

She was plump when I first met her, little girl fat clinging to curves too stubborn to fill out. Eleven going on twenty. Eyes full of shit no one should have to see, especially little kids. Didn't remember where she came from or wasn't saying. Just sat there in that old motel room, covered in blood, head held high, like she'd been to some charm school, only charm school was old school and nobody took "charm" anymore.

Nobody.

When they came and took her away, she didn't say a word. Just looked at me with those blue seen-too-much-of-the-world eyes.

Then she turned away.

And never looked back.

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That was fifteen years ago. Another time, another life. Back then I was a cop in San Diego, California, dealing with humanity's ugly side every hour, every minute, every second of the day.

Now, I'm just a Lincoln City P.I. Hung a sign so small most folks squint to read it on my door stating only my name: Robert Quigley.

Things are pretty low key up here in Oregon. Folks call me Bo, instead of Robert or Bob and I like it that way. Not to say bad things don't happen; L. C. has its share of the nasties. But I soured on nasties working SDPD. These days I leave trouble where it belongs: in the capable hands of the authorities.

Like Grandpappy always said, "Trouble's like a pack of fleas. Once you got it, it never goes away."

I'd left those fleas behind the day I left San Diego. Kept my nose out of trouble ever since. So when I got back from a cut-and-shave one rainy Tuesday in late May and found a woman curled up in the overstuffed recliner parked outside my office door, I was blindsided. Not because I didn't recognize her.

Because I didn't smell the trouble.

Smelled cinnamon and spice and something I couldn't quite identify trying to take over the stale office air, but I didn't smell trouble.

Guess I was out of practice.

I stood in the waiting room doorway and studied the storm-darkened room. The woman snorted – a soft, feminine sort of snore – murmured something I couldn't make out, then quieted

back down.

Should've left her snoring. Headed down to the beach. Let the rain clear the cobwebs from my brain.

But I waited, staring at the sailboat pictures on the walls. Listening to the rain slash eager against the windows. Wondering for the thousandth time how long before a tsunami – a real, soul-sucking, hotel-crushing monster wave – took out my little slice of the Lincoln City business world.

Not that I'd miss the expense. I pay too much cash for a waiting room and office on the bottom floor of a renovated bed and breakfast. The waiting room wraps around a recliner that pretends to be leather and a secretary's desk made for a midget, a too-tight glove dying to be removed. The office is what makes the deal, though. Six inches wider than the waiting room and almost as long. Everything nicely decked out with ocean memorabilia in true Lincoln City style.

The attorneys upstairs claim they got the best view. Maybe so, but I got a sliding glass door that dumps right onto the beach.

That and three pennies . . .

The slumbering babe cracked open an eye. A blue, seen-too-much-of-the-world, eye. That's when I knew. She was all grown up, baby fat turned to womanly curves, plump in all the right places, but it was definitely Sheila Lange.

Time changed the girl into a woman, but time couldn't change those eyes.

"You broke my heart," she said, voice low and throaty as a cat's purr. She opened the other eye. Cradled her head in her hand. Stared.

Why did I suddenly feel like a mouse caught halfway between the fridge and his safe hole?

I shook the rain off my hat and tossed it at the stand guarding the door to my inner sanctum, keeping my movements slow and nonchalant. "Kids don't have hearts. They have dreams that never come true."

The hat – a hand-brushed Belfry Classic Murino done up safari style – snagged a peg, twirled once, then settled. I turned and parked a hip against the secretary's desk. Waited some more. I could wait all day if I had to.

The storm outside intensified, sucking out more light and replacing it with a damp chill that went straight to the bones as Sheila uncurled like a cat just waking up from a nap. I wondered if

she practiced the move along with the voice.

And why.

Too many years since that day in the city. The day little Sheila sharpened her claws and dug them in, refusing to be abused anymore. The day I decided to stop pretending to be a cop.

"I'm married." Again the purr.

I crossed my arms and waited, searching her face for a clue that the little girl I once knew was still there – vulnerable, scared, and defiant – hiding behind the veil of city mall makeup and self-certainty.

Faux tan cheeks with rose blush. Pearl eye shadow. A slash of red mouth. But no sign of the eight-year old who had almost gone to prison.

"You know Sheldon Price, don't you? He owns one of the biggest electronic stores in southern California." She stood with a smoothness that would make her feline brethren proud and took two steps to the desk. The strange cinnamon-spice fragrance drifted with her like a cloud of anxious mosquitoes.

I shook my head and squinted down at her through the cinnamon. "Don't know the man." Couldn't be from around here. Politicians, cops, attorneys, prominent business types – I knew them all. It was part of the job.

"He . . . treats me right."

A whole lot of hurt in those words. The kind of hurt that could be contagious. The kind of hurt best left alone.

"What are you doing here, Sheila?" I crossed my feet at the ankle. Leaned back further on the desk. Away from the cinnamon. Away from trouble. I'd let myself get wrapped up in hurt before. Bad enough when you owned the hurt. Deadly when you didn't.

"I'm in trouble, Bo. Big time. I need you to get me out of it."

I could hear the elevator beep down the hall. What natural color there was faded from Sheila's face, leaving behind two rose-colored feathers on each cheek and a slash of red where her mouth used to be.

"Friends of yours?" I raised an eyebrow and nodded at the hall.

"I thought I'd have more time," she murmured. She bit her lip and suddenly that sultry cat self disappeared. In its place, confusion and defeat. For one brief moment, Sheila looked like the little girl I'd found all those years ago, knife clenched tight in a blood-drenched fist, staring

down at the man she thought she'd just killed.

Her father.

The man who'd abused her over and over until one day she just couldn't take any more. The neighbors heard her screams and called for help.

Back in my young and stupid days. When I thought working a beat could somehow save the world.

Footsteps shuffled in the hall and the little girl disappeared, tucked back inside that protective cat personae. She gave a quick smile and shrugged. "I thought we'd have more time to catch up, but your police work fast here in Lincoln City."

I shoved away from the desk. "What . . . ?"

"Just remember – whatever they said I did, however convincing they sound, I didn't do it. And I need you to prove it."

"Didn't do what?"

She laid her hand against my chest, light as a down feather. "You were there for me once before, Bo. Please, for old time's sake, be there again."

The footsteps stopped. I looked up and frowned at the homicide detective dripping rain in my doorway. Time to take control of a situation that seemed suddenly out of hand. "What're you doing here, Duke? Can't you see I've got a client?"

Tall as his namesake and twice as ornery. That's how Duke McKenzie once described himself. Stretching it on the tall part, but the ornery part was right on.

"Sorry to barge in, but your client has a previous appointment." Duke waved and two uniformed officers wearing dripping-wet navy blue slickers stepped into the room. Looked like I wouldn't have to shampoo my carpet after all. The scent of fresh rain overpowered the cinnamon spice. "Game's over, Mrs. Price. But I think you know that already."

He moved over to Sheila. "Hands behind your back, Mrs. Price. You know the drill."

I stepped forward, but one of the officers threw a body block my way. "Stay where you are, sir."