

## **NaNoWriMo 2008 - Particular People - Chapter One**

*Those who came before me / Lived through their vocations.  
--"Blue Monday," New Order*

I was sitting outside the Camelot Music in the misleadingly named 100 Oaks mall when my entire life fell apart. It was August of 1983, unemployment was around 10%, my office had been reduced to a kiosk in the main corridor of a dying shopping mall and I figured things had to get better sooner or later because surely there was no way they could get worse.

I had a couple of legitimate reasons to stay optimistic, actually: morning in America, it seemed, came with a hangover. We all had our fingers crossed that maybe Reagan would be beatable this time, maybe if there were a nuclear war it would at least be over quickly, maybe gas prices would stay low for a while. OK, so we didn't have much, but we clung to what we had.

One of the few immediately apparent reasons to stay optimistic was, at that moment, walking towards me: Czarina Misha. *Ah, you're thinking, But "Misha" is the diminutive for "Mikhail," a boy's name.* You're quite right, but Misha would probably have been insulted if he'd heard you point that out. He was about 5'6", thin as a rail with black hair that looked like it had been dyed with shoe polish and wore an over-sized, off-the-shoulder hunter-orange tee with the Orange Julius devil over his heart – the logo being an aggressive little imp, his arm around an orange with a big bead of juice about to run off its skin - and those stone-washed jeans . He bought the jeans, as a rule, more than slightly too small. I imagined it took him quite a bit of effort to get into them every morning. "Painted on," he called it - that look, I mean. "Da," he said with his ridiculous, exaggerated Russian accent the first time I'd asked. "They are 'painted on,' perhaps I need volunteer to peel them off?" He batted his absurd eyelashes at me that first time but I'd been in no mood to play games with a 19 year old Russki being led around by his dick. As the months went by he went back to that well again and again until it became more or less a standard salutation, our mall-level friendship's version of "aloha," suitable as a greeting or a

parting. "Perhaps you volunteer tonight?" he would ask in a way that said I wasn't exactly number one on his list of candidates but neither was I off the table. I'd chuckle and he'd bat his lashes again - a trick that I confess never got old - and then he'd go flirt with his customers at the Orange Julius stand.

"Privyet, Jason," he purred. That's the thing: Czarina Misha could actually purr words. He was so completely outside the realm of believable that he was completely believable. Everyone knows a Czarina Misha. If you don't know a Czarina Misha then you probably *are* the local Czarina Misha. When he said "Jason" it had a habit of coming out "Jyason" in a way it was probably illegal to take across state lines.

"Hey," I said. I had watched him walk the twenty yards from the Orange Julius without bothering to disguise that I was watching. It wasn't like I had anything else to do.

Misha wagged one finger at me in a way that indicated he didn't really mean it. "You take liberties," he said. "Tsk tsk. Such aggressive glances might drive away customers."

I looked to one side, then the other, then back to him. "Oops, looks like it's too late. I don't have any."

Misha raised both eyebrows - had I really never noticed that they were emphasized with eyeliner? - and turned up the corners of his mouth into tight little curls. "Are you so sure? I have not been able but to notice the intentions of a certain... senior gentleman." Misha ducked his head off to his right, my left, and I swung my eyes around to find that there was a guy sitting there on a bench, reading a magazine, wearing a fairly plain brown jacket and blue pants and black shoes. He had no tie and the collar of his white shirt was sweat-stained such that it didn't seem likely it got laundered every day despite the summer heat and he wore an old-fashioned tweed hat, the brim of which he'd tug on every now and then. He seemed to be using the magazine as cover for staring at the high school girl working the register Payless two doors down. The only thing between it and the Camelot were empty storefronts.

I looked back at Misha. "He's not even looking at me and he could be my father."

"Daddy, perhaps," Misha smirked. "But I have seen him look over here furtively, several

times. He has sat on that bench for thirty minutes.”

“Do you just stare at people all day?”

“Oh, no,” he said, lips a perfect lower-case 'o.' “Sometimes I fail to seduce them, too.” Then he did his patented turn and slow-walk and was gone. My gaze naturally swiveled around to the old guy again and this time I caught him looking at me. He started to pretend to go back to the magazine but I lifted a hand and waved.

“Can I help you?” In that quiet place, tiled brown, floor to ceiling, my voice carried easily. The man seemed to ponder how to answer, then got up and shoved the rancid cigar he was smoking from one corner of his mouth to the other before walking up to me. He mouthed the words of the sign as he read them – Marks' Independent Term Insurance – and then slapped the magazine under his arm. “Alright, son,” he said, voice a tad too thick with its cartoonish Northern accent, like Bugs Bunny with a head cold and a drinking problem. This guy had been at the Dickel already and it was barely four in the afternoon. “I was going to try to be a little discreet for his sake but I need to talk to the fairy what runs the joint, this Marks fellow.”

“I'm Jason Marks,” I said, raising just the left eyebrow at him. When I was a kid I'd been so impressed with that move I'd stood in front of the mirror to practice it. “How can I help you?”

The guy cleared his throat and didn't look around. “I'm a fag, too, and need a life insurance policy on another one. I been asking around and I hear you're the one for the job.” The guy wasn't exactly keeping his voice down and I could feel Czarina Misha staring at us. I didn't need to look over there to know. It felt like I had two hot needles poking me in the side of the face, just from his eyes.

“Okay,” I said, “Here are the problems with that, in order: number one, don't ever call me a fairy. Number two, you're about as gay as a bag of girly mags so don't bother lying to say that you are. Number three, nobody sells life insurance policies on third parties – like, walking up and asking to buy a policy on someone else who just might happen to have an accident in their remarkably immediate future. Number four, this mall's too cheap to keep a security guard around so you've got however long it takes Nashville's finest to respond to get the fuck out of my sight.”

I stood up, walked around the kiosk, took the keys out of my pocket and marched to the barely noticeable smoked-glass door to what is actually my storefront, set into the gap between those two empty storefronts that separated Camelot and Radio Shack. In truth, it used to be the security office but the 100 Oaks really was too cheap to have any guards around; they'd canned them all a year ago and when I'd inquired about the smallest possible storefront they'd given me the rent-a-cop corral on the condition I populate the kiosk nearby. A little foot traffic and an essentially free office were better than the rental rates on the offices upstairs or anything I could get downtown in this shitbag economy so here I was, at the mall three afternoons a week.

I flipped on the lights as soon as I had the door open, took the two steps that separated the front door from the front counter and picked up the phone. The asshole in the mismatched clothes and cigar smoke had come after me trying to talk some threat or another, the usual mix of "you'll be sorry" and "I'm a big man in this town" combined with a little waving of the magazine, but he couldn't see that I didn't hit any speed dials when I picked up the phone.

"Yeah," I said into the dial tone, turning to give him a look that told him he'd be smart to stay out in the hallway. "I've got a guy giving me the business at the 100 Oaks. Grey tweed jacket that's seen better days, blue pants, brown shoes, a George Burns hat, caucasian, maybe sixty. You can find him by the smoke of a cheap cigar. I'm outside the music store."

"You ain't calling the cops," the guy said, but his eyes believed I had or at least were not eager to gamble on whether or not I could be that stupid.

"What's your name again?" I swiveled the mouthpiece away from my face and asked him with a jut of my chin. "Or do you think they'll maybe know you when they see you?" I wasn't even sure what that meant but it sounded good in the moment.

"Fuck you, you fucking fag," the guy said, "I got better things than this." He rolled up the magazine and threw it down with a loud *SLAP* against the tile floor and then trotted off towards the nearest exit into the parking lot. I hung up the handset, glanced at the machine to see if I'd gotten any messages – I hadn't – turned off the lights and locked back up. I scooped up the magazine to glance at the cover. It was a *Time* from three months ago; lousy bastard had

probably stolen it from a proctologist's office. I rolled it back up and swatted it against the opposing palm a couple of times before chucking it in a trash can and going back to my kiosk.

It took Czarina Misha about three seconds to start sauntering towards me. "Such drama," he said with that little curlicue smirk. "Whatever that was, it was the most interesting thing to happen in this mall in six months."

"More interesting than when those kids tried to steal the purse off a lady karate champion?" I barely flicked my eyes over at Misha. Rarely was I the one in our friendship who had the interesting story to tell and I was going to savor it. No way was I going to tell him the details that easily.

"No," he chuckled. The Russian accent was amped so high I'm surprised he didn't say 'nyet' and then burst into *The Internationale*. "But it was still pretty good: shouting, male-pattern aggression, lots of testosterone in the air."

"Huh," I said to him, trying out his trademark eyebrow lift on him. "You could smell it all the way down there, huh?"

Misha pursed his lips at me and then took a step backwards. "You will tell me sooner or later, Jyason. Everyone tells me what I want to know, sooner or later."

"Nn," was pretty much all I could come up with. Misha turned around and walked back to the Orange Julius where he had, for the first time all day, a customer waiting for him.

That night I went out downtown and walked the length of Printer's Alley, awash in battered hookers and twitchy crack dealers sucking their last remaining tooth, so that the bath houses on Church Street would seem clean and civilized in comparison.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I manned my little kiosk in the afternoons. Mornings on those days were devoted to "follow up" calls to clients to see if anyone needed any new insurance lately – maybe Stan was thinking about a little hatchback for the houseboy and I could push him over the edge with a good deal on liability, or maybe Rog and Sherman were spooked by the house fire last week and I could sell them on a new policy. They'd been telling

everyone about that projection TV they'd bought and maybe they wanted to insure it, too. That wasn't my favorite part of my job but it's what no insurance agent will tell you: for a good agent, recurring premiums pay the rent but the Christmas money comes from pushing more insurance later.

Tuesdays and Thursdays were what we politely refer to as "debit" days. I would literally drive around to clients' homes to collect monthly premiums – or even weekly, from the handful of industrial policies left in my book thanks to some agent in the distant past - from the ones that didn't mail them in, either because they preferred to pay in person or because they hadn't had the cash. The guy in the hat had shown up at my kiosk on a Wednesday afternoon so Thursday morning I dropped by my office – the little security guard room – and went through the calendar to check my list of debits for the day. By lunchtime I'd been to a half-dozen homes and collected as many premiums. Two were great big mansions in Green Hills, three were apartments on the edge of downtown in what were fairly questionable areas and one was a brick ranch on an aging street of bungalows and the like with fenced yards and tall grass. That summer was exceptionally hot – not just in Nashville but all over, record heat waves in Boston, in England, everywhere, and people weren't out mowing like they normally would and especially not on a run-down street like this.

I pulled up to the house of my last debit for the morning and parked my car – a 1977 Lincoln Town Coupe, black on black, bought secondhand from the estate of one of the old debits in my book a couple years back – on the street, then thought better of it and pulled into the driveway. I got out and checked and the tail fins were just barely out of the street. I straightened my tie knot in my reflection in the driver's side window, pushed the aviators up a little on the bridge of my nose and walked up to the front door. I was halfway to the ringer when the door opened and my client, one Melvin Blanc, aged forty seven years, five and a half feet tall, probably two hundred ten pounds though his life insurance paperwork said one eighty, answered the door.

"Mr. Marks, you've caught me in the shower, I can't possibly invite you in looking like this."

He cooed and used a Scarlett O'Hara drawl as fake – or at least as exaggerated – as Czarina Misha's Muscovite brogue. He was wearing a white terrycloth robe that probably had a Holiday Inn label and had a white towel turbaned on top of a head that had been hairless, save the occasional hairpiece, for a number of years. He was two months behind on his premium and this was his last chance. He knew it and I knew it and I couldn't imagine why he'd been in a hurry to answer the door in the first place.

"Funny how you heard me park from all the way in the shower." I'd crossed my arms without thinking about it but consciously unfolded them, hooked a thumb in one pants pocket and put the other against the door frame; unsubtle, but sometimes effective.

"You don't have to be rude about it," Melvin sighed. "Listen, if you give me another week I can catch you up on June and half of July and then in September I could--"

"You could be finding another insurance agent, that's what." I stepped away from the door. "Have a nice day, Mr. Blanc."

He nearly opened the screen door but then he didn't – he glanced quickly up and down the street in each direction. "Listen, alright, let me get my checkbook. Oh, you *brute*, I'll be eating soup for a week for this."

I paused but didn't actually come back up onto the little square of concrete that served as a front step. Blanc was always doing this, always a month or two behind but desperate to make sure he didn't have to go somewhere else for a policy. I couldn't quite figure out why – at least, not then. Later I saw a lot more of that kind of fear: the gay men who would do anything to avoid the medical examinations that came with getting new life insurance. "OK, go get your checkbook, but you're catching up all of July, not just half, and I'll let it ride if you promise to pay all of August and September next month."

Blanc gave me a look that tried to say "thank you" and "fuck you" all at once and got its tongue tied. I knew why he'd shown up at the door in the bathrobe, too: he'd hoped I'd flirt a little, maybe let him work off a month's premium the easy way. No dice. It made me want to ask a lot of questions about the old queen whose debit book I'd gotten when he hired me on nine

years ago so he could retire but I didn't say a word. I didn't want to talk about fucking an old club slag like Melvin for fear of the taste the words might leave in my mouth.

I didn't actually hate him, though. He'd seen a lot, been through a lot, been used a lot if word around the bars was to be believed. He was just another tired old fairy who'd gotten arthritic knees and a bad reputation for all his troubles. In twenty years, I reminded myself, it would be me on the other side of that door. I didn't have a massive life insurance policy, though, the way Blanc did. I'd seen the paperwork, of course, and knew the beneficiary was his mother. She had to be pushing ninety by this point and I didn't know how she'd ever have time to spend that kind of money if Melvin stepped out in front of a bus but there hasn't been a salesman yet who'd complain about a nice commission.

Melvin came back with a check he was waving around to get the ink to dry. I wondered if he'd used a real fountain pen or if he just liked the look of money getting shaken around in his face. He cracked the door an inch or two and slipped the check through. I took the offered edge and folded it into my little plastic bank pouch that made everything seem so professional. "I'll see you next month, Mr. Blanc."

"Yes... if I'm lucky." He said it in a kind of pouty way that was even more of a turn-off than everything that had come before it and I offered him the No-Frills Base Package Insurance Smile before walking down the path of chipped and weathered flagstones to my car. I slid behind the wheel, looked at myself in the mirror, tried very hard to remind myself that I wasn't yet Mr. Blanc and turned the radio to a pop station as I backed into the street. Maybe the Billboard Top 40 in heavy rotation could shave off the years I always felt had found purchase on my face after a few minutes negotiating with Melvin Blanc.

After lunch I had another, longer round of debits to collect on. They were the pretty standard mix, at least for my niche market, but I saved my favorite for last. I parked the Lincoln in a guest space outside an aging but maintained apartment building downtown, a couple of blocks from Gay and Church Streets, and again checked my tie and glasses in the driver's side



window before walking up two flights to get to an apartment door that, due to the way things were arranged, was in a quiet little alcove off from the other six apartments on that floor. I checked my watch – 5:30pm, late enough that he'd probably be home from his job by now – and rang the buzzer for two seconds. In moments I heard footsteps pad towards the door, saw the peephole darken and then the door opened.

“Evening, Mr. Marks.” Jonathan Nuñez, aged thirty two, six feet even, one hundred eighty pounds, with the features and overall health of a man ten years younger, was wearing a dirty, wrinkled pair of khaki slacks and a white t-shirt that had come half-untucked when he'd pulled off whatever God-awful America Rah Rah bullshit they made him wear at work. He smiled a little and leaned against the doorway and I couldn't resist doing the same so we were a lot closer together.

“I'm pretty sure I've asked you to call me Jason.”

“Only once business is concluded, and since it's the fifteenth of the month I'm guessing this is – at least in part – a business call.”

“Well...” I wagged my head a little. “There is a monthly premium to collect but as one of my best - ” he sucked in his cheeks and gave me That Look so I put up one finger and amended myself, “My apologies, as my *very best* client I would hate to give you the impression that I don't also enjoy the short time we spend together on such occasions.”

“I demand an enthusiastic display as proof of the sincerity of such claims,” he said, standing away from the door and gesturing to invite me in. “But first, let me get you a check.”

I walked inside and loosened my tie a little while he wrote out a check for something or other, I can't really remember what.

## **Particular People – Chapter Two**

*With a thrill in my head and a pill on my tongue / Dissolve the nerves that have just begun.  
--"True," Spandau Ballet*

Friday morning I rolled into the mall parking lot a few minutes after it opened. I'd read the fine print on my leases and technically I was to be open "at all and any hours so designated by the property and/or its management" but fuck 'em. They weren't exactly burdened with applications for either of my spaces and I'd spent the evening before going out and getting fairly tight in a succession of clubs. The last thing I remembered was making it far enough past the front door of The Chute to slide onto a stool at the first bar and asking Fritz to call me a cab despite there being a line of them outside. Talking to Melvin Blanc made me do stupid things like that and I pretended not to know why.

I kept on the aviators as I strolled past a dust-covered Payless, an empty storefront and the glassed corner that held a local store peddling overpriced shoes and oversized belts to local women of a certain age. I hit the main corridor and glanced over at the Orange Julius to see Czarina Misha half-heartedly cleaning a spigot. As soon as he saw me he came out from behind the counter to chase me down before I could get to my kiosk. "Oh, you poor thing," he cried, a hand clutching my arm and jerking me to a halt. "I saw you last night, out. You looked like you'd been shot in the heart."

My immediate urge was to yank my arm free but I caught myself halfway when Misha's response to an involuntary tug was to grab on more tightly than before, this time with both hands. "Darling," he whispered, "There is a very rich man waiting at your office. Take a moment to collect yourself before you go over there."

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, then turned my head just enough to swivel my eyes just as far as I could and sure enough, standing in front of my office was a tall, dapper guy with salt and pepper at his temples and a red power tie. I turned back, opened my mouth and said, "OK, thank you for that." Misha winked and trotted off to the Orange Julius while I turned

back, hit one of the mall bathrooms and took a few moments to splash cold water on my face and try to get the bags under my eyes to go away by wishing really hard. I wasn't hot for the guy outside my door but a guy like that would probably want one hell of a lot of life insurance and I could sell it to him at an exorbitant rate without him batting an eye. I was also, I realized, dying to ask where he'd heard of me. If that suit was any indication we were talking about a closet case Republican with a lot of cash to throw around. I trailed Misha back over to the Orange Julius stand and made use of the mirrored column to which one corner of it was attached in order to straighten my pale blue tie, smooth my grey jacket and run my hands through my hair mostly-dark, straight hair. Misha, without asking, offered a stick of gum and I popped it in, chewing fast and then kind of tucking it into one cheek, out of the way. Misha gave me a wink and a nod and I coasted back around the Orange Julius and towards my office, a spring in my step.

The guy with the salt and pepper hair was trying not to look impatient. I strolled up, jingling my keys and smiling. "Morning," I rumbled, going for my best, deepest voice. "Jason Marks. Can I help you?"

He smiled very faintly and insincerely. "I hope so, Mr. Marks." He glanced at his watch. "Unfortunately I've very little time."

I tried to put on a brave face. "My apologies, I had to visit a client this morning, Mister..."

"Walker."

I held out my empty hand and he, after some consideration, took it lightly and only for a second. "Good to meet you, Mr. Walker." I put the key in the door, opened the office and gestured to my desk and the client chair, farther in, past the reception counter the security guards had used as their duty station. "Go ahead and have a seat, I'll just be a moment." Then I turned and started to open the blinds.

"I... I'd rather you left them down," Walker said. So, I thought, closet case.

"Whatever you wish," I murmured, smiling again, and I stepped around to take a seat behind the desk. I didn't turn on the computer because it largely mystified me. Oh, the guys at the Radio Shack had sold it to me with tremendous enthusiasm and I could use the spreadsheet

program but I was an accountant before there were personal computers and I trusted my own books more than anything not on a real piece of paper. The computer had become, I had to admit, something of a stage prop.

"So, Mr. Walker," I said, smoothing out my tie again. "How can I help?"

"I'll get right to the point, Mr. Marks." Walker smoothed his own tie and leaned forward just a little and I realized he was mimicking my own body language, the oldest sales trick in the book. That sent up a red flag. "I'm with Cumberland River Records. We, in the course of maintaining the prospects of the label and of our talent, sometimes choose to insure that talent. I'm sure you've heard some of the more exotic, likely apocryphal stories of guitarists' hands being insured and the like, but that isn't what I mean. We're seeking nothing more complicated than a basic life insurance policy on one of our partner performers whose earnings potential is quite high and whose income we wish to insure, just like any individual who chooses life insurance as a form of income protection for their family." He shifted and pulled a card out of an inner coat pocket, handing it over and setting it on the calendar blotter on my desk. It said he was an Executive Vice President.

"Which performer?" I read the card, then looked back up without touching it. I smiled, but I expect he could tell that I didn't mean it.

"Chad Ballew, who records under the name Harley Scoggins. I'm sure you've heard of him." He smirked just a little as he eased back into his seat and folded his arms across his chest, the classic pose of you'll-never-beat-that.

The truth was, I had heard of him. Rumor had it he was the most famous closet case in Nashville. Harley Scoggins was a stage-handsome country singer whose crystal blue eyes were probably the new tinted contacts and whose hair and skin were impossibly airbrush-perfect in photographs. He had also been the hottest closet-case gossip in town for at least two or three years. Everyone knew someone whose ex-boyfriend had hooked up with a guy whose roommate was the gardener who worked with the part-time hustler who'd been arrested blowing Harley Scoggins in a city park. *That* was the kind of gossip that got around about Harley Scoggins and,

although it could also be said of some heterosexuals, everyone knew he'd been seen at The Chute once or twice... a month.

He was as open an open secret as there can be. Like any country singer he made his fortune at the beck and call of gospel-thumping hicks and semi-virginal teenage girls with pictures of him in collages on their *faux* tartan cross-hatch patterned walls. He was young and very single and a significant portion of the kids and the grown-ups who bought his albums – full of soulful love songs and bonhomies for glorious yesteryears after which he'd been born and that hadn't existed in the first place, really – because they fantasized of the day his rustic, American-made pickup broke down in front of their house and when he came in to call a tow truck he saw their devotion as fans and... you get the idea. He was a gust of cool Caucasian breeze through the smoky room of ginned up nostalgia and nuclear war panic that drove a lot of Reagan voters and Southern exceptionalists. Scoggins had released three albums in as many years and an album of Christmas songs. I hadn't bought them because I hate country and western but I was unquestionably in the minority in Music City USA in that regard. Scoggins was a hit and there was no getting around it. It probably took him ten minutes to put his pants on every morning just from all the dollar coins he had to shake out first.

I smiled a little at Walker, still didn't take his card and said, "Sorry, I'm not familiar with him."

Walker smirked at me. "Sure. So, like I said, not much time this morning. Let's get the paperwork started and I'll write the check for the first month's premium and be on my way."

"It's not that simple." My voice was flat and businesslike, ungenerous, almost mechanical. "Mr. Walker, insurance agents do not, generally, write life insurance policies for a third party's benefit. If Mr. Scoggins walked in here and said, 'Hi, I'm a huge asset to my record company and I'm interested in getting life insurance and naming them the beneficiary,' that would be just fine. I would happily write that policy. It would be impossible for me to refuse that policy. I cannot have strangers walk into my office, show me a card they might have gotten done at any print shop in town, ask me to write out a policy for what would surely be millions of dollars and then

breeze back out the door. I don't know you, have no idea whether you really represent Cumberland River Records, Mr. Scoggins or anyone else. For all I know, to be perfectly frank, you just watched Mr. Scoggins' car go over a cliff and you're hoping I didn't hear that bulletin on the radio. If I wrote that policy every company with which I work would cut their ties to me at the speed of light." I had paused for short breaths here and there because really, I did not need this two days in a row and yet here it was, the mall – the *fucking mall* – was dying out from under me and I hadn't gotten any new business in two weeks. I finally wound down enough to take a deeper breath and Walker, who had sat impassively, watching, listening, no expression other than a cool contempt for anyone he suspected might squeak out a "no" in response to his requests, said nothing. "Is that sufficiently clear, Mr. Walker, or shall I have you put out?"

Walker stood and reached for his card but I put my index and middle fingers in its center and blocked him. "The door is that way, Mr. Walker, and I shall keep this as a memento of your visit. Good morning."

Walker looked at his card, at my hand, then – for two or three seconds longer than was necessary or comfortable – my face. He turned and walked out without another word. He did not slam any doors, kick any walls in or flip me off; he just walked out and off down the corridor as though nothing had happened at all. His face was as blank as a sheet of sketch pad paper. I watched him go, then sat back, relaxed my fingers – I'd pushed so hard on the face of his business card that I'd crinkled it in the middle – and rubbed them with my left hand, then finally took a deep breath and blew it all out at once. I picked up my phone and picked up my phone. This was the sort of thing that sent up red flags like crazy. Two days in a row? People trying to take out policies on other people were expecting them to die soon; *real* soon, and usually with a little help if they didn't go soon enough. If I'd been an agent with a company I could have – *would* have – gone directly to my management to let them decide what, if anything, to do. I didn't even know what those options *were*.

So instead I picked up my phone, started to dial Norman Fleet – the agent whose business this had been until his retirement in '78 – but then set the phone back down. No, I would figure

this out on my own. For five years I'd run this little shop as my own and one hinky pair of mornings wasn't going to send me running for cover. The economy wasn't getting perceptibly better and I was just going to have to man up and deal with it. I went back to the front of the office, ran up the blinds, walked out to the kiosk to open it up and saw that Misha was already on his way over.

"So, Jyason, did he pay you lots of money?" His eyes glittered oddly. Some days I wasn't sure Misha was all there.

"No, he wanted me to write a policy I didn't want." I smirked at Misha. "Did he leave in a huff?"

"He looked..." Misha licked his lips and gazed off at one of the empty store fronts. "Blank. The sort of blank that some men get when they are very angry and everything has shut down and all they can do is leave the room. The only question for them is whether they will tear it apart before they leave."

"Ah." I clucked my tongue. "Oh well, water under the bridge." There were a few old mall walkers out this morning, doing their rounds. The same faces as always but maybe today one of them wanted insurance. "Let's see what today has in store." I folded down the walls of the kiosk and pulled the barstool out of the little cubby hole for it, set up the sides as tabletops, arranged some brochures and sat down with my book. "Maybe someone wants to buy a lot of insurance."

He arched up both of his eyebrows. "But didn't *he* want to buy insurance?"

"Not the kind that I sell," I sighed. "Not even close."

Czarina Misha produced a tiny smile, put his hand on my right shoulder and squeezed it once, lightly, then walked off. "Another day, another ruble and a half at official exchange rates."

It was a slow day. I had a teenager and his mom come by to get quotes from several companies at once. That's good work, easy work, because that's the common stuff I can rip off in my head with practically no effort. It's also fairly easy to steer them towards the policy with the best commission by tweaking the numbers, cutting them a break, all that jazz, without them ever

knowing. I sold them on a full package by subtly tweaking the mother's fear that her son was going to drive their wagon into a lake at the first opportunity. It's funny what a little "good natured" ribbing can do to inspire one's worst fears.

That was it for the day, but it was a new policy and in that place, at that time, I called it a success. Misha and I grabbed corndogs from the "Food Factory" and talked shit about the other stores that were still open, something he assured me was the number one workplace pastime for everyone who works in every store of every mall. By seven in the evening I was in my Lincoln and back to my apartment to grab a quick shower, shave, change into some tight jeans and a dark blue button-up with double breast pockets and make my leisurely way back down the gauntlet of Nashville's forbidden fruits. I didn't immediately get completely hammered that night, though. It was a good day, once I shook the creep with the business card out of my head by making a sale, so I didn't have a lot in the way of shit to forget. I spent an hour or two cruising the baths but didn't make anything happen. Then I walked Church Street for a while, just seeing who was out, saying hello to old friends I hadn't seen in a while as we drifted from one preferred bath or bar to another. A lot of my friends had congregated towards Blu but I still preferred the press of The Chute, the throng into which I could throw myself.

Maybe now is a good time to tell you what The Chute is like. It's got... seven bars? Maybe eight? One in the middle of the dance floor, one out back and several scattered around the room. The place is the size of a warehouse but it's divided into rooms that have different themes, if not by explicit design then *de facto* thanks to the crowds that gravitate towards one another in them. Some of the rooms I've yet to go into based on their reputations. I tended towards the rock room that played a lot of Zeppelin and groovy bullshit from the '70s. The main dance floor was still heavily disco and New Wave, a little "flannel revolution meets Devo" kind of space, and the piano bar. For all that we were the generation that had stripped off our shirts and invented the gay pride parade, we were still a bunch of fish on the line for a few ferns and a baby grand. All the rooms had a few things in common, though: tons of men, poor lighting and the smell of sweat. The Chute was big enough that it drew a non-gay crowd, too, something I didn't know of



happening anywhere else.

That night I realized by the time I was halfway there that I'd been both avoiding The Chute and steadily approaching it for reasons I couldn't articulate. I had no special reason to avoid it unless I'd started to slip into a little boredom with it. There wasn't anywhere that made a more likely place for something interesting to happen, however, so I finally went directly there, still stone sober for what had to be the first time in months.

The little awning over the door belied the vast expanse inside the building. To get into the club itself one had to go through the outer door and into a little anteroom where one could check a coat in winter, pay the cover, get one's hand stamped and go inside. I stepped into the anteroom and got at the back of a line of a half-dozen other people, pulling out three singles to pay the cover and chuckling a little at myself as I considered whether to pull out my driver's license, too. I seriously doubted it was dark enough in any bar for any bouncer to think I might be under eighteen. A couple of other people in line knew me well enough to wave and so we passed a couple of minutes murmuring fairly flirtatious hellos with one another, in no real hurry, letting others go past us to get stamped and through the door. It was looking to be a pretty crowded, fun night, music pouring out of the inner door every time someone was buzzed through and I was getting a little more enthusiastic about being here when a grumbling, mud-caked pickup pulled into the lot and parked closer to the exterior door than anyone technically should. The bouncer didn't make any move to do anything about it, however, after glancing out the small, wire-glass window set into the outer door. A few moments later the outer door swung open and in walked, of course, Harley Scoggins.

He was every bit as beautiful in person as he was on TV. He wasn't as *pretty* – no one is, to be honest – but he was unquestionably beautiful. He smiled at the bouncer who buzzed him through with barely a second glance and without anything like asking for cover or ID. The couple I'd been chatting with for a moment looked at one another, then at me, then we all giggled like schoolgirls.

Sometimes one simply has to *live* the stereotype.

I went inside. It was definitely going to be a fun night. Hell, maybe I'd work up the nerve to tell Harley Scoggins that at least one and possibly two older men had come by my office to put a price on his life.

On second thought, there was no way in hell that would happen.

I went inside a minute or two later, split up from the club friends I'd been talking to in the entrance and got a beer at the first bar. I circled the main, central area of the club a couple of times, slowly, killing a good fifteen minutes. I thought about dancing but honestly I didn't know if I could do so without looking like an idiot. This was what I hated about being single: the half hour after one arrives at a bar, one is still sober and one has nothing to do but walk in a big circle and try not to look alone.

Eventually I settled into a corner and watched other people dance, ordered another beer, wandered into the pool room and played a couple of games, then wandered into the other rooms I knew well – the piano bar, the rock room, the usuals. I saw plenty of people I only ever saw at The Chute, the sort of bar friends one isn't sure actually exist outside of that place, and finally, by midnight, I was sufficiently exhausted by growing ennui and the exciting crush of humanity that I wandered towards the rooms I didn't normally visit, including the leather bar at the end of the long, dark hallway one could take either to get to the deepest, darkest, most name-worthy part of the bar of the freedom of outside on the fenced-in back patio.

The leather bar was a dark room with red lighting and some very dark couches and usually there was no one in there which was pretty creepy in its own right, as though this was the room we all – all of gay Nashville – avoided as one because it was truly the end of the road, the death of dignity.

That night there were probably a dozen men in there, not all of them wearing very much, some nothing, and no one was speaking in meaningful syllables but they were making plenty of noise, barely audible under the constant thud of dance music from the main room. Most of them were in one group, a mix of guys of different ages and different skin tones and different builds

that in later years would have been called "admirably diverse" but by the conformist standards of 1983 was, even in a gay bar, a little shocking. They were moving to their own rhythm, unrelated to and unconcerned with the music playing throughout the club or in this room. Each room had its own sound system, even though the music from the main floor could always at least be felt if not heard, and in here the thump-thump-thump of some disco number was incongruous with the slightly slower music playing in here: Bauhaus. Years later this would have been thought of as the goth room and it would have had a less gritty, more trust-fund-depressives vibe to it but that night, in that time, it was dirty and grimy and gritty and a guy was singing largely incomprehensibly over top of loud, traumatized guitars. Bauhaus didn't even exist anymore but that song had become a staple and at nine minutes no DJ had to think twice about putting it on before sitting back to have a smoke.

In the center of the main throng of seven or eight guys was Harley Scoggins, Chad Ballew, whatever he called himself here. His picture-perfect hair was mussed, his shirt and pants were somewhere else and he only looked half aware of his surroundings beyond arms' reach. In the dark I could make out a lot of beer bottles, at least one dusty mirror and a couple of bottles of poppers. He looked in my direction without seeing me and one of the other guys in the group gave me a long look up and down then nodded as though to invite me to join in. He wasn't begging me to dive in but he was making it clear I didn't have to stare if I wanted more.

A part of me was tempted, I'll admit. I wasn't above a little generosity. I was feeling alone and lonely and the beers had started to kick in just enough for my inhibitions to be sagging against their supports and there were a bunch of guys whose quiet little orgy was in some ways the dark reflection of what had been so many nights of joyful abandon five or six or seven years ago. In that mass of rounded shoulders, curved spines and gliding silhouettes I saw a lot of my better, younger years being played out for me.

I tossed the dead soldier in my left hand into a trash can and started to unbutton my shirt.

Months later, reading about it in a retrospective piece in *The Tennessean*, I realized that

very early the next morning the Nashville Police Department's homicide division decided, privately, that it was very likely dealing with a serial killer when it found a third body in as many months that fit the same profile: young, handsome and probably a fag.

## **Particular People – Chapter Three**

*Garden parties held today / Invites call the debts to play*  
--"Garden Party," Marillion

Saturday afternoons I stopped in the office for a few hours when I decided it had been uncomfortably slow of late. The downside of all the freedom that came with my own agency – such as it had become – was that I was never *not* working. I would always be on the lookout for a new client, a new policy to sell, a new commission, and a day on which I didn't go in was a day I was guaranteed not to make a sale. In the haze of the night before I'd lost my shirt and a new pair of underwear but I'd made some friends, apparently: the morning after found me waking up at home, alone, on the couch, with a bar napkin covered in smudgy phone numbers shoved into my wallet. At least I still had my pants and my good black loafers.

I staggered out of my chafing blue jeans and into the bathroom. I looked like hell but a part of me suspected that the hangover was dampening the truth a little. For thirty seven, I looked like hell but a kind of *hot* hell. I smirked a little, turned sideways. If I sucked in my stomach a little I looked just fine. Hell, I looked better than some of the guys in that crowd in the leather room last night. Now I just had to learn to hold my breath for the rest of my life and stand just *so*.

Chills ran over my flesh and goose bumps broke out. Wow. Last night had been a lot to remember all at once.

Not that I remembered anything like all of it.

What I did remember was that a public room in a bar that already faced its share of police harassment was not the smartest place to have what amounted to an orgy. God, what if someone had seen us? What if someone had seen me?

I'd seen Harley Scoggins getting tag-teamed.

I couldn't help but laugh. Fuck it, it was a sexually awakened age. People could fuck if

they wanted to. They could fuck eight different guys at once if they wanted to, for that matter. I didn't need to spend the rest of my adult life becoming more and more prudish, did I? That wasn't going to do a thing for my social calendar, I knew. I shook it off and got into the shower and spent twenty minutes nearly scalding myself trying to scrub off the night before so I could go back into the daylight world.

God, I wondered, how did we not get thrown out of there? Probably because there was a famous country singer in there. I couldn't imagine anything more embarrassing leaking like rain through a thin wall into the rest of my life.

By one in the afternoon I was at the mall. Czarina Misha, who apparently never had a day off either, was there, reading the newspaper and using body language to discourage any interest in frozen drinks. I didn't see anyone hanging around the kiosk or my office so I went straight over to the Orange Julius. I was still wearing my sunglasses and stifling a yawn.

"Good afternoon, Jyason," he drawled at me. He looked me up and down – scruffy jeans and a rugby shirt, hardly office wear – and tsk'ed twice. "Surely you are not here to serve the insurance-hungry public in such shabby attire."

I gave him the finger and nodded at the machines. "Fire one up, I'm a paying customer today."

Misha blinked owlshly and stood up straighter. "You mean to interrupt my devoted reading of tragic events to make me use these delicate, *so* delicate hands in manual labor like a peasant?" He held out his hands, palms up, then turned them over, limp wristed. "I cannot believe you would make such unreasonable demands of such a lovely young thing. Surely it is you who should do *my* bidding were there any justice in the world. You are a coarse, masculine man and I am but a child, a green leaf new to the tree and not yet grown cynical or weary or dulled in my tastes."

I had no idea what all this over-the-top play-acting – even by Misha standards – was about but then, come to think of it, I had never ordered a drink from Misha before. "Well, I guess that's

why I'll have to pay you," I smiled. Misha arched one eyebrow. "Oh, and leave a generous gratuity, of course." I held the smile and Misha eyed me in a funny way.

"Gratuitous, indeed," he said, then he turned around and started to fiddle with cups and the juicer and the like. "Do you want anything special or just a standard Julius?"

I hadn't ordered an Orange Julius in months and never from his stand. I looked up at the board and saw only one thing that could be done to it: raw egg.

"Give me the egg," I said. "I haven't had breakfast." It was something I used to do every Saturday morning after a wild night. Whatever trick I'd picked up – or had picked me up – and I would go to the nearest mall for an Orange Julius with a raw egg in it and see if we could gross each other out with our enthusiasm for it. It was this thing I made them do. If they didn't want one then I would get it and see how they'd react.

Misha turned halfway around to look at me and nod with a look on his face of serene approval. "Now that is a good, Russian sort of thing to order. Do you know the company is thinking about discontinuing it because they think it might be unsanitary? Bah. I practically grew up on the stuff. No one here orders it." He whipped up the drink and then cracked the egg into it and stuck it back under the blending nozzle *thing* they use. He put a top on it, stuck in a straw and handed it over.

I slid a couple of bucks at him and swept it up and started drinking. It was a little too cold but that's the only way I can get the egg down; the cream flavor covers the egg and the cold enhances the sweetness of the juice so that it still tastes like an Orange Julius "should." After I downed half of it faster than I should have, then closed my eyes and ground the palm of my left hand into my temple to fight against brain freeze I opened one eye and looked at Misha with it. "You ate a lot of raw egg growing up?"

He shrugged at me. "Of course, yes."

I opened my mouth, then stuck the straw in it and kept drinking lest I say something I'd regret. Misha wasn't anything like blind to body language, though, and crossed his arms to frown at me just a little. "When you are done with that, darling, I am going to insist you tell me what

you just did not tell me.”

I started to slow down on the drink so I wouldn't run out very fast – when Misha makes statements like that he gets what he wants – but he was too smart for that, too. He simply took the drink out of my hand and watched me gulp down the last bits I'd gotten from it. “So,” he said. “What do you think of me drinking raw eggs.”

“Well...” I cleared my throat, got a napkin from the dispenser and wiped my mouth. “It's just that it's normally for, you know, body builders. Big guys.” I gestured vaguely at nothing in particular.

“And I am neither a body builder nor a big guy,” he said. He smiled a little. “You have such narrow opinions! Every Russian mother will tell you that a raw egg has better proteins that more easily melt into a child's body to build muscle and bone.”

I smacked my lips and then nodded at the water jug. “I'll take an ice water, too.”

Misha got some water in a little plastic cup and slid it over to me. I downed it, using it to swish a little – raw egg, I was reminded, is kind of sticky – and then nodded. “That is some unscientific bullshit, about it melting more easily or whatever, but if it grows big, strong, Russian farm hands then what do I know?” I shrugged and gave Misha a friendly wink. “So what's in the news today?” I reached over and turned the newspaper around.

## **THIRD BODY FOUND ON SITE OF FUTURE RIVERFRONT PARK**

“My friend Samuel, he has told me about this. You know, he is a cop, or something. He tells me that there is a serial killer in Nashville who targets us.” Misha tapped the paper meaningfully. “No one knows why he targets us other than the obvious reasons anyone might do so, but here it is, three bodies in three months. It had been long enough since the last one that I think everyone hoped it was over and there had never been a serial killer I the first place. Even



the cops must think it now, though. They are declining to comment when they are asked, which everyone knows means that they believe it but they do not want to say so." Misha was surprisingly cavalier about the thought of a serial killer targeting whatever "us" he meant: fairies like us, Russians like him, fuck, for all I knew he meant Orange Julius employees.

"Us?"

"Faggots, of course, you silly twatwaffle." Misha pursed his lips at me and shook his head. "You need to spend less time with your head in the sand, Jyason – or wherever you put it. I hear everything. For instance, I hear that a big deal country and western star was getting his ass fucked in two at the Chute last night but no one will say more. I bet you did not know that sort of thing even happens there, protected as you are by the walls of the piano bar." Misha gave me a dirty leer and I honestly had no idea whether he was teasing me that he *did* know I'd been in that leather room group sex insanity or whether he did *not* and was just bragging about something probably half the queens in Nashville were currently claiming to have *organized*, much less merely attended.

I smiled a little and chuckled – noncommittal reaction that could mean anything in any context, as my mentor had taught me about responding to a prospect's diatribes about taxes and the weather. "So what does Samuel say about the murders?"

"He says that they are each done in a different way but that the killer leaves a blank black matchbook – like might be printed for a bar but would have writing on them and these don't – in the pockets of his victims. Otherwise, some are stabbed, some strangled, some shot." Misha shrugged. "It is a tragedy but hey. Life is shit sometimes."

"You make it sound like there have been more than three..." I trailed off. How had I never heard this rumor? Was I that detached from my "club friends" that I never just talked about random shit like the news?

"Oh, there have been many," Misha said with a wave of his hand as he began to peel one of the oranges with his perfectly trimmed and shaped fingernails. "They only report some. They want the killer to get angry and expose himself by not getting all the attention he seeks, like with

Zodiac, when they stopped printing his letters in San Francisco.”

I blinked at that, and then laughed. “Right. Nashville has its own serial killer. Sure.” I tapped the newspaper. “They're going to find out that a bunch of faggots who smoked and got old before their time got murdered like anybody else and if they don't they won't tell anybody they don't because the city doesn't care about people like us enough to demand that they do a goddamn thing.” I was suddenly angry for no reason I could explain. I stood up and took the Orange Julius cup back from Misha's side of the counter. He was looking at me like I might be just slightly questionable, in terms of sanity and emotional balance. I sighed. “Sorry. Rough night. I'm on edge this morning.”

Misha smirked, glanced behind me to one side, and then smirked again. “And you have business waiting at your door.”

I turned around and from that distance, hangover or not, sunglasses – his or mine – or not, I had no trouble whatsoever recognizing Harley Scoggins.

He was dressed in faded denim and a baseball shirt for the Nashville Sounds – white torso, red sleeves and shoulders and a big 78 in red letters for the year they were established. He had the sleeves pushed up to his elbows and a plain black baseball cap and dark sunglasses the size of two dinner plates. He clearly didn't do much of his own shopping or at least not here, as he didn't have many people around to be worried about recognizing him. As I approached I slipped off my sunglasses and smiled at him, blushing just a little. I had no idea what to make of this visit. I had fucked him or fucked next to him the night before as had, it seemed at the time, practically everyone else in a half-mile radius. I didn't warrant any special follow-up. He slipped off his glasses and those crystal blue eyes were either completely real or the cosmetic lenses were way better than I'd believed they could be; they were also completely bloodshot. The exhaustion he must have felt didn't seem to have killed the habitual, flirtatious good cheer that I imagine is the bread and butter of every young star whose schtick is raw promise on prominent display. He smiled with what looked like real warmth – I couldn't imagine how much it cost to get

orthodontics to make teeth like that – and bobbed his head down and a little to the side in exactly the *aw shucks* way that would make anyone, man or woman, up to and including Narnia's White Witch, putty in his hands.

“Hi,” he said, smiling just a little as though, the way he'd said it, it was a joke.

“Good morning.” I glanced at my watch. “Afternoon, rather.” I twitched up the corners of my mouth and he nodded at the door to my office.

“Are you Mr. Marks?”

Mister?

I nodded at him, both of us still faintly smiling. “Speaking. Can I help you?”

He grinned again, reached up, took off the cap, scratched his ridiculously wavy hair underneath and then put the cap back on. “I understand an executive for my label came by yesterday to talk to you about a life insurance policy for me and you turned him away.” Harley – Chad, whatever – chuckled a little and crossed his arms. “To be honest, you kind of pissed him off but not me. I appreciate that you'd think like that – looking out for somebody's best interests, you know?” He had a teenage voice but a late 20's body. He was a tenor when he sang and his speaking voice was only barely lower with this almost contradictory bit of baritone around the edges. When he was sixty he'd be singing bass and gay boys would be throwing stolen panties at the stage.

I blinked at him. I reached up and scratched my chin and realized I'd forgotten to shave that morning. I must look like shit. “Well, maybe that's true and maybe it isn't. Maybe you're Harley Scoggins and maybe you're a guy who looks an awful lot like him.” I couldn't believe we were having this conversation. “Why don't you step into my office and we can talk about it?”

He nodded, smiled, held out a hand towards my own office door as though he needed to invite me inside. “After you.” His voice was too crisp and clear. It was the kind of crisp, clear voice that whispers to you, very softly, *Wouldn't you like to hear me slur something dirty?*

I unlocked my office door, nodded towards the client chair in the back and then started to run up the blinds beside the door. “Actually, I don't mean to be weird but--” he said, turning as he

got just past the counter by the door, but I interrupted.

"But you'd prefer I didn't do that."

He smiled a winning smile, a gold star smile. "Yeah," he chuckled. "Sorry."

I gave him a fairly tight little flex of the corners of my mouth. "No problem. Happens all the time."

I ran the blinds back down and when I turned to walk back to my desk caught him in an unguarded moment of rubbing his tired eyes. I couldn't tamp down the thought that my eyes would be pretty tired, too, if I spent too many nights seeing what he'd seen last night. Then I remembered what they say about people in glass houses, ran my fingers through my hair and cleared my throat before heading back to the desk.

"So," I said... and here I had to decide: mention last night or not? I punted. "What can I do for you today?" I tried to look bright, efficient, helpful, all the things they tell us to look like we are.

Harley ran his fingernails up and down the middle of his chest, as though buffing his nails on the front of his shirt or swiping at a speck of something untidy, and looked at my nameplate for a couple of seconds. "Well, Jason – can I call you Jason?" He looked up and met my eyes and looked like it was a real quest. I fluttered a couple of fingers and nodded. "Jason, I really do want the life insurance policy. Like I said, I respect that you refused to sell it to a stranger. Walker says you were pretty sharp with him and I don't mind telling you..." He gave a little chuckle that hit its mark with clockwork precision. "*Nobody* gets sharp with Walker. You were right, though. Walker's been on me to take better care of the business side of my career – stuff like this, what they call 'income protection,' I think – for a long time and finally I said, great, if it's so important, go do it yourself. I mean, I'm an artist. I write songs, I sing songs, I get dressed up and go on stage and do my thing, but I don't have a head for the numbers. You know?" He smiled at me, weaving between just-a-normal-joe and too-important-for-the-small-stuff. It was a sales pitch. I was a salesman and I could smell a sales pitch coming down the road before I could

hear the tires. "Anyway, I think he knew that it wouldn't be easy to take care of it *for* me and he's a penny pincher so, at least, he said, he went to an independent agent so he could try to get a good deal, 'multiple offers,' he said, and honestly, no offense, I think if he just walked into an office and flashed his card and my name that some agent out there would dance both halves of a tango just to get the commission." He shrugged like a teenage boy who'd been asked if he knew what he'd just done was wrong: a little annoyed, a little mystified, a little *of course I do*. I was both intellectually aware of how he would be attractive to so many people, including me, and hated his silly guts. He didn't remember me from last night even I the least.

He went on. "Walker told me to let the label's lawyers take care of everything for me and not worry about it anymore, which told me, see, that he'd had a snoot-full from somebody and wanted it off his desk so he wouldn't be reminded of whatever had happened. I asked enough times in enough ways that finally he told me what you'd said when he came down here and I knew, just like that. I said to Walker, 'That's the man! That's the agent.' It was that simple." He grinned at me. He probably had a filing system for smiles like that; this one was probably labeled #274-A, The Gosh-Golly Go-Getter.

I tapped my pen against the calendar and waited two seconds longer than would be strictly necessary to process all that; I wanted to convey that I wasn't taking everything at face value and I did. His smile slipped just a millimeter or two but didn't disappear. "So what kind of insurance are we talking here? Disability? Life? Health?" I cleared my throat a little. I needed to steer this into some legitimate business talk so I could filter all his show business antics through some numbers. Numbers were very good at forcing the world and the people in it to explain themselves.

"Uh, life," he said. "Just normal life insurance. You know, in case of an accident or something."

I nodded and leaned back a little in my chair. "So, a term life insurance policy. Not an investment, just plain old life insurance."

Harley had taken off the cap and folded his hands up in it in his lap. He looked a little

nervous, a little attentive. He looked a lot like a freshman who'd shown up for his eight o'clock class even though he had a hangover. I frowned just a little. His eyes got brighter, more earnest. "Exactly," he said. "If something happened to me, I mean, God forbid, but if it did, well, there would be a lot of people I'd want to take care of."

"People like Mr. Walker of Cumberland River Records?" I frowned again, just slightly, not disapproval so much as a desire for precision.

Harley nodded at me. "Yeah, and..." He stopped and blushed, hard. "And some other people."

I arched my eyebrows. Now we were getting to the good part, the filet. "Such as whom?"

Harley stayed flushed and looked away. The way his eyes jiggled a little wasn't something easy to fake. He wasn't this good an actor. He was honestly a little embarrassed and scared. "Just... um..."

I cleared my throat and straightened my tie, then cocked my head to one side. Misha, I noticed, had managed to find an excuse to linger at my closed-up kiosk and was trying to get a peek in the door. I didn't see any reason to try to stop him. I looked back at Harley and spoke in a clear, even tone, the salesman voice that says we've all had a good, long think and now I'm going to sell him something very nice and he's going to pay for it. "Mr. Scoggins, listen, I know why Walker came to me yesterday. He came because you'd heard my name before. I'm no big secret but lots of my clients are, if you take my meaning. I've gotten plenty of referrals in this fashion. You don't need to tell me who recommended me or where or when or anything like that. It's enough to know you can be honest with me and I'm going to be more than merely nonjudgemental; I'm going to be sympathetic from first-hand experience of the same pressures and uncertainties you feel." It was a little speech I had to give a lot of first-time clients who were queens. They couldn't believe it would be possible to sit in an office and tell a guy in a tie that they wanted to insure another man. It just wasn't done, after all. Truth told, they usually asked me to come to their homes rather than to come to my office. It was easier for a lot of us to talk to a stranger in surroundings we felt we controlled.

He looked at me and his eyes were just blue, not as bright, and his face was a little less teen heartthrob and a little more that of a guy who also had a rough night and forgot to shave this morning. "Okay," he said, kind of quietly. "So maybe I sent Walker here. Maybe you're right. I have some... people that I would want taken care of. I would want them rich enough that they could go wherever they wanted and do whatever they wanted and they'd be too rich for anyone to ever hurt them."

I nodded. It wasn't the first time I'd heard that explanation. "That's what insurance often is for. But that kind of insurance can be very expensive."

He smiled and there was cynicism in it. "I've got enough."

"Then why not," I said, tugging at the corners of my mouth with finger and thumb, "Just leave *that* to these people?"

He shook his head. "No. I just want checks to show up at their doors. All of them. Walker, too, for that matter. I just want no one to have to worry or even think about what they're going to do the next day."

I nodded a little. "Okay, then. We can do this. I certainly am not disinterested in the commission, as you suggested, and selling insurance is what I do. And if you're *you*, there's really no problem. You could name anyone you wanted as the beneficiary. You fill out that part of the form, anyway." I chuckled a little. "Truth told, I could have sold Walker a policy yesterday."

He blinked at me and a little of the boyish rogue came back into his smile. "Really?"

"Sure. Anybody can insure anybody as long as they have what's called an 'insurable interest.' The policy just has a CQV clause – a *cestui qui vit* clause. It means that we verify that the person who is taking out the policy would stand to lose as much or more from the death of the insured as they would from the policy. It's insurance for *us* that they won't just write the first premium check – or the first twenty for that matter – and then knock off the insured for the payout. When someone walks in and wants to take out a policy on someone else the first thing I do is give them a little rough treatment about how we can't do that because it's subsidizing murder. If that's what they have in mind, having their bluff called so fast sends them running for

the hills. If they're legit they'll keep pushing.”

Harley Scoggins blinked at me, very slowly. “Do people do that? Actually take out insurance and then kill someone?”

I shrugged a little and nodded at him, reaching for a pen and clicking it in and out a few times. “They sure do. Case law holds us partially responsible for the death, too. *Liberty National v. Watkins*, 1957. It's an old idea, though. I mean, look at *Double Indemnity*.” I smiled. “People will do pretty much anything you can imagine, Mr. Scoggins. We are a nation of motherfuckers.”

He looked at me for a long second and I think recognition might have flickered in his eyes for a moment, but it either died or he snuffed it out himself. “Yes,” he said with a big smile that came out of nowhere, too suddenly, practiced to the point of being a reflex. “There's no doubt about that.”

We spent the next few minutes filling out the basic paperwork. When it came to the part about beneficiaries, Scoggins demured and insisted that he would need to do some research before he could fill that part out. “How about you just tell me what all I'll need to mail off to them to start the application?” Normally we handle that for them but for some of my clients, when they were scared to tell even me whether or not they had a lover, maybe an ex somewhere, who knows what or whom they felt the need to hide, well... I'd let it slide. I nodded and acquiesced so that in less than an hour Harley Scoggins had left my office with a pre-addressed, stamped envelope, a mostly-complete application, a filled out health questionnaire – clean on all counts, he assured me and hey, it was on him if he lied – and a note with a fat monthly premium noted on it so he could send off the first month's with the application.

I didn't think about him – well, not often, anyway – for at least three weeks after that.



## **Particular People – Chapter Four**

*See, you're the kind of person / That believes in making out once / Love 'em and leave 'em fast.*  
--"Little Red Corvette," Prince

My insurance business trucked along like normal through the end of August and the beginning of September. Every other day I would go sit at the mall and read most of a paperback and wait to sell some insurance to somebody looking for a deal at a mall about to die. On the days between I'd make rent by going and collecting premiums from clients. Some of those clients would try to fuck me instead of pay me and none of them were successful. A handful of clients both fucked and paid me and those were my favorite clients, always the last stop of the day. In one particularly good week, Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday afternoons ended with me getting home tired and drenched, taking a shower, getting dressed again and going back out to the Chute, Blu, a bathhouse, wherever, always with a stroll through Printer's Alley to gin up a little moral superiority before diving right back into abandon.

Some days I really did love the job.

Somewhere in there I got the commission payment for Harley Scoggins' life insurance policy and the paperwork to add him to my debit book. I shook my head at the commission check, then went out and bought four new suits, new jeans, new shirts, most of a new wardrobe. Harley Scoggins as a client demanded that I dress a little better at least once a month. He would probably be the sort who sent his payments in by mail but it wouldn't hurt to drop in now and then, would it? One never knew when he might need a little more insurance.

It was a Friday afternoon in early September that I was sitting at the kiosk and Misha turned up with an orange drink with a cracked egg in it. He stepped back, looked me up and down and whistled once. I was wearing something a little sharper than usual for a Friday afternoon – I didn't plan on going home before I went out – and then he nodded at the dark office. "No flies in the trap today?"

I looked up from my book, fluttered my lips in mock amusement and took the drink. "Not

a nibble," I sighed. "Thanks for the drink." We clinked our cups together and then set about drinking.

"Did you read the newspaper today, Jyason?" Misha was dawdling over his own Orange Julius in the way he did when he had something he wanted to tell someone but wanted to seem casual about it, too. I shook my head at him and he leaned forward to speak low, as though anything printed in the paper might also be a secret. "They found another body by the river," he whispered. "This one had his throat sliced. Black matchbook tucked in his shoe."

I arched an eyebrow. "His shoe?"

Misha nodded at me. "The newspaper will not say it, but he had his pants pulled off. The laws, they think he was raped."

I blinked. Then I blinked again. "What?"

Misha nodded and shrugged at me. "That is what they say. Another fairy murdered, this one raped first." He smirked a little. "None of the cops will look closely enough to be sure."

I took a long pull from the drink Misha had brought me and then shuddered, set it down and shuddered again. "God, that's fucking gross."

"I thought you liked the raw egg," Misha said. I gave him a cross look and he looked away and tried not to giggle.

"You're pretty cavalier about this aren't you?" I asked. "If there's a serial killer targeting faggots in Nashville you'd be a pretty easy target." I smirked at him and he turned bemused eyes at me, then punched me on the shoulder with a self-consciously weak fist.

"Not with you around to protect me. Besides, I do not go cruising for married dick in this city's most grotesque corners. So far all the ones they've been found were dumped in the river, yes? When the dead wash up on the shores of a future public park that is a place for certain men to go to feel ashamed of themselves, I do not imagine that they floated very far, you know? No one is going to show up here to murder me. If they do at least it will be the most interesting day of work I have ever had." Czarina Misha winked at me then and turned to go. He got about ten feet before he stopped and looked back, legs posed *just so*, half-step, hand on hip. "You haven't

been visited by any more deathly handsome and famous young men, have you?"

I looked up at his eyes and snorted.

"Good. I could not take it if your work life *stayed* more interesting than mine." Then he held my gaze for a moment before starting back on his hilariously slow pace towards the Orange Julius stand.

I knocked off early that afternoon. Nobody was at 100 Oaks, or at least nobody who wanted insurance. I figured since it was about time for the first regular premium on Harley Scoggins' policy then maybe I'd pay a house call to find out how he wanted to handle them. I had his address now, and plenty of legitimate reason to drop by. A little personal service early in an insurance relationship is pretty well expected in some quarters.

That was all the self-justification I needed. Twenty minutes later I had hunched over a map of Nashville long enough to find his address, written directions and was in the Town Coupe and rumbling out Woodmont Boulevard towards state highway 100, the Harding Pike, and the little town of Belle Meade, Tennessee, one of the last bastions of the incredibly wealthy in the greater Nashville metropolitan area.

I turned down the 4400 block of Forsythe Place and drove a single-lane, paved, unmarked street bordered on both sides by low, decorative walls of gray stone broken here and there by a yard with no border and then resumed again by another that needed the granite blocks to accent its own faux granite facing. If you've ever been to Mt. Vernon, from a distance – say, the far end of the front yard – it looks like it's been constructed out of enormous slabs of white stone. When one gets up close it becomes apparent that it's actually just sided with wooden panels that have had false grooves carved into them to create that impression. These houses had something of that same look, like they were probably solidly built but had to present a made up face anyway. They were like women with strong features who wear too much makeup anyway.

I glided past one after another of these gray, severe homes like mornings in January, then turned down another little side street and then, finally, up a shockingly narrow paved drive that

almost immediately dropped to a dirt road lined with somewhat scraggly fir trees of some sort. I could just barely keep the trees from scraping the length of the Town Coupe if I took it slowly and I figured that was probably the goal. A new Lincoln or Caddy would make this without much trouble but five years ago cars had been a lot bigger and these trees were the functional equivalent of speed bumps.

After an eighth of a mile there was a sudden break in the firs and I found myself idling across a drive of soap-flake white granite chips that would probably get stuck between the treads of every tire I had but I'd bet a shiny new nickel they also guaranteed that no one ever made a sound when they walked across the drive in the middle of the night. The house itself was modest by mansion standards but still something of a monstrosity. I parked somewhere in the half mile of gravel between the front door and the garage, got out, checked myself in the window reflection and then caught a trolley up the front walk to ring the bell. If the house had a moat it wouldn't be entirely out of place. All this and he was twenty nine according to his life insurance application. I shook my head. Surely in ten or fifteen minutes the doorbell would finish chiming chords and someone would drive up to open the door.

It didn't take nearly as long as I'd thought. There came a crackle from a speaker next to the arched, custom, maple front door and either the speaker was no good or the world's biggest sissy was on the other end. "Might I help you?" He sounded like a regular Georgia peach.

"Jason Marks," I said, trying to sound just gruff enough to be unquestionably butch in comparison. "I'm Mr. Scoggins' insurance agent, I wanted to pay a courtesy call and discuss a couple of minor particulars with him."

There was a brief, muffled sound that might have been anything from a gasp to a snort on the other end and the speaker clicked off. I rocked on my heels for another minute or so and had started to really debate with myself whether I ought to ring the bell again when the door opened a crack and a bottle blond with washboard abs, lime green speedo swim briefs that looked like they had a sack of marbles stuffed in the front and big bags under his eyes glared out at me from the dark interior of the house. "Mr. Scoggins," he said, and it turned out the speaker system was just

shitty because he had a voice that sounded like any other newscaster's, "Would like to know if you might call another time."

I smiled and couldn't help but glance up at his face, then back down, then all around. I tugged on the cuff of my left sleeve and smiled in a way I hoped wasn't a leer. Well, mostly hoped. "I'd be glad to. I just happened to be in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by to discuss how he wanted to arrange payments on future premiums but if now isn't convenient..." I trailed off and shrugged. "I'll call and make an appointment."

I heard someone walking towards the front door and heard Scoggins' voice, though it sounded gravelly, like it had been dumped from a motorcycle on a country road. "Who is it, Hank?"

I arched both eyebrows at Hank, who scowled fiercely at me. No salesman would ever turn down an opening like that. "It's Jason Marks," I said brightly. I couldn't see Scoggins but I was sure he would hear me. "I just wanted to check in and have a quick chat about premiums. I didn't mean to disturb you, but I was nearby on some business and thought I might could take a couple of minutes of your time."

Scoggins stepped into view, just finishing wrapping a stars-and-stripes beach towel around his waist. "Oh, Jason." He gave me that same open-mouth smile he'd used at the office, the one that was so ludicrously flirtatious. "Sure. We were just having a swim. Do you swim?" Hank, the bottle blond, still hadn't gotten out of the way and in fact seemed to act like the sun might burn him to ash. He squinted at me as the bright, brittle light of late summer glinted off my sunglasses.

"Well, I do, sometimes, though I didn't bring anything, uh..." I chuckled. Somehow I was enjoying the look on Hank's face too much to turn down this opportunity. "You know, to wear." I lifted one foot. "Loafers don't make very good paddles."

Scoggins smirked at my loafers and his eyes sparkled in a way that anyone should see as a warning sign. "We'll make do somehow. Come in, come in. We can talk by the pool." I took a step forward at the invitation and Hank, after just a split-second of hesitation, looked at the

ceiling and got out of the way. Without a word he walked off in the direction opposite from which Scoggins had entered, sulking. I stepped inside, closed the door behind me and Scoggins smiled. "This way."

We walked back to the pool and settled into chairs. I spent two minutes making noises at him about whether he'd gotten all the paperwork he should have from the life insurance company and then how did he want to handle premiums, all that jazz. Then he took off the towel and dove into the pool and eventually, with minimal cajoling and an assurance that Hank wouldn't mind if he ever found out, got me to fuck him hard on a padded lounge chair that probably cost a hundred bucks.

When it was over he told me to wash off in the pool. He dug around in some pants draped over a chair, pulled out a checkbook, wrote me one and said he'd like to pay his premium in person every month. "I'm old fashioned about some things," he said with a little smile. "Say... do I know you from somewhere other than insurance?"

"No more than you'd know anybody else," I replied. He wasn't sure what that meant but I played it close to the vest, took his check, shook his hand and looked him in his eyes. His pupils were only about as big as a Kennedy half-dollar. I wasn't sure he'd remember me this time, either, but he, still naked, walked me back to the front door and after opening the door an inch and then shutting it again, wrapped his arms around my shoulders in a surprisingly intimate hug and whispered one word, "Transcendent."

The next morning Harley Scoggins was found dead in Printer's Alley. The hooker who found him told the newspaper he'd had a smile on his face.

## **Particular People – Chapter Five**

*Precious kisses / Words that burn me / Lovers never ask you why.*  
--"Do You Really Want to Hurt Me," Culture Club

The police came by the kiosk on Saturday afternoon. I'd had a reasonably restrained time the night before and Saturday was my best day to attract a little new business from the phantoms haunting the corridors of the 100 Oaks mall so I was dressed pretty sharp in a pair of black pleated slacks and a robin's egg dress shirt with a skinny tie made of black leather. Czarina Misha was working the evening shift that night so he hadn't been there when I'd arrived and wasn't due until around half past two that afternoon; thus, nobody had been around to read the newspaper for me.

I had one loafer hooked on a rung of the other stool at the kiosk and my back to the hall, a paperback in my hands, when the two guys sent down from Central Casting walked up and cleared their throats a little. I'd read that cops who don't have to wear uniforms – lieutenants and detectives and the like – hated it when they were recognized as being cops right off the bat so I smiled as nicely as I could ever be asked and said, "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"You Jason Marks?"

I nodded at them, still smiling. "That's me," I said.

They took turns waving badges at me and then one introduced himself as Detective Herman, homicide. I hoped that when my brow furrowed and the space between my eyebrows wrinkled it looked genuine because it was every bit genuine. I had no idea yet that Misha wasn't supposed to be in yet so my first reaction was to crane my head towards the Orange Julius and wonder where he was, if something had happened to him. "Oh, my God," I said. "Has something happened?" I set my book down and turned towards them.

Herman gave the impression that he was left doing all the talking because the other hadn't yet been trained to speak. He nodded at my office door. "Got somewhere we could discuss this in private?"

I nodded and waved towards the glassed door. "Certainly, my office is right over here." I got up and walked over with them trailing me. I was moving a lot faster than they were, but then, they'd already heard the news. I unlocked the door, went in and started to reach for the cords to let the blinds *down*.

"Actually," Herman said, but I cut him off with a little sigh.

"You'd rather I didn't do that. It's like I flunked Blinds Management 101." I chuckled, nervous, reacting with humor nobody else would ever understand. Herman gave me a look and a waved it off. "Sorry. Nothing."

They stood aside and waited for me to go past them, behind the counter, to my desk. They were very polite, not like movie cops who go snooping the moment they've got one toe in the door. On the other hand, there wasn't much to look at. I gestured at the client chair and said, "Sorry, I've only got the one seat. Feel free to grab a stool from outside."

Herman took the seat and spoke still for his partner. "He'll be fine standing. Mr. Marks, have you read the paper today?"

I shook my head at him, settling into my seat and smoothing out my tie before sitting back and trying to relax. "No, I'm afraid I don't subscribe."

"Not a lot of people of the professional persuasion don't get a paper." Herman's voice was mild. I was left wondering what "the professional persuasion" meant.

"I listen to people tell me what scares them for a living, Detective Herman. I don't need to hear the real thing on top of the paranoid fantasies of the paying public." He blinked at me once. "In short, news is a big fucking downer. I buy a paper if there's a story that interests me but I don't get it every day." I shrugged. "Why?"

"Harley Scoggins was found dead this morning in Printer's Alley, downtown. I understand you were one of the last people to see him alive." Herman's gaze was steady and unblinking, now, and I couldn't imagine *not* blurting out a confession under that scrutiny if I'd had anything to confess in the first place. One's natural desire when held in that gaze might even be to gin up a few crimes worth admitting just to get things over with.



I could feel all the blood drain out of my face: that swooshing, spinning sensation I've always imagined as being what one feels right before fainting. My lips were suddenly as dry as week-old sandpaper and I licked them roughly. "Oh, Christ. You're for real, aren't you?"

Herman shifted a little and he and his partner exchanged a coded burst with a glance. I couldn't have told what they thought if I'd had two hours to puzzle it out in slow motion. Herman turned back and nodded at me once. "Entirely, sir. Is it true that you saw him yesterday?"

I cleared my throat and could feel whatever drained away at first starting to swell back up. "Yes," I said, voice hoarse. "I went to his home yesterday afternoon to collect a premium payment from him and discuss how he wished to pay in future." They looked at me without reacting, as though I'd said nothing at all, so I made forward-movement motions with the pencil in my right hand and said, more quickly, "Some people prefer to pay by mail, some by bank draft, some in person. A lot of my more old-fashioned clients don't trust mail service to get it there on time. I don't really know why, they're just... it's how it was done back in the day." I cleared my throat again. "With the old weekly industrial policies, you know."

Then I leaned over and puked into my little plastic waste basket.

Strong Silent Type went and got me a drink of water from the food court and Herman kept going with the questions. An undefended moment passed in silence had clearly been wasted in his book. I gave him an extremely sanitized version of events – that I'd gone by, I'd spent a few minutes discussing his payment plan and I'd left.

"Would you say Mr. Scoggins seemed nervous? Upset?" Herman had his little notebook out on his knee, a pen in his other hand, but he wasn't writing anything down, at least not when I said it. He'd write something down for just a second after I was done talking, putting a distinct boundary of time between the end of my answer and the beginning of his next question.

"No, not especially," I said, after a moment's hesitation I hoped seemed like concentration. "He seemed to be in very good spirits."

"When you say 'in good spirits,' do you mean he was intoxicated somehow? Alcohol?"

Herman paused a respectful second. "Perhaps something harder?"

I started to chuckle, then realized that this was probably the worst possible time to chuckle, but by then it was too late. I made a sort of chuh-chuh noise, then cleared my throat again and scooted my trash can farther away with my foot. "It's possible," I said. Strong & Silent Type returned with a paper cup of ice water and a handful of napkins. I wiped my face, then drank some water, then dipped the napkins in the water and wiped down my face again. I was starting to feel just a little better after that so I sat up slightly straighter. "I didn't see him do any drugs – or drink any alcohol – but I remember when he showed me out I noticed his eyes were extremely dilated." I coughed, then leaned over and spit into the trash can. "Do you believe his death was drug-related?"

Herman shrugged at me. "No idea yet. Mr. Marks, are you a family man?"

I blinked at him. "Family" had long been slang for queers. I decided he was way too straight-edge to produce a double entendre like that. I shook my head after a long few seconds. "No. Bachelor."

Herman made a grunting noise. "Did you and Mr. Scoggins have anything other than a professional relationship?"

I blinked at him, very slowly. "What does that mean?"

"I mean, are you a faggot? And did you fuck him?" Herman said it like he asked that of everyone in the world.

I tried to force a laugh that ended up coming out as more coughing. "I left Mr. Scoggins' home at around seven in the evening yesterday and did not see him again after that. He was alive and he might have been high as a Georgia pine when I left but if he was then I don't know on what and he didn't let his insurance agent see him taking it. That, I can assure you, would require me to do some paperwork that increased his premium. Is there anything else I can do for you gentlemen?"

"Was there anyone else at his home?" Herman was as unruffled as he could be.

"There was a blond man there who didn't tell me his name. He answered the door, told

Scoggins I was there and I didn't see him again." My voice was flat and dull. "I didn't fuck him, either."

Herman smirked and made a little grumph at me. He looked back at Strong & Silent Type, who glanced at me long enough to miss a stroke on the nail he was buffing, then Herman stood up and dug around on the inside of his coat. "Here's my card," he said, dropping it on the desk but not offering to shake hands. He and Strong & Silent went out the door just as Czarina Misha waddled up in his painted-on jeans. Misha looked up at each of them just long enough to realize they were there before he got shoved out of the way by Strong & Silent. They didn't so much look at or notice him as walk through the same space he was occupying. He got out of the way in a hurry that – surprising me by the way it surprised me in the first place – made it apparent it wasn't the first time Misha had to scurry out of the way of someone a lot bigger than he.

He turned in place, slowly, to watch them go, then finally completed the three-sixty and walked into the office. The trash can had started to smell of puke and Misha had a couple of orange drinks in his hands and since he'd started giving me a raw egg in mine every time he brought one over I could feel my stomach winding up for another pitch at the sight of them. I stood up quickly and waved my hands, coming around the corner of the desk at him. "No," I said, "Outside. I can't sit in here a moment longer," and Misha drew up short, eyes wide at me.

"Jyesus, Jyason." He blinked owlshly. "You look like someone died."

I shook my head as we walked back out the door and over to the kiosk. "Someone did. Remember Harley Scoggins?"

Misha clucked his tongue. Under his arm was a newspaper. "I was coming to tell you the news, darling. It's all any reporter can talk about."

We settled onto the stools at my kiosk. For once I had a customer waiting so I waved my hand at her – another mom with a kid who would have meant a great commission but I just didn't have it in me right then so I blurted out that we weren't open – and then let Misha force me to take a sip of the orange drink. It didn't go down easy but if I held my breath and thought about a pretty field full of fresh-smelling flowers I could just about not be in the same room when I

swallowed it.

"OK," I said, finally, breath a little ragged. "What do they say in the papers?"

Misha looked at me with the kindly, moist eyes of a mother. "You do not want me to tell you just yet."

I shook my head at him and smiled a little. "No, go for it."

He sighed and at least tried not to relish the telling. "He was found two floors up on a fire escape that hangs over a strip club. He had a knife..." Misha looked around, pointed at an empty store front. "Bah, the KitchenWorx is gone. A kitchen knife, one of the big ones, bigger than a steak knife. Anyway, he had one stabbed through his heart. His pants were around his ankles and, they say," but here Misha had to pause, look around and lower his voice, "He was smiling. Grinning, they say. The strip club over which he died? It is a straight place that is well-known." Misha made a little smirk appear out of nowhere. "Honestly, that may be what surprises people the most." All the color drained out of my face again and Misha leaned forward to put a hand on my arm. "Darlingk," he said, honest to God putting a 'k' on the end like a Boris and Natasha cartoon, "You are going to faint."

I shuddered, a cold wave passing over me followed by sudden, drenching sweats. Misha didn't say anything else, just stood there by my stool and kept me from cracking my skull on the floor. He downshifted from sarcasm to sympathy pretty quickly and finally I had held my head in my hands long enough to feel like maybe I could hold the rest of me up, too. Misha eased back onto his stool and then whispered, "Tell me what it is that I do not know about this."

I blinked back a couple of tears – of terror more than sadness - and then sighed. "I fucked Harley Scoggins yesterday beside his indoor pool." I laughed abruptly. "Some blond party favor who answered the door was somewhere else in the house. And Harley was dead, what, twelve hours later?"

Misha shrugged. "If you and he were together at seven in the evening, more like nine hours, give or take." I gave him a look and he went on, "Still, yes, this must be very strange for you. I know."

"Strange?" I laughed again, out of place. "You don't know the half of it."

Misha pursed his lips a little. "Have you ever had someone close to you die before?"

I opened my mouth, closed it again, then opened it again and looked at him as I replied. "Yes, of course. I wasn't close to Harley Scoggins, though. That isn't what has me flipping my wig. It's just... you know, we were in the same room last night. He was alive, laughing, high as a kite on something. I was..." I shuddered. "Well, you know. I got him off yesterday and this afternoon I'm reading his obituary." I shuddered again. "Sorry. I can't expect you to know what that feels like or to be able to give me advice."

Misha kept his lips pursed and smiled at me a little more serenely. "Of course," he said. "Well, regardless, yes, this is scary and weird and bad for you. The police have been here. They have asked questions. Do they think that you killed him?"

I shrugged a little. "Not that I know of. Won't matter, though, I have an alibi. I was out dancing last night. A million faggots in Nashville saw me at The Chute."

Misha smirked again. "Assuming they are willing to say that they were at The Chute in the first place. But yes, you will be fine. Will this affect your job? Scoggins was your client now, yes?"

"Yes, he was," I sighed, "But I can't really see how it affects me. Clients die. That's kind of the point of insurance for a lot of them. No big deal."

Misha nodded, listening and actually processing it and thinking about it at a time when I just couldn't. "Will they refuse to pay given the circumstances?"

I shrugged and then thought for a few seconds and then shook my head. "I don't know. If they can make a case that he died in some manner that isn't covered, of course – say, suicide – or if they think they can go to court and convince a jury that he was participating in a lifestyle about which he wasn't adequately honest when he did his paperwork, that kind of thing, sure, they'd refuse to pay. But I don't decide that. Case investigators, insurance adjusters, those types, they decide that. I just sell the policies." I shook my head, rubbed my jaw with the open palm of my right hand while leaning my weight on the kiosk with the left. "Nah, won't matter one bit."

Sometimes people fuck their clients. Straight agents do it, too, but they keep it a secret because their clients have husbands. Me, well, the agency that wrote that policy won't know or care. I could see them declining to write any more policies for me but so what? I've got a debit book that pays the rent and I could write policies for the other guys just as easily. It'd be a sticker I had to scrape off the side of the kiosk, nothing more."

Misha nodded and stood up then. "I see. Then you are sorted. You must gather your nerves back to you but you mustn't let it bother you too much. It is bad and weird that you had sex with a man who is dead, but lots of people have had that experience and they survive. You should drink the rest of this drink and then either come talk to me at the Orange Julius stand or you should go out immediately and get your mind off of all this." Misha put a fingertip to my chin and turned my head so our eyes met. "Promise me that you will do one or the other or yet another thing but that you will *not* just sit here and think about Harley Scoggins' corpse." He smiled a little. His eyes were damp. He'd had someone die after he'd fallen in love with them. I should have known.

"Who was he?" Tears started to well up in my eyes. I wasn't in love with Harley Scoggins; I wasn't even in *like* with Harley Scoggins. It was still weird. It was still the emotional wringer.

"Three years ago, I had a boyfriend in Moscow. He was eighteen years, I was sixteen. He went into the military. Eventually they sent a picture of him to his mother and I left the country."

I cocked my head a little and let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. "Afghanistan?"

Misha shrugged. "No, we do not know. Only that it wasn't Afghanistan." He smiled. "But three years is a long time. It is very long to the very young. Now go think about something other than Harley Scoggins.

I nodded, Misha walked away and I went to my office just long enough to lock it up and get the hell out of Dodge. But first I grabbed a few claim forms. I was kind of surprised my phone hadn't already started to ring.

I went driving. I didn't know where I was going, just that I was going somewhere. I turned the Lincoln out onto the road and started driving counter-clockwise around the outside of town, then realized I was going nowhere too fast on the highway so I got off on the Murfreesboro Pike, drove out to Mill Creek from there and then started cruising side streets and back roads letting my mind wander hither and yon. I was thinking of absolutely nothing at all as I turned east, then southeast, then south, then wound up on 155 and within twenty minutes of that I'd hit I-65 back into downtown and pulled up two blocks from Printer's Alley. I parked at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. I could see a crowd of people at the mouth of Printer's Alley and a couple of cops standing around with some of their yellow and white sawhorses set up to keep people back.

The crowd weren't pushing or rowdy; some had their heads down, lips moving, praying in silence but many were staring down the alleyway, craning their necks, trying to get a glimpse of the place where their favorite rising country star had died in shame.

I gently squeezed between sets of short, rounded shoulders and made my way up to the front. One of the cops looked like he was keeping an eye on me to make sure I didn't bug out or try to get past him or anything but I was simply there to rubberneck like everyone else. I weaved from side to side, slowly, as did many of those around me – all of us cranes in slow-motion – and tried to find that perfect spot from which to see the empty space that hours before had been the scene of Harley Scoggins' last adventure of the flesh. *Fuck, I thought, Half-naked, stabbed in the heart. He knew whoever did this. Or he thought he knew them, anyway. That is so fucked up, a kid like that. His record company is probably going to shit itself.* I shook my head, and finally the beehive hairdos and the denim jackets parted in just the right way that I could see the last of the evening slip through the crack between two buildings whose backs formed the alley so that it glinted off a spot somewhere up the biggest fire escape there. I had no idea if that was even the right fire escape, much less the right spot, but the crowd and I all shared a moment of silent wonder as the light twinkled for our benefit and then was gone.

A woman in front of me started to cry audibly and I could sense some sort of shift in the crowd. They were all, to a man, going to swear that Harley Scoggins' ghost had come and given

them one last sun-bolt smile before making his way to Heaven. This one trick of the light would rehabilitate him forever in their memories. They would go home tonight and speak of it in hushed tones to spouses and children and siblings and parents who all thought they were complete lunatics for having said it at all. The emotion was building in the crowd, some unseen ripple, and as quite possibly the last person to see Harley Scoggins in the most vulnerable moment possible, short of his death, I couldn't take sharing anything with these people. I had experienced the intimacy of which all these people had fantasized and I didn't want it anymore and something about the way the crowd swelled forward by an inch when that ray of light struck the metal rungs of the fire escape made me feel like everyone of them had turned a grubby hand to me to stroke and feel and paw at my flesh as though to catch some shred of *him* that might have been left behind.

I turned and tried to get away from the crowd but they had pushed in closer and this time it was harder. I had to piss a couple of people off. I took a couple of elbows for my trouble but when it was done, when I was finally free and I'd been called an asshole twice and told once that I wasn't the only one grieving, you know, I got to the back of the crowd, which had grown, and I walked in silence back to my car, got in and drove straight to Belle Meade. If the blond number in the Speedos or Mr. Walker with Cumberland River Records wanted to fill out a claims form and get out of my life I'd be only too happy to oblige.



## **Particular People – Chapter Six**

*Dream of better lives / The kind which never hate.*  
--"I Melt With You," Modern English

I only had to threaten to run over half the staff of *Entertainment Tonight* at the foot of Harley Scoggins' driveway. The Belle Meade cops had called in the Nashville PD to help try to keep people back but there was only so much they could do without walking all over all the neighbors' very expensive yards, too. One of the cops had given me the stink-eye and made me stop the Lincoln in the middle of the street until I'd shown him my card, my license, my debit book and the stack of claims forms I'd brought with me.

"You sure you're not just a *hopeful* insurance agent, Mr. Marks?" He'd asked in the usual pig tone that suggests he's just figured out something really clever, like how to pick his ass and talk at the same time. I smiled at him just a little.

"I assure you I have a legitimate business relationship with Mr. Scoggins' estate. If you'd like, you can talk to Detective Herman – he was by my office this afternoon – or Mr. Walker with Mr. Scoggins' label, Cumberland River Records, as he was in my office not quite a month ago. If you call up to the house it's possible someone there will remember the business call I paid on Mr. Scoggins yesterday afternoon." I cleared my throat. "Perhaps those are sufficient references?"

The cop grunted at me and then went to his car, talked into the CB radio for a little bit, listened for a longer bit and then came back and clapped his hand on the landau roof three times. "In you go, Mr. Marks. I'll radio ahead; just drive slowly and safely, I wouldn't want you flushing any photographers out of the bushes with surprise." He laughed with an ugly guffaw and I smiled and pulled away on little more than base idling power. I crawled down the street, around the right and then past a couple of sheriff's deputies who'd been manning the end of the driveway like human gates.

By the time I'd gotten all the way up the drive it almost seemed like it was any other

mansion on any other day. I certainly felt about as out of place here as I would in the architectural fantasy home of any other rich guy in town. I parked a little closer to the front door this time, gathered up my papers and walked up to the maple archway, custom carved for a price I would estimate of at least ten large, reached out and rang the bell.

The blond number answered the door. His eyes were so red they were nearly purple. I was ashamed of myself when I realized that some genuine emotion on his part had surprised me. Then I realized it wasn't this guy, whom I didn't know from Adam, that surprised me by displaying genuine emotion, as though he were incapable; it was that anyone who knew Harley Scoggins well enough to live in his house would *miss* him so much.

He was wearing a lime green Izod and a pair of brown slacks. They weren't exactly mourning gear but they were a hell of a lot more formal than the banana hammock he'd been showing off yesterday. He looked at me and then started to close the door. I put out a hand and stopped it by reflex, before I'd even realized he meant to shut me out. That made his eyes narrow at me and he sniffed once as though daring me to say anything he didn't like, just one little syllable he didn't find satisfactory. I cleared my throat and found myself, a professional salesman, at a loss for what to say. It wasn't exactly my first time calling on the home of a deceased client but it was the first one in this precise circumstance.

"I'm sorry for what's happened," I said, and Blondie stared up at me from beneath lidded eyes. I held out the stack of claims forms. "I thought I should bring these over as soon as I heard so that the estate can file its claim." Blondie still stared at me. "Mr. Scoggins--"

Blondie interrupted. "Chad."

I nodded, remembering when Walker told me his real name was Chad Ballew.

"Mr. Ballew," I nodded. I didn't dare take the familiar just yet. "He purchased a life insurance policy through my agency. I wanted to help with the paperwork however I could." I cleared my throat again. It was a lot harder than normal, this time. "Normally I offer to fill out the claims forms on behalf of the beneficiary, and I'll be happy to do the same in this instance. I would need a copy of..." I paused, sighed a little. "I'm sorry, it's probably too soon, but I would

need a copy of the death certificate.”

Blondie's emotions shut down for a few seconds as the words “death” and “certificate” washed over him, funneled through whatever temporary cognitive paths we set up when the pain is too fresh, the wounds too raw, for us to really process what someone else says. This was something I'd seen enough times to recognize it: a loved one who can't yet hold out the idea that someone is dead and look at it from all angles so they take whatever anyone says and pack it away in a little box and, over time, they open that box and start pulling out statements, one at a time, to see how they look with a little age to them. I'd done it myself. It's only natural. It's why I usually offer to fill out the forms.

“Am I a beneficiary?” Blondie had found something other than the death itself to talk about and that got his lips moving again. I blinked at him, though. I had a copy of the policy with me and I held up my briefcase. “I'd be glad to look for you. To be honest, the policy was so new that I don't recall. I'd barely gotten the paperwork myself.” I gestured a little with the case. “Do you mind if I come in?”

Blondie blinked finally. “Oh,” he said, looking around slowly like he'd just awakened in a strange room. “Sure. I'm Hank.”

He looked about as much like a Hank – a name that, to me, inspired images of guys in chaps with rifles and horses, play-acting in some '60s Western – as I thought I looked like a Mujahedeen. Still, I held out a hand that he took after only the slightest hesitation. His hand was warm and extremely soft, the sort of soft one only gets with a lot of lotion and not a lot of hard work. It felt nice. I was ashamed of myself, briefly, for finding him incredibly attractive with those red, puffy eyes and that hurt look and those soft hands. He had to be all of twenty two, maybe twenty three.

Hank stepped away from the door and led me in the opposite direction from the pool. The front hall opened into a large living room with stairs going up to a balcony hallway with doors off of it. I thought of the living room of the rich people in *The Long Goodbye*, with the separate bedrooms off the hallway that overlooked practically everything else in the house. I glanced up

and around and just barely contained the urge to whistle in wonder at my surroundings. I'd been in the houses of some rich old Nashville queens before – including some with hot houseboys in loud shirts – but never one like this. Harley – Chad, whatever – had taken the cake and the plate it was on.

Blondie – Hank – stopped and watched me look around. “It's a lovely home, isn't it?” He smiled a little and his eyes welled up. “I can't imagine where I'm to go after this.”

I put a hand on his shoulder in what I hoped was taken as more of a fatherly or at least big-brotherly gesture than anything else. “That's what I'm here to help answer. Now, do you have the death certificate?”

Hank blanked again for a second, then shook his head. “Family only,” he murmured. This came up a lot, but one never knew. It was worth asking.

“That's okay,” I said, voice low to encourage a little calmness, a little sobriety. “I've handled a number of situations such as this and I can request a copy. It won't be an issue, it just would have saved a little time – a couple of days at most, nothing to worry about.” His eyes had widened for a moment when I'd said “time.” I looked at his pupils; either he was sober or he wasn't on the same stuff Harley had taken yesterday. That was good, too. “Now, let's look at the policy.”

I set my briefcase on the coffee table and opened it, pulling out the forms. I flipped through them for thirty seconds, a minute, and then said, “Hank? Is your legal name Henry Simpson?”

Hank nodded at me, looked away again. “I hate my name.”

I smiled but didn't comment. I didn't see a problem with it, anyway. “You are listed as a beneficiary. Let me do some quick math to tell you how much you can expect. Of course, I'm not a tax professional and can't speak to how taxes will affect it...” I smiled again and caught his eye. “I have to say that every time. I can give you a rough estimate.”

Hank nodded and tried to smile back. Looking at the paper in front of me, he was going to be positively giddy in a few moments when I got done divvying up the millions of insurance Harley

Scoggins had taken out on himself; Hank Simpson was about to become a very, very rich man.

I took another look at the list of beneficiaries and blinked a couple of times. Hank wasn't the only person who was going to get rich; his label was going to get the lion's share, Hank a few hundred thousand and then another few hundred thousand going to two other people, people whose names I'd never heard before. I arched an eyebrow and Hank drew a sharp breath so I looked over and smiled again. "It's OK. I'm just double-checking my numbers. It looks like you're going to be receiving a benefit of eight hundred thousand dollars."

Hank went very pale, very suddenly and I took hold of his forearm to steady him. It wasn't the first time I'd seen that, either. Hank's lids fluttered for a couple of moments – he did have lovely eyes – and then he was back with me. "You're kidding."

I shook my head. "Assuming no problems with the claim, the insurance agency will deposit the sum of your benefit in a checking account and credit it for interest earned since the time of death. Then they'll mail you a checkbook. You can write it all to yourself at once or you can parcel it out. That's pretty standard." I let go of his forearm and patted him on the knee, briefly. "Har – *Chad* clearly wanted to make sure you were taken care of. In fact," and I paused a little and left my hand on his knee for a moment, "That's one of the things he said to me. He said he wanted to make sure you didn't have to spend a single day wondering what you'd do, if anything happened to *him*. He's done so. He's done a far better job of it than most people do, especially if you get some good advice on how to invest this and take care of it so that it takes care of you."

Hank Simpson's eyes were very far away for a few moments and then he looked back at me. "'Problems with the claim?' What does that mean?"

I smiled again. It's always the same set of questions. "Well, the insurance company will, as standard practice, run this past a claims investigator. He'll want to make sure nothing about Chad's death conflicts with the terms of the policy." I shrugged a little. Now wasn't the time for a two-hour game of What If. "It's standard procedure. It shouldn't take more than a few days. In the meantime, what will happen to the house, all that, will be up to what was in his will. That will take at least a few days, probably a lot longer. So, you don't need to start packing your bags.

You're going to be fine." The tears had started to well up again as some snapshot of reality flashed in front of the mind's eye to be processed for the first time. I reached into my jacket, produced a handkerchief and offered it to him.

He took it and wiped at his eyes for a moment or two, then tried to fold it neatly before handing it back, failed and started to quietly cry. I knew what to do, had done it dozens of times before: I reached out and drew him in to let him rest his face on my shoulder, put an arm around him and pressed on his shoulder blade. He really turned on the waterworks then, balling up his fists and tapping me on the chest with one of them; not punching, not even lightly, just rapping me with his knuckles every once in a while. I scooted a little closer, let him go on for a couple of minutes and he seemed to wind down on his own. When he stopped and dropped his hand it landed on my knee and I realized with some shame that I'd gotten a hard-on. *Christ*, I thought, *This job is going to be the death of me.*

Hank abruptly seemed to have realized the intimacy of the moment and pulled an inch or so away, then paused, leaned in again. Finally, quietly, he said, "What are the odds they're going to consider a murder something they don't pay out for?" His voice was muffled by my sports coat. I shrugged a little with the other shoulder.

"I really don't know. That's not my department."

He nodded his head, leaned back and looked up at me. Those eyes were as gorgeous as ever. He was the kind of guy who gets prettier the more he cries as long as you're not the one who causes it in the first place. I wondered if Harley Scoggins – Chad Ballew – had fallen for him because of how he cried over other men. This is the lot of the insurance man: to be an accountant trying to give counseling sessions, trapped in an intimacy that can be neither explored nor ignored.

"Is there anything I can do to help make sure they pay out?" His eyebrows lifted just a little and his eyes were hollow, red-rimmed, bloodshot.

I shook my head. "No, you just have to let the insurance agency do its work. There really isn't anything to be done." I gave him a little pat on the back, where my hand still was.

His lids drooped. "Are you sure? *Nothing?*"

I shook my head, brought my hand around to stroke his cheek with one thumb. "Honestly, there's nothing."

Hank Simpson regarded me with cold calculation for a few seconds and then his hand slid an inch or two up my knee. He didn't say anything, but he did lean forward towards me. I held his cheek with that hand and stopped him. I shook my head. "There isn't anything I can do," I said.

He had absolutely no emotion on his face at all. His voice was flat and low, huskier than it had been at any other moment in which he'd spoken. It was like one of those computer game things where one can type in a phrase and make the computer mispronounce it: flat. Dead. "When Chad walked up to our room yesterday evening, after you left, I could smell you on him." He pushed my hand aside and kissed me. I didn't protest the first kiss and neither did I protest the second. His hand slid a little further up my leg. "Besides," he whispered, "I figure it can't *hurt.*"

I didn't bother asking what that meant, his odds or the part of him that screamed in pain when he thought of Chad Ballew; I just let him fuck me. By the time we were done his eyes had shed those deep red rings and I didn't think he was nearly so beautiful without them.

It didn't exactly get my mind off of things but it sure beat worrying about them.

## **Particular People – Chapter Seven**

*I can't get to sleep / I think about the implications / Of diving in too deep / And possibly the complications.*

--"Overkill," Men at Work

That night I went out drinking but didn't pick anyone up. I'd had enough in two days for a lifetime, it felt like. Sunday afternoon I went to the mall and sat at the kiosk for a while but didn't get anything done, sold or taken care of. I wouldn't be able to get a copy of Chad's/Harley's death certificate until Monday morning so there wasn't much point in starting on that just yet. I read most of a paperback and didn't see Misha all day; he had the day off. After an hour of boredom I took the trash can out of my office, washed it out in a bathroom down the mall corridor and brought it back, spraying it and the air in my office with some air freshener to try to wipe away the reactions of yesterday. Then I went and settled in again, pleased to have passed ten minutes.

It rained that day, a surprisingly cold rain for early September. It was the first reminder that the heat would fade and the leaves turn and slumber would come upon the world again. I found it refreshing and a little sad; somewhere in Printer's Alley, the last of Harley Scoggins was being washed down a rain gutter: the last napkin on which he wrote his number, the last nickel to fall from his pocket, the last hair brushed out when he cocked his ball cap and smiled that open smile at someone.

Who was that someone? I have to admit I hadn't really thought about it, given the circumstances. I'm sure the police thought it must have been someone who knew him, to get that close, but if Harley Scoggins had his pants off when he died then the odds were even—Steven it had been a stranger, to be honest. I wondered, though. Who would have wanted Harley Scoggins dead? Whom would that profit? Looking at his life insurance policy, just about half of Nashville. The cops would be back, I was sure of that. They'd get a subpoena and come back asking to see the policy, looking for suspects, if nothing turned up. I'd make them get a



subpoena, with my clientele; my specialty was serving a client base that lived in fear of police scrutiny. Too many of them remembered the days of raids, of the Stonewall Inn, of bullying and brutality and blackmail. Too many of them got harassed every night in the parking lot of The Chute when straights could wobble out of any bar in town with a martini in each hand without a cop so much as scratching his nose.

I sat at the kiosk and thought such things between pages of the book for three hours before I decided it wasn't getting me anywhere, or at least nowhere good, to stew like that. I stood up and closed up the kiosk, went to my office and proceeded to put everything in order for Monday morning when there was a knock at the door.

I turned around to find Mr. Walker of Cumberland River Records standing outside looking impatient and out of place in his chinos and a Mr. Rogers sweater. That was probably his definition of casual wear; hell, that was probably his definition of sweats.

He saw me, obviously, otherwise I would have just left him out there to think I was closed for the day. Instead I walked back to the door, threw the bolt and opened it a foot or so. "Afternoon," I said, not sure whether to smile or to look dour and bereaved. The personal relationships that linger like the stumps of torn limbs after a death were easy to handle; the professional ones were new to me.

"Mr. Marks." He nodded once. "I wondered if I might speak to you about Mr. Ballew's life insurance policy?"

I started to make a lot of noise again but that was reflex more than anything and I held it in check. The man was, after all, the representative of a beneficiary organization. I nodded and stepped aside. "Of course, come in."

I went back to my desk and Walker followed, easing in to the client chair. I patted my briefcase, where it sat on a corner of the desk. "I've got a few claims forms to fill out tomorrow; I'll be stopping by the coroner's office first thing, on my way in here. I'll fill out the forms and have them out with the morning mail. I assume Mr. Scoggins discussed the benefit with you beforehand, of course. Do you have any questions about anything?"

Walker smiled a little and shook his head. "No, I'm sure you've done all this before. I haven't, from my end, but I have known labels to lose talent in unfortunate circumstances such as this so I'm glad we're covered." He paused, lacing his slightly-too-thick fingers together in his lap and then clapped his thumbs together, a nervous tic. "We *are* covered, aren't we?" His countenance was dour, like a father asking a condescending question in the royal We.

I arched one eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Walker shrugged slightly, as much with his thumbs as with his shoulders. "The policy isn't merely good in case of accident? It covers murders as well? I should certainly think," and I could hear him winding up for the preemptive scold, dumbest rhetorical trick in the book, "That the provider through which you insured him wouldn't be so dense as to insure a public figure without covering murders in this day and age."

I didn't let myself smile slightly; I perfectly preserved my poker face. Clients can be condescending pricks but agents have no such luxury. "Well, first, yes; the policy covers murder. Second, it isn't my job to decide whether this particular event does or does not fall within the bounds of the policy. I'm the agent. I make the sale. It's up to adjusters and claims investigators to decide whether to pay out a given claim. I have zero influence over those people."

Walker snorted just a little. "You hardly have no influence. You're a part of the same organization and you're the one who talks to the customer. You've got strings to pull, I know." He relaxed slightly. Once he thought he was being hornswaggled he got comfortable again. I couldn't help but think what a sad little man that made him. I smiled this time because it seemed the thing to do.

"Actually, as an independent agent, no: I don't have any strings I can pull and, more importantly, if I did have those strings I still would not pull them. I have to stay objective, Mr. Walker. Chad Ballew, also known as Harley Scoggins, walked into my agency and bought a policy in good faith. I have a responsibility to make sure the terms of that policy are met without exercising any undue influence. It's as important that I not be seen as trying to force the

company to pay out as it is that I not be seen as trying to force them *not* to pay out. Regardless, I don't even know who will be working this claim. It'll be someone in a basement somewhere in another town working for another company. Mr. Walker, I don't even know what *town* that is." I spread my hands wide: open, honest, forgiving. "If the company finds that the events of Mr. Ballew's demise were within the bounds of what his policy covered, they will pay. If they do not, they will not. Period. I will file a claim on your behalf, as I do for all beneficiaries in a sad event such as this but then it's out of my hands." I sat back and held his gaze. "Do you have any questions?"

It wasn't often that someone said no to Mr. Walker – I realized I wasn't even sure I knew his first name, despite having his card, despite possibly having been told it the first time he was here – and I could tell he didn't like it once, much less twice. He set his mouth in a thin, narrow line and the nostrils of his Roman nose flared a little in reflex. His eyes narrowed.

"Mr. Marks," he said, his voice very calm, "Your assistance in seeing this through in the manner expected of you will be greatly appreciated."

I wasn't sure what that meant. Well, scratch that; I knew what it *meant* but I couldn't give it any literal meaning. The manner expected of me? I expected legality of myself; it was clear that Walker did not. Oh well, it's a hard ol' world. What was I going to do, though? Turn a man accustomed to his own power down the path of the virtuous? Not hardly. I smiled and shrugged at him. "I'll do what I can."

He didn't nod, grimace, smile, shake hands or sing the Star Spangled Banner; he just got up and walked out looking like a mobster trying to dress down for the day. As soon as he was gone I shook my head, chuckled once, then chuckled again, then giggled, then set my head down on my desk and laughed until I cried. It had been that kind of weekend.

I spent the rest of the afternoon out at the kiosk, where I actually sold two new auto policies. That was gangbusters for a Sunday. I also took a call from a client who'd rear-ended somebody the night before, got the ball rolling on his claim and called it a day. For a non-

collection day that was plenty of actual work. By five in the evening I was sitting in a little bar down the street from my apartment, eating a chopped steak sandwich, drinking a beer and wondering over the death of Harley Scoggins. Someone had stabbed him in the heart with a kitchen knife, no two ways about it. It was no accident, of course. My only question was whether it was random or someone who knew him. Visions of Misha's breathless news reports from weeks past swam back and I wondered if they'd found him with a black matchbook in his pocket. I asked the bar man if he had a Sunday newspaper and he did. Scoggins was still front-page news, of course, as was that moment of glinting sunlight on the fire escape (paragraph six, though, which was some small comfort). I read over the newspaper's rehash of the basic facts and then read it again more slowly looking for any mention of anything out of the ordinary. In a case like this, the cops were keeping their lips sealed. No one had managed to print that Blondie – Hank Simpson – was hiding out in Scoggins' mansion in Belle Meade or even run a picture of the house that wasn't a file photo from the previous Spring. There was no mention of black matchbooks but there wasn't much mention of *anything*, to be honest, just the same thing: found stabbed in a "compromised position." The *Tennessean* would only say that; the *Banner* was probably refusing to say even that much. I'd heard enough chit-chat in gas stations, bank lines and especially around the fag bars to know that everyone knew he'd been trying to get laid. All the remaining chatter consisted of theories as to *by whom*.

What I didn't mention to anyone was that Harley had been my client, or that there were two beneficiaries with whom I still hadn't spoken.

Monday morning I was up and at the coroner's office by nine. I kept everything in check the night before so that I would be bright-eyed and respectable, dressed up a little – dark sport jacket, red tie, white dress shirt, dark gray slacks, basic black sunglasses – and when I got there I looked every bit the part of a cog in the financial machine of a star. I wasn't unknown to the kind paper pushers of the combined metropolitan government of Nashville – every insurance agent is a regular – but I wanted to make sure there wouldn't be a single snag. I had a lot to get done

today and I wasn't going to let the bureaucracy throw any tacks in my path.

I walked in and glided down the long, tall counter top to stop in front of Gladys, the person with whom I overwhelmingly preferred to work when it came to the coroner's office. She was smart, she knew everyone and everything and she didn't yank my chain about getting copies of death certificates to file claims. Gladys was on the squat side of short with hair that had remained the same slightly unnatural shade of raspberry red far past nature's plans for it. She wore horn-rims with a bunch of really glitzy rhinestones on the earpieces that were a lot more festive than her usual countenance but I'd spent enough time asking her for paperwork to get the idea that maybe she had gotten so good at looking sour so she could save the good stuff – the smiles, the thanks, the occasional joke – for those who'd earned them. Though some other ladies in the records department of the coroner's office were kind enough to ask to help me I waved them off and went and stood, patiently, hands in pockets and a song in my heart, for Gladys to finish doing whatever she was doing at the desk she'd occupied since, oh, probably no later than 1957.

She noticed me immediately without even glancing, as I would bet she does for all who patronize her – and truly, anyone who wanted anything done in a hurry did patronize her in the sense of being her patrons. She was the boss and we came, hat in hand, asking for assistance and gladly doing whatever was asked; not like *that*, of course, I just mean that we were only too happy to match our moods to hers, talk about the weather, the economy, politics or whatever else had been chewing her big toe all morning long. Gladys nodded once without looking at me and kept working at whatever paperwork held her attention. Two minutes later she clicked her ballpoint pen, stood up, scooted her chair in neatly at her desk, reached up to her aged face, lifted the rhinestone cat's eye glasses off the end of her nose and let them hang from the chain of faux gemstones she wore around her neck. She turned towards me, walked over to the counter, leaned her elbows – she wore a dress with a complicated, green and purple floral print on a white background, sufficiently busy that it blurred together into a general melange of colors and meaningless shapes in the mind, with sleeves that came down just above her elbows in a tufted pattern, seeking unconsciously at the end of her career to outfit herself in a way reminiscent of

the styles of the beginning of her career, and as always there was a tiny, hair-thin gold cross on a whisper of a chain that was probably about as fragile as anyone's faith after a lifetime of sorting the dead by surname – against the counter's edge and then, after fixing me and my rather natty outfit with an assessing look, met my eyes and produced a sudden, brilliant smile. “Jason Marks, you rascal,” she grated – thirty cigarettes a day, two smoldering in the ashtray on her desk right now and probably a nip of sherry in the evenings, I'd guess; the actuarial boys would have a stroke if they did a work-up on her, “You sure know how to dress to visit a lonely old widow. Now what on God's good earth can I do for a heartbreaking scallawag such as yourself?”

Her eyes were crystal clear and I could not escape a sense that behind that smile and that enthusiastic greeting – normally her way of signaling smooth sailing ahead – she had spotted something slightly off in my expression, body language or, for all I knew, my aura. The corners of her eyes tightened just a little as though scanning me deep beneath the skin. She went on, “Have a client get unlucky over the weekend?”

I smiled back at her and nodded. “Indeed I did, m'am.” No one called her by her name until asked to do so. She usually let one get in a few “m'am”s before she asked. “I need six copies of his death certificate, if you'd be so kind as to help a sole-worn salesman.”

Gladys made a little noise like a hiccup or something and nodded at my shoes. “Sole or soul?”

I kept the smile. “I worry too much about everyone else's to worry about my own just yet.”

“And you, an insurance man. Tsk.” She smiled again, a little wryly, and then stood up straight again, hands on the counter in front of her. “Well, let's have it: last name, first, middle initial.”

I cleared my throat and now I leaned towards her a little, instead of the other way around. Very quietly, I murmured, “Um... Ballew, Chad, F.” Gladys' smile dropped away.

“AKA, Harley Scoggins?” She was whispering.

“The one and the same,” I said with a polite little smile and an easy shrug. Her eyebrows

went up. After a second or two she pulled out a clipboard with the request form and a pen on a chain. "The pen doesn't work too good, but sign here." I filled in what I needed to on the request and then signed off, showing her my driver's license because even friends of Gladys had to have a legal right to request a copy of the certificate.

"So you sold him insurance, huh?" Gladys looked the form over quickly and held out my license to be taken back from her.

I nodded. "Sure did," I said. "Everybody gets insurance somewhere, Gladys."

Gladys leaned back and looked me up and down and then pursed her lips. "So true. Well, let me get started. Take a seat over there and I'll be done in a little bit."

I nodded, gave her a thumbs-up, and said, "Thanks, Gladys."

"You need the cause of death on there?"

I shook my head. "Nope, I just need the basic certified copy."

"Good," she smirked, slightly. "They don't know what killed him yet."

I blinked at her. My mouth went slightly dry. "Well," but I paused to glance around a little and then dropped my voice again. "A knife in the chest is hard to miss."

Gladys leaned forward a little. "He was on everything under the sun, child. They're waiting on toxicology reports on the blood work. Coroner says he doesn't know what did the poor thing in. They say he had a little of everything on him and probably in him."

I very carefully did not allow myself to react to that phrasing. Instead I forced myself to look concerned and made my lips a thin, straight line. "Hmph. Well, here's hoping they work fast. The claims men don't like questions hanging over things."

Gladys clucked her tongue and off she went. I waited in an extremely uncomfortable plastic chair that had been assembled at some point in the Johnson administration and sat in by operatic sopranos ever since. Thirty minutes later I had half a dozen certified copies of Chad Franklin Ballew's death certificate.

I drove straight to the mall, did the paperwork on the claims forms, took them to the

Federal Express place over by the airport and then went back to my office to make some calls. First was to Hank Simpson, who answered only after I had started to leave a message on the answering machine. I noted it still had the generic, prerecorded greeting and wondered if he'd had to buy it this weekend to keep reporters from bothering him. When he picked up I could tell he'd been thinking about Chad/Harley.

"I wanted to let you know I just mailed your claims form," I said, speaking quietly. "I called the insurance company yesterday and let them know I'd be sending it over. I dropped it off with "

Hank was quiet for a long time, so long I wondered if he'd hung up or we'd lost our connection or something. Finally, "Thank you. Would you come over later?"

I blinked. Strings were not high on my list. "I'll see. I have a lot of people to talk to today."

"About Chad?" His voice shook just a little.

"No," I lied, "Just normal business."

"Please come by here later."

"I'll see," I said, and hung up.

Next it was Walker's turn. I pulled out that copy of his card that I'd kept from his first visit and rang him. He answered halfway through the first ring. "Walker," he intoned.

"This is Jason Marks, Mr. Walker. I wanted to let you know I sent the claims form via overnight express this morning."

"Mail?" he said, like I'd just called his wife a slut in a foreign language he happened to speak. "Why didn't you just fax it?"

I blinked at the top of my desk, sitting at it, talking to him. "I couldn't find the machine in all this space," I snapped, gesturing around at the close walls. He couldn't see me but he deserved the sarcasm. I didn't have to do the form in the first place and Mr. Walker of Cumberland River Records was not my favorite person in the universe after our first couple of encounters.



He made a little snorfle sound of disgust or disregard. "Will there be any problems with the claim, Mr. Marks?"

"Not with the paperwork I did, if that's what you mean."

"You know what I mean."

"I rather hope I don't. Perhaps you should ask your own insurance agent how the industry works, Mr. Walker."

I hung up. The fucker could find somebody else's chair to lean on.

Then I went out in search of the remaining two beneficiaries of Chad Ballew's posthumous generosity.

## **Particular People – Chapter Eight**

*Said no to him again and again / First he took my heart and then he ran.*  
--"Stand Back," Stevie Nicks

There were four people or entities listed on Harley/Chad's insurance form: Hank Simpson, Cumberland River Records, and two people I didn't know: Dorothea Slater and Jude Bellwether. Chad/Harley had included street addresses and phone numbers but no social security numbers or anything else for either of them. Luckily, they were both in Nashville. I had to wonder where he had come from, where he had grown up, that he would leave piles of money to people in Nashville but no one else, no family tucked away in the Ozarks. That's the voyeurism of my job: always finding out unseen and often uninteresting but sometimes very deeply revealing snippets of trivia about the client and always far too late for the interest to be anything but academic. I'd had a client once who was an old faggot with an apartment downtown four times the size of mine and packed to the rim with *faux* classical statuary of naked men standing around a bunch of leather divans, like a Freudian analyst's orgy room. He was one of the clients I'd inherited with the agency. When he died in the winter of '79 I'd cracked open his policy and started making phone calls and filing claims and found that he'd had a wife, four kids and two grandkids in Memphis. He drove to Nashville every weekend to live his "real" life and left his wife a fortune to make up for it. People do a lot of fucked up shit like that. Insurance is where some of them bury their last apology or their last flipping someone the bird or both.

Dorothea Slater was listed as living in a street I recognized as being in Bordeaux, which meant locking my doors and not taking very long. It didn't even occur to me to think that crime might be so high in Bordeaux because its residents – held by powerful hands in the prostrate pose of the working poor – were easy pickings, not because they were instigators. I just thought of Bordeaux as the "bad" part of town. I wrote down the address, consulted my map of the city and figured out how to get there. Then I looked up Jude Bellwether, unsure whether he was a he or a

she, and saw that Jude lived in Hermitage. Best to get the visit with Dorothea over with first and then head to Hermitage. I picked up the phone and called Dorothea. The phone rang five times and then a man answered.

"Hello," he grumbled.

"Might I speak with Dorothea Slater?"

"Speaking."

I was silent for two heartbeats. "My name is Jason Marks," I said, for lack of anything more original in the way of a reaction. "I'm an independent insurance agent --" and then Dorothea Slater hung up.

Well, at least I knew she was home.

The next call to Jude was much more polite. Three rings and a weak tenor answered the phone.

"My name is Jason Marks," I said, and this time I thought first. "I'm calling on behalf of a client of mine. You see, you're a beneficiary of a client's life insurance policy; I'm that client's insurance agent. He was recently deceased and I wondered if I could talk to you to outline the policy, how much you can expect to receive if there are no issues with the claim, that sort of thing."

There was a long pause and then a small sigh. "I wondered if I would get a call like this," he said. "When can you be here?"

"This afternoon," I said. "I already have your address."

"I'll be here."

Then he rang off without saying goodbye but at least he wasn't angry.

I closed up the office, locked the door behind me, waved at Czarina Misha from afar and went off to do my work.

Bordeaux is probably Nashville's poorest neighborhood. It's where the city sweeps everyone it doesn't find convenient to integrate elsewhere. It has a lot of "discount" grocery

stores, a lot of crime and a lot of people who have absolutely zero indication in their lives that any authority wants to help them be anywhere or anything other than where and what they already are: poor, easily frightened, slow-moving targets, convenient scapegoats. To be honest, I didn't care very much about any of that. I cared about not getting my car stolen while I talked to Dorothea Slater. That had been a hell of a voice on the phone, though. To be honest, I wondered if I ought not be more frightened of Dorothea than any of her neighbors.

Her address turned out to be a number on a street of tiny bungalows that thirty years earlier were considered prime real estate but now were just seedy and small and sad. The ones with new paint had too much of it, slathered on too thick, but most just had it peeling off in sheets, cheap interior latex used on the outsides of houses so that it sloughed off like sunburnt skin after a couple of days. The driveways were short and narrow and the yards little postage stamps, the trees ungainly, old, ill-kept, threatening. Ivy ate a lot of the mailboxes and the streets were full of too many cars parked at the curbs. I ended up trying to squeeze the Lincoln Town Coupe into the driveway of Dorothea's house and having to be satisfied with having the ass of it hanging out in the street a little, shielded between an old Rambler and a newer Chevette already showing wear at the seams.

Dorothea's house was one of the ones with too much paint on the outside so that the phone line, where it had been run into the living room by drilling a hole in the exterior wall, was bulbous, almost cartoonishly puffy, encased in a baby blue shell of paint that had formed one eternal, fossilized drop of paint at the lower end of the cable, the paint having started to gather there as it dried in some forgotten summer sun. All in all the house wasn't in bad shape but the yard was patchy, ragged, too much like Melvin Blanc's neighborhood in which no one had watered or mown or fertilized in months because of heat, unemployment, depression, whatever it was that had driven people, one by one, to give up the suburban dream that had built all these neighborhoods on the outskirts in the first place. There was a garage door and it wasn't hard for me to picture some tiny Datsun or maybe an old domestic slowly oxidizing in there, Dorothea lifting the door by hand and backing it out once or twice a week for groceries or church or who

knew what. To have a voice like that she had to be old enough to remember this neighborhood in classier days. I shuddered a little. *May God preserve me from such a place*, I thought. I wasn't charitable, I admit.

I walked up to the front steps, a pile of bricks that were starting to fall away from one another like old friends who'd moved too far apart but still lived in the same town, and didn't see a doorbell. I opened the storm door and rapped directly on the front door itself, four or five medium taps with my knuckles rather than full-on SWAT team bangs, and let the storm door close itself in exhausted jerks and starts. After twenty or thirty seconds I heard the same bag of gravel as had been on the phone.

"Who is it?" The tone was wary, almost accusatory. I couldn't blame her.

"Jason Marks," I called. "We talked on the phone a little while ago."

"I'm not interested in any insurance," she said, "So go the fuck away."

"Ms. Slater," I replied, patient to a fault, "I'm not trying to sell you anything. I wanted to inform you that you're a named beneficiary of the life insurance policy of a recently deceased client."

"Oh? Who?" She still hadn't so much as halfway turned the knob.

"Mister Chad Ballew."

Silence on the other side, then, "Never heard of him."

"Harley Scoggins was his stage name."

There was more silence but this time it had a different quality. The bolt was thrown back and the knob jiggled for a bit and then the door opened. The woman inside was middle-aged but not nearly as old as her voice implied. She had a round face that helped to hide a few years and some hasty makeup that was too thick, the base off-color so that she looked more orange in the neck than in the hands. She was wearing a house dress that had seen better days and she had her hair in curlers the size of beer cans. She opened the door a little wider and I could see enormous veins and gnarly knuckles on the hand she used to catch the edge of the door. They were man hands.

"You legit?"

I nodded, reached into my coat – that made her flinch, interestingly – and pulled out a business card I offered between index and middle fingers. "Jason Marks, Independent Insurance Agent. Auto, Fire, Life, Disability." She looked at the card like it might burn, then snatched at it and cocked her head back to read it in a practiced way that suggested she didn't answer the door to strange men while she was wearing her reading glasses. Her lips moved a little and then she slipped the card into her pocket. "Come on in, Mr. Marks." She turned her back and walked seven or eight feet – three strides – into a living room sparse on furniture but crowded with memorabilia: photos of people and of a number of dogs in frames, old movie posters on the walls, a royal flush pinned neatly under one of the wall lamps at one point, a newspaper from last week in sections on the coffee table, at least a dozen half-empty coffee cups with sludge of varying ages in them here and there. I walked in and closed the door behind me.

"I hope you don't mind my dropping by."

"Whatever suits your toots," she said and she fell into a faded grey Barcalounger. I stepped past some magazines and shoved a few clothes onto a few other clothes on one of the couch cushions, making a tiny space for myself. I perched there, like a bird ready to bolt from a cage as soon as the door opened, and set my briefcase down on the coffee table. "I wanted to let you know that I've filed the requisite claims on Mr. Scoggins' life insurance policy," I said, clearing my throat. Dorothea hadn't said another word to me but was watching very closely. "You are one of the named beneficiaries and I wanted to discuss that with you. Assuming there are no problems with the claim, you would receive a substantial sum. It would be in the neighborhood of five hundred thousand dollars."

Something darkened Dorothea's eyes like a cloud passing in front of the moon. "Half a mill," she said. She tried to whistle but all that happened was that she pooched her lips out and then made a blowing noise. She ran a pale tongue over them and tried again with the same result and gave it up. She smiled a little. "Guess they ain't what they used to be." A sharp laugh. "You know. The pucker muscles." She pointed at her face.

I smiled a tight, faint, insincere little smile. "Nothing ever is."

"Ain't that the truth."

I held the very tight little smile for a moment and tried to make polite conversation. "So," I said, "How did you know Mr. Scoggins?"

She shrugged a little. "Y'know. Here and there. *Around.*" This was apparently high comedy as suddenly she broke into peals of laughter, leapt from the Barcalounger, swept two fistfuls of magazines up off the floor and then threw them into the air. They were supermarket tabloids, the kind that are loose, so they sprayed themselves all over the room as she stood there, hands in the air, shrieking with laughter. Her whole body was rigid, the disturbed air thick with dust she'd sent up in clouds with her sudden movement, the pages arrayed in the air, a beam of sunlight angled through the dust and smoke and onto the floor like a steel beam jutting through the house and melting on impact. Her laugh was old, nearly arthritic, her voice mannish, her manner that of one with bipolar disorder: abruptly grandiose, larger than life, like some sci-fi doppelganger warping time and space around herself for just a moment through force of will.

She eventually wound down while I sat in total silence with the small smile plastered to my face. Then she fell backwards into the Barcalounger once more and I stood up. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Slater."

"Dorie," she said in that voice. "My friends all call me Dorie."

I hand one foot out the door when she cried, "What problems with the claim?"

I didn't stick around to answer her. I couldn't believe, when I got back to my car and practically dove through the window to get in and get out of there, that I had worried more about my car out on the street than about myself in that house.

Jude's neighborhood, I mentioned, was Hermitage. Hermitage is one of the ritzier parts of the greater Nashville area. It's where Andrew Jackson's home was. It's where there's still a lot of old money. There are people there only too happy to tell you that their great-a-million-times-grandfather was in his administration and some of them are possibly telling the truth. Hermitage

is where very nice people go to live very insulated lives. It's a very quiet little town of its own and it likes it that way. I'm pretty sure that if anyone tried to take a car registered to an address in Bordeaux and drive it straight into Hermitage, an alarm would go off on somebody's desk. I figured that since my car was a Lincoln and nobody on the street could prove just by looking that I'd bought it secondhand, I was probably going to be OK.

I found Jude's house and it was a fairly modest home, actually: brick, larger than most, sharp as a tack on a lawn of golf course grass, yes, but in that part of town anything with fewer than two stories is practically a shotgun shack. I started to park on the street but realized no one else had done that here and figured that would probably get me towed. I pulled into the short driveway and ignored that the last two feet of fender were hanging past the mailbox. I checked myself in the window reflection, as usual, and then carried my briefcase up the walk.

The door opened before I got to it. Behind the glass of the storm door was a guy in his early forties, dark haired, dark eyed, I'd have guessed Greek, maybe Jewish, maybe even Egyptian in his appearance. Very much from a people that spent a lot of time on the Mediterranean, anyway. His eyes were just a little pink around the edges, nothing like Hank's vicious glare. Hank looked angry about being so sad, angry about the anger, anger that all this had happened in the first place, anger at his own uncertainty, his own apprehension. This guy, Jude, he just looked sad. There wasn't much else to it.

"You're Mr. Marks," he stated, through the glass. I folded my hands together on the handle of the briefcase, holding it in front of me. It's something Norman Fleet taught me, he said it reminded people of images of undertakers holding their hats before them as a casket went past. Norman was the master when it came to the insurance business. He knew how to do it right. I didn't believe I'd ever be as good as him but I tried to use every little trick of his that I could when I wasn't sure what else to do.

"I am," I said. "Jason Marks. You're Mr. Bellwether."

He nodded at me and opened the storm door wide. "Please, call me Jude, and come in."

I nodded again and stepped into a dark, decorated, very expensive home. There weren't



any lights on inside, really – a lot of windows with the curtains halfway drawn so that the room was lit by bright rectangles of light so bright they were almost solid white, like windows in an under-drawn cartoon or walls in a science fiction movie. The furniture was all burgundy and dark wood and the carpet was a plush brown. The walls were wood-paneled and there was no TV in the living room, just a fireplace as the centerpiece, like living rooms were when our parents were kids. Bellwether showed me into the living room and asked if I'd like anything to drink.

"I'm fine, thanks," I said, waving him off. "I wouldn't want to impose in a time of grief."

"You wouldn't be," he said with a sad smile. "I'm going to make something for myself, anyway. But, I suppose you're on-duty." That's when I realized he meant a *drink* drink. That was something else Norman Fleet had taught me, to always refuse alcohol in someone's home. People don't want an insurance salesman who's likelier to get in an accident than they are, he'd told me. On the other hand, Bellwether wasn't a client.

"I'll take a very short scotch if you have one." I held my thumb and index finger very close together and Bellwether touched his forehead with one finger, a casual salute.

"You bet." He made some rattling sounds at the wet bar in the corner and when he came back handed me mine then held up his to catch the light. After a few seconds of consideration he held it aloft and said, voice steady, "To better tomorrows."

"Here, here." We clinked tumblers, downed our drinks and he went back to make another while I set my empty down on the coffee table in silent refusal of a second slug. Finally he sat down across from me, papers arranged neatly on the table, and I said, "I'm sorry to have to discuss business at a time like this but it won't take long. Have you ever benefitted from a life insurance policy before?"

He nodded once. "Yes."

I nodded back. "I won't explain it all, then. Suffice to say, if there are no problems with the claim, you stand to inherit seven hundred thousand."

Jude's eyes fell to the bottom of his glass and he downed that one, too. He didn't stand up for a new one right away but I could see he was thinking about it. I wasn't his mother, so I didn't

try to advise him one way or the other. "That's a lot of money," he finally said, still staring at the ice in the glass.

"It certainly is. If you'd like, I could talk to you about financial planning, recommend a good investment firm, that sort of thing. You have a beautiful home in an expensive part of town, if you don't mind my saying so, but that's still a lot of money all at once and anyone might need a little help lining up to be ready for that kind of windfall." I smiled a little.

He smiled and shook his head. "No, I already have an advisor and an accountant and all that." Then, out of nowhere, he looked at me. "You know, I'm the *other* boyfriend."

I nodded just once, looked politely away for a moment, then back at him. "So this means that you know..."

He grimaced in a way that I think was probably supposed to look like a grin. "Hank. Yes. Well, we know *of* one another. He never totally won Chad's heart, but neither did I." He got up to get the third double. "That remained a battlefield neither of us entirely controlled. Contested territory, if you will. We were both just far enough into it to see the opposition's tracks everywhere."

He drank that one still standing at the bar. There wasn't an agent in Nashville who'd insure him after seeing that display of fortitude. The scary thing wasn't how much he drank, it was how it hadn't affected him, yes. I'd bet a marble wouldn't have rolled off the back of his hand. He could have walked a tightrope in a hurricane and done a split in the middle.

"Well," I said, unsure what to say, "I think it's apparent that Chad cared a great deal for you, considering what he left to you."

"Some dirty socks by the pool and seven hundred grand." He set the glass down just heavily enough that I corrected my perception of how much of the alcohol had gone to his head. "I bet he left that little fairy more than he did me, too." There was a catch in his voice that was ugly and sad and betrayed the sheer horror at the center of so many people's grief, so many forms of despair: sheer horror that the universe cared so little about someone that it would let a lover get taken away. I started to put away my papers without saying anything. I closed the

latches on the briefcase and stood up as he turned around. His eyes were swimming a little. He wasn't still sober, not at all; just practiced at carrying on anyway. "He did, didn't he? He did leave Hank a bigger check than me?"

I didn't change my expression from the blank one I'd gotten hearing him complain. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bellwether, but I can't discuss any other beneficiaries or percentages. Thanks for seeing me."

He looked away and sucked on his upper lip for a moment, then cleared his throat and looked back at me. "I'm sorry. I'm acting like a child."

I frowned a little at myself. "It's alright," I said. "Everyone grieves differently. There's no meaningful code of honorable conduct at a time like this."

Bellwether smiled very sadly and crinkled up the corners of his eyes. "That's well said. I like that." He was silent for a second. "No meaningful code of honorable conduct, indeed." He shook his head. "Please, sit. Let's try this again."

I smiled. "I'm sorry. Another time, Mr. Bellwether. I need to get back to my office."

Jude tried to smile but moist eyes washed it away. He held out a hand and I shook it, then he showed me to the door. "Please come back sometime," he said. "Give me a chance to be a more gracious host. I wouldn't mind getting those financial recommendations, you know. Maybe your advice is better than the other guy's?"

I smiled at him. "Sure. Here's my card. Anytime."

I wasn't sure he'd remember having asked for it if he kept putting back doubles like that for the rest of the afternoon, but whatever. He was a sad old queen whose boyfriend – ex-boyfriend, maybe two-timing boyfriend, maybe who knew what – had just been stabbed to death. I doubted I'd handle that very well, either.

## **Particular People – Chapter Nine**

*I see you crying and I want to kill your friends.*  
--"Oblivious," Aztec Camera

I went back to the mall and did some paperwork, made some calls to clients, sat out at the kiosk for a while and then packed it up and got ready to go home. Misha was there that afternoon so I stopped in at the Orange Julius on my way out.

"Jyason," he said, ludicrously slurping from a straw at me as I walked up. "I missed you so much yesterday." He winked in slow-motion and I laughed out of nowhere. I was relieved when he did the same. It was hard to remember by that point in that particular day that there were still people in the world who could just laugh and be playful and have fun. By the time I'd sat down and wiped my eyes on my sleeve he had poured me a drink with a cracked egg in it. It had turned into my regular thing. "So," he said, "Why the face?"

"The face?"

He shrugged just a little and reached out to pinch my cheek very lightly. "You look like it has been a hard day."

"Thanks a lot," I smirked.

Czarina Misha fluttered his lips at me and shook his head. "You are still adorable, of course, but you look as though you are carrying the burdens of many others and it is weighing you down a little."

For reasons unknown to me, I reached out and took his hand as he started to pull it away. He was surprised but he didn't yank it away and after a second he relaxed. I was a little shocked, in some corner of my mind, when someone as extravagantly flamboyant as Misha looked around nervously just because a man was holding his hand. That I *didn't* probably should have told me a little something about the state I was in. I ran my thumb across his knuckles, his bone-thin hands with pale skin like white suede. With the slightest pressure his skin would turn white, almost yellow. I stared at his hand for a few moments, both of us silent, neither of us willing to

look the other in the eye. Then I squeezed his hand once, softly, and let go.

"So what you are saying," he said, after a few long seconds, "Is that I should have cracked a bottle of vodka into the drink instead of an egg, yes?" He smiled sweetly.

I laughed and ducked my head. "Sorry. It's been a long day."

"Money and death cross paths and it's a wreck every time." He sighed at me, a sudden exhalation through his nostrils, then leaned over and rested his chin on one hand, the one I'd held for a few moments. "You should come out tonight. I am going to be dancing with some friends. You should come with us, forget about all this Harley Scoggins. Forget all of it for a night."

I opened my mouth, didn't look at him, and said, "I'd love to, but someone asked me to come over after work." I blushed furiously, out of nowhere.

"Someone..." Misha smiled a little. "You are seeing someone?"

I snorted at him. "Not sure." Then I took a breath. "Rather, no. I don't think so. I expect he'll be long gone before too much time has passed, but you know, it's fun for now, and he needs somebody."

I looked up and met Misha's eyes, finally. He regarded me in solemn silence and then patted my arm. "You are seeing someone who was close to Harley Scoggins."

I nodded at him. "I am *visiting* them, anyway."

"Him, you mean."

"Yes."

"So Harley Scoggins had a boyfriend and you're going to have sex with him?"

I flushed red again. "Again."

Misha arched one eyebrow very, very high. "Well, well," he cooed. "Is it going to take all night?"

I blinked at him.

"I mean," he said, waving a hand vaguely, "That this is no reason not also to go dancing with us afterwards." He smirked and then I smiled and then he grinned and then I laughed.

"Okay," I said, finally. "I'll see you there."

"Good," he said. He reached out to tussle my hair but I caught his wrist to stop him and we both smirked. "You'll be able to find us by the hot guys surrounding us."

I drove over to Harley Scoggins' house. I didn't think of it as Hank's house. Neither did he, it seemed like. I drove up on egg shells and he opened the door like he was scared his mother might catch him. We walked on cat's feet to the bedroom and he drew the blinds – surrounded on all sides by dense woods and a security system – and I had to wonder if he was going to change the sheets when we were done. He didn't have the red rings around his eyes anymore and with the sadness some of the anger had faded. He still wasn't as pretty without them but he was still pretty. Some of the fire had left him compared to the first time, too, but this time he was much sweeter. Eventually we were lounging together, a lot of sweat and energy evaporated into the atmosphere, and he pulled out an ashtray from a nightstand and a pack of cigarettes. I

He turned, lithe and young and gorgeous and, with one semi-emotional task out of the way to make room for it, sad again. "Want one?" He held the pack between thumb and forefinger and shook it back and forth to rattle them around. He looked like a pornographic tobacco advertisement from some alternate dimension's more interesting 1950's. I'd had a few smokes as a kid but they'd never gotten their hooks into me so I waved him off; I thought to myself, though, that if he did it like that every time he could have sold cigarettes to a school of trout.

He struck a match from a paper matchbook and I reached up and took his wrist too suddenly for his liking. "What the fuck?" he said, eyes wide. The matchbook was a little paper job from a gas station somewhere, nothing to get paranoid over. I hadn't realized how scared I was until just then and it clutched the insides of my chest in a cold fist. I shuddered a little and let go of his wrist.

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head and pulling the covers over me. "Sorry."

Hank watched me closely for a few seconds, then nodded and reached over to tap ash in the tray. Smoke poured out his nose after every inhalation so that he looked like a gorgeous

young dragon of some sort. I smiled a little at the thought and he smiled back, curious. "What's funny?"

"Nothing," I said, waving it off. "My head's just all weird today."

"How come?"

I drew a breath and then stopped myself. Now wasn't the time to talk about Jude Bellwether. I shook my head again.

His smile faded. "Chad's insurance policy?"

I let out the breath and nodded. "Yeah."

"You had to talk to *Jude*, didn't you?" He frowned by reflex, took another drag. I didn't say anything, which was as good as saying yes. "I hate him so much. He's a bitter old queen who thought Chad owed him the rest of his life." Hank shook his head at no one, took another drag, then sat up and stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray before blowing out one final cloud. "It's too stuffy in here to smoke. I'm going down to the back patio. You can take a shower if you'd like."

"Thanks," I said and I rolled off my side of the bed to stand up and walk into the bathroom. It was huge, the size of my living room, and the glassed-in shower had three shower heads with room for twice that to stand inside. I made some noise of surprise and Hank stuck his head in long enough to see where I was looking.

"Quite the house, huh?"

I smiled at him. "Feel free to join me after your smoke."

He smiled a little. "We'll see."

That was probably half-past seven in the evening. When I left again it was nearly ten. I mentioned in passing to Hank that I was going to go home and change before going out to meet some friends and he shrugged at me. "There's a closet full of clothes up there that won't do me any good. You look you could just squeeze into his jeans."

I thought about it, thought briefly that if he'd been alive still it would have been kind of hot, and shook my head. "I appreciate the offer but..."

"But it's too soon," he said. I nodded. "We take these things in stages," he replied. "But you'd better take a look soon to see if you want anything. They're all going to Goodwill after the label comes to get what's theirs."

He put on underwear and a bathrobe to walk me out and hid behind the door as he said his goodbyes, then shut the door on me, and I went home to just squeeze into jeans of my own.

It was eleven o'clock by the time I made it home, changed and got over to The Chute. This time I skipped the usual stroll down Printer's Alley. I didn't like to think what I might see there – business as usual or throngs of the grieving, neither were what I wanted to see – and so I drove up to The Chute in the Lincoln and had to part the crowd to get to a space. I walked inside, made a little small-talk with the door man, got a Cape Cod from Fritz and made my way out into the crowd with the little plastic cup of ice and booze and juice. There were a lot of guys out that night, more than I would have expected on a school night but maybe the weekend and weeknight crowds were different, or maybe they did something special on Monday nights that had managed to escape my attention. I wandered around the main dance floor, then poked my head into a couple of the rock/pop/whatever rooms and then smiled to myself: of course Misha would be in the country and western room. I was shocked I hadn't thought of it already.

I made my way back through the crowd and found the country room – a homemade wooden sign above the door read THE O-GAY CORRAL – and walked in. It was dark, lit with red and blue lights in the corners and had a small dance floor and a couple of prop jukeboxes. There were couches, a couple of booths, a small bar on the back wall and Misha and four of his friends, all nelly little queens a lot like him. He was wearing his usual tight jeans, a white Panama Jack t-shirt and over that a loose, over-sized, red and black cowboy shirt with short sleeves and a lot of embroidered roses over the heart with little red clasps everywhere instead of buttons. He had on a cream colored cowboy hat and he was, I realized, unbelievably beautiful. He was smiling and happy and surrounded by his friends and out of nowhere I wanted to kiss those round, pale lips he was always pursing at me when we talked.



I walked over and reached out to take his arm and it surprised him – halfway scared him, by accident, so that he jumped a little and turned around, then he and all his friends laughed. I opened my mouth, held his upper arm for a moment, leaned forward an inch and as he lifted his eyes one of his friends shrieked, “Oh, Mi-mi, is this your work friend?”

Czarina Misha blushed deep purple and looked down again, hiding behind the brim of the hat and I held my breath for a moment, then forced a smile at his friend. “I’m Jason,” I said, holding out a hand. The little butterfly took it between two dainty prongs of flesh and half-curtseyed at me.

“I’m Marshall.” He had dirty blond hair and no appreciable chin. He nodded his head at two black guys and another white guy in turn. “That’s Frankie, Melvin and Sammy.” They all nodded at me and I at them. Marshall was having to shout to be heard over the twang of some goddamned song or another and apparently none of them felt like making the effort. Misha turned a little without making me take my hand off his arm but I did anyway and just like that I was standing in the circle rather than outside it.

“Come on, Jyason, show me American dancing.” Misha had stood on tip-toe to get near my ear and his breath was warm and moist and smelled more than a little of beer. It occurred to me immediately that I could have swept him right out the door, to my car and home if I wanted to and that made feel about as guilty as if I’d taken the last cookie from the jar in the kitchen of an orphanage. I smiled at him and shook my head, hand up.

“Not until at least the third or fourth drink and never to this,” I shouted back into his offered ear. I might have leaned a little too close, as I heard him giggle and he pulled away an inch or so. The country was something bombastic and sad, something about love lost never to return and I could have shot the DJ if I’d had a gun. Misha looked at me a bit cockeyed and then gave me a little punch on the shoulder.

“You are pussy,” he yelled. “You are coward.” He nodded at me with his chin, thumbs in belt loops, Lenin dressed like the Duke. I finished the rest of my drink in a go and rattled the ice at him, held up my index finger to indicate “one,” pointed at the cup, then pointed at the bar. I

tried to gesture to ask whether he wanted another of whatever he was having but he shook his head. Then he jerked it to one side so the bangs sticking out from under the hat fell in front of his eyes and he winked his ridiculous stage wink at me and again the moment dissipated. I turned and walked over to the bar, ordered two more, drank one standing there and then turned back to rejoin the cadre of teenagers.

That was probably my big problem – I had never been more aware of an age difference before. Misha and his friends were all teenagers and maybe they were nice, maybe they weren't, but in any other setting I wouldn't have given them a second glance or a first thought. By the time the first drink had started to hit me and the second was just getting comfortable next to it I was on my way back to the dance floor intent on telling Misha I was going to walk around for a while. I couldn't imagine myself partying with these kids until last call and then trying to drag into the office in the morning, even if the office was a kiosk thirty yards from Misha's Orange Julius stand. I put a smile back on and delivered word of my planned digression. Misha had leaned back and looked up at me for a couple of seconds, his clear eyes searching mine with some purpose, beer breath or no, and then he stood on tip-toe again and kissed me on the cheek.

“Go out into the club and tell us if you find anything we must see. But do not get lost.” He smiled at me, put a hand on my chest and tapped his index finger and thumb in time to the music for a moment, then pushed lightly. I took a step back, raised my plastic cup in salute and walked out of the country and western room. I wasn't even sure Marshall and the rest of the Mouseketeers had noticed I'd been gone or back again.

Working my way around the club I started to get a little down, to be honest. I didn't see any of my usual club friends there on a Monday and it felt like the first time going there rather than a return to a familiar haunt. By midnight the crowd had started to gravitate towards the piano bar in the back and so I went with the current, stepping into that bar long enough to finish off my remaining drink, look at my watch and start thinking about water instead of alcohol. I was standing in the inexplicable throng at the piano bar's service counter when the lights dipped, the music dropped, the door closed to block out the rest of the club's staccato beat and a drag queen

took the stage. She was tall, broad – maybe a little fat, really – and the moment she turned to face us and the light went on and she started to sing in a ridiculous, gravelly voice, I recognized her: Dorothea Slater.

“I'd like to dedicate my first song to a dear old friend many of us knew. He left us too soon, too recently, and I don't dare say his name because, well...” She batted her absurd eyelashes. “I'm never one to kiss and tell, but I'm sure we all know the gentleman of whom I speak.” The voice was still hell but the tone was a lot classier than when I'd been there today. “He was very generous with his kindness, however, and I don't want him to go into that great night without saying goodbye.” Then she sang that Laura Branigan song, *How Am I Supposed to Live Without You*, in her gravelly, pre-op voice – or maybe she'd had the snip, I couldn't really tell – while a motley assortment of leather boys, nelly queens and balding mavens got their drinks, found their seats and listened with polite if slightly embellished interest. When the song was over they all broke into applause and Dorothea told a dirty joke I wouldn't repeat to a man on death row. I stayed and watched the crowd's reaction, their ebb and flow as Dorothea ran through her routine, took a request, told a few more gags. She was energetic, charismatic and, under the makeup and in costume, charming. I could hardly believe this was the cackling maniac in whose living room I'd felt cornered, trapped, the very same day. On the other hand, I'd known my share of drag queens and they didn't tend towards the low end of the emotional intensity scale.

By half past midnight I wandered back out and, though I didn't let myself think about where I was going, found my way to the leather bar down the back hallway, before the door to the back patio. I tried to be very casual about it, just glancing in on my way by, and saw a handful of guys in there, three or four, clustered around one couch. I hesitated, then stopped, then went past, then turned around and went back and walked in trying to look like I was just glancing around. The room wasn't nearly as lurid as it had become in my memory of that first time I'd seen Harley Scoggins here, but it was still surprisingly out of place compared to the rest of the club: red, dark, upholstered in black and chrome and more like a cave than a room in a bar, even a bar that was normally fairly dark. One or two of the guys – varied in appearance, a black guy,

an asian guy with tendons as sharp as a knife and an older white guy in leather pants – glanced over at me and I at them but they were obviously waiting to see how I reacted to whatever they were doing. I cleared a couple of the yards between us and could see that they were all gathered around one guy who was on the floor between them. It was Jude Bellwether. He looked at me, looked away with obvious embarrassment, then turned his back and everything seemed to come to a screeching halt in the little cluster of bodies pressed close to him. The guys watched him for a moment, then one of them turned to me.

“Beat it,” he said, simple as that.

I turned around and walked out of the room and back to the country and western bar. The whole club couldn't have been more than half the size of a city block but it felt like I had to walk ten miles. When I got to the country room I found Misha and his friends dancing again. Four of them seemed to have broken out into couples and Misha was more or less by himself. He smiled when he saw me and came over to give me a wet, sweaty hug.

“Did you find anything interesting?”

“Maybe a little too interesting,” I said, and he arched those eyebrows at me. I waved it off and shook my head. “Nevermind. I'm tired from today and I've got to get in tomorrow morning so I think I'm going to go home.”

Misha pushed his lips into a flat line and looked at me, then nodded. He stepped back, bowed with one hand tucked behind him, the other flourished in front, and smiled. “Bon noir,” he said. I waved, we both laughed a little and then I turned around and left.

I wanted nothing more than to ask Jude Bellwether about that room and to ask Hank about Jude Bellwether.

## **Particular People – Chapter Ten**

*There are ten million stories in the Naked City / But no one can remember which one is theirs.*  
--"City Song," Laurie Anderson

The next day Misha didn't come and talk to me like normal. I understood. I'd been nineteen and easily weirded out once, too. I did see that he was in that afternoon, as I left to go make the rounds with my debit book, and he did wave and smile but he didn't come over and flirt. I was kind of glad to give him the space. Apparently I could still get weirded out at thirty seven.

I breezed through my payment pickups, not even bothering to brush off the attempted flirtations of a couple of old queens and barely hearing Melvin Blanc's excuses this time. I let him skip this month, told him I'd cover it myself but he owed me one and left him agape in gratitude for generosity no insurance salesman should ever offer a client. I practically screeched to a halt outside Jonathan Nuñez' apartment and bounced up to the door. He answered, I smiled, we flirted, he invited me inside and by the time the afternoon rush hour had picked up out on the Pike I was standing by the front door slipping my jacket back on and my tie into a pocket.

"So why are you all dressed up today?" Jonathan leaned on the back of his couch, a little amused by the way I was trying to look presentable again as though I had another client to visit.

I smiled at him and then checked myself in one of the big mirrors he kept on all the walls. "One more client to visit," I said, then I winked at him. "Sorry, otherwise I'd ask if you wanted to get some dinner."

He reached up and scratched his nose with the thin, defined fingers of a piano player or an athlete and looked a little surprised. "Wow. Another client? After *that*?"

I grinned at him and clapped my right hand to his left cheek and jawline. "What, are you jealous?"

He veiled his eyes and frown-smiled, a look of gentle admonishment. "Maybe I am, but that wasn't my point. Just... it's a little late in the day and you're not exactly shower-fresh."

I waggled my eyebrows at him. "He won't mind."

"What a dirty little whore," he murmured, but he was laughing. I left, half-jogged out to the car and booked it back around to Belle Meade. By then the cops had seen me come and go twice in two days and they waved me on by without even making me roll down the window on the Lincoln. For the first time I had the vague impression that they were there to protect Hank from prying eyes and thus, by extension, they were there to protect me. That was certainly a new sensation in a town like Nashville. The next moment I remembered they weren't there to protect me or him or anybody; they were there to protect the image and fortune of a dead man.

I punched it between the fir trees and crunched up the crushed gravel, walked up to the front door and rang the doorbell twice in a row. Ninety seconds later, the door opened and Hank was standing there in those same Speedo trunks from the first day I'd seen him. He had a pair of sprinting goggles pushed back into his hair and he looked pretty amazing. I gave him a smile I felt was probably wolfish and he blinked at me very slowly. "Evening, Jason."

"Evening, Hank." I leaned against the door frame.

"Want to come in for a swim?" He leaned against the door.

"I'd love to but I haven't got a thing to wear." I figured it would sound... I didn't know, playful? He shrugged at me and something dissipated.

"The label still hasn't come to go through Chad's clothes, I'll get you a suit from his dresser." He turned to walk upstairs and left the door open as what I took to be my invitation.

I walked in and closed it behind me. "I don't necessarily need one," I said.

He looked back at me, blank for a moment, then smiled at me. "Ah. Fair enough."

I smiled, he smiled, it was all very nice and it wasn't like either of us was about to turn down the offer but something about it was very calibrated. Chad had been dead for less than five days and his boyfriend was already done with his rebound fuck. He just didn't know it yet.

We got to the pool and Hank dove in ahead of me while I took my time getting everything off. Finally I slipped into the water, still warm from the sun despite the cool and rain of the day before, Hank swam over and eventually we were out of the pool and he had me on that same

lawn chair. I took that to mean he'd been watching that day, that he knew exactly what he was doing but I wasn't going to bring it up. We fucked without saying a word and he seemed to be a little mechanical about it. Eventually we paused to take a break and he went to get us drinks. When he came back he smoked I downed mine in one go then watched him sit in one of the other chairs and smoke a cigarette. I said something – I can't even remember what I said, now, but it was something about whether he liked the view, or it's a nice view, or something like that – and he looked over at me.

"I don't get it," he said.

"Well, I..." I smiled, blushed. "Nevermind."

He stood up, walked back over, leaned in, kissed me. He smelled like smoke and hooch.

"Tell me," he said.

"I..." I felt the color drain from my face. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"You fucked him here, didn't you? Was it on this chair?"

I blushed again. "Look, I'm sorry. Forget it."

His eyes looked like little crystals mounted in his eye sockets, glittering and sharp, and his mouth was a very thin line that turned down at the ends into the world's tiniest grimace. "That's pretty sick," he said, after a moment, "That you'd think of that now."

I wrinkled up my brow and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, look, I'm sorry."

"Yeah," he said, "Real sick..."

The fire came back on, somewhere inside him, and the passion came back. He was rough for the first time and he was both more engaged and more detached than I'd seen him at any moment since we'd started whatever we had. To be honest it was fantastic, and when it was over I was just a little scared of this beautiful young man with the puffy red eyes that seemed to have faded for good.

Two hours later I was showering in that ridiculous bathroom while Hank made omelettes for dinner. I'd gone for a real swim when we were done but it hadn't cleaned me up. After a few

minutes of near-scalding water I was starting to feel in control of my circumstances again in a way Hank had taken away earlier. I got out of the shower, remembered my clothes were all still downstairs and said to hell with it, he kept telling me to take Chad Ballew's clothes so why not? I went over to the walk-in closet that wasn't hanging open all the time on the theory it was the one Hank didn't use and found it full of jeans hanging up from proper pants hangers and pressed cowboy shirts a lot like the one Misha had been wearing the night before. The thought of Misha sent an unexpected pang through my chest. I hoped he didn't think we couldn't be friends now that we'd had the same moment of uncomfortable attraction pretty much any two gay friends have sooner or later.

Eventually I found a pair of acid washed jeans that were a little too big for Harley/Chad so they managed to fit me. Next was a red t-shirt that had one of the heat-transfer decals of the Texas flag. I pulled it on, found a pair of socks and a belt I wore a notch looser than Chad/Harley had done and went downstairs to the sound of The Ramones being played on a boom box in the kitchen.

Hank acted like nothing at all had happened that was unusual. He even greeted me with a kiss on the cheek and a pat on the ass. We ate in good cheer, talking about this and that. Hank basically hadn't left the house in the intervening time since Chad's death and so we talked a little about the non-Harley news, the weather, work, that kind of thing. I told him I'd met Misha and his friends at the Chute the night before and seen the opening of a drag show and Hank made interested noises but there was something perceptible in his sudden disinterest in The Life. Eventually I worked up the nerve, figuring it was now or never either to cross or burn a bridge.

"So, you don't go to The Chute?"

Hank made a shrug as he chewed, then said, "Not there, anyway."

"Do you go out at all?"

"Why," he asked, "Do you need someone to go dancing with?"

I smiled. "I wouldn't object, but mainly I had a question about a room at The Chute."

Hank looked at me over his bacon and waited for me to keep going.



I took a sip of the bloody mary he'd made me, licked my lips. "I... see, a few weeks ago I saw a bunch of guys in this room near the back and it..." I coughed. "Well, it looked like maybe they were... you know..."

Hank didn't modulate his voice or in any other way project emotion. "It looked like they were having an orgy in a public room in a bar in the middle of downtown."

My face turned hot. "Well... yes."

Hank looked at me, took another bite of his eggs, kept looking at me, then shrugged again. "I guess that takes some nerve."

He knew something but he wasn't biting. After only a moment's hesitation I said, "And last night I saw Jude Bellwether there and it looked to me like if there was an orgy going on then he was the main attraction."

Hank's eyes went blank and distant and his face fell for a moment. Then he chewed and chewed and chewed until finally he could manage to get down that bit of omelette and he took a slow sip of bloody mary that turned into a glass-draining draught. He set the glass down very carefully and steadily and without looking at me said, "That's his favorite thing to do. He got Chad into that kind of thing: *real* exhibitionism, you know, the dangerous kind, the kind that can get you arrested, your recording contract cancelled, you name it." I hadn't realized it but Hank was livid and I wondered how he'd fuck now before trying not to think about it again just yet. "He's so rich, he inherited so much money off his rich-ass parents and he lives in his nice house in a nice neighborhood surrounded by nice little white people who think Nixon never did anything wrong and cluck their dry little tongues when they think of that nice Bellwether boy being one of *them* and it makes him crazy." Hank stabbed another bite of omelette with the fork. "It makes him want to be as dirty as he can be. I think he hates himself. I think he lives the posh faggot life over there in Historic Hermitage and when the rest of his neighbors are sucking city cock to get another allowance for decorative lamps at the sidewalk he's on his knees in some dick farm seeing how many fleas he can pick up in one go." Hank chewed, gulped, set the fork down, pushed the plate away. "He dragged Chad down with him. If they hadn't..." He stopped, waved

a hand. "No, nevermind. Forget it. I know what you're talking about and yes, you can bet it was Jude Bellwether. It was probably him the first time you looked in there, too."

I didn't correct him. I couldn't ever imagine telling him it had been the man whom he'd so clearly loved in whatever fucked up way available to him. I couldn't put that much hurt on his face. I couldn't imagine making him cry like that.

I thought of how beautiful he'd been when I'd first seen him cry over Chad and hated myself for even thinking of it. He was so angry now he was on the verge of tears, little lines forming along those long, gorgeous eyelashes and it killed me to think how little damage it would take to make just one tear roll down that perfect cheek.

"Thanks for dinner," I said, suddenly. He looked at me like I'd burst out in Chinese. "I have to get a bunch of paperwork done."

I stood up, leaned over, kissed him on the lips once, then started to pull away when he pulled me back for a second that had a little more feeling in it, and then I got three feet before he grabbed my hand and stopped me. I looked back at him.

"Don't go see that awful man," he said, voice hoarse.

"Jude Bellwether?"

"Yes." He practically hissed it. He couldn't bring himself to say the name.

"I've got a few questions for him. It's nothing."

"Don't," he said.

That one tear rolled out over the edge of his eyelid and crawled down his face. I turned around, reached back to him, brushed it away with my thumb and gave him another kiss. "I have to," I said.

He didn't say anything else and I showed myself out.

I got to Jude Bellwether's by about ten. It was long past dark and I wasn't sure he'd be home but there were lights on in the house. I parked in the drive, walked up to the front door and rang the bell. I realized, in the reflection of the storm door, that I had shown up uninvited

wearing Chad Ballew's clothes. That was weird, I had to admit, but it was too late now: I could hear him walking up to the front door.

The pinpoint of light in the peephole went dark for a moment and I heard a gasp. I smiled a little. Maybe weird was just what I wanted. The door opened after a few seconds and Jude looked at the middle of my chest, not at me. "Good evening," he said.

"Evening. Mind if I come in?"

He studied me – neck to toe – and then finally met my gaze, more or less. "Of course. Please do." He opened the storm door and stood out of the way but not so far out of the way that I could avoid brushing him with a shoulder and an elbow as I went by. I wondered if it was on purpose and then decided that if I had to ask it was probably true. I stopped in the foyer and clasped my hands together to stretch my arms out and up, then down again. If the outfit had him interested then I wasn't above encouraging him a little. I wanted him cooperative before I started throwing out questions.

"So," he finally said. "What brings you by?"

"I thought maybe I'd take you up on that second drink," I said with a little bit of a smile. He returned it, though he looked incredulous at the same time. I wasn't such a fantastic catch that he couldn't believe I was interested – nothing like that, I didn't have enough going for me and it wasn't like I'd be ringing any chickenhawk bells at thirty seven – but it had definitely caught him off-guard. I had to stay nimble to keep him that way. I wanted him just enough in the context of his relationship – or whatever – with Chad/Harley that he would talk but just enough out of his element that he wouldn't know exactly what to do. Most people, when they don't know what to *do* find that they *talk*.

"That's very..." He didn't know how to finish it but he did walk into the living room and over to the little wet bar. He made some more rattling noises but this time he brought back a full drink for me and a double for himself. Meanwhile, I eased into the plush leather couch and crossed one leg over the other, ankle to knee, shoulders back, arms out, relaxed, encouraging without inviting. He brought the drink over and sat down on the same couch but at the far end.

"To what should we drink?"

"Better tomorrows?" I smiled with one side of my mouth.

"And those gone but not forgotten." He held out his glass and I leaned over to clink it with my own. I drank all of mine in a go in hopes he'd do the same. He started to, but caught himself. He wound up finishing it off in a series of gulps, then set it down on the coffee table. "So," he said.

I set mine down as well and said, "So."

"There was the drink, is that everything?"

I smiled. He wasn't biting, so I might as well get to the point. "No. I wanted to ask you about the first place I ever saw Harley Scoggins."

"Chad Ballew," he corrected me. "He hated being called his stage name by his friends."

"Kind of the diametric opposite of a drag queen, huh?" Every drag queen I knew loved to be thought of as her stage persona. They seemed to take it as a tribute to their powers of performance that the identities would merge.

Something about that gave him pause but he recovered, looking at my face now and pointedly *not* at the outfit I was wearing. "Maybe so," he said. "So where did you see him first?"

"The back room at The Chute. He had half a dozen guys around him and nobody seemed to feel left out." I picked my glass back up, rattled the ice and then finished off the dregs. "Another drink? I'm buying."

He was still looking at the spot where I'd been when I first said it, not where I was now: leaned forward, sitting up, arm out. Finally he held out his glass and took it but he still didn't say anything. I went over to the bar, checked out the supplies and realized everything was in a decanter with no label. It was the ultimate drunk's bar: plenty of everything and nobody would ever need to know what was what because nobody else would ever drink at it. I sniffed a couple of them, came up with whiskey and figured that, over ice, was good enough for both of us. He didn't need to pretend to be civilized on my account. I probably could have found lip balm smeared on the edge of the jug if I'd looked close enough. I turned around, came back, put the

glass in his hand and clinked mine to it.

"Drink up," I said, and I tried not to sound mean. "They've got the good stuff here."

"I figured you recognized me," he finally said, "But there's no need to play a nasty joke to go along with it."

I smiled at him and again I had to fight to keep the cruelty out of it. I didn't know why but all of a sudden I wanted to be mean to him. Something told me he could be a real son of a bitch. "I don't get the joke angle," I said. "I'm not making one. Last month, mid-August, I saw Chad there. More than saw him, actually. A lot more. Then when I saw him again the next day and sold him some life insurance it was all a big coincidence. He didn't recognize me himself, no matter how much of him I'd seen before or how close." I shrugged a little. "I don't go back that far in the club, usually. Mostly I stagger in after a few hours of keeping an eye on every bar between my place and there, get a beer and Fritz gets me in a cab before the beer comes back out. That night I was a little more with it and I checked out the corners I'd never seen before. I didn't know it was that kind of place."

Jude sat there holding his drink and looking to it for answers for a long time, then put it back in a single go. "It isn't," he finally said. "Or it isn't supposed to be. I'm not sure they know what's happening. They use that room to store the rest of the tables when they wax the floor every Wednesday." I wrinkled my brow and he set his glass down a little heavily. "Not that they don't know it's there, they know they have a leather room, of course, but I think they don't know – or they pretend they don't know – what gets going in there towards the end of the night and everybody else is either too embarrassed or too turned on to say or do anything."

I nodded. "And you took Chad there his first time. I guess a bathroom down at the mall is hard to get to after midnight."

He glared at me with unconcealed hate. "Oh, go fuck yourself. I don't need any lectures about how good or bad I should feel about myself."

I smiled and put up a hand. "No judgements here. I just wanted to make sure I had the lay of the land."

"So to speak." He gave me a nasty little smirk.

"He certainly wasn't bad," I said with a casual shrug. "A little distracted at the time, sure, but this past weekend he was all there." I smiled again. "Trust me, I checked."

Jude stood up suddenly and walked over to the bar, poured himself another drink and then leaned against the bar to drink it. He wanted space. He wanted to get away from this conversation but unhappily for him it was happening in his own house. I wondered how many conversations like it he'd had, how many times Chad had taunted him with conquests. "Have you fucked his little faggot, too?"

I stood up, set down my glass – untouched, this time – and walked over to stand maybe three feet away, arms crossed. "Hell no," I said, "But I did let him fuck *me*. It's funny, he gets rough when I talk about Chad, you know, in the moment."

Jude spun and threw his empty glass at the fireplace. It shattered into a million pieces that were going to be hell for some maid to pick up tomorrow. "Like he has any right!" Jude's voice rose in volume and pitch to a loud squeak. "Like he has any claim! Chad was mine first! I made him!" He turned on me and I took a step back. "When he needed money for his first *real* guitar, whom did he ask? When he needed clothes to perform in, who bought them? When he needed to get that fucking truck fixed so he could drive to a gig in New Orleans, who paid for the new transmission?" Jude's eyes were wobbling in their sockets, from anger or liquor or both. By this point I knew most of what I wanted to know and I'd never wonder again whether Jude Bellwether was an angry drunk. "And what did I get for it? I'll tell you, I got the clap twice, a signed copy of every album and my heart broken because the minute he could stand on someone else's dime he was out the door and he only came back when he wanted to find the dirtiest ditch around."

Jude's eyes were blazing and I took a few steps backwards towards the foyer. "Listen, Jude," I said and the fear in my voice was probably mostly genuine, "I wanted to ask about it but I didn't mean to bring all this back up."

"Oh, the hell you didn't," he said, coming towards me, one hand raised to point a finger at

my chest. "You wore those clothes and you talked about his little bitch and bragged about how you fucked him and you asked about the back room. The *hell* you didn't mean to bring it all right back up. He's not even in the ground and you want to live his life, huh? Well, try this on for size, Jason Marks, if you don't watch out you might live *all* of it, including the finale."

Then he tripped over the corner of a rug and went down on his face. His glasses flew somewhere and his nose started to bleed and he sobbed in great, wracking gulps that shook his whole body.

I turned around, went to the front door, hesitated, decided I couldn't listen to him anymore and left. It would have been easy to write it all off as the outburst that revealed him to me as a potential murderer save for one thing: if he had to get that drunk to get that mean, there's no way he had climbed a fire escape over a titty bar in Printer's Alley. That's what I kept thinking as I drove away, radio off, hoping Jude Bellwether didn't kill himself tonight out of sheer grief and spite.

## **Particular People – Chapter Eleven**

*You're in his eye and you'll know why / The more you live the faster you will die.*  
--"Der Kommissar," After the Fire

Detective Herman appeared out of nowhere a few feet behind me when I put my key in the lock to my apartment door. "Evening, Mr. Marks," he said. He had a slightly affected drawl, or maybe it had been a long day and he was tired enough to betray some human origin with his voice. I jumped when he spoke, scared right out of my skin, and turned around to put my back to the door.

"*Fuck,*" I said, then I stopped and ground my teeth together while I tried to pull myself together.

Herman seemed to find that an acceptable response, nodding a little and taking a toothpick out from between his teeth, checking to see if he'd worn it down to a splinter yet and then sticking it back in. "Sorry to scare you, Mr. Marks. I was wondering if you had a few minutes to talk. I tried to call your office around the end of the day but I didn't get any answer."

I forced myself to take a deep breath and then nodded. "Sure. Yeah, Tuesdays and Thursdays I'm out getting payments from clients." Herman nodded again at that, just once, and waited for me to unlock the door. I went in, turned on the lights, invited him in after me. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Scotch?"

"Never on-duty, Mr. Marks, but a glass of water would be just fine." He walked into the living room of my apartment and stood in the middle of it, inspecting every individual thing, one at a time, without approaching any of them. I wondered if he only ever took glasses of water because they were clear and couldn't have, I don't know, goofballs dropped in them or some shit. The world is full of crazy people after all. I made some noises of agreement and went off into the kitchen, returning with a glass of water with two cubes of ice and a cocktail tumbler with about a finger and a half of single malt. It wasn't like I hadn't had plenty to drink that night but I still



needed to unwind. Alcohol and adrenaline seem to cancel each other out, at least for me. I gestured towards the sofa after handing him his glass and Herman, after giving it a close, brief look, eased into it. He hadn't taken off his grey sport coat or his outdated grey plaid fedora and despite that he gave the impression he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Cops make me jumpy – they make everybody jumpy who isn't a cop – but he seemed to be going out of his way to make me nervous. I reminded myself that I'd been on his side of that game about a million times talking to clients and swore I wouldn't let it get to me.

“Mind if I put on some music?” I was asking purely to have something to say; my hands were already on the stereo, turning it on so it could warm up, and reaching over to the cassette bin I kept next to it. I pulled out something recent, New Wave-ish, something he probably wouldn't enjoy very much. I turned the volume way down so that the beat could be heard but the words were a mumble. Then I turned back to the seats and eased into an overstuffed arm chair I have with a mismatched ottoman, kicked my shoes off, my feet up and let out a sigh. “What a day.”

Herman had watched all this, I was sure, with the critical eye bestowed on any and all officers of the law. Finally he had said enough nothing for both our tastes, sitting there and looking from one book to another, one lamp to the next, like they each told a story about the life of the person who owned them, and he got down to business. “I hear you've been back out to Harley Scoggins' home several times.”

I nodded. “Yes. I had to take some information over there to one of his beneficiaries.” I was careful not to take another sip of the scotch.

“Three times?” He took out the toothpick and held it up to the light. He was a thin guy going bulky in his late middle age despite carrying the usual cop's chip on his shoulder all the time. He put the toothpick back in and looked at me.

“I've become friends with Mr. Scoggins' roommate.” I shrugged a little. “Why do you ask?”

“How much does Mr. Scoggins, um, roommate stand to get from that policy?”

I opened my mouth and raised my eyebrows, then paused, then opened my mouth again.

"He stands to inherit quite a bit but I can't discuss specifics without a warrant or a subpoena, detective. I'm not trying to be difficult but it is a private business contract and I do have my own legal responsibilities to uphold." I shrugged again. "I'm sorry."

"General ballpark?" He was staring at me with squinted eyes like he'd collared me robbing a bake sale, like a pathetic thing that should be beneath his attention.

I smiled and said, "In the hundreds of thousands, assuming no problems with the claim."

He whistled once around in a neat tonal circle. It had to have taken years of practice. "That's a lot."

"Not for a rich man such as Mr. Scoggins." I took a sip of the scotch. "A man like him could have bought much more insurance than that and the company probably would have been glad to write the policy. He was young, talented and wealthy. He could afford a lot of years of premiums at the rate he was going."

"Could he?" Detective Herman gave me a look and a smirk. "I wouldn't know."

"Well..." I smiled a little. "I certainly didn't hesitate to submit his application. I don't decide who gets insured and who doesn't, though, and I don't decide who gets paid or how much." I shrugged with both hands out before me. "I sell the policy and collect the premiums and that's pretty much that. I'm about as much a claims adjuster as a Chrysler salesman is the guy who designed the car in the first place or changes the oil when you bring it in."

He changed directions on me rather abruptly, or maybe not. "So what got you friendly with Mr. Scoggins', um, roommate." He paused and looked me up and down once. "Seems a bit quick, don't it?"

I finished the scotch and didn't bother to conceal the sigh. "Yes, it does. People grieve in different ways. There's always been that Eros/Thanatos thing going, hasn't there?"

"I don't know," Herman said, taking the toothpick out and waving it around. "Has there? You tell me."

I warmed to the topic. It beat talking about Harley Scoggins. "Well, Freud said we had the life drive, Eros, and that we had a death drive, too. Most people call it 'Thanatos.' It's kind of

built into a lot of mythology and culture, the idea that what makes us feel alive will probably kill us." I stood up and took a step towards the kitchen. "I'm going to get another drink. You want more water?"

He waved me off and stood up to follow me into the kitchen. I kept talking as we went. "So what if it works in reverse? What if experiencing death from a very near second-hand perspective – the death of someone we know, someone we love – makes us need to express the life force in reaction to balance things out? It would explain a few of my behaviors over the years as friends and family died. Haven't you ever had a rough case, a personal tragedy, something that cut deep into your..." I stopped. Poor choice of words. "Well, haven't you had something cause you great pain and make you seek out equal pleasure?" I took the bottle of scotch down off the refrigerator and was grateful it was almost entirely full. I don't think I needed a cop sniffing around my house and finding nothing but pop psychology and mostly-empty bottles of booze. I looked at Herman and shrugged. "Well?"

"I think you got your Freud mixed up with your Newton," he told his toothpick before putting it back and rolling it between his teeth. "I think people do what they want to do. Always. Maybe they don't know they wanted to do it, but they did. Maybe it takes shaking 'em up to make 'em do it but they wanted it all along. Trust me, all day long and half the night I stare at people who've been on the receiving end of what someone else always wanted to do." My face was falling as he spoke and his gaze met mine. "Besides, what's a bunch of fairies know about people's normal emotions? No, I think it's like this: somebody – maybe you, maybe his little faggot, sorry, I guess he's *your* little faggot now, huh, maybe somebody else entirely - wanted Harley dead and they waited until they'd get a big pile of dough to boot and then they did it and now they're getting ready to live pretty high on the hog, so high they had to buy a special ladder. So they got his pants around his ankles in a precarious spot and they put a knife in him and they walked away and in a place like Printer's Alley everybody's too busy staring at fake tits to look up and see a dead guy on the fire escape."

"You're a real class act, Detective Herman." I took the scotch and poured another. I didn't

care what a guy like him thought of me.

"I see it all the time, Mr. Marks. I see it every goddamn day. Besides, if you ask me, faggots are more likely to do something like this to each other. I mean, we all know you people live out on the fringe as it is. The 'edge,' maybe." He smiled a little. "I don't get how you end up there in the first place. You're not a bad looking guy, couldn't you find a girl?"

I pressed my lips into a thin line and didn't answer. He didn't wait long for me to before continuing to expound. "Anyway, you're always protecting each other, covering for each other, hiding from everybody else, I figure if you spend your whole life keeping big secrets like that, what's one more? What's one more law broken when you're already breaking all the rules you were given to start with? Hell, what's a few laws?"

"This is Nashville," I said with a weary glare. "This isn't exactly the murder capital of America. We do not exactly wake up every morning to news of another axe murder on the steps of the Grand Ole Opry and neither do we wake up every morning to news of a stabbed faggot all his fans thought was straight."

Herman gave me a weird little grin. "Nashville's murder rate is nearly twice the national average, mister. On every kind of crime we're above average. It's a busy little place. No, it isn't someplace really bad, but it isn't someplace really good, either." He paused and clucked his tongue. "You know, it wouldn't be good for you if his estate's lawyers or the label heard you call him a faggot. They'd sue you over that. Defamation, libel, something like that. That can ruin a guy's image fast." He took out the toothpick, tossed it into the trash and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "You got any matches?"

I frowned a little. "No and I'd prefer you not smoke in my house."

"Huh," he said. "I could step out onto the landing. I'd still need matches, though."

I pulled open a couple of kitchen drawers, rifled through them, and then stopped suddenly and turned towards him. "You think I'm the black matchbook killer?"

"I wouldn't know what you're talking about," he said, shrugging a little at me like a bad impression of Rodney Dangerfield. "What do you mean, the black matchbook killer?"

I smirked. "I don't get the paper, Detective Herman, but some of my friends do. We know. We know there's somebody killing people out there. You think he was a victim of that serial killer?"

Herman smirked back at me. "Evening, Mr. Marks. I'll show myself out, but be sure to lock up behind me and make sure you obey the speed limit." He turned around, walked out the front door and just barely slammed it behind him.

"Dick," I said to the empty room. I had the urge to open all the windows and air it out and play my music really loud. Truth was, I felt lucky he hadn't beaten me up.

The next morning, Misha's reaction was to nod and shrug it off. "Such are the police in every place," he said. He was applying the lightest possible layer of lip gloss – strawberry flavored – in one of the mirrored columns holding up the back of the Orange Julius. I couldn't believe he didn't want to be seen letting a guy hold his hand for two seconds but he'd wear lip gloss. He'd told me he wanted it subtle enough to be noticed by "anyone who gets close enough, but not just walking by."

"No," I said, "That's the way the cops are in China. That's the way the cops are in a banana republic. That's the way cops are in - " but I caught myself. He smiled a little at my reflection in the mirror.

"In Soviet Russia?" He raised both eyebrows. "Jyason, darling, you can say it. I came here for a reason: I wanted to leave *there*."

I blushed and ran a hand over my face, chuckling a little. "Sorry. I'm just really on edge after all that."

Misha decided he was satisfied with his lips and dropped the gloss into the backpack he carried to work every day. He sat down on the stool behind the counter and looked at me for a long time. "So do you think he really believes you killed Harley?"

I shook my head, waved a hand. "No. He just wanted to rub our faces in it for some reason."

"In what?" Misha folded his arms together, regarded me with his head back a little bit.

"In the fact we can't do much to help ourselves once the police get involved? Maybe in the way we're seen as secretive, skulking around, like we're all a bunch of old men fucking in city parks. He probably had to eliminate me but I'd bet anything he got a kick out of the way I didn't offer him an alibi for the night of Harley's murder."

"What alibi?" Misha smiled a little.

"I was out getting hammered and cruising steam rooms but I don't relish saying that to his face in my own living room much less in a police interrogation room." I shuddered a little. "Christ, it's not like they're really even trying. They're probably being pressured *not* to find out who killed Harley, just let it get chalked up to a hooker or something and leave it at that." I shook my head again and wrapped my arms around myself. "I don't know. I have no idea what to think about why he showed up and then did the whole 'got any matches' routine. Like, why would he suspect me?"

Misha stood up, came around the counter and gave me a tight, brief hug. "Jyason," he said after he let go, "You have to relax. The police have a serial killer. On the one hand, he is killing people they do not much care about. On the other, he may have killed a famous person. On the third, linking the two might pull the famous person out of the closet and on the fourth, because it takes two people to get this many hands in one place, they are probably, yes, being pressured to wrap this up neatly and sanitarily and put a bow on it and hand it back to the label and the newspaper with a kiss. He doesn't know what he is doing anymore than you know what he is doing. He is just doing what he does. Police show up and ask questions and make insinuations and generally see who gets spooked. Did you get spooked?"

I blinked at him. "Not especially? Unless I did? Fuck if I know."

"If you had, he would have run you in on the spot." I laughed abruptly, uncomfortably. Misha smiled quietly and went on. "Go to your office. Make some money and forget that policeman."

I sighed and rubbed my face with both hands, then looked back up and nodded. "Yes, sir."

Misha smiled and his eyes sparkled for a moment and I thought, I should do it. I should say something right now, but he beat me to it. "This weekend, Marshall and I are going to Opryland on Saturday."

I blinked.

"I have the day off, and so does he, and we are going to Opryland. We have never been. You should come with us." He smiled again.

"I... " I thought, and then stopped myself from over-thinking. "Sure." I smiled. "Saturday."

## **Particular People – Chapter Twelve**

*It's interesting when people die / Give us dirty laundry.*  
--"Dirty Laundry," Don Henley

I spent a couple of hours in Hank's bed every other night for the rest of the week. I never mentioned Jude Bellwether and he never mentioned Harley/Chad but he did keep shoving clothes of Chad's into my hands. By Friday night I had taken home a third of that walk-in closet. Hank assured me that the label would never come get it all, they were too busy dealing with the police and the murder investigation. I told him about Herman being at my apartment that particular night and Hank shrugged it off. "They're probably trying to decide whether to pin it on one of us or on some hooker they've already got downtown." He summed it up just like that, as neatly as can be.

"Have you ever heard of the black matchbook thing?" I asked this over another round of omelettes and coffee after a drink and a vigorous fuck in the living room; slowly but surely Hank was branching out and annexing bits of the house as his, as though he was starting to realize that Chad really was not going to show back up and offer any objections. "A friend of mine says he thinks there's a serial killer killing us."

"Us?" Hank cocked one eyebrow at me and slurped his coffee.

"You know," I said, "Fags."

He fluttered his lips and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, and the tooth fairy is real."

That was pretty much the end of that topic for the foreseeable future.

Saturday morning I drove over to Misha's apartment. I had never been there before, didn't even know where it might be and had to ask the address. It turned out it was a pigeonhole in a shoebox in the shadow of Bordeaux. It wasn't a great neighborhood but then, he worked for the Orange Julius. He probably figured it was as good as anything Stalin had managed. I walked up



to the door and knocked and a couple of minutes later the door opened. Marshall was standing on the other side.

"Oh, hi," he said. He looked me up and down – I was wearing a pair of Chad's jeans again and the Tennessee Sounds t-shirt he'd been wearing the day he came by my office – and smiled in a way that made evil little dimples pucker on his cheeks. It wasn't a nice smile, a flirtatious smile. It was a smile that realized I hadn't expected the silly little queen to answer Misha's door with no shirt on. "We'll be just a minute," he said. His eyelashes fluttered and I wanted to choke him to death with my bare hands.

By ten o'clock we were at the gates to Opryland USA. Marshall and Misha were flirting non-stop and I was ready for the day to be over. Needless to say, Opryland USA wasn't exactly a gay haven. We were all very careful not to be touching one another and still we got some looks and some sour glares from some of the other people there. Even straights with no gaydar can smell a queen like Marshall or Misha. It didn't matter that they had tried to butch up a little. It didn't matter that Misha didn't wear lip gloss and Marshall barely said a word when there were other people around. Other people could just tell. Add to that the fact Marshall and Misha were all giggles every moment we were away from the rest of the crowd and I was about ready to hand them cab fare and bail out. Instead I told them I wanted to grab something to eat and they didn't mind parting company so they could be alone for a little bit. I took off in the opposite direction from them and had eventually found myself in the State Fair area when I heard a barker calling out about a gift shop and I recognized Jonathan Nuñez wearing a red, white and blue seersucker suit.

I strolled into his field of vision and he stopped calling for a moment, turned halfway to purple and then kept going. I couldn't help but laugh. I was kind enough to duck back out of the State Fair plaza, though I took my time so he'd see where I had gone. Five minutes later he was buying me cotton candy at a stand off the main State Fair area and telling me he didn't usually have that job.

"Why would I care if you did?" I looked at him a little funny.

"Well, it's... I'm a manager and the usual guy called in sick. See, this isn't even my suit. It's two inches too long in the sleeve." He was at great pains to convince me so I took a bite of cotton candy to give me something to do while he showed me the too-long cuff. I nodded again and again. Finally I cut him off.

"Jonathan, I don't care if you rake the petting zoo pens every day. Fucking A." He frowned a little. He wasn't satisfied. Instead, he was embarrassed. I didn't have any idea why, it wasn't like I was a high roller, like *any* of us were upper class, but I shrugged it off. "Listen, why don't we go for a walk? Show me your favorite ride."

He made a face. Despite having a big, flashy nametag that had the OPRYLAND USA logo – incongruously psychedelic and patriotic at the same time – with his name on it and a bunch of buttons that read things like OPRYLAND STAR and a pin that said he was, at some point, Employee of the Month, he made a disgusted little noise. "Listen," he said, "This place is nothing but noise and country music and screaming kids. If you want a ride, do the Tin Lizzies. They're little old cars, Model T's or Model A's or whatever, and they run around on a preset track. They're quiet and slow and the kids go to sleep. Sometimes when I need ten minutes away from everything I go ride them just to be by myself."

I blinked at him. "I thought this place seemed fun."

"It is for the first six months or so. Then you've heard and seen every possible public behavior, misbehavior, cat fight and curse." He wrinkled up his chin and lower lip like he'd just eaten a bucket of lemons. "The pay is decent enough and the dressing rooms are fun but it's not exactly a dignity farm."

I looked at him over the cotton candy as we turned in the direction of . "Dressing rooms?"

He smirked. "Have you seen the male dancers?"

We were on our way around to the Tin Lizzies when we passed through the Doo Wop Diddy City area, this part of the park that looks like it was designed with someone who had a serious hard-on for *Happy Days*, and I heard a voice I'd recognize anywhere by this point.

"Well, you know," it said, "I heard they found one of those black matchbooks in his pocket but maybe that's just talk." It was Dorothea Slater. I reached out and grabbed Jonathan's arm and we both stopped. He looked questioningly at me and I shook my head at him and put a finger to my lips.

"I think that's just a rumor," the other voice – textbook sissified queen, by the sound of it – said. "The cops would be crawling all over that alleyway if they seriously thought there was a serial killer on the loose."

"I said I thought it was just talk." Dorothea sounded angry at being doubted. I pitied whatever poor fairy had wound up taking a smoke break in her neck of the woods. "Besides, I *know* that he didn't get rubbed out by any fucking pervert serial killer." I could hear her smack her lips and a cloud of tobacco smoke drifted around the corner across us. I had to bury my face in the elbow of my sleeve to keep from gagging on it. Jonathan coughed into the straw hat that was part of his costume. Dorothea went on after a few moments she probably thought of as teasing her listener. "I know he was scared somebody was after him."

Jonathan and I exchanged a glance and he whispered sternly into my ear, "What the fuck are we listening to?"

I waved him silent again and all but wrapped my ear around the edge of the little wooden storage building we were behind. "Oh, you did, huh?"

"Yeah. He knew somebody was asking around about him, asking where he'd been, who was he there with, you know, gossip."

Her conversation partner fluttered his lips and laughed. "Right," he sighed. "Honey, I don't even buy he was a *fag*."

Dorothea produced a low, guttural, gurgling chuckle, like mud being hauled out of her lungs. "Oh, he was a fag, alright. He was getting fucked by half this city, sugar."

"No, *I'm* getting fucked by half this city, *sugar*."

"Then maybe he just had the other half. Either way, he got a lot of strange, you know what I'm saying? And he got it in ways that wouldn't sound good to the little choir girls buying up

all those records he made and so he was always keeping an ear to the ground. That's part of why he was friendly to me, he knew I heard everything."

"And he told you he was, what, being threatened?"

There was a long pause. It wasn't hard to imagine Dorothea Slater smiling at having interested the other guy after all. "I don't know," she finally said, "But he was real worried about what people would find out. I think he was scared someone would use it to hurt him."

"So how did you help him with that?" The queen sounded incredulous, his attention an act of generosity or boredom or both.

"I kept an ear to the ground. I spread a little..." She got a little more mud from the depths. "Disinformation on his behalf. I let him know who was asking and why. Sometimes I kept an eye on him or played lookout."

"Oh my God," the queen said. "Does that mean you were.. you know.. *there* when it happened?"

"No," she finally said, after a pause that suggested she had said no only in the absence of being able to invent a plausible story that would allow her to answer in the affirmative. "I wish I had been. I might've stopped it, the poor shit. If I hadn't I'd at least have a story worth telling to somebody in the news, you know?"

"God, you dirty skank," the queen giggled. I heard Dorothea say something low, something I couldn't make out from around the corner and a few yards away, and then the queen squealed. "You have *got* to be lying!"

Dorothea chuckled again and it sounded like mixing cement. "No, I'm gonna be rich. 'Im sticking out this shit job while they do whatever they do. Fingers crossed, they'll just send me a book of checks." Then she cackled, that mad laugh. "I thought I was raking it in being Harley Scoggins' gossip sponge, but this? Shit, kid, if I'd know he was going to leave me a fat wad like that I'd have killed him myself.

They both produced ugly laughs, like bleating sheep, and the two of them were off to return to whatever they did here. I pressed a finger to my lips, then to Jonathan's lips, and we

backtracked and swung out a little so that once we were where Dorothea could see us she would only see me from a very great distance. Then, as she walked away with her back to us I whistled long and loud to get her attention. A lot of people turned, and so did she, and from a few dozen yards away, with me in my sunglasses, she didn't see *me*, she saw the last person she'd seen wearing this outfit: Harley Scoggins. Her eyes went white and wide and she turned and ran in her clunky nurse shoes – she was dressed not as one of the poodle-skirted or muscle-shirted faux teeny boppers of Doo Wop Diddy City's regular staff but in a green and gold plaid dress of heavy polyester with her hair drawn up into a ratty bun as though she were the school principal from *Grease* and she had a broom in her hand. The little queen she'd been favoring with her claims and opinions was indeed a dancer, dressed in the ridiculous orange polyester suits with long tails of one or another of the shows going on at the time. He watched her go, then looked back at me and, after a moment, waved before ducking out of view in a hurried return to the stage.

Jonathan looked at me for a long moment and said, “OK, you have to explain what just happened.” So, I did.

Twenty minutes later, as we were nearing the end of the Tin Lizzies, he turned to me and said, “So you've basically taken over his life.”

“Oh, don't be such a drama queen.” I rolled my eyes all the way around and back at him.

He sighed and put up both hands. “Fine, but here's my question: if somebody got so obsessed with Harley Scoggins that they murdered him – and I'm sorry, but random murders are so wildly uncommon that I basically refuse to believe in them, I mean, what are the odds, right? Anyway, if they were that obsessed with him, maybe you ought to think twice about fucking all the same people and wearing all the same clothes.”

I blinked at him. “You're joking.”

“Not for a second. Listen, Jason, you're a fine insurance agent and a great lay and I want to keep being able to go back to that well. Don't think you're impervious. That's probably what killed Harley Scoggins, you know? He thought nobody could touch him for all his walls of money

and he got stabbed in the heart for it.”

“He didn't think he was impervious,” I said, “You heard that old tranny up there. She said he thought someone was after him.”

“No,” Jonathan said, one finger up as we neared the fake barn where the Tin Lizzies ride started and ended. “She made it sound like he was afraid of blackmail, not murder. OK, so maybe he didn't think of himself as bulletproof but there's no way he thought someone he knew was going to kill him. If he had, he never would have gone anywhere with them, much less somewhere as weird as a fire escape.”

“I have to admit, that just seems weird.” I shrugged. “I mean, I can't figure out the score there: was he fucking on the fire escape? I don't know.” I shook my head. “Maybe it was the matchbook killer after all.”

Jonathan looked at me like I'd just insulted him, personally, by suggesting that. “Please, do not go in for that bullshit.” He rolled his eyes and we entered the twilight of the barn. We climbed out and walked out the exit to stop along a railing a few feet from the line of people waiting to get onto the ride.

“Well, whatever it was, I don't get it.”

“Well, it isn't your *job* to get it,” Jonathan said with a small sigh. “You're an insurance agent. You're not Sherlock Holmes. And now I have to go sell red, white and blue teddy bears, speaking of vocations.” He frowned, then reached out and squeezed my arm. There were tourists all around us, crowded by children, half a dozen music sources competing to get the attention of collective nostalgia. The sun was bright and high in the sky and lots of people in the crowd wore the sour, pinched expressions of the repressed, repressive population at large, the sort of people who firmly believe that their lifestyle of reproduction and consumption is the only truly American way. It was in every possible way the direct opposite of the sort of environment I wanted. I wanted to give Jonathan a hug, maybe a kiss, tell him not to feel bad about his job, not to feel like he needed to prove something to me. I was just his insurance agent and occasional lay, anyway. It was weird. It was a weird moment, a weird day, a weird time in my life and for

queers everywhere. Instead we were surrounded by people who would think it was weird for two men to hug and condemn us for anything more. He might lose his job. So he squeezed my arm and then we shook hands for a moment longer than necessary and after a second or two spent gazing at one another we simply walked in opposite directions without saying another word.

I walked around for a long while after that, with no particular destination and nothing I wanted to do. I didn't want to ride any of the rides by myself and I didn't want to be around Misha and Marshall. I wanted to be alone with the questions Jonathan had brought up. Let's say Harley Scoggins was murdered by someone who knew him. Why? Money seemed the obvious answer but it didn't make sense to suspect any of the people who knew him whom I'd met so far. Hank was more terrified than liberated by Chad/Harley's death. Jude Bellwether was so depressed he was drinking himself into a stupor. From the sound of things, Dorothea had no idea she would profit by his death. Walker surely wouldn't have killed his rising star, would he? It didn't make any sense to me. On the other hand, he'd been the one so keen to find out about payments, the one trying to insure Harley in the first place.

Eventually I'd walked all the way north, around and back down, through the State Fair area – though I didn't see Jonathan this time – and into New Orleans. There was an audience just getting out of the little amphitheater where some sort of river boat show thing happened and Marshall and Misha were in the crowd. I caught Misha's eye from a distance, lifted a hand to wave, and when Marshall followed Misha's gaze I could see something like puzzlement take hold of his features for a moment.

When I got up to them, I didn't dilly-dally. “You thought I looked like someone else for a moment, didn't you?”

He blushed. “Yeah.”

“So you knew Harley, too?” I laughed with something like exasperation. “Is there anyone in this town who *didn't* know Harley?”

Marshall blushed harder still. “To be honest, I never knew his name.” Misha looked at him

and blinked. So did I. He went on, clearing his throat. "Well, I didn't know his name was *Harley*." He cleared his throat again and looked at Misha. "I knew him from a bath house. He told everybody his name was Chad."

"What bath house?" I smiled casually, just a normal, curious guy. It was the sort of thing people asked each other all the time in those days.

"Fountain of Youth," he said after a long moment.

Misha hadn't said a single word but he did reach up, adjust his sunglasses and walk off without a word. Marshall look at me and then we both looked at Misha. I gave Marshall a little shrug. "Well," I said, "Let me know when you two are ready to leave."

"Is he mad?" Marshall was staring after Misha like a puppy left in a box outside the pound. I didn't mind that. I didn't find it attractive, either. I was just happy to see a wedge that could be driven between the two of them. I'm not proud of that confession, but it's true. I was thrilled to see that there was something about Marshall that pissed Misha off.

Something of that must have been betrayed by my facial expression or the way I watched Misha's ass as he walked away. Marshall made a little noise that could conceivably have been disgust. I turned back to him and smiled a little. "So, do you go to Fountain of Youth often?" This time Marshall turned around and walked off. "Well," I called, finally, "I'll be by the front gates at, say, six o'clock?" Then I walked north again to go ride some rides. All of a sudden my mood had improved.



## **Particular People – Chapter Thirteen**

*There's a fossil that's trapped in a high cliff wall / (That's my soul up there)  
--"King of Pain," The Police*

On Sunday morning I slept in. I had not gone to Hank's the night before. I had not gone to The Chute. Misha and Marshall hadn't said another word in my presence from the moment we'd met back up at the Opryland gates to when I'd dropped them off at Misha's apartment. A Lincoln Town Coupe is a big car, the biggest, but it wasn't big enough for any warm air to pass between those two. I tried not to smile. I at least didn't let myself go out and celebrate.

Sunday I went to the Huddle House on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue before I went to the mall. I was starving and ordered a big breakfast, something to put some real weight in me before a long afternoon of sitting around waiting to sell some insurance. I picked up one of the papers by the door and while I was waiting for my food I saw a story towards the bottom of page three: **MAN FOUND MURDERED IN CHURCH STREET ALLEY**. According to the story, a man named Marshall Tukewala, age 22, had been found with his neck broken in an alleyway down the street from "a succession of businesses that are constant sources of complaints." Translation: he'd been found in an alleyway down the street from a bunch of bath houses.

He was Misha's budding boyfriend, and he had been strangled to death. There was, the reporter said, an unconfirmed rumor that a black matchbook had been found in the man's pants pockets.

I ate my breakfast when the waitress brought it to me. I was so frozen inside, so scared, that I didn't know what else to do. After, I drove to Misha's apartment. He didn't want to answer the door but I threatened to kick it in, something I don't even know how to do – who does, anyway – and he found that sufficiently ridiculous that it just almost made him laugh. Then we stood in his living room and he cried against my chest for half an hour or more before we sat down on the shitty futon couch and he cried some more. Eventually he stopped crying long

enough to ask if I had anything to drink and I reminded him it was his house and he laughed again and then cried again and never got his drink.

I felt like a complete fucking louse.

I also decided the best thing I could do for Misha was, clearly, to figure out who killed Marshall and maybe Harley, too. It was too coincidental, I decided – then and there, really, with Misha's tiny shoulders wrapped in my arms, shaking like a leaf – that Marshall had turned out to know Harley Scoggins and wound up dead himself. No matter what Detective Herman had said about Nashville being higher than the national average on almost all crimes that was too much for me to believe. It was ridiculous on its face, of course, to think that I could solve a murder better than the cops but then, there were things I knew and places I wouldn't mind going where cops wouldn't be caught walking by much less going inside and asking questions. We'd all been sitting around saying that the cops were probably holding back on the Harley Scoggins murder, so why the hell would they break their neck on a bunch of garden variety, every day fairies if they wouldn't step up to the plate for one with money?

I didn't tell Misha any of this. I didn't want him to worry. He was so scared, so fragile, so hurt. I couldn't imagine adding anything to his list of concerns. I couldn't imagine giving him something else to think about. I pressed my lips to his forehead, the part of his hair, smelled the way he smelled and felt the texture of his skin and could think of nothing other than that somebody had to do something to keep anyone from ever hurting him or me or Hank or Jude or Harley or Marshall or Jonathan ever again.

Especially if it was one of us doing the hurting.

I didn't go to the mall that afternoon. Instead I went to Dorothea Slater's. I didn't know how much of what she had to say had to be taken at a discount but I had to start somewhere and I'd heard her bragging that she was Harley Scoggins' ears on the ground. I pulled up outside her house in the Lincoln but I had gone home and changed so that I was wearing Chad's too-tight jeans and a t-shirt of his that read KEEP ON TRUCKIN' and had that classic '60s cartoon guy on it.

I bounded up to the front door and buzzed three times in a row.

"Go away," I heard from inside, but my only use for it was as confirmation that Dorothea was inside. I opened the storm door, turned the knob and walked into her living room without announcement or hesitation.

Dorothea was sitting in the living room in her big, gray Barcalounger, feet up, the Sunday paper spread out on her lap, the side table and most of the floor. She looked like she was clipping coupons. There was the last millimeter of a cigarette poking out of a corner of her mouth and she needed a shave. Her hair was up in curlers and her face was so veiny and bloodshot that it looked like she'd held it over a blender with a tomato inside.

"What the fuck do you wuh - " but she got a good look at me, backlit in the doorway, and again the magic of Harley Scoggins' clothes did their work for a moment. Then, shrieking with anger, "*What the fuck do you want?*"

I stepped forward, yanked the grocery circular out of her hand, folded it up, set it on the coffee table, took the scissors out of her other hand, closed them, set them down on top of the grocery circular and then leaned down over her with a hand on each of her Barcalounger's arm rests. "Somebody's been asking around about Harley."

She blinked at me, eyes watery.

I cleared my throat. "Yesterday you overheard something and somebody asked around about Harley - or maybe you're one of the people he allowed to know him as Chad - and you figured, what the hell? It wasn't like Harley was around to mind anymore, right? It wasn't like telling them to blow and then running to the nearest payphone to tell Harley Scoggins about it was going to get you anything. So you told them what you'd heard and now there's a kid dead for it. Did you count on that? I have to wonder, did you know that's what would happen to him?"

Dorothea snarled at me like a dog and without touching it with either hand drew the last pull from her cigarette and spat it - *spat* it - across the living room into a pile of butts I hadn't noticed before. Christ, she spit cigarettes across a room full of newspaper in a shack like this and she'd survived a week? I couldn't believe what a crazy old bitch she was. Dorothea wasn't done

showing off, though, as she clapped both hands on my shoulders and came up out of the Barcalounger with all the strength of the big man she'd once been. "I don't know what you're in here selling, pretty boy, but you'd better take it next door before I have to show you out."

"Tough talk for a two-bit gossip monger with blood on her hands," I murmured low. We were both grinding our teeth together. We weren't like two peacocks or two roosters strutting or shouting for attention, we were two rams in that moment when their horns are locked and it can go either way. "I heard you with my own ears. You told that little faggot in the tangerine tails all about how Harley Scoggins used to pay you to keep your ears open for anyone asking around and then you saw me wearing his clothes and it scared you to see them – to see *him* – from a distance like that. You're a smart dame, though, Dorie, and you got your head back on in short order and you came looking for me and you heard that kid tell me how he'd fucked Harley Scoggins at the Fountain of Youth," (here she flinched, just a little, just a twitch of the eyes), "and you sold your info to the person who'd been sniffing around and asking questions and you took your thirty pieces of silver and you went home with a song in your heart. Am I right?" By now I had my hands on her shoulders, hers on mine, not sure whether we were pushing each other apart or keeping each other within arm's reach.

"I didn't hear anything and I didn't tell anybody anything, you cheap slut – you cheap whore wearing your dead fuck's clothes like the skin of something you brought down on the hunt – and I don't like it when people barge in my house." She reared back and spit at me but I paid it no mind. I smiled a little and tried to push her away but she was as strong as I was and I couldn't do it.

"Then somebody was asking around sometime, you know it. You know they were and I'm here to tell you that if a murderer doesn't turn up soon the insurance company is going to decide the whole thing is too hinky and they won't pay you or anyone else a goddamn dime." I smiled again. "You've got a tell, Dorie, like any other gambler, and you showed yours when I mentioned the Fountain of Youth. So you might as well spill or I go there myself and maybe the insurance company decides to sue to give me your payout as a reward. They've done it before, you know,

there's case law on it." Purest, homespun bullshit but Dorothea Slater was no estate lawyer.

She mulled it over. We were both straining against each other now and my arms were going to give out pretty soon. I couldn't understand how she, easily twenty years my senior and probably on so many hormones she didn't know what day it was, could match me but she was in danger of doing better than that.

All of a sudden she relaxed like a limp rag and she slammed back into her Barcalounger and the fight drained out of her eyes. I nearly fell forward on top of her, she went back so fast, but instead I merely stumbled and caught myself on the wall so that by the time I came to rest I was back in a position of aggression, one arm out against the wall and the rest of me leaned on it, though purely by accident. She was so off in her own world that I don't think she cared or noticed, anyway.

She leaned over the side of her chair and shuffled around in the scattered pages of the Sunday paper, probably other papers, too, spread around like her whole orange stucco living room was one giant hamster cage, and picked up the world's unlikeliest 1950's plastic basket handbag. She unclasped it and dug around until she came out with a pack of EVE cigarettes - "Every Inch the Lady" - and a green plastic disposable lighter. "I don't know who it was," she croaked around her cigarette. The place stank like a hamster cage, too, already, and all of a sudden it was like she'd lit her own ass on fire. Smoke billowed out her mouth and nose as she spoke and she looked not at me but at the far wall. "Chad was always scared that someone was going to blackmail him. He was terrified. He'd go out and do stupid shit and then he'd sit around and fret that somebody was going to use it against him. I'd say, 'Chad, kiddo, ice the stupid shit and you don't have to worry about it, just cut it out and there's nothing to blackmail,' but he wouldn't listen. Maybe he couldn't listen. Maybe he wanted to but he was so hopped up on the way the whole town wanted between his legs that he just couldn't say no. Maybe he'd gotten somewhere by being so willing at some point in the past. He had old boyfriends with money." I knew, of course, that she meant Jude. "He wanted money of his own, though, and when he got it - when he half mortgaged his own ass to the label to get it - all he did was sit around scared that

someone would take it away from him. He used to sit and worry about that when he was sober, when he faced that cold gray dawn we've all seen the wrong side of once or twice." She took a long pull from the cigarette and a quarter inch of it disappeared into her lungs.

"So somebody was asking around." I cleared my throat a little, prompting her. She wasn't going to get to wander off down a nostalgic path.

Dorothea nodded. "Yeah. Always. Always somebody new. Somebody he'd fucked somewhere would ask around, 'Was that really Harley Scoggins?' I'd usually say no, Harley had a cousin here in town who looked just like him. A stupid story but people always think they're small, themselves, that they're too small to touch somebody famous so it must be true, right? It must be that they fucked a cousin who looks just like a famous guy because there's no way they'd get to fuck the *actual* famous guy."

"That's ridiculous," I said. I sat down on the coffee table, shoving a mountain of newspapers and God knew what onto the floor behind it.

"People love ridiculous," she said, and her eyes finally turned to me. "They love it. The dumber the story the likelier they are to eat it up. Real life is so fucking messy that we'll buy anything as long as it's entertaining and dumb. Look at movies. The one with the neat alibi is always the one that did it, aren't they? But we never walk out of the movie and demand our money back because the story was too *rational* because we know, deep down, that everyone with the stupid, unlikely alibi is probably telling the truth and the one with the neat cover is probably lying because life ain't neat. Life ain't tidy." She swept one hand around the room, cigarette held in it like a scepter. "This life ain't, anyway." She chuckled, gravel on tin in a tumbler.

"So why don't you know who was asking around? You make it sound like they always asked *you* for some reason."

She shrugged at me, the most human gesture she'd produced yet. "I'm everybody's mama and everybody's nurse. They come to me because they get what they need, whatever that is. I don't know. But this person? No, they didn't come to me and that's what had me worried. That's what had *Chad* worried. They didn't come to me because they didn't want Chad to know

they were asking around, the way I figure. I mean, they must have wanted to keep it a secret that they were asking questions, right? They were asking questions but not of me and not of Chad and they'd scared people into not being willing to tell me a thing. I couldn't find out who it was and Chad got more and more worried and finally, I guess, they got what they needed and they got him."

"So you think Chad was murdered by a would-be blackmailer?"

She shrugged again. Her cigarette was done and she spat it across the room and lit another. It waggled when she talked, perched on – no, glued to – one corner of her mouth. Her lids were half-closed. "Dunno. Probably. He probably told them to go fuck themselves so they killed him."

"And one of the places they'd been asking around was the Fountain of Youth." I had started rubbing each of my upper arms with the opposite hand, hugging myself.

She half-flinched again. "Yeah," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Because all of a sudden Chad stopped going there. It had been his favorite place but all of a sudden, a few months ago, he wanted to find a new bath house. He even talked about opening one of his own through, you know, *intermediaries*, but it was a crazy idea. He got talked out of it."

I stood up abruptly. "Thanks, Dorothea."

"Dorie," she said. "My friends call me Dorie."

I walked out the door, got back in my car and drove downtown to my apartment. I had to think about things and, later, I had to visit the Fountain of Youth.

That night, I put on a pair of Harley's jeans that Hank had given me and a t-shirt for North Carolina State University with a picture of their wolfman mascot wearing a jaunty little cap. They'd won the national championship in basketball, apparently. To be honest, I never cared much about that kind of stuff. I put on a trucker hat he had left in the closet, too, the one he'd

worn when he visited my office, and I drove over to the Fountain of Youth. Hank had left a message on my answering machine. He wanted me to come over that night. I didn't call him back and I didn't plan on being there but hey, you never know.

The outside of the Fountain of Youth was nothing special, an old brick-faced warehouse kind of thing divided up and converted into a number of purposes. It looked shabby, blue paint peeling at the corners and the walls covered in handbills and faded graffiti bleached by the sun. It had a parking lot in the back and one had to drive down a little alleyway between it and another building, this one unmarked and possibly abandoned, to get there. There was no entrance on the street. It was the sort of place that afforded discretion but couldn't afford maintenance. It was cheap and it looked cheap.

I parked the Lincoln, finding a space between two import hatchbacks that allowed me to hang a little over the lines on each side. One day, I imagined, I'd be driving one of those, but no time soon. I was an insurance agent. I knew why it cost less to include medical coverage on the policy for a Lincoln than it did for a Datsun.

I sat in the car and debated with myself about whether to go inside, then said fuck it and got out of the car. I locked up behind myself, walked in the metal door and into an entryway that then had another door at the end of it that opened into a dimly lit waiting room with a check-in desk and a fat guy in an AC/DC t-shirt behind it. He had his feet up on an ottoman that didn't match any of the extremely dated, vinyl furniture in the room and he had a copy of *Penthouse Letters* in his hands.

I walked up to the counter and he looked at me for a moment, then held out a hand. "Membership?"

"I don't have a membership," I said. "How much are they?"

"No membership, no entry." He was back in his magazine just that quick until I cleared my throat and smiled at him when he looked up again.

"A friend recommended this place. He said that if I had a referral I could get a membership."



"What's your friend's name?"

"Marshall Tukewala." I kept my voice bright and casual.

He opened up a little recipe box full of index cards and started flipping through them. Eventually he stopped towards the back and pulled one halfway out before nodding. "OK, let me make you a card."

It was just that easy. I didn't look like a cop. I looked like a fag with jeans that were too tight. He wasn't any queen but he knew a customer when he saw one. He probably bounced somewhere in East Nashville in a bar that didn't play honky-tonk. Places like this don't operate by making it difficult for a real customer; they make it easy for the real customer and tough on everybody else. Twenty seconds later he had a fresh card with all the information he needed from me circled and he had a pen in his hand.

"I'll need some ID," he said.

I smirked. "What, I don't look 18?"

He might be efficient and he might be able to spot a non-cop but that didn't make him a comedian or anybody's friend. He looked at me and said, less casually, "ID."

I got my wallet out, cracked it open and dug out my driver's license. Then I wrapped a fifty dollar bill around it and said, "You sure you need that ID?"

He looked at the money and wasn't fazed for a moment. "Mister, I'm pretty sure you don't match the picture."

I smiled a little. "OK then, how about a little information." Now, that got his attention. I couldn't tell whether it meant he was going to throw my ass back out the door after me or if he was a willing rat. I licked my lips, just barely, and plunged ahead. "Somebody's been in here asking after somebody named Chad." I pulled out a picture of Chad/Harley from the newspaper. "This guy, to be specific."

The guy's expression darkened all of a sudden. "I don't know what you're talking about, mister."

I took the fifty and put it back in my wallet but still handed him my ID. "OK, maybe I

asked in the wrong place. I'll still take a membership." I filled in the card, he filed it and then he handed me a key on a ring with a cheap plastic fob on it. It had the name of some local garage or something only it wasn't local to Nashville; it was somewhere else, somewhere far away, and somebody had probably left it in a locker or something and it had been swept up into a new life as a fuck-room key fob. No place local would advertise on a key ring in a bath house in this town.

I took the key from him. He nodded at a darkened hallway behind him and said, "Towels are in the bath rooms."

"Thanks."

I hoped he'd pick up the phone and make a call the moment I was out of earshot.

## **Particular People – Chapter Fourteen**

*Number one public figure what a pain*  
--"My Own Way," Duran Duran

I had been to a lot of bath houses in my life and I had been to a lot of the bath houses in Nashville but, to be honest, I'd never been to this one. It was scummy. I know that sounds pretty typical by '83 – the bath house scene had finally started to acquire that patina of disapproval, that suspicion that it was somehow a really awful behavior to indulge – but this place was one of the grossest of the gross. I could only guess why they kept the lights low, and it wasn't out of respect for the two guys fucking in the hallway. It was probably so that they couldn't see each other very well – including seeing the purple lesions that we'd all learned to recognize as "gay cancer." It was probably so that no one would see the rat in the corner. It was probably so that no one would notice if the bench had been cleaned, the towels bleached, the floors mopped. The Fountain of Youth was a place to go for the sake of going to someplace really raunchy.

I was surprised Marshall had the stomach for a joint like this.

The key I'd been given had a numeral 6 stamped into it sloppily so that in a different light it might read 8 instead. There were only seven bath cubicles, though, so I went around to number six, tried the key in the lock and found that it fit but that the door wasn't locked anyway. I went inside and turned on the light but only half the fluorescent tubes were on and one of them flickered and hummed. I turned the overhead lights back off and turned on a lamp on a tiny table in the corner and that gave the room a softer, yellow glow.

There was nothing to be done but to do this thing I'd come to do, crazy-ass idea though it might be, so I stripped down to nothing, wrapped a towel around my waist, draped the clothes I'd worn – all of a sudden I didn't think of them as my clothes, when I'd been perfectly happy wearing Chad's clothes out in the world just yesterday – on the bench and went back out into the

hall. I walked around a little – there were two saunas and a central area of open showers and a presumably walled or screened area out back where there was a sign reading DECK. I poked my head out there but didn't see anyone in the cooling September evening. The moon was full and just almost about to rise above what skyline there was from here. I watched it for a few moments but then I started to shiver and went back inside.

The showers only had a couple of guys in them so I went in there and actually bathed. There wasn't any soap anywhere and for no real reason I found that a surprise. In the end I rinsed off just briefly while the two guys – older dudes who looked like truckers passing through or farmers in from the countryside for a weekend – watched and I didn't think it was very fun. I dried off and then went to the sauna where I picked up another towel and went through a heavy door into another dimly lit room. This one had a few more people in it and most of them seemed to be pretty friendly with each other. I stuck to a far corner and let the steam cloud my view of the show.

The whole time, the soundtrack to *Saturday Night Fever* was playing on a loop. I couldn't believe guys came here and stuck around long enough to fuck.

After thirty minutes in the sauna I felt like a baked raisin. I had to admit the sauna did feel good but there were better saunas in Nashville with better mailing addresses and better janitorial staff. I had deftly avoided any interest in me and to be honest had thus far failed to get why someone like Marshall had come here but it occurred to me, eventually, that maybe when he came here he didn't do it as a leisure activity. He wouldn't be the first hot young thing in Nashville to realize that there were enough old farmhands around to pay the rent and there was no way a house like this was going to push a few spare-change hookers out the door if that's what kept the louts coming back. It was an ugly thought and I honestly hated to have it about a kid who'd died for no good damn reason that very morning but facts are facts. They is rarely any beauty to them.

I got up and walked back around, checked the shower room and found it empty, checked the back deck and found one skinny blond kid getting blown by a guy who could have been his

grandfather, and strolled – ever more slowly – towards bath cubicle number six.

The door was closed. I'd left it slightly ajar.

The thing about being jumped in the dark is that no one is actually Bruce Lee except for Bruce Lee. Nobody knows what to do or how to react. All the kung fu movies and all the Bond movies and all the John Wayne movies in the world don't teach you how to fight back in the total darkness.

When I threw open the door and tried to run inside, I barreled head first into the mass of someone else standing just outside the arc of the door. We both cried out and went down in a heap and then we were wrestling around on the floor all of a sudden. There was dim light from the hallway, sure, but it wasn't doing me a damn bit of good and in the confusion he or I or someone kicked the door shut anyway. The lamp in the corner had been turned off so just like that we were in *real* darkness and I just hoped that when I opened the door that whatever light we had from the hallway had gone right into his eyes so that he didn't have an advantage.

There was a light, almost tinny clatter on the tile floor and I of course assumed it was a gun until, in our grunting and rolling around on the slightly greasy linoleum I managed to cut my upper left arm open on the blade of the knife he'd dropped.

I wanted to shout, to cry out for help, to demand who he was, anything, but there wasn't a damned thing I could get out for his weight on top of me. As awful as it probably is to admit, somewhere in my mind I was unbelievably relieved to know it wasn't Misha who'd been waiting in that room with a knife.

Finally, eventually, somehow, I got out from under him and managed to flip him over and got my weight on top of him and I used him as a platform to launch myself to my feet. That knocked a little wind out of him and had me standing up and I slapped the wall with both hands until I found the switch and those sad, fluorescent bulbs flickered into life way too slowly for my tastes.

I had lost the towel sometime and my left arm was bleeding such that it looked worse than

it was but not as badly as it felt and I imagine I struck a pretty ridiculous image standing naked over the guy but I recognized him by that classy salt-and-pepper hair before he got the hand away from his own face and it turned out he was who I'd thought he'd be.

"Hello, Mr. Walker," I said.

Walker pushed away from me, his teeth grit against one another, lips curled back. He hadn't lost his cool yet but he was thinking about it. The knife was a big, ugly thing, the kind you use to chop the big vegetables or to impress someone, the kind that's always getting sharpened in knife ads. It was on the floor, off to the left, but I got to it first and then pressed myself against the wall with the knife out in front of me, not like a fighter or a hunter or Indiana Jones but like the cover of a '50s paperback about a murderess fallen from some previous grace.

He started to get to his feet but I took a step towards him with the knife. Maybe three more steps were between us. It was pretty big for a bath house room. I guess they figured on orgies. "No," I said, "You can stay right there. I want to hear a little before you stand up."

He made a low noise but he didn't stand.

"So, you killed Chad." I nodded at the clothes. "Someone came around asking about him and throwing around the name of the kid who died this morning and he was wearing some of Harley's clothes so you showed up with the first kitchen knife you could find and stormed over here the minute you got the call. Christ, Walker, you dress like Mr. Rogers playing golf and you stab people in the heart?"

He smiled a little. It wasn't a pretty smile. A part of me wondered if I'd ever smiled that way at Hank or Jude or God forbid at Misha when he walked over to the kiosk wearing those ridiculous pants. "You little faggots never know when to stop," he said. He started to ease up off the floor but I took one of those three steps and he ended up leaning back on his hands. "That's the problem, you know."

I nodded at him, waved the knife. "Keep going, I won't interrupt."

He smirked. "Chad Ballew like dick too much for his own good. He ran around all over town getting fucked in the ass by anybody who'd spend five minutes on it and then he worried

he'd get sued, blackmailed, who knew what. Maybe he'd break somebody's heart and they'd go to the tabloids and every supermarket in America would have a headline that read, I WAS HARLEY'S HOMO FOR A NIGHT and all of a sudden he wouldn't be able to give away an album if it came with a five dollar bill inside." He shook his head slowly, still smirking. "What time he spent *not* getting it from another queer he spent scared everyone would find out. He didn't have a single atom of iron in his blood, he just spent all his time looking for the next trick to be scared of." He trailed off, sat forward and folded his legs up in front of him.

"So you decided to go ahead and eliminate those worries." I didn't let myself relax any. I thanked God this was the sort of bath house where a little rough stuff wouldn't get you thrown out, either.

He shrugged. "At first it was just me trying to clean up after him. Then I realized I was treating the symptom, not the disease." I blinked but he didn't stop to explain. "Do you know what we invest in talent? The house, the clothes, the taxi cabs to the airport, the bus, the crew, the backing band, the lip sync track, the media tour, the payoffs, the bought reviews, the air time in the major markets, do you have *any* idea how much it costs to sell a record?" He looked at me like I was the dumbest son of a bitch in town. "Do you know what makes *money*? Back catalogue." He smiled again. "A guy drops dead," he snapped his fingers, "And just like that he's profitable. Everybody runs out and buys his records so they can tuck them away and talk about what a tragedy it is. He doesn't need anymore haircuts. He doesn't need anymore hush money. He doesn't get anymore blackmail threats. The label doesn't get anymore letters saying that so and so is going to call their friend the music reviewer for the station down the road and give them the scoop on what Harley Scoggins needs to do with people to get his rocks off. He doesn't need a bus. He doesn't need anymore clothes. He needs a black suit, a big funeral and an auction of his estate and he's done. He's money in the bank from that moment forward."

"Have you ever killed talent before?"

Walker snorted and laughed. "No. I haven't needed to. A country singer doesn't have to be perfect. It's fine for him to father eight kids by as many different women and spend two years

on a bender, fine, whatever, as long as he gets Jesus at the end. Hell, that's just free advertising. But a faggot? No faggot's going to make it in this town. I never would have signed him if I'd known but he kept it a secret from me for a long time. He kept it a secret until the third or fourth blackmail letter showed up at my office. Then he couldn't lie about it anymore. Once I knew about Harley's cockaholic behaviors I knew what I'd need to do to keep him and everybody else nice and quiet."

I blinked again and my face probably went a little slack. "You didn't just use the matchbook killer as a cover. You *are* the matchbook killer. All these gay guys that show up dead are guys who fucked Harley Scoggins and talked."

He smiled again. "The first ones, yes. They talked. They talked to me, they talked to their friends. I knew they were just the tip of the iceberg, though, so I started nosing around on my own, finding out who knew Harley by name or by face. Anybody who'd seen him do anything, much less been the one doing it to him, they were a potential. I figured I'd eliminate the queers he'd fucked first and then work my way out from there as necessary. What's a few dead faggots? I can sell a five million commemorative Best Of albums tomorrow if I say the word. That's real money. That's business. That's *life*. We own these people and he turned his ass to us every time we tried to remind him of that. Even if he'd behaved, though, who's to say he wouldn't just get sick and die? You faggots are dropping like fucking flies."

"Whose idea was it to buy the insurance?"

"His." Walker grinned, a wicked smile that blossomed across his features I one go. "He had heard someone was asking around. He'd heard a couple of guys he'd fucked had turned up dead. He got worried. He got worried nobody would take care of all his little cocksucker buddies around town. He felt like it was a noble thing, you know? But the little faggot didn't know thing one about money or about real responsibility so he told me to go do it, to go take care of it. I'd been asking around enough that I could find out who in Nashville wouldn't ask a lot of questions of their own, you know? When you wouldn't bite the hook I sent him down to do it himself. Usually people will roll right over for a commission like that. I knew I should have gone



somewhere else, but he was certain a normal agent would ask too many questions, gossip, something like that. You people look out for each other. He figured he'd be safer if he went with somebody who'd sucked dick, too."

I swallowed a lump the size of an apple and my hand had started to shake a little. "Well," I finally said, but my voice had a tremor, too, "Now it's all over. Now we walk out front and call the cops and it's all over and done with.

Walker stood up. He did it slowly and he didn't come towards me but when I barked for him to sit down he just laughed at me. "Get over it, you fucking fairy. You wouldn't stab me with a sponge. What are you going to do to me otherwise? Call the cops and say you got a confession out of a straight guy who was hanging around a faggot fuck palace? Are you going to tell them you've been wearing Harley Scoggins' clothes because when he dropped dead you went from fucking him to fucking his resident piece of ass?" Walker made another sound of derisive, strangled laughter. "I just bet you can't wait to testify in court to how you fuck your clients sometimes." He very casually opened the door and walked out and it felt like about ten minutes before I could breathe again.

I put on Chad Ballew's clothes and went out front myself – I left the knife in a drawer of the side table – and didn't look at the bouncer as I left. He was probably surprised to see me walking if he even bothered to look up from the girlie mag. I went outside, climbed into the Lincoln, then climbed back out and walked down the little alley of driveway to the main street front. I walked half a block, stepped into a phone booth and dialed '0.' When the operator picked up I asked for the Nashville Police Department. Eventually I got to a switchboard operator and I told her I needed to talk to Detective Herman.

"Herman," he finally said. The transfers had ruined our connection so that it was infested with pops and whistles but he could hear me well enough when I told him to arrest a guy named Walker who was Harley's handler at Cumberland River Records. "What evidence you got?"

"He confessed to me," I said.

"You got it in some, uh, meaningful format? Or something physical?"

"I know where there's a knife that he tried to use to attack me," I said, fumbling, "Though I touched it myself."

"That doesn't sound like an open and shut case, Mr. Marks."

"I also have a hunch," but I had to lick my lips, "That you're going to find a black matchbook in his pocket."

Herman made a noise like 'huhn' and then hung up.

I drove home, locked every door, every window, climbed into bed and didn't sleep a wink.

## **Particular People – Chapter Fifteen**

*Hear no evil in all directions / Execution of bitterness / Message received loud and clear.*  
--"Don't Change," INXS

That night the Nashville PD executed a search warrant on Walker, including his office and his car. They found some hair in his trunk that matched a couple of the matchbook killer victims and they found a plain black matchbook in his pocket, just like I'd said.

"That was meant for my pocket," I said to Herman when I found him standing around outside my apartment the next day and he'd given me the ten second run-down. "He was going to kill me next."

"Is that so, Mr. Marks?" That was all he said. He never even asked me how I'd known. He didn't want to know. Dragging me and Chad and Jude and Hank and Misha and Marshall and the whole Nashville gay scene into court would have weakened his case. At least, that's what I told myself. The impression he gave me was that, to be honest, he just didn't care that much about us.

That day I showed up to the mall even later than usual and found the lot empty and Misha sitting outside. I didn't understand where everyone else had gone but I understood all too well that he didn't get the day off for his boyfriend dying. He had a newspaper folded up next to him but it had been opened, taken apart and put back together a different way. I'd stopped at a gas station and seen the headline: RECORD EXEC SERVED WARRANTS. I parked the Lincoln in the middle of the pavement and got out to walk up to him. He stood, gestured at the mall itself with his chin and said, "They closed it."

"They closed it?"

He nodded. "Closed. For good. They were losing too much money."

We both stared through the dusty doors, through our own reflections and into the dark

recesses of the mall. Somewhere in there was my office, my files. They'd have to let me back in but apparently that wasn't going to be today.

"Why did he do it?" Misha asked.

"He was scared Harley would get sued, get sick, get exposed, something like that. He's nuts. I think he got off on sadism. Serial killers are usually control freaks first and murders second."

Misha nodded. Neither of us had looked away from our own reflections in the doors of the 100 Oaks Mall. We both stood there for a long, long time, what felt like weeks, and then we looked at one another and I slipped an arm around Misha's waist and we kissed. It was everything I'd wanted that night at The Chute only we'd both been waiting longer for it this time. I didn't let go for a while, not even when he started to. He was moulded perfectly to me, made to fit against me, and that one kiss was the sweetest thing that had ever happened to me in my whole life. When we finally pulled just far enough apart to draw a breath he put one hand in the middle of my chest. "It's too soon," he said. "And I'm too uncertain."

I took his chin between thumb and index finger and lifted it so our eyes could meet. "What's to be uncertain about?"

He smiled a little. "Everything. About what you've done. About this Hank, this Jude, about the things that you have implied you've done, about the things I have been able to deduce that you've done. You've taken over a dead man's life and now you'd take over another dead man's boyfriend?"

I blinked at him. Everything got blurry all of a sudden. "I don't understand," I whispered.

He didn't pull away, we stayed wrapped together while we talked, but Misha was sure, thoughtful, things I hadn't been in a long time. "You've given up a lot of your own life in the last few weeks for a whiff of someone else's. I don't know whom I'm kissing. Am I kissing Jyason Marks who flirts and drives a car that's too big and pleated slacks from the JC Penney's outlet in the mall and has his fun but has a center, too? Or am I kissing Jyason Marks the Harley Scoggins impersonator, who wears his clothes and makes love to his men?"

I think my lip probably trembled because he reached up and put a finger to it. "I do not say these things to hurt you, Jyason," he whispered. "I say these things because I have to tell you the truth when things are important. You did something yesterday to find out who killed my Marshall and who killed your Harley and I don't doubt it was a little brave and a little foolish – those are the things that make us love someone in the first place. My problem isn't with the sex you've had, the actions you've taken, but with not knowing enough about those things to understand the reasons for them. Did you realize you were moving stepping into Harley Scoggins' shoes right away? Or did it just happen? If it just happened, Jyason, then what else might just happen in your life?" He moved his hand around to cup my cheek and jaw, rub them with his thumb. I had my sunglasses on but his were pushed back into his hair and his deep blue eyes, almost navy blue, were as clear as could be.

"Is this about punishing me or something?" I probably sounded a little angry but I think I was more likely just scared.

Misha gave me a sad little smile. "No," he said. "But I do have to know what I'm getting into and with whom I'm getting into it. If something is going to happen here then it needs to be with a Jyason Marks that knows who he is and what he wants, not a Jyason Marks who so needs to feel important and excited – stimulated – that he can't predict his own course of action."

"I'll..." I gulped air. "I'll promise anything. I'll take a vow of chastity. Whatever it takes."

Misha smiled again and this time there was more amusement there than before. "I know you would, Jyason. That isn't the problem. What just happened is a big deal. It needs to matter. It needs to matter to both of us. There need to be... ramifications. We need to let this make us question things. We need to process it. We need to deal with it and put it behind us and maybe then we can see whom we see in each other's eyes."

He gave me another kiss and it was much softer. Then he stepped away and said, "Now give me a ride to my apartment and let me out at the sidewalk. I have to get to work finding a new Orange Julius to run and you need to find a space for your office."

"Maybe we could set up in the same mall again?"

Misha smiled at me and walked over to the car. He stood by the other door. "Come on, Jyason. Time's a-wasting, as they say in this country."

I pulled out my keys, stared at the sidewalk for a moment and then walked over to the driver's door and climbed in. He slid into the passenger's seat and we made small talk all the way back to his place. True to his request, I let him out on the sidewalk. He did not invite me in. He did not return my call the next day.

Eventually I got an office downtown but it was in a terrible location and I had to spend money to advertise. When the 100 Oaks reopened in '86 I went back there.

They didn't have an Orange Julius anymore.