

Meryl McQueen

Velvet Corner Blue

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For Yusuf, who said yes

Chicago: September, 2015

It wasn't self-defense. I told the cops it was, when they came to arrest me. I told the lawyer it was, when he sat across the table from me in the interview room down at the station. Chester Finch, public defender, all of twenty-six years old, a white boy from Cedar Rapids, with a shiny, black briefcase and a fistful of click-it ballpoint pens. I told the shrinks they sent in, doctors Garth and O'Grady, a pair of women who looked like wooden ducks, all beak and beady eyes and quack-quack-quacking on about childhood and neurological impairment. Three years after the fact, twice more after that, I fed the parole board the same damn line, the uptight suits in a stiff row, their poisoned arrows lined up to shoot me down.

Yeah, I tossed them all the same bait, the cops and the lawyer and the psychs and the parole board. Even Judge Taylor, with her purple talons, blue rinse

beehive, and robe so big it swallowed her to the top of her neck, sitting there like the dark shadow of God in the courtroom. I pledged the truth and perjured myself without blinking, without a wasted breath.

They couldn't argue with the injuries. Zipper scar the color and ruffles of a pink carnation from cheekbone to chin, nose broken but never well-set, and nothing to say that my knee healed right. Sure, I played it up a little, hobbling to the stand, leaning hard on the red cane with the dragon's head carved into the knob, swaying as they swore me in. Telling them the same old, same old story, one they'd heard a thousand times before.

It wasn't self-defense. But I knew the lingo, the legal-speak, the case law. I'd read all about it at the Harold Washington Library, State and Van Buren, sneaking off between cold sausage-and-extra-garlic pizza and a House of Blues gig for an hour in the stacks, taking mental notes. Never wrote a thing down, kept it all tucked inside. I left the bodyguards and the sweet ride behind. Hat on, head down, straight through the library doors. No one suspected a thing.

It wasn't self-defense. I killed him on the hottest day in

July; I'd been planning it since Halloween.

The money? The money was the easiest part. You think real estate, you think, "Location, location, location." I figured, you think murder, you think, "Cash, cash, cash." I've got about two and a half million stashed from Kenosha to Joliet. Worn bills, starched clean as a preacher's collar on Sunday, all under floorboards and behind circuit breaker panels in public places, all where I can get to it, easy and quick. One stash at a time.

Image? Image is easy. Shave less, drink more, shower every three days, tattoo inked on somewhere that can show when you want it to. Besides, it's about the threads, the style. Dump the bling, the lights go out, TV cameras disappear, and all you've got left is a lonely nobody from nowhere.

And the line? Wrong place, wrong time. Just another invisible man: no past, no pressure to be someone else. That's the bait. Here's the switch.

It couldn't be me that killed the bastard. Sure, I knew guys who would have done it for an offshore account and a one-way ticket. Not up close, not in my circle, though the bodyguards always have guns they

know how to use. Soul music has its own demons—drugs, girls—but I was no gangsta rapper, gangsta wannabe, gangsta nothing. I just knew people. You don't get as good and as loud and as loaded down with Grammys as I am without knowing who lives in the shadows.

You think I didn't think of that first, trying to find a way to keep my life?

But this wasn't some biker blood feud, with the body count the only measure of success. It was one man, one man who deserved to be hurt. I couldn't risk dragging Macey and the rest of the crew into it. I didn't want to give them the politician's excuse, 'plausible deniability,' where every word they said was another step closer to the truth. I needed to give them absolute alibis. I needed to be three months dead.

Okay, I could have run farther, faster. But I'm not a small stakes man—don't give me no five-dollar ticket at the dog races, no back alley dice game, no Sunday football spread at the water cooler. Never been to Vegas, but guarantee if I do make it to the 24/7 gambling capital I head straight for the big boys with their smooth suits and silky Cubans. Forget about not

fitting in; I'd wear my Armani with the platinum cufflinks, Zermegildo shoes shined sharp, Cardin rimless glasses. Money clip? Sure, skip the Ben Franklins and go right for the McKinleys, show the table I'm there for keeps. Rustle up the muscle, Frankie and Jeron, two-by-two, stand behind my chair like statues. Poker with the big boys.

Yeah, that's me. Do it hard, do it fast, do it right. None of that lazy-ass, small-time crap. Don't need to stand in the middle of the see-saw, tipping it up and down, praying I'm not gonna fall off. I'd rather jump, take my chances.

Not that hard to disappear. You read those detective novels, guys in debt or women in trouble faking their own deaths, flushing wedding rings down the can. Most people are invisible anyway, even at night, naked under the covers with husbands and wives and lovers, no one sees them. In winter, Chicago is a single ant column of the shivering lost, each person following the one in front by instinct. Blind under their scarves and their parkas and their ear-flap hats, they bump and mutter, weaving around one another, veering off into dead-end jobs, writing shopping lists or hating

their bosses or worrying about that lump they found in the shower. Invisible. In summer, the Lakeshore trades boots for bicycles, but nothing changes. Eyes on the asphalt, shouts of ‘on your left,’ mingled with blood-pumped commuters, pedaling on the bridge to nowhere.

Imagine all that, inside out. Not a chance in hell they’d recognize a celebrity who simply didn’t want to be seen. Not without my entourage, who mostly carried blanks. Not without my wheels, the silver Hummer, or the paparazzi I paid to chase me when I was getting started in the biz.

It wasn't self-defense.

It was rage at what happened to Rebecca, though I hadn’t seen her in fourteen years.

Nah, it wasn’t self-defense.

It was tempered, disciplined, careful revenge, sculpted from rage. It was retribution. It was worth every day of every week of every month of nine and a half long years downstate.

You want to know why I didn’t tell them? Why I didn’t find a less bloody way to expose his lies, to show the world their precious hero was the bad guy?

Evidence. One brittle word, held up against

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