


*Even the darkest secrets won't
stay hidden forever...*

WHISPER IN THE DARK



A THRILLER

“PROVOCATIVE...BREATHTAKING.”*

—Publishers Weekly

ROBERT GREGORY BROWNE

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ONE

The Woman Who Wasn't Quite Myra

Chapter 1

It was a pretty uneventful night until the naked lady tried to kill him.

Dubosky was just coming off a twenty-hour shift, had just dropped off a couple of Latino kids who had gotten frisky on his backseat, when he decided to forgo the usual last lap around the neighborhood and head straight for the cab shack.

His dispatcher, Freddy, a waste of space if there ever was one, was on the radio trying to get him to respond.

“Hey, numbnuts, I got another pickup for you.”

Dubosky ignored him.

He couldn't count the number of times he'd heard that phlegm-throttled voice telling him to get his ass in gear, telling him he was one step away from the unemployment line, telling him if he put even a single dent in his rig, it was coming out of his own pocket.

Numbnuts, huh?

Fuck him. And fuck this job, too.

Dubosky didn't know whether it was age or sheer exhaustion that made him feel this way, but after eighteen years on what seemed like an endless circling of the city, he was ready to crash this friggin' rig, grab a shotgun, and start blasting away.

Freddy was first on his list.

Dubosky had been working twelve-, sixteen-, twenty-hour shifts for the better part of his life. He couldn't pick his kids out of a high school yearbook, and if his poor wife hadn't taken on a lover by now, it was a miracle, because he didn't have the energy to eat, let alone screw. Even half a dozen hits of extra-strength Levitra wouldn't get Old Rusty to stir.

There comes a point in your life, he told himself, you gotta ignore all good sense, forget about doing the right thing, and think about one person: you.

Which was exactly what he planned to do the moment he got back to the cab shack. Tell Freddy to shove this job up his stinky little bunghole, then get out into the world and breathe some free friggin' air. Fill his lungs and keep filling 'em and never look back.

By the time he turned onto The Avenue, he was already lost in a daydream about a weeklong cruise in the Greek Islands, Judy hooked on one arm, sipping a piña colada, as they headed back to their cabin to put Old Rusty to the test.

He was pretty deep into it when a shadow flashed under a nearby street lamp. Before he knew Christ from Hosea, a figure darted in front of his windshield.

Dubosky slammed the brakes, his rear end fishtailing, his tires making a sick squeal beneath him. Squeezing his eyes shut, he waited for the inevitable thud of bumper against bone.

But it didn't come.

Instead, he skidded to an unimpeded stop in the middle of the street and looked out to see nothing, nothing but the streetlights and the parked cars and the stark empty black-top with its newly painted lines.

What the hell?

Instinct drew his attention to a space on his left. Huddled between two parked cars, trembling in the cold night

air, was a street hag—this one more street than hag—about thirty or so from the looks of her, and as naked as a two-year-old at bath time.

Except for the blood all over her hands and face.

Jesus. Had he hit her?

Dubosky cranked the parking brake, then threw open his door and took a tentative step toward her. “You okay, lady?”

It was a ridiculous question. She was, after all, crouched there in her birthday suit, covered with about a year’s worth of grime and fresh blood, a skinny little thing looking what could generously be described as disoriented. As he approached her, he realized it didn’t much matter *what* he said. She was tuned to another frequency.

He was about three feet away from her, trying not to stare at her tits—which were, admittedly, pretty remarkable despite the circumstances—when she suddenly looked up at him with fierce, untamed eyes.

Then she pounced.

It was only then that Dubosky realized she was holding a pair of scissors. They arced high in the air—the windup before the pitch. Halfway through the pounce, Dubosky did the instinctive thing again and put a fist in her face.

The woman went down with a whimper, scissors clattering on the blacktop, and stopped moving.

Friggin’ nutcase.

Dubosky crouched beside her and winced. She smelled like roadkill. But she was still breathing. And despite the blood, he couldn’t see any major damage.

Was it even hers?

Glancing at the scissors, which also had a fair amount of blood on them, he wondered if this was the first time she’d tried to use them.

The radio squawked behind him. “Where the hell are you, you goddamn potato chugger?”

Dubosky grabbed a blanket from the trunk, then got on the radio and told Fuckhead Freddy to shut his cake eater and call the cops.

Solomon St. Fort was coming up on the Dumpster behind The Burger Basket, looking to score a late-night snack, when he heard someone crying. It came from inside the alleyway, the deep, wracking sobs of a soul in pain.

Solomon hesitated, listening to the sound, torn between hunger and curiosity.

His gaze drifted to the Dumpster. The Burger Basket routinely dumped their leftovers, filling the bin with stuff they couldn't unload before closing time. Solomon could smell the chili dogs from ten yards away.

But the dumpster wasn't going anywhere, and the sobbing intrigued him. Moving into the alley, he headed toward the source of the sound, stopping short when he saw a man in a ratty overcoat sitting in the narrow space between two overflowing trash cans, knees to his chest, head in his hands, crying like a lost child.

Solomon immediately recognized him. "Clarence?"

The man looked up sharply, tears streaming, ragged tracks on a dirty face. The sobs grew louder when he saw Solomon. "She's dead, man. She's dead."

Solomon frowned. "Who's dead? Who you talkin' about?"

"Who you think? Myra, that's who."

Myra was a stone-cold junkie who had hooked up with Clarence about six months ago. Fine-looking white woman who used to be a swimsuit model, although she didn't have much meat on her bones these days. Solomon had just seen her this afternoon, over at the Brotherhood of Christ soup kitchen, thinking she didn't look quite right.

"What happened?" he asked.

“I told you she was sick, man. Coughin’ up all that shit. Then she goes and puts the needle in her arm and bugs out right there in front of me, eyes rolling up inside her head. Next thing I know she’s on the ground and she ain’t movin’.”

Solomon felt gut punched. He hadn’t known Myra very long, but he liked her. Had a kind of fatherly affection for her. “How long ago was this?”

“I don’t know. Couple hours.”

“And you just left her?”

“She’s dead, man. What am I supposed to do?”

“Don’t you know nothin’ about junkies?” Solomon said. “Just ’cause they stop movin’ don’t mean they’re dead. You shoulda got some help.”

“From who?” Clarence cried. “The cops? They ain’t interested in some hopped-up street whore.”

“Bullshit. You got scared, so you run away.”

Solomon remembered how Myra had once shown him a picture from a magazine. Kept it folded up in the back pocket of those ratty jeans she wore. It was an old ad for men’s cologne, a younger Myra staring out at the camera with pouty lips and fuck-me eyes.

He heaved a weary sigh. “If she wasn’t dead then,” he said, “she probably is now. Where’d you leave her?”

Clarence wiped his face with the sleeve of his overcoat. “Over at our place, under the lean-to.”

“Come on.” Solomon said, then reached out and pulled Clarence to his feet.

“Where we goin’?”

“Where you think we’re goin’?”

“No way, man. I don’t wanna see her lookin’ like that.”

“I don’t give a damn what you want. We’re gonna do right by Myra. She was a good woman.”

Clarence started crying again. Solomon threw an arm

around his shoulder and the two men walked the three blocks back to the freeway underpass, where Clarence and Myra shared a small cardboard lean-to among the litter of street people who called the river bottom home.

When they got there, they were surprised to find the rutted earth beneath the lean-to was empty except for Myra's dope kit, a jumble of plastic bags she used for blankets, and her clothes, which were scattered in the dirt.

No sign of Myra anywhere. Dead or otherwise.

"You sure this is where you left her?"

"I may be a drunk," Clarence said, "but I ain't crazy. She was right here."

"Well, she ain't here now." Solomon picked up Myra's jeans, dug in the back pocket, and found that same folded magazine page she'd shown him. He opened it up and stared at it, thinking how pretty she looked, thinking what a shame it was that she'd let the needle get ahold of her.

Clarence was crying again.

Then a voice from the darkness said, "You looking for the white girl?"

Solomon turned and saw Billy Eagleheart, a burly Mitskanaka Indian, curled up under his own lean-to.

"Yeah," Solomon said. "Somebody come and collect her?"

"Collect her? Last I saw, she was up on her own two, more or less."

Solomon and Clarence exchanged looks, and Clarence immediately stopped crying. "She's alive?"

"Stood right where you're standing," Billy said, then nodded to the jeans in Solomon's hand. "I don't know what she was on, but she was ripping off them rags like they were burning her skin. Had me wishin' I had a handful of dollar bills." He grinned at the memory.

"Don't you be playin' with us, Billy."

“I ain’t playin’ with nobody. Watched her stumble on up that hill, naked as a goddamn prairie bird. Looked like she was on a mission.” He chuckled. “Maybe she needed some new shoes to match her ensemble.”

Solomon turned, looking at Clarence. “You hear that? All that crying for nothin’.”

“No way,” Clarence said. “She was dead. I know dead when I see it.”

“Yeah, and I know dumb when I’m lookin’ at it.”

Solomon nodded thanks to Billy, returned the magazine page to Myra’s pocket, then gathered up the rest of her clothes and hooked a thumb at Clarence. “Let’s go round her up before the cops do.”

As they headed up the embankment toward Main Street, Billy said, “You find her, let me know what she does for an encore.”

Betty Burkus found the body.

She was an old woman who had trouble sleeping, the extra weight and the constant heartburn and the sleep apnea making life twice as miserable as it should have been. She had rolled out of bed a little after one A.M., hoping a glass of ice water would kill the fire in her stomach.

Standing at the refrigerator in her small courtyard apartment, she glanced out her kitchen window and noticed that, across the way, the Janovic door was hanging wide open.

She sighed. Carl Janovic had been a pain in her backside since the day he moved in. The way he and his friends paraded in and out of that apartment, she might as well have had a revolving door installed. It was times like this Betty wished to God she’d never agreed to take on management duties. A two-hundred-dollar rent reduction was hardly worth all the fuss and bother.

Moving to her phone, she picked up the handset and

pressed number three—she had Janovic on speed dial, that’s how much trouble he was—then listened to it ring and ring. Not too surprised when she didn’t get an answer, she sighed again, cradled the phone, then threw on a robe and headed into the courtyard.

She was halfway to the Janovic apartment when she started to reconsider this little excursion. It was, after all, well past bedtime for most normal human beings, and an open front door at almost one thirty in the morning was not a sign of welcome. Especially when you factored in the complete lack of lights. No porch light, nothing in the foyer, the place as black and silent as an abandoned mine.

But despite her complaints, Betty had always believed that if you take on a job you should *do* that job, so she soldiered on, trudging up to the open door and peering inside. “Mr. Janovic?”

She waited for an answer and got none. Also not a surprise. Chances were pretty good that Janovic had gone out with one of his light-in-the-loafers boyfriends and was so busy playing grabass he’d forgotten to close his door. Not that Betty had anything against his type. They could do whatever they wanted in the privacy of their own homes, but did they always have to flaunt it?

She leaned past the doorway. “Mr. Janovic?”

Still no answer. She was about to say to hell with it and pull the door shut when an odd smell wafted into her nasal radar. Betty frowned, sniffed. It smelled like . . . well, to be frank, like someone had fouled his pants.

Was it a plumbing problem? Had Janovic gone and clogged up his . . . Oh, God, the visual popping into her head right now was too awful to even contemplate.

Yet that smell was unmistakable. And if the plumbing *was* clogged, that meant it was up to her to get it taken care of.

Betty sighed again. Why oh why had she ever taken this stupid job? Stepping into the foyer, she fumbled for the light switch. There wasn't much point in saying anything out loud, but she nevertheless tried a third time: "Mr. Janovic? Are you home?"

She flicked the switch, half expecting to find a pile of excrement in the middle of the polished wood floor.

What she found instead was Carl Janovic, lying faceup in a pool of blood, wearing only a bra, panties, and a shiny blond wig, his eyes wide and lifeless, his bare chest and abdomen covered with dark, gaping puncture wounds.

That was when Betty Burkus backed out of the apartment and vomited a night's worth of antacids, thin mints, and leftover Hamburger Helper into the ficus tree on Janovic's front porch.

Chapter 2

“Hiya, Frankie boy. Where’s your partner?”

“I’m dining solo these days.”

“Yeah? There’s a nice little after-dinner snack waiting for you inside.”

Frank Blackburn had just pulled up to the crime scene, an upscale courtyard apartment complex called the Fontana Arms. The crime tech wagons had beat him there and Kat Pendergast, a cute, coltish patrol officer, was waiting for him at the gated entranceway.

“You the first responder?” Blackburn asked.

“Me and Hogan, yeah.”

Kat opened the gate and motioned him past. They moved together into the courtyard, where a platoon of crime scene techs flowed in and out of an open apartment doorway. Across the way, a fat woman in a faded bathrobe watched the proceedings from her kitchen window, hand clutched to her throat in horror.

Blackburn turned to Pendergast. “How many units this place have?”

“About ten.”

“You scare up any witnesses?”

“Not so far,” Kat said. “Hogan and a couple of the backup boys are shaking ’em out of bed as we speak.”

They moved up to the doorway, Blackburn taking in

the glassy-eyed twentysomething who lay in the middle of the floor. Jesus, what a mess. The bra, panties, and wig were a nice touch—and the reason they'd dragged him out of bed. Even a hint of sexual assault and it was his squad's catch.

Special Victims.

"Lovely," he said. "Who is he?"

"Carl Joseph Janovic. Twenty-four years old. Moved in about three months ago. Landlady thought it was important to let us know he's a high-octane butt pilot."

"Looks like somebody was afraid to fly." Blackburn stared at the dark wounds and the blood, which had splattered just about every surface within a three-foot radius. He sighed. "Why do I always get stuck with the nasty ones?"

"Because nobody likes you."

Blackburn shot her a look and Kat threw her hands up. "Don't kill the messenger. Just ask Carmody."

"Carmody can kiss my ass," Blackburn said, then offered just enough of a smile to let her know he was kidding. Which he wasn't.

Truth be told, Blackburn had never been a particularly popular addition to the unit, a fact he attributed to his unbridled insensitivity and severe lack of social skills.

His ex-partner, Susan Carmody, an uptight Republican Goldilocks who was more suited to a career with FOX News than a detective squad, seemed to take offense to his occasional remarks about her rear end—which, Republican or not, was quite formidable.

Blackburn had grown up with four older brothers, in a household where such lapses of decorum were not only encouraged, but served as a measure of your masculinity.

So could she really blame him?

Apparently so. Six months after they partnered up, Carmody stopped just short of filing a grievance against

him and transferred to Homicide. Rumor had it she was already screwing a White Shirt and was up for promotion. Seemed she had no trouble *using* the rear end she didn't want Blackburn making remarks about, but that was neither here nor there.

Bottom line, the Unit was short a body and he was an army of one right now. And when it came down to it, that was just fine by him. That way, he didn't have to spend every ten seconds wondering whether he was properly navigating the battlefield of political correctness.

Besides, Blackburn wasn't here to win a popularity contest. All he wanted to do was work the case and make a collar.

He looked at the body again. "I can already see this one's gonna be loads of fun. You got a cigarette on you?"

"I thought you quit."

"A temporary solution to a long-term problem."

"Uh-huh," Kat said. "You know what they say, don't you?"

"What's that?"

"It's just an oral fixation."

Blackburn grinned. "You speaking from experience?"

She rolled her eyes. "Why don't you chew on a carrot or something."

"You got a carrot on you?"

Pendergast shook her head, stifled a smile. "You're too much, Detective." Starting back across the courtyard, she said, "I'm gonna go give Hogan a hand."

Blackburn watched her go, his eyes fixed on what was, without a doubt, another formidable rear end.

Careful, big guy.

Sometimes they bite.

Determining time of death was a science that Blackburn had no real interest in understanding.

Oh, he had learned the basics: body temperature, corneal cloudiness, potassium leak rate, parasite infestation, but anything beyond that was a foreign language to him and he'd never been good at geek. All he was interested in was the final determination, and preferred to be spared a detailed road map of how the medical examiner got there.

Some might say that made him a lousy investigator. And, who knows? Maybe they'd be right. But Blackburn had proven more than once that he wasn't all that concerned with what some might say. He'd cleared enough cases to shut most of them up.

The assistant M.E. assigned to the case, a chiseled-jawed Swede named Mats Hansen, was something of a whiz at pinpointing time of death. He usually proffered a guess right there at the scene that, more often than not, proved to be accurate.

"So what do you say, Mats? What's the magic number?"

Hansen was crouched over the body, staring intently at Janovic's bloody chest. "This one's pretty fresh. I'd say two hours, give or take."

Blackburn checked his watch. "So . . . what? Around midnight?"

"Glad to know you can subtract."

The world was full of wiseasses.

"I wouldn't want to second-guess anybody here, but is it safe to assume he was stabbed to death?"

"Cardio-respiratory arrest is more likely," Hansen said, then smiled. "Caused, of course, by the stabbing."

Comedians, too.

"Thanks for the clarification. What kind of weapon are we looking for?"

Hansen leaned in for a closer look at one of the puncture wounds. "A single-edged blade," he said. "I'm guessing

a steak knife, about half an inch wide. We've got six fairly forceful hits to the chest and abdomen. At least two of them pierced the breastbone, probably ruptured the heart."

"Wonderful," Blackburn said. "He didn't happen to spell the killer's name in his own blood, did he?"

Hansen, being infinitely more adept at social niceties than Blackburn, chuckled politely and said, "Sorry, Agatha, no such luck. My guess is he was dead after the first hit. The rest were just for good measure. A lot of rage there. And check out the hands and forearms."

Blackburn looked. "No defense wounds."

Hansen nodded. "Happened so fast he didn't have time to react. No sign of forced entry or a struggle of any kind. Front security gate wasn't touched. This guy knew his attacker." He gestured to a crimson smear on the floor. "And it looks like we have a partial footprint."

"Oh?" Blackburn crouched down, studying the smear, but couldn't make heads or tails of it. Or heels or toes, for that matter.

"And when I say foot," Hansen continued, "I mean barefoot. Whoever left it wasn't wearing shoes, and it's most likely a woman."

Blackburn stared at the smear a moment longer, wondering if Hansen had quit smoking too, because you'd have to consume a whole shitload of carrots to see all that.

But if Hansen was right, then the rather obvious theory that had been percolating in Blackburn's brain—that this had been the work of a jilted gay lover—had just fallen victim to a busted pilot light.

Hansen launched into his usual disclaimer about providing a more definitive analysis once he got back to the lab, but Blackburn tuned him out. If the murder happened around midnight, then one of the other tenants might've

been awake and seen something useful, like Cinderella fleeing the scene without her slippers.

Who knows, maybe he'd get lucky with this one. Not that he and Luck were on speaking terms, but you never knew.

No sooner had he thought this than his cell phone rang.

It was Kat Pendergast. "I've got two words for you and I think you're gonna like them."

"Don't keep me in suspense too long."

"Naked lady," Kat said.

Blackburn paused. "There's a couple ways I could respond to that. What exactly does it mean?"

"I just got a call from dispatch. Seems a cab driver almost ran down a naked woman about two blocks from here on The Avenue. She's covered with blood."

Blackburn felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "You gotta be kidding me."

"I kid you not," Kat said. "And when the cabbie stopped to help her? She tried to stab him."

Chapter 3

Solomon and Clarence weren't having much luck finding Myra. They tried the usual haunts: the strip mall that held a Rite Aid drugstore, a Von's supermarket, a fast-food Chinese joint, and a Taco Bell. Then they checked the 24-hour laundromat behind it, where a lot of folks gathered to get warm on chilly nights like this one.

No sign of her.

They wandered up The Avenue, checking the dark doorways of the discount dental offices and pawn shops. Still nothing.

Where the hell had she got to?

They were about to give up when Solomon spotted the flashing lights of a police cruiser and an ambulance up near DeAnza Drive, where The Avenue abruptly turned from brown-skinned working class to white yuppie paradise.

A couple of paramedics were loading a woman onto a gurney in the back of the ambulance, her bony bare legs hanging out of the blanket wrapped around her. She looked unconscious.

"Shit," Solomon said. "We're too late."

"What?" Clarence squinted into the darkness. He'd

broken his glasses a couple weeks ago and Solomon knew he couldn't see worth a damn. "Is that Myra?"

"How many white women you know walkin' around butt naked at two o'clock in the A.M.?" He gestured for Clarence to follow. "But let's go make sure."

Clarence didn't move. "I ain't goin' near no cops."

"They got their hands full. They ain't gonna be fussin' with the likes of you."

"That's right," Clarence said, "'cause I ain't stupid enough to get that close." He turned and started in the opposite direction.

"Come on, man. Why you always gotta run?"

"That's what keeps me alive. I ain't goin' down for no junkie-ass whore. 'Specially a dead one."

"If she was dead, they'd be loadin' her in the back of a coroner's van. Least we can do is find out where they're takin' her."

"Be my guest," Clarence said. "But count me out."

A moment later, he was across the street and gone.

Solomon shook his head, wondering what Clarence's tears had been about. Did he care about Myra or what? Then a sudden realization hit him. Maybe Myra hadn't shot herself up, after all. Maybe it was Clarence who gave her the needle. She goes flatline, and it was panic, not grief, making him cry.

Solomon had always thought Myra was too good for the sonofabitch anyway.

He worked his way up the block toward the police cruiser and ambulance. There was a Seaside Cab parked several yards away, its driver leaning against the left front fender, quietly sucking on a cigarette.

By the time Solomon got close, a late-model sedan had pulled up to the scene, and a big guy in a suit and tie climbed out. A plainclothes detective.

What the hell did *he* want?

One of the uniformed cops called him Blackburn and they exchanged pleasantries that, to Solomon's mind, weren't all that pleasant.

A small crowd had gathered, a lot of folks standing around in their pj's, and Solomon did his best to blend in. He still had Myra's filthy clothes tucked under one arm. A coupla house hens took one look at him, crinkled their noses, and stepped aside, giving him wide berth.

So much for that plan.

The cop named Blackburn took a look into the back of the ambulance, then turned to one of the uniforms as he gestured toward the cab driver. "I hear she tried to stab him."

Solomon's ears pricked up. Myra?

"So he says," the uniform told Blackburn. "Came at him with a pair of scissors."

"Scissors?" Blackburn seemed surprised.

"That's right." The uniform went to the front seat of the cruiser and brought out a plastic bag carrying a bloodied pair of sewing shears.

Blackburn took the bag, studied it for a moment, then handed it back. "He say what direction she came from?"

The uniform pointed across the street, which was lined with apartment houses. "Over that way. Looks like she could've cut right through from Hopi Lane."

Blackburn turned to one of the paramedics. "How bad is she hurt?"

"She's got a pretty good knot on her cheek where the cab driver thumped her, but the blood isn't hers, if that's what you're asking. Got some cuts and bruises, but nothing that would cause that much bleeding."

Hearing this, Solomon felt relieved. If that was Myra in there, at least she was okay. But what was all this bullshit about her trying to stab somebody?

Not the Myra *he* knew.

He wished he could get a closer look.

“We’ve gotta sit on her until the assistant M.E. gets here,” Blackburn said. “I need a sample of that blood.”

“We should’ve been on our way to the ER by now.”

“And I should be in bed with a beautiful blonde, but that ain’t likely to happen anytime soon.”

Before the paramedic could protest, Blackburn turned and walked over to the cab driver, flashing his badge. They exchanged a few words and, from Solomon’s vantage point, it looked like Blackburn was trying to bum a cigarette.

Solomon turned his attention away from them and looked in toward the woman on the gurney, figuring now was as good a time as any to get a better look. He stepped forward, moving closer to the ambulance. He wasn’t half-way to it when one of the uniforms spotted him and came over.

“Hey, hey, what’re you up to?”

“I think she’s a friend of mine.”

The uniform looked him over, barely disguising his contempt. “You been drinking, pops? Figure maybe you can sneak a peek at a naked lady?”

Solomon ignored him. “Her name is Myra.”

“Well, what do you know.” The uniform turned to his partner. “You hear that, Jerry? She’s got a name and everything—and it ain’t Tina Tits.”

His partner chuckled and Solomon took an instant dislike to both of them, the way they were disrespecting Myra. He had the terrible urge to lash out, but kept himself under control.

The cop named Blackburn was coming over now, no cigarette in evidence, and he didn’t look happy. “Toomey, do us all a favor and shut your fuckin’ yap.”

The partner, Jerry, quickly averted his eyes, but the one

called Toomey shot Blackburn a look. There wasn't any love lost between these two. For a moment, Solomon thought they might come to blows, then Toomey backed off, joining Jerry over by their patrol car.

Blackburn turned to Solomon. "You say you know this woman?"

Solomon nodded. "I think so. I just need a better look."

Blackburn gestured and they walked over to the ambulance. "Go ahead."

Solomon glanced around, felt all the eyes on him, then stepped up into the back of the ambulance.

The woman had blood on her and some of it had soaked into the blanket. Her left shoulder was exposed and Solomon immediately recognized the faded Hello Kitty tattoo adorning it.

Myra had once told him that they'd called her that when she was modeling. Kitty. She'd walk into a studio and they'd all go, "Hello, Kitty." Kinda laughing when they said it.

He let his gaze drift up to her face, but was surprised by what he saw—and it wasn't the blood that startled him.

Taking a couple involuntary steps backward, he almost fell out of the ambulance.

The cop named Blackburn steadied him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin'," Solomon said. "She . . . she looks different, is all."

"Different? Is she your friend or not?"

Solomon was momentarily at a loss for words. How could this be? When he found his voice, he said, "I *thought* she was, but now I ain't so sure."

"What do you mean?"

Solomon swallowed. "That looks like her body, all right. But there's something wrong with her face."

Blackburn frowned at him. He looked as if he was about to respond when the woman's eyes flew open, as wide and frightened as a trapped animal's. Her mouth started moving, words tumbling out so rapidly they were barely intelligible:

“. . . a lie stands on one leg, the truth on two . . .”

What the hell?

“. . . a lie stands on one leg, the truth on two . . .”

Her gaze focused on Solomon.

“Two times four is a lie, two times four is a lie, two times four is a lie, two times four is a . . .”

Then, with a cry of rage like Solomon had never before heard, she sprang up from the gurney and lunged at him.

Blackburn had never seen anyone move so fast.

One minute she was babbling incoherently, the next she was launching herself at the old homeless guy like a charge from a shotgun.

Blackburn immediately grabbed for her, but she spun on him, catching him off-guard, swinging a bloody fist at his head.

He stumbled back, and before he knew it she was out of the ambulance and running. Toomey and his partner and the EMTs all stood around with their heads up their asses as Blackburn regained his footing and took off after her.

She plowed through the crowd, screams and shouts erupting around her, then cut diagonally across the road, heading for a narrow side street crowded with parked cars and boxy, rundown houses.

Blackburn heard an engine start up behind him—the patrol officers finally getting their shit together—but the psycho bitch cut sideways, heading into the darkness between two houses.

Jerking his Glock out of its holster, Blackburn followed, picking up speed, then slowing as he reached the mouth

of the passageway. He listened for sounds of movement, but all he could hear was the commotion behind him, the distant barking of a dog, and—

—what?

Psycho Bitch, babbling again. Barely a whisper.

“A lie stands on one leg, the truth on two, a lie stands on one leg, the truth on two, a lie stands on one leg, the truth on . . .”

Blackburn took out his Mini-Mag, flicked it on, and pointed it into the passageway.

Psycho Bitch sat huddled near the wall of one of the houses, next to an old, rusted bicycle, the blood on her face shining garishly in the light, her eyes alive and frightened.

“Two times four is a lie, two times four is a lie, two times four is a lie, two times four is a lie . . .”

Blackburn slowly moved toward her. “Easy now.”

One of her hands dropped to her side, fingers groping in the dirt, searching for something, then latching onto a small, dusty chunk of brick. Her inner arm was mottled with bruises. Needle tracks.

“Drop it,” Blackburn said. “Put it down.”

“Two times four is a lie, two times four is a lie, two times four is a lie, two times four is a . . .”

“Come on, now, nobody’s gonna hurt you. Put the brick down and step away from the wall.”

He knew it was probably pointless talking to her. She was deep inside her own head. But he kept trying anyway, wondering where the hell his backup was.

“Put it down,” he told her again. “Put it down and we’ll find someone to—”

There was a shout behind him as a car screeched up and—

—suddenly the fingers hurled the brick, forcing Blackburn to duck. Psycho Bitch sprang from her crouch with

an animal-like agility and threw her arms around him, knocking him against the adjacent wall. The Mini-Mag flew out of his hands as—

—the shouts grew louder and then Toomey and his partner were there, pulling her off him and wrestling her to the ground, as Blackburn got to his feet, struggling to catch his breath.

He stared down at them, annoyed.

“I can’t believe you morons didn’t cuff the bitch.”

Still rattled, Solomon edged away from the ambulance, watching as the crowd of onlookers moved across the street, then down toward where the cop car had screeched to a stop.

The EMTs had already followed on foot and now they were bringing her out—the woman who wasn’t quite Myra—carrying her between them, her hands cuffed behind her, her bruised and bloodied body exposed to the world.

Solomon thought about her face, about how different it had looked. And about those wild, terrified eyes.

A sudden thought occurred to him then—a memory of his childhood in St. Thomas and a grandfather who liked to tell tall tales.

Tales of darkness and death and resurrection.

And as he thought about those tales and what they’d meant to him, a single phrase crowded his brain. One that had given him nightmares for years:

Enfants du tambour.

Children of the drum.

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