a violation of the Patriot Act and then you don’t get to call a lawyer. Someone with no fingerprints almost always means terrorist. So you’re not getting a phone call, lady. Wanna get up now, or should I call the marshal to take you to the jail?”

“Jesus Christ,” I said.

“Ah, she speaks.” He sat down, drumming his fingers loudly on the table while I stretched and disentangled myself from my cocoon.

I sat opposite Detective Friday.

“Did you bring me some aspirin?”

He shook his head.

“All right. No lawyer, no aspirin, nothing.”

I held out my hands, palms up. My fingertips were extremely white, almost powdery.

“You see these fingers? I was a gymnast. Do you know how we do all those exercises on the beams and the parallel bars and all that? Sandpaper. Sometimes powder, but mostly sandpaper where I was training. That’s the God’s honest truth. I have no secret identity. I’m not a spy. I’m not in witness protection, nothing like that. Not on the lam. I am simply a retired gymnast with no discernable fingerprints.”

“How come I’ve never heard of anything like that before?” he said. He pulled my right hand across the table and ran his fingers roughly over mine. “They feel normal,” he said. “Prove it.”

“How do I do that?” I asked. “I don’t carry around my old medals or anything. What do you want for proof?”

“I don’t know...The name of your coach, or the place you were trained. How about that?”

“It was in Europe, and the coach died a few years ago.”

“Oh, sure,” he said. “A likely story.” He looked at the scars in the center of my palm, then turned my hand over and back again. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s from the ripping,” I said. “See, this hand is the same. It happens in gymnastics.” I showed him the palm of my left.

“I don’t even want to know,” he said. He dropped my hands and looked at me as if I’d claimed the scars were stigmata.

“So we’re back to square one,” I said. “I’d like a lawyer, please. If you talk to my chairman at the university you’ll get a character reference to know that I’m not a terrorist, so hopefully you’ll allow me to have access to an attorney. I have a legitimate U.S. passport and birth certificate...What else can I give you?”

“Let’s talk about what happened to Neville. Take me through the events of last night, step by step.”

I thought about this. His threat to jail me under the Patriot Act was probably just a way to get me to spill everything about Neville because I’d be so grateful that he wasn’t going to pursue those pesky fingerprint charges. But maybe I shouldn’t fall for that ploy.

“Listen, I want to help you, but I really need some aspirin and a cup of coffee first. Can you arrange that?” I smiled. It was excruciating. “It’s been a long night.”

He grimaced back at me. “Sure, no problem, we’ll get you that in a few minutes. Just take me through it once and I’ll get you that aspirin.”

He opened the file and the notes from Officer Orlosky. “So, what time did you arrive at the residence?”

I repeated my story several more times, to Friday and several other days of the week before they brought me a bottle of water and a cellophane package of Bayer aspirin. After I downed the aspirin, I leaned my head back and sighed. Friday tapped his pencil on the table. “So,” he said. “What’s your novel about, anyway?”

“Why do you want to know?” I asked.

“Just curious. You said you went over there to talk to Carstairs about it, and we found pages of it scattered all over the floor. I was just wondering what it’s about,” he said.

“It’s sort of complicated. . . . But the quick and dirty summary is that it’s about a ring of art thieves who are peddling stolen treasures that they discovered hidden in these caves deep in the forests of Hungary. Some vagabonds come across these art treasures and one by one, they bring them out and find private dealers to sell them on the black market,” I said. “That’s the basic plot. In the end, they get greedy, and ultimately, they get caught.”

“I think I saw that movie a couple of years ago,” he said.

I didn’t take the bait.

More pencil tapping. “So, what were you arguing about? This Carstairs guy, he didn’t like the story? Or he didn’t like your writing, or what?”

“Look, I don’t know where you’re going with this. We had a difference of opinion on some style issues. I didn’t stab him over it, believe me.” I rubbed my temples. “Can you just let me go? I need to get some real medicine into my system. Have you ever had a migraine, Detective Friday?”

He shook his head, a motion that made me dizzy. “I’m just wondering why your manuscript was all over the floor — it seems like there might have been an argument before Mr. Carstairs was stabbed. And it seems that your book might have been part of it,” he said.

“I can’t explain it,” I said. I put my head down on the table. By then, I was reeling from the nausea and the pain. “Do me a favor, would you?” I asked. “Either turn out the lights, get me some coffee, or just shoot me.” Friday seemed to be considering the last request, but someone knocked on the door and he left the room.

I heard raised voices, but I was no longer fooled by their games. No one was being reprimanded and no one was going to rescue me. When he returned, I asked for a piece of paper and a pen. In clear print, I wrote: “I hereby request the presence of an attorney to represent my interests before the court.” I signed my name, dated the paper, and handed it back to him.

“Really? After all we’ve gone through, this is what you want to do now?” he asked.

“Yes.” I closed my eyes and felt the room spin around me. Clutching the edge of the table, I bent to the side and vomited neatly on the floor, a small puddle of frothy bile with two Bayer aspirin floating in it. Some of it landed on the toe of his shoe. Oops.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he said. He leaned over to wipe his foot with a tissue. “I’m not getting you any more aspirin, so if you want them, you better pick those up and swallow them again.”

While he was working on his shoe, I stood up. “I’m leaving now,” I said. “Unless you’re charging me, you can’t keep me here. You know where I live. I’m going home to take some medication. If you want to stop me, you’ll have to shoot me. At this point, I don’t care.”

I put on my jacket and walked to the door. My dramatic exit was interrupted by the locked door, but I stood with my hand on the knob, patiently waiting for someone to open it.

“Isn’t there anyone with a shred of humanity in this entire building?” I asked. After several beats, I felt the door click. It opened.

“Make sure you don’t leave the city,” Friday said. “I’ll be watching you.”

I didn’t respond. Officer Orlosky was in the hall. She gave me a ride home.