



*BLOODY MARY* by J.A. Konrath. Copyright ©2005 by J.A. Konrath. Available in paperback and hardcover by Hyperion Books, and on CD, MP3, and cassette by Brilliance Audio, wherever books are sold. All Rights Reserved. Unauthorized reproduction or distribution will result in a stern lecture.

**Bloody Mary**

**1½ oz. Vodka**

**4 oz. Tomato juice**

**1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce**

**Several drops of Tabasco sauce**

Shake well over ice and strain into an old fashioned glass.

Add several ice cubes and celery.

## Prologue

“It would be so easy to kill you while you sleep.”

He rolls onto his side and faces his wife, tangling his fingers in her hair. Her face is shrouded in a dried blue mask; an anti-aging beauty product that has begun to peel. The moonlight peeking through the bedroom curtains makes her look already dead.

He wonders if other people look at their partners at night, peacefully dozing, and imagine killing them.

“I have a knife.” He brushes his fingertips along her hairline. “I keep it under the bed.”

Her lips part and she snores softly.

So ugly, especially for a model. All capped teeth and streaked hair.

He wedges his hand between the mattress and box spring and pulls out the knife. It has a large wooden handle, disproportionate to the thin, finely-honed blade. A fillet knife.

He places it against his wife's neck, gently.

His vision blurs. The pain in his head ignites, a screw twisting into his temple. It tightens with every heartbeat.

Too many headaches in too many days. He should, will, tell the doctor. The six aspirin he took an hour ago haven't helped.

Only one thing helps when the pain gets this bad.

He caresses her chin with the edge of the knife, shaving off some of the mask. Sweat rolls down his forehead and stings his eyes.

“I can cut your throat, reach in and rip out your voice before you even have a chance to scream.”

She twitches, her head titling away. Her neck is smooth, flawless. He clenches his jaw hard enough to crush granite, teeth grinding teeth.

“Or maybe I should go through the eye. Just a quick poke, right into the brain.”

He raises the blade up, trying to control the trembling in his hand. The blade wavers over her lid, creeping closer.

“All you have to do is open your eyes, so you can see it coming.”

She snores.

“Come on, honey.” He nudges her shoulder. “Open your eyes.”

He bites down on his tongue, the inside of his mouth hot and salty. His brain is a tiny clawed demon trying to dig its way out.

“Open your goddamn eyes!”

She shifts towards him, mumbling. Her arm falls over his bare chest.

“Another headache, honey?”

“Yeah.”

He places the knife behind her head, at the base of her skull. He imagines jabbing it in, the tip poking through the front of her throat.

*Wouldn't she be surprised?*

“Poor baby,” she says into his armpit. She rubs his cheek, her fingers cool against his burning ear.

He gives her a little prod with the knife, just under her hairline. Her head jerks away.

“Ow! Honey, cut your nails.”

“It's not my nails, dear. It's a knife.”

She snores her response.

He nudges her again. “I said, *it's a knife*. You hear me?”

“Did you take some aspirin, baby?”

“Six.”

“They'll work soon. You should see a doctor.”

She hooks a leg over his stomach. He feels himself become aroused, unsure if it's her touch that's causing it, or the thought of peeling off her face.

Or perhaps both.

He smiles in the darkness, knuckles white on the knife handle, ready to finally give in to the nightly temptation. But as he readies the blade, he notes that the pain in his head has begun to subside. Gradually, the sharp throbbing melts away into a dull ache.

Bearable.

For now.

“I'll kill you tomorrow.” He kisses her on the scalp.

The knife goes back under the mattress. He holds her tight and she makes a happy sighing sound.

When he finally falls asleep, it's to the image of cutting her open and bathing his face with her blood.

## Chapter 1

“Dammit.”

My fan had died. It didn't surprise me. The fan had ten years on me, and I came into the world during the Eisenhower years. It belonged in a museum, not an office.

Today was the first day of July, and hot enough to cook burgers on the sidewalk, though you probably wouldn't want to eat them afterwards. My blouse clung to me, my nylons felt like sweat pants, and I'd developed a fatal case of the frizzies.

The 26<sup>th</sup> Police District of Chicago, where I slowly roasted, was temporarily without air conditioning due to a problem with the condensers, whatever the hell they were. We were promised it would be fixed by December.

I hit the base of the fan with my stapler. Though I was the highest ranking female cop in the Violent Crimes Unit, I tended to be useless mechanically. My handyman skills maxed-out at changing a lightbulb. And even then, I had to read the instructions. The fan seemed to sense this, slowly wagging its blades at me like dusty tongues.

My partner, Detective First Class Herb Benedict, walked into my office, sucking on a soda cup the size of a small garbage can. It didn't seem to be helping him cool off. Herb weighed about two hundred and sixty pounds, and had more pores on his face than I had on my whole body. Benedict's suit looked like it had been soaked in Lake Michigan and put on wet.

He waddled up and placed a moist palm on my desk, leaving a streak. I noticed droplets in his gray mustache; sweat or diet cola. His basset hound jowls glistened as if greased.

“Morning, Jack.”

My birth name was Jacqueline, but when I married my ex-husband, Alan Daniels, no one

could resist shortening it to Jack.

“Morning, Herb. Here to help me fix my fan?”

“Nope. I’m here to share my breakfast.”

Herb set a brown paper sack on my desk.

“Donuts? Bagels? Cholesterol McMuffins?”

“Not even close.”

Benedict removed a baggie containing, of all things, rice cakes.

“That’s it?” I asked. “Where’s the chocolate? Where’s the canned cheese?”

“I’m watching my weight. In fact, I joined a health club.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You know the one that advertises on T.V. all the time?”

“The one where you get to work out with all of those Olympic body builders for only thirty bucks a month?”

“That’s the one. Except I’ve got the Premier Membership, not the normal one.”

“What’s the difference?”

He named a monetary figure, and I whistled at the amount.

“But with it, I get full access to the racquetball and squash courts.”

“You don’t play racquetball or squash.”

“Plus, my membership card is colored gold instead of blue.”

I leaned back in my chair, interlacing my fingers behind my head. “Well, that’s different. I’d pay extra for that. How is the place?”

“I haven’t worked out there, yet. Everyone that goes is in such good shape, I thought I should lose a few pounds before I start.”

“I don’t think they’d care, Herb. And if they do, just impress them by flashing your gold card.”

“You’re not being very supportive here, Jack.”

“Sorry.” I picked up a file to fan myself. “It’s the heat.”

“You need to get in shape. I’ve got guest passes. They’ve got Pilates at the club. I’m thinking of taking a class after work.”

Herb smiled, biting into a rice cake. His smile faded as he chewed.

“Damn. These things taste like Styrofoam.”

The phone rang.

“Jack? Phil Blasky. There’s, um, a bit of a situation here at County.”

*County* meant the Cook County Morgue. Phil was the Chief Medical Examiner.

“I know this is going to sound like a paperwork problem--” He paused, sucking in some air through his teeth. “--but I’ve checked and double-checked.”

“What’s wrong, Phil?”

“We have an extra body. Well, actually, some extra body parts.”

Phil explained. I told him we’d stop by, and then shared the information with Herb.

“Could be some kind of prank. County are a strange bunch.”

“Maybe. Phil doesn’t think so.”

“Did he say what the extra parts were?”

“Arms.”

Benedict thought this over.

“Maybe someone is simply lending him a hand.”

I stood up and pinched the center of my blouse, fanning in some air. “We’ll take your car.”

Herb recently bought a sporty new Camaro Z28, an expensive reminder of his refusal to age gracefully. Silly as he looked behind the wheel, the car had great air conditioning, whereas my 1988 Nova did not.

We left my office and made our way downstairs and outside. It was like stepping into a toaster. Though it couldn’t have been much hotter than the district building, the blistering sun amplified everything. A bank across the street flashed the current temp on its sidewalk sign. *One hundred and one*. And the sign was in the shade.

Herb pressed a gizmo on his key chain and his car beeped and started on its own. It was red, naturally, and so heavily waxed that the glare coming off it hurt my eyes. I climbed in the passenger side and angled both vents on my face while Herb babied the Camaro out of its parking space.

“Zero to sixty in five point two seconds.”

“Have you taken it up to sixty yet?”

“I’m still breaking it in.”

He put on a pair of Ray Bans and pulled onto Addison. I closed my eyes and luxuriated in the cool air. We were at County all too soon.

Cook County Morgue was located on Harrison in Chicago’s medical district, near Rush-Presbyterian Hospital. It rose two stories, all dirty white stone and tinted windows. Herb pulled around back into a circular driveway, and parked next to the curb.

“I hate coming here.” Herb frowned, his mustache drooping like a walrus. “I can never get the smell out of my clothes.”

Years ago, when my mother walked a beat, cops would smear whiskey on their upper lip to combat the stench of the morgue.

Sanitation had improved since then; cooler temps, better ventilation, greater attention to hygiene. But the smell still stuck with you.

I made do with some cherry lip balm, a small dab under each nostril. I passed the tube to Herb.

“Cherry? Don’t you have menthol?”

“It’s a hundred degrees out. I wasn’t worried about wind burn.”

He sniffed the balm, then handed it back without applying any.

“It smells too good. I’d eat it.”

The heat hit me like a blow dryer when I got out of the car.

A cop walked over and eyed the Camaro—there were always cops around County. He was young and tan and didn’t give me a second glance, preferring to talk to Herb.

“Five speed?”

“Six. Three hundred ten horses.”

The uniform whistled, running his finger along some pin striping.

“What’s under the hood, five point seven?”

Herb nodded. “Want to see?”

I left the boys with their toy and walked into the entrance, to the right of the automatic

double doors.

The lobby, if you could call it that, consisted of a counter, a door, and a glass partition. Behind the counter was a solitary black man in hospital scrubs.

“Phil Blasky?”

He shot his thumb at the door. “In the fridge.”

I signed in, received a plastic badge, and entered the main room.

Death overpowered the cherry, so strong I could taste it in the back of my mouth. It had a sickly-sour smell, like rotting carnations.

To the right, a mortician in an ill-fitting suit hefted a body off a table and onto a rolling cot. When he finished, he pulled off his latex gloves and shot them, rubber band style, into a garbage can.

Next to him, resting on a stainless steel scale built into the floor, was a naked male corpse, grossly obese, with burns covering most of his torso. The LCD screen on the wall blinked *450 lbs*. He smelled like bacon.

I held my breath and pulled open the heavy aluminum door, which lead into the cooler.

The stench worsened in here. Bleach and blood and urine and meat gone bad.

Cook County Morgue was the largest in the Midwest. Indigents, unclaimed bodies, accident victims, suicides, and cases of foul play all came through these doors. It held about three hundred bodies.

Just my luck, they were running at capacity.

To my left, corpses lay stacked on wire shelves warehouse-style, five high and thirty wide. Stretching across the main floor was a traffic jam of tables and carts, all occupied. Some of the dead were covered with black plastic bags. Some weren't.

Unlike movie depictions of morgues, these bodies didn't lie down in peaceful, supine positions. Many of them had kept the poses they died in; arms and legs jutting out, curled-up on their sides, necks at funny angles. They also didn't look like a Hollywood conception of a corpse. A real dead person had very little color. Regardless of race, the skin always seemed to fade into a light blue, and the eyes were dull and cloudy, like dusty snow globes.

The temperature hovered at fifty degrees, fans blowing around the frigid, foul air. It

chilled my sweat in a most unpleasant way.

To the right, in an adjacent room, an autopsy was being performed. I focused on the figure holding the bone saw, didn't recognize him, and continued to look around.

I found Phil Blasky near the back of the room, and walked up to him carefully; the floors were sticky with various fluids, and all of them clashed with my Gucci pumps.

"Phil."

"Jack."

Phil was leaning over a steel table, squinting at something. I stood next to him, trying not to gape at the nude body of a toddler, half wrapped in a black plastic bag, laying next to him. The child was so rigid and pale, he appeared to be made out of wax.

"I went through every stiff in the place a second time. No one is missing arms."

I glanced down at the table. The arms were severed at the shoulder, laid out with their fingertips touching, the elbows bending in a big *M*. They belonged to a female, Caucasian, with fake pink nails. A pair of black handcuffs connected them at the wrists. There was very little blood, but the jagged edges to the wounds suggested they didn't come off easily.

"I suspect an axe." Phil poked at the wound with a gloved finger. "See the mark along the humerus, here? It took two swings to sever the appendage."

"It doesn't look humorous to me." Benedict had snuck up behind us.

"Funny," Phil said. "Never heard that one before, working with dead bodies for twenty years. Next will you make some kind of *gimme a hand* joke?"

"I did that one already," Herb said. "How about; *it appears the suspect has been disarmed?*"

"She was always such a cut-up?"

"Would you like a shoulder to cry on?"

"Can I go out on a limb here?"

"At least she'll get severance pay?"

Phil cocked an eyebrow at Herb.

"Severance?" Herb said. "Sever?"

I tuned out their act and got a closer look at the arms. Snapping on a latex glove, I pushed

back the cold, hard fingers and peered at the handcuffs. They were Smith and Wesson model number 100.

“Those are police issue.” Benedict poked at them with a pencil. “I’ve got a set just like them.”

So did every other cop in our district, and probably in Chicago. They were also sold at sporting goods stores, sex shops, and Army/Navy surplus outlets, plus a zillion places over the internet. Impossible to trace. But maybe we’d get lucky and the owner etched his name and address on the...

I inhaled sharply.

This couldn’t be right.

On the cuffs, next to the keyhole, were two small initials painted in red nail polish. I tugged out my .38, holstered under my blazer, and looked at the butt. It had the same two red letters.

*JD.*

“Herb.” I kept my voice steady. “Those handcuffs are mine.”

## Chapter 2

I treated the morgue like a crime scene, calling in the CSU, cordoning off the area, gathering a list of employees to question.

No one had seen anything.

The Crime Scene Unit, consisting of Officer Dan Rogers--tall, blonde, goatee--on samples and Officer Scott Hajek--short and compact, blue eyes hidden behind glasses--on photographs. They were young, but knew their stuff.

Rogers scanned the arms with an ALS, and they glowed flawlessly pale under the high intensity light.

“Not a thing.” Rogers scratched at his beard.

Unusual. Under Alternate Light Source, even the tiniest bit of foreign matter glowed like a hot coal. Particles, hair, dirt, bone fragments, blood, semen, bruises, bite marks—they all fluoresced.

Dan bent down, his nose to one of the wrists.

“They’ve been washed. Smells like bleach.”

“Are you sure? The whole morgue smells like bleach.”

Rogers, in a move characteristic of his thoroughness, touched the tip of his tongue to the arm.

“Tastes like bleach, too. Probably diluted with water, or it would have mottled the skin.”

“Get a sample to burn. And go brush your teeth.”

Rogers dug into his breast pocket for some cinnamon gum. After popping three pieces, he moved the soft blue light closer to the fingers on the right hand.

“I have a slight indentation on the index finger. Looks like she usually wore a ring.”

Hajek brushed past me, zooming in on the fingers. He snapped a close-up.

“I missed the taste test.” He playfully shoved Rogers. “Can I get one with you sucking on the fingers?”

Rogers showed him a finger of a different kind. Hajek’s shutter clicked.

“When you’re done scraping the fingernails, I need one of the fakes.”

“Finished already, Lieut.”

Rogers snapped off an orange press-on nail, bagged it, and handed it to me. Then he used a scalpel to take skin samples from each arm, putting them into glass tubes.

“Nothing on the handcuffs?”

“Wiped clean. I can take them back and fume them to make sure.”

“Do it. You’ll need these.”

I took the cuff keys from my ring, where they’d been attached for the last year. Rogers undid the handcuffs and placed them in an evidence bag. Then he brought the ALS around.

“No abrasions on the wrist.”

Hajek moved in, shooting a few frames.

“Thanks, guys,” I said. “If you can get the pictures on my desk tomorrow, along with the prints.”

“I’m on it.”

Rogers dug into his bag, removing fingerprint ink and two sets of cards. I left him to his work and went off in search of Herb.

Benedict stood in the lobby, talking to one of the attendants. Herb’s hand cradled a snack-size potato chip bag, half full. The other half was in his mouth.

He must have noticed the question on my face when I approached, because he said, “They’re fat-free.”

“Herb--it’s a morgue.”

“My Pilates instructor told me to eat small snacks several times a day to keep my metabolism up.”

He offered the bag.

“Try one. They’re baked. One third less sodium, too.”

I politely declined. “Get anything?”

“They run three eight-hour shifts, twenty-four hours. I questioned the four attendants here, and no one saw anything. Full list of employees is in my pocket.”

“Won’t help.”

The thin black man standing next to Herb offered his hand. I took it.

“And why won’t it help, Mr...?”

“Graves. Carl Graves. All them bodies come here in bags. Cops and EMTs wrap them up before dropping them off. Be real easy to put some extra parts in a bag, wheel it in, then sneak them out. No one would see a thing.”

“How many bodies are dropped off every day?”

“Depends. Sometimes, five or six. Sometimes, a few dozen.”

“Who has access to the morgue?”

“Cops, docs, morticians. Some days, fifty people sign in.”

“How many employees?”

“Around twenty, with the M.E.’s staff.”

I frowned. If the arms had been here for a few days before being discovered, we could be dealing with several hundred suspects.

“Thanks, Mr. Graves.” I handed him my card. “If you hear anything, let us know.”

Graves nodded, walked off.

“Anything with the arms?” Herb asked, lips flecked with bits of greasy potato.

“Nothing, other than the fact that they’re my handcuffs.”

“Should I read you your rights?”

“Not yet. First you have to trick me into confessing.”

“Gotcha. So... was the rest of the body hard to dispose of?”

“Yeah. I’ll never get those stains out of my carpet.”

My cell rang, saving me from further interrogation.

“Daniels.”

“Ms. Daniels? This is Dr. Evan Kingsbury at St. Mary’s Hospital in Miami. Mary Streng was just admitted into the Emergency Room. You’re listed on her insurance as a contact.”

My heart dropped into my stomach.

“She’s my mother. What happened?”

“She’s sedated. I know you’re in Chicago, but is it possible for you to get here? She needs you right now.”

### Chapter 3

I hadn't realized how fragile my mother had become until I saw her in that hospital bed, an IV cruelly jabbed into her pale, thin arm. She couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, eyes that were once bright and active now sunken and sparkless.

This couldn't be the woman who raised me, the tough-but-loving beat cop who played both mother and father in my upbringing. The woman who taught me how to read and how to shoot. The woman with such inner strength that I modeled my life on hers.

"The doctors are over-reacting, Jacqueline. I'll be fine." She offered a weak smile in a voice that wasn't hers.

"Your hip is broken, Mom. You almost died."

"Didn't come close."

I held her hand, feeling the fragile bones under the skin. My veneer started to crack.

"If Mr. Griffin hadn't made the police break down your door, you'd still be lying on the bathroom floor."

"Nonsense. I would have gotten out of there soon enough."

"Mom... you were there for four days." The horror of it stuck in my throat. I'd called her yesterday--our twice weekly call--and when she hadn't answered I assumed she was out with Mr. Griffin or one of the other elderly men she occasionally saw.

"I had water from the bathtub. I could have lasted another week or two."

"Aw, Mom..."

The tears came. My mother patted the back of my hand with her free one.

"Oh, Jacqueline. Don't be upset. This is what happens when you get old."

"I should have been there."

"Nonsense. You live a thousand miles away. This is my dumb fault for slipping in the shower."

“I called you yesterday. When you didn’t pick up, I should have...”

My mother shushed me, softly.

“Sweetheart, you know you can’t play the what-if game, especially in our profession. This isn’t the first time this has happened.”

She couldn’t have hurt me more if she’d tried.

“How many times, Mom?”

“Jacqueline—”

“How many times?”

“Three or four.”

I didn’t need to hear that. “But you never hurt yourself, right?”

“I may have had a cast on my elbow for a while.”

I fought not to yell. “And you never told me?”

“I’m not your responsibility.”

“Yes... you are.”

She sighed, her face so sad.

“Jacqueline, when your father died, you were the only family I had left. You were also the only family that I ever needed. I would never, ever, allow myself to become a burden to you.”

I sniffled, found my center.

“Well, get used to it. As soon as you’re released, you’re moving in with me.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Please, Mom.”

“No. I have a very active social life. How could I get intimate with a gentleman when my daughter is in the other room?” Reluctantly, I played my trump card.

“I spoke with your doctors. They don’t feel that you’re able to take care of yourself.”

Mom’s face hardened.

“What? That’s ridiculous.”

“They’ll only release you from the hospital into my custody.”

“Was it that Dr. Kingsbury? Smarmy little bastard, talking to me like I’m a three-year-old.”

“You don’t have a choice, Mom.”

“I always have a choice.”

“It’s either me, or assisted living.”

I watched my words sink in. My mother’s biggest, and only, fear, was going into a nursing home. Before meeting my father, she worked briefly as an activity director in a continuing care facility, and swore that she’d jump in front of a bus before ever checking into one of the “death hotels”, as she called them.

“No way in hell.”

“Mom, I can invoke power of attorney.”

“My mind is sound.”

I made myself keep going, even though I hated this.

“I have friends in the courts, Mom.”

My mom turned away, shaking her head.

“You wouldn’t do that to me.”

“Look at me, Mom. How far do you think I would go to protect you?”

Mom continued to stare at the wall. Tears streaked down her cheeks.

“Bullying an old lady. Is that how I raised you, Jacqueline?”

“No, Mom. You raised me to care. Just like you said; you’re the only family I’ve ever had. You took care of me for eighteen years.” I squeezed her hand. “It’s my turn to take care of you for a while.”

Mom pulled her hand away.

“I’d like to be alone.”

“Please. Don’t be like this.”

She pressed the button to page the nurse.

“Mom... please.”

A white-clothed figure poked her head into the room.

“How are we doing, Mrs. Streng?”

“I’m very tired. I’d like to take a nap.”

The nurse looked at me, sympathetic.

I stood up, briefly fussed with the get-well flower arrangement I’d brought, and then turned to leave.

“Nurse,” Mom’s voice cracked. “Please make sure I don’t have any visitors for the next few days.”

“Perhaps you’ll feel differently tomorrow, Mrs. Streng.”

“No. I’m sure I won’t.”

The tears came again. I took a deep breath and stopped my chest from quivering.

“I love you, Mom.”

For the first time ever, she didn’t respond with “I love you, too.”

The nurse put her hand on my shoulder, giving me a gentle push.

I took one more look at my mother, and walked out of her room.

## Chapter 4

Mom lived in Dade City, a pleasant town that seemed out of place in Florida. Rather than tourist-crammed beaches and mega-theme parks, Dade boasted gently rolling hills, actual woods, and so many antique malls you couldn't spit without hitting one.

The night had arrived, hot and thick like a soggy blanket, but I kept the windows down. The rental had decent air-conditioning, but I didn't feel I deserved it.

I'd been to her place twice before, and always missed the turn onto her street. Tonight was no exception. I pressed through three lefts and found it on the second pass.

Her condo had a matching numbered space in the parking lot. Overnight bag slung over my shoulder, her keys in my hand, I was just about to enter the lobby when I stopped, mid-step.

Was I doing the right thing?

A quick image of Mom face-down in the bathtub spurred me on.

The Highlands were retirement condos, regardless of what the brochures promised. No one under fifty-five lived here. A full time staff kept the pool clean, ran errands for the tenants, and tended the prerequisite eighteen hole golf course. They also had EMT training, a necessity since the elderly often acted, well, *elderly*. But even though they were available twenty-four hours a day, they didn't routinely check on their residents.

I took the elevator to the fifth floor, and found a painfully thin old man in a bright Hawaiian shirt crouched before my mother's open door, fiddling with a screwdriver.

"Hello?"

He peered at me through thick glasses; first the upper half, then tilting his head up so he could squint through the bifocals.

The man had a bald head so speckled with age spots it was a dead-ringer for a sparrow's egg.

"Mmm? Oh, hello."

The man stood, with much creaking of bones. Fully erect, he wasn't much taller than when he'd been squatting; his back curved like a question mark. He smiled, flashing bright white dentures, and offered his hand.

"You must be Jacqueline. Sal Griffin. I'm a friend of your mother's."

I forced down my smile. Mom often told me stories of her trysts with Mr. Griffin, and usually described him as "insatiable," "unrelenting," and "He's a machine; his pelvis is spring-loaded." I'd always pictured him as a distinguished, Sean Connery type. Instead, standing before me was a bald Don Knotts.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Griffin."

"The police made a bit of a mess." He motioned to the door. "I'm putting in a new jamb."

"Don't they have people here that can fix it?"

"Sure. But I wanted to make sure it was done right. Excuse me, where are my manners? Let me take that for you."

Mr. Griffin reached for my carry-on. I thought about protesting, fearful he might hurt himself lifting it, but then let him play the gentleman. He led me into the condo, flipping on lights as he walked.

The place was clean, tidy, well-kept. I resisted the immediate urge to check the fridge and the cupboards to make sure Mom was eating right.

"I spoke with your mother a little while ago. She mentioned you might be coming."

He set my bag down on the dining room table.

"How long ago? I've tried to call a few times since leaving the hospital, but she has a *do-not-disturb* on the line."

"Oh, about five minutes. She called me. I've never heard her so upset before."

"We had a... disagreement."

He frowned, nodding.

"Proud woman, your mother. When I had the police break in, earlier today, her first words to me were to get the hell out of her bathroom, because she didn't want me to see her like

that.”

I smirked. “That sounds like Mom.”

“I’m sorry she was there for so long. I just got back into town this morning. If I’d have even considered...”

“Thank you for coming to her rescue, Mr. Griffin. I’m the one who should be feeling guilty. She’s fallen before.”

“I know. Eight or nine times. I installed the safety bar in her shower.”

I tried to keep the surprise out of my voice. “Eight or nine? She told me four.”

“I’m not surprised. You’d have just...”

His voice trailed off. We both knew what was unsaid. If I’d known she’d been falling a lot, I’d have forced her to move in with me earlier.

“Well, I appreciate all you’ve done for her. Thank you.”

Mr. Griffin shrugged. “Beautiful woman, your mother. Nice to finally meet you. She talks about you incessantly.”

“It must be irritating.”

“Not at all. I’d love to hear your version of how you got that guy who killed all those women, the Gingerbread Man. The way your mom tells it, that private investigator fella, the one who was the hero in the TV movie, he really didn’t do a damn thing.”

“True.”

“And you’re much prettier than that fat actress they got to play you.”

“Thank you, again.”

“Though I will admit, that scene in the sewer, where you grabbed that fella’s leg and begged for him to save you--” Mr. Griffin chuckled. “That was pretty funny.”

I frowned. That wasn’t how it happened, but I figured I got off easy. In the original screenplay, the writer had me wet my pants in that scene. I had to threaten legal action to get that taken out.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“It’s fine.”

Mr. Griffin grinned. “It’s hard, having your pride trampled on.”

Then he winked at me. Clever old coot. I was about to explain the difference between having a bruised ego and having a broken hip when a beeping sound interrupted us.

“My phone. Pardon me.”

He removed a cell from his baggy shorts.

“Hello? Hi, how are you feeling, Mary? Yes, she’s here right now. Hmm. I see. Would you like to talk to her? Perhaps you should tell her that yourself. I wouldn’t feel comfortable... yes. Okay. I understand. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

He folded up the phone and put it away, his wrinkled face pained.

“Just tell me.”

“Your mother said that she’d prefer it if you didn’t stay at her place.”

I think I flinched.

“She’s just angry right now, Jacqueline. Angry and hurt. I’ll talk to her.”

“She was stuck on the bathroom floor, in pain, for four days--”

“I know.”

“--lying in her own mess--”

“I know.”

“She could have died, Mr. Griffin. I can’t let that happen to my mother again.”

Mr. Griffin put a hand on my shoulder, patted.

“You have to understand something about getting old, Jacqueline. We can’t hold onto our health. It’s impossible. But we try like mad to hold onto our dignity.”

My eyes teared up, but I refused to cry.

“I just want my mom to be safe. Dignity doesn’t matter.”

“But it does, Jacqueline. Once dignity is gone, the will to live isn’t far behind.”

I walked away, heading for my overnight bag.

“Fine. I’ll stay at a hotel.”

“You can, but your mother was quite clear. She refuses to speak to you until you stop bullying her. I’m sorry.”

I clenched my teeth and my fists, wanting to scream. Instead of picking up my carry-on, I walked past it and headed for the bathroom. Seeing where it happened, seeing the mess, would

help steel my resolve.

The bathroom was spotless.

“I cleaned it up earlier.” Mr. Griffin put his hand on my shoulder again. “She’ll come around. Just give her time. Asking for help just isn’t your mother’s way.”

I spun, ready for a fight.

“Neither of you seem to think she needs help.”

Now it was his turn to look sad.

“Oh, she does. Yes, she does.”

“So you agree with me?”

He nodded.

“Why does that make me feel even worse?”

Mr. Griffin, with the spring-loaded pelvis, hugged me, and I hugged him back, and we spent a moment trying to understand the unfairness of it all.

“Should I get a motel room?” I asked. “Try to force her hand?”

“She doesn’t want you here right now, Jacqueline. It’s best if you go home. I’ll talk to her. This will all work out.”

I nodded, but deep down I knew differently.

The three hour plane ride back to Chicago seemed to take a million years.

## Chapter 5

I made it home a little after three in the morning. I live in Wrigleyville, in an apartment on Addison and Racine. It's a loud neighborhood, the streets always full of Cubs fans and bar-hopping kids, many of whom like to spend their evenings directly under my window, shouting at one another. As a consolation, the rent is too high.

Exhaustion hammered at me like the tide, but sleep and I weren't close friends. On good nights, I could get two hours of REM before stress woke me up.

Tonight wouldn't be a good night.

I blame my job, since it's easier than blaming myself. I've been to several general pracs, but haven't broken down and seen a shrink, yet. The latest wonder drug, Ambien, worked for me, but with consequences--the next morning I swam in an unending groggy haze that severely impaired my ability to serve and protect. So I only took it as a last resort. Besides, insomnia gave me an edge; less sleep equaled more productivity. Plus, my boyfriend found baggy eyes sexy.

There was a message from him on the machine. I let it play as I undressed.

"Hi, Jack. The conference is going well. Accountants are actually a fun bunch, once you get a few drinks in them. Naw, I'm kidding--we become even more boring. I just had a two hour argument with some guy about accruals. I'll be back in Chicago tomorrow night, so tell your other suitors you're mine for the evening. I have an important question to run by you. Miss you. Love you. Hope you're keeping the city safe. Bye-bye."

I smirked. I met Latham Conger, head accountant at Oldendorff and Associates, ten months ago, through a dating service that Herb had conned me into joining. Latham was pleasant, attractive, attentive, employed, and heterosexual. Which, for a forty-something woman in Chicago, was like winning the lottery. He also loved me, and wasn't put off that I didn't return

the sentiment yet.

I liked Latham, a lot. And I might love him some day. But my heart muscle atrophied when Alan left me, and I haven't been able to get it up to speed since.

I pulled on an old T-shirt and climbed into bed. Latham's cologne clung to the pillows, and I hugged one to my chest, thinking about his phone call.

*I have an important question to run by you.*

What could that mean?

As if I didn't have enough on my mind.

Rest, as expected, defied me. I tossed. I turned. I did deep breathing and relaxation exercises that brought me close to sleep, and perhaps actually into sleep for short periods of time, but I always jerked myself awake after a few minutes.

I felt immense relief when my alarm went off and it was time to go to work.

After showering and changing into a yellow blouse, a tan jacket, and matching slacks, I did a quick make-up job with extra attention to eye concealer and headed for work.

Eight in the morning, and already the temp hovered in the nineties. Chicago, a city that didn't smell good on average days, reeked in heat like this. I had to pass an alley on the way to my car, and the smell from the garbage cans hit me like a punch.

Kitty-corner to the 26<sup>th</sup> District, a gourmet coffee place had set up shop. I got a Columbian dark roast, black, for myself, and almost ordered a double chocolate hazelnut cappuccino for Herb until I remembered his diet. He also got a dark roast.

Caffeine in hand, I entered my building and was surprised to find it cool. In fact, it was downright chilly.

Violent Crimes Division was on the third floor. Herb sat in his office, hand in a box of Fat Free chocolate cookies. He brightened when he saw me.

"Jack? Why aren't you in Florida? Is your mom okay?"

Rather than get into it, I nodded a yes and handed him his cup.

"Coffee, thank God. I'm freezing."

"I see they fixed the air conditioning."

"They did, but the temperature regulator isn't working. They can't shut it off."

“Feels good.”

“Give it ten minutes, and you’ll start seeing your breath. I tried opening a window, but I can’t handle the dumpster smell. This is just what I needed.” Herb took a sip, then made a face.

“What’s this?”

“It’s coffee. That’s what it tastes like without cream and sugar.”

“It’s supposed to be this bitter?”

“Yeah.”

Herb dug through his desk and pulled out a fistful of little pink packets.

“Well, I’m glad your mother’s okay, and it’s good that you’re back. Index got a match on the prints.”

As Herb added carcinogens to his brew, I leafed through the reports on his desk.

The arms belonged to Davi McCormick of 3800 North Lake Shore Drive. Arrested once for solicitation, but clean for the last five years. Mug shots were known to be unflattering, but hers looked good enough to print. Davi was an attractive woman, much more so than the average prostitute.

I read her case details and it made sense. At the time of her arrest, she’d been working for Madame Pardieu, a high class escort service that charged up to a grand a night. That would account for the nice neighborhood.

“Does she look familiar?” Herb asked. His jowls were stuffed with fat-free cookies, giving him a chipmunkish appearance.

“Yeah, she does.”

“You’ve probably seen her a few dozen times. When we got her name I cross-reffed with Missing Persons, and found a report from yesterday, called in by her agent. She’s Sure-a-Tex Girl.”

Sure-a-Tex was a brand of tampon marketed to the younger crowd. Sure-a-Tex Girl, wearing a not-very-subtle red cape, flew to the rescue of women who started their period in extreme situations, such as mountain climbing or white water rafting. The product came in a variety of designer colors, including neon green and hot pink.

“Did you contact the agent?”

“He’ll be here any minute.” Herb took a sip of coffee and searched his desk for more saccharine.

Phil Blasky’s post-mortem report was the shortest I’d ever read, due to the amount of material he had to work with. An elevated histamine level and platelet count indicated the victim had been bleeding prior to her arms being severed. Tests for several dozen drugs came back negative. Lipid levels normal. No evidence of heart disease, STDs, or pregnancy. Everything else about the arms was unspectacular.

Phil noted that the handcuffs were put on after death; axe marks indicated the swings came from the front, with the arms splayed out crucifixion-style.

Officer Dan Rogers knocked on my open door. I invited him in.

“Got the GC results from the burned skin samples.” He handed me a file. “My tongue was correct. The arms were diluted with bleach.”

“No trace of anything else?”

“Nope. Bleach will clean up just about anything. That’s why it’s used by HazMat teams. Hey, Lieut, you got any aspirin? I’ve got a headache that’s making my eyes water.”

I found a bottle in my desk and tossed it to him. He shook out five, and swallowed them dry.

“Thanks, Lieutenant. Call me if I can be any more help. I like CSU, but *Detective Rogers* has a nice ring to it, too.”

Rogers left. Herb made a grunting, satisfied sound, and tossed his empty cookie box into the garbage, on top of three other such cookies boxes.

“Herb, not that I want to question your dieting efforts, but how many boxes of those cookies have you eaten today?”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say you could hibernate with all I’ve seen you eat today.”

“So what? They’re fat-free.”

“Chocolate syrup is fat-free, too. Look at the calories.”

He fished out the box he’d tossed and squinted at the nutrition panel. “Ah, hell. No wonder I’ve gained four pounds on this diet.”

“You need to watch the carbohydrates, not the fat.”

“Oh. These only have fifteen grams of carbs.”

“Per serving. How many servings per box?”

“Ah, hell.”

A knock. I turned to see Officer Fuller in the doorway. Fuller was an ex pro football player, tall and wide, and he towered over his companion, a short, balding man wearing Armani and too much Obsession for Men.

“This is Marvin Pulitzer.”

Marvin smiled, his caps unnaturally white, and offered his hand to me. I took it, and discovered he was palming something.

“Pulitzer Prizes Talent Agency. Very pleased to meet you, Miss...?”

“Lieutenant. Jacqueline Daniels.”

He held onto me a moment longer than necessary. When I got my hand back I saw he'd given me his card.

“You've got great bone structure, Lieutenant. Do you model?”

“I did *Vogue* a few issues back.”

Pulitzer narrowed his eyes, then smiled again.

“Joking. I get it. Funny. But seriously, I just landed this new account. They're looking for distinguished, mature women. You should come in, take some test shots.”

“What's the company?”

“Ever-Weave.”

I confessed to never hearing of them.

“They sell protective undergarments. You know, adult-sized diapers.”

Fuller chortled, deep and throaty. I dismissed him.

“Think it over. You wouldn't have to pose wearing the product. You just have to stand there, looking embarrassed.”

No kidding.

“I don't think I'm quite ready to delve into the glamorous world of modeling, Mr. Pulitzer. Come in and have a seat.”

Pulitzer and Herb exchanged greetings, and then he sat in a chair between us on the right side of the desk.

“So, where’s Davi?”

Herb handed Pulitzer the mug shot.

“This is Davi McCormick?”

“Yeah. Oh, Christ, she’s in trouble, isn’t she? What did she do? Has she called a lawyer yet?”

Pulitzer pulled out a cell phone the size of a matchbook and flipped it open, dialing with his pinky.

“She doesn’t need a lawyer, Mr. Pulitzer. The county Medical Examiner found Davi’s severed arms in the morgue yesterday morning.”

“Her... arms?”

Herb handed him another picture. Pulitzer lost all color.

“Oh shit! Those are Davi’s? Shit! What the hell happened to her?”

“When was the last time you spoke with Davi?”

“Four days ago. We did lunch at Wildfire. Right after that I had to catch a flight to New York.”

“What did you talk about during lunch?”

“The usual stuff. Upcoming gigs. Auditions.”

“Did Davi seem nervous, or afraid?”

“No, everything was completely normal.”

Herb and I took turns interrogating Pulitzer. We confirmed his trip, and asked several dozen questions about Davi, her friends and family, her state of mind, her life.

“She has no enemies. Not one. Which, in a competitive business like this, is amazing. She’s just a nice girl.”

“You called in a Missing Person’s report yesterday.”

“Yeah. She missed a shoot two days ago. Davi never missed a shoot. I called her. Even dropped by her place. She just disappeared. Jesus, who could have done something like that to her?”

Pulitzer had to take a time-out to reschedule his afternoon appointments. While he was on the phone, Herb and I conferred.

“Davi was a celebrity. She may have had stalkers.”

“We’ll call Sure-a-Tex.”

I added it to my notes.

“We also need to call Davi’s parents, check with her friends, and try to pinpoint her movements for the last week.”

Pulitzer finished his call and asked where he could get some water. I pointed him to the washroom.

Herb took a sip of coffee, then reached for more sweetener. The pile of pink wrappers on his desk was almost as high as his cup.

“If it’s someone who knew Pulitzer, where do your handcuffs come in?”

“Coincidence? They could have fallen out of my pocket, someone picks them up and pawns them?”

“I don’t buy it.”

“It’s thin. But the only people with access to my office are cleaning people and cops.”

The maintenance staff was carefully screened during the hiring process, and cops were, well, cops. I didn’t know anyone working out of the two-six with a grudge against me, and I especially didn’t think I had any murderers on my squad. The process to become a police officer included psych profiles, mental evals, and endless personality tests and interviews. Wackos were supposedly weeded-out early on.

“Maybe someone pinched it.”

That seemed more likely. I didn’t carry a purse, and most of my outfits had oversized pockets to hold all of my essentials, cuffs included. Even a mediocre thief could have gotten them from me without much effort.

“But why me?”

I used Herb’s phone to call Fuller back into the office. He’d been particularly helpful on the Gingerbread Man case, and I needed an extra man.

“Officer, I’d like you to cross-reference my previous case files with the names from

County's sign-in book. You know how to build a database?"

Fuller snorted.

"You think because I can bench three-fifty I can't work a spreadsheet?"

"You can bench three-fifty?" Herb asked. "I almost weigh three-fifty."

"It's not that hard. Just a combination of diet, exercise, and supplementing."

"Maybe that's why I'm not getting results. I'm not supplementing."

I thought of a hundred things to say, but managed to keep a lid on them.

Fuller walked next to Herb and leaned against his desk. The desk creaked. "I stack to boost my metabolism. Plus I use chromium, L-carnitine, CLA, and I protein-load before working out. If you want, I could take you through my NFL routine sometime."

Herb beamed in a way that he usually reserved for chili dogs. "That'd be great! Can I get a list of those supplements you're taking?"

"Sure. See, an ECA stack is a combination of--"

"Officer Fuller," I interrupted, "we could really use that database."

"Gotcha, Lieut. I'll get right on it."

Fuller left. Herb gave me a frown.

"What's wrong, Jack?"

"I wanted to stop the conversation before the two of you started flexing."

"Too much guy talk, huh? Sorry, didn't mean to exclude you."

Herb said it without sarcasm, but the comment chafed. Being a woman in the CPD meant constant, unrelenting exclusion. It didn't matter that I was the number one marksman in the district. It didn't matter that I had a black belt in tae-kwon-do. Herb wouldn't ever think to ask me about my workout routine. Unconscious sexism.

Or perhaps I was just being overly touchy because of the situation with my mom.

Pulitzer returned, looking a little better.

"I thought of something, but I don't know if it will help or not."

We waited.

"If Davi was doing anything illegal, it wouldn't matter now, right? Because she's gone? It's silly, but I still feel protective of her."

“Drugs?” I asked.

Pulitzer’s shoulders slumped.

“Cocaine. Recreational, as far as I knew. It didn’t affect her work.”

“Do you know where she got her drugs?”

“No idea.”

Again, we waited.

“I really have no idea. I want to help, but I’m not into that scene. I could put you in touch with some of my other models who might know, but I wouldn’t want them getting into trouble.”

Pulitzer reached up to rub the back of his neck, exposing a bandage beneath the cuff on his right wrist.

“How did you get that?” Herb asked, pointing it out.

“Hmm? Oh. Mr. Friskers.”

“Mr. Friskers?”

“Davi’s cat. I hate that damn thing. Mean as hell. I went over to Davi’s apartment before I called the police. She gave me a set of keys. I figured, I don’t know, maybe she had a heart attack, or fell and broke her leg so she couldn’t get to the phone.”

I felt Herb’s eyes on me. I kept focus on Pulitzer.

“We’ll need to check the apartment. The keys would save us some time.”

Pulitzer dug into his pants and handed me a key ring.

“Be careful. That thing is like a little T-rex.”

After assuring Pulitzer we wouldn’t pursue any narcotics possession charges with his models, he gave us the names of three who used coke.

“Is there anything else? I wasn’t able to reschedule my afternoon meeting. Big client. I want to help Davi, but I really can’t miss this.”

“Thank you, Mr. Pulitzer. We’ll be in touch.”

We shook hands.

“Please catch the guy that did this. Davi is--was--a real sweetheart.”

After he left, I stood up and tried to stomp some blood back into my toes, which felt frost-bitten.

“You up for a drive, Herb?”

“Hell, yes. My nose hairs have icicles hanging from them.”

“We can only hope those are icicles.”

Keys in hand, we headed for his car to check out Davi’s apartment.

The summer heat felt wonderful for the first five minutes. Then Herb cranked the air conditioning.

## Chapter 6

It's a bad one.

He looks around his office, a knuckle jabbed against his temple, trying to will the pain away.

Does anyone notice? They must. His neck muscles are tight enough to strum, he's drenched in sweat, and he can't control the trembling.

He's never experienced pain this intense. Not even his injury hurt this much. It's as if his head is in a vice, being slowly tightened until his eyes are ready to pop out. The pills he took earlier aren't doing a damn thing.

Maybe his wife is right. He should see a doctor. But the idea terrifies him. What if the doctor finds something seriously wrong? What if he needs surgery? He'd rather deal with the pain than let some quack poke around in his brain.

"You okay?"

A coworker. Female. Plain-looking, heavy hips, short brown hair in a spiky Peter Pan style.

"Headache." He manages a sickly grin.

"Do you need some aspirin?"

He decides to kill her.

"Yeah, thanks."

She walks to her desk. He imagines her, kneeling on the floor in his plastic room. She's crying, of course. Maybe he's taken a belt to her first, to loosen her up. Leaving marks on this one will be okay. Since she works with him, he can't allow her body to be discovered.

"Tylenol?" she calls over the cubicle wall.

“Fine.”

How should she die? Her haircut inspires him. He will draw his knife across her forehead, pull back the skin to expose the bone. Work a finger in there, then two and three.

Skin stretches. His hands are large, but he should be able to get his entire hand between her skull and her scalp.

“Like a warm, wet glove,” he says, shivering.

“What’s like a glove?”

She’s holding out the Tylenol bottle, one eyebrow raised.

“I want to thank you for this.”

“No problem. I used to get migraines. I would have killed somebody to take the pain away.”

*I know what that’s like.*

“You know, Sally, we’ve worked in the same building for a few years now, and I don’t know anything about you.”

She smiles. Her front teeth are crooked. He can picture her mouth stretched open, screaming and bloody, as he practices some amateur dentistry with a ball-peen hammer.

“I’m married, with two kids, Amanda and Jenna. Amanda is eight and Jenna just turned five.”

He forces a grin, his hopes shattered. Who would have guessed an ugly thing like her had a family? He doubts he’ll be able to get her alone, and even if he manages, she’ll be missed.

“How about you? Married?”

“Yes. No kids, though. My wife is a model, and she doesn’t want to ruin her body. You know; hips spreading, stretch marks, saggy tits.”

Ugly Sally’s smile slips a degree.

“Yeah, well, it happens. But I think it’s worth it.”

“Look, I gotta get back to work. Thanks for the Tylenol.”

“No problem. *TOSAP.*”

He inwardly cringes at the slogan. “Yeah. *TOSAP.*”

Ugly Sally waddles away, and he works the cap off the bottle and dry-swallows six

Tylenol. The throbbing, which abated slightly during his murder-fantasies, comes back harder than ever.

He needs to kill somebody. As soon as possible.

The pain relieving properties of murder were discovered by him at a young age, when he was in his third foster home. Ironically, he'd been removed from his previous home for being neglected—the couple who had taken him in had also taken in eight other children, for the monthly check from the government. They would blow it all on drugs and let the children go without food. Well meaning Social Services had whisked him away from the neglect, and handed him over to a psychotic alcoholic instead.

After a particularly nasty beating with a car antenna, he and his younger foster brother were locked in a closet.

He'd really been hurting. But along with the pain was a sense of helplessness, of frustration.

He took that frustration out on his foster brother, in the dark, muffled confines of the closet. The more he hurt the smaller boy, the more his own pain went away.

His new foster father went to jail for the murder.

When the headaches began, he knew just how to deal with them.

After four clicks of the mouse, his monitor fills with eligibles.

He finds a girl, one who lives just a few blocks away. Address seems to be current. He calls, using his cell.

A woman answers, her voice deep and throaty.

Perfect.

## Chapter 7

The doorman at Davi McCormick's apartment building wore a heavy wool blazer, dark red, complete with gold epaulets and matching buttons. In this heat he looked positively miserable.

"Last time I saw Ms. McCormick was Sunday evening, right before Murry took over. Murry works the 6pm to 2am shift, and she left the building about fifteen minutes before that."

"Do you remember what she wore?"

"A black cocktail dress, heels, diamond-stud earrings. Her hair was up. As I held open the door I told her she looked beautiful and asked where she was going."

"What did she answer?"

"She said, *Big date. Real big.* And then laughed. Is she okay?"

Herb gave him the news, then got the phone numbers for Murry and the morning doorman. He called them during the elevator ride. Neither had seen Davi since Sunday.

Pulitzer's key got us inside. I could have fit three of my apartments inside of Davi's, with room left over to park my car.

"I'll take the bedroom," I told Herb.

Then we heard the scream.

I tugged my .38 from the holster strapped to my left armpit, senses heightened.

Movement, to the right. Both Herb and I swung our guns over.

A cat, wearing a large disposable diaper, bounded out from under the dining room table and into the hallway, screaming like a train whistle.

Herb exhaled. "I just had about four heart attacks."

"That must be Mr. Friskers."

“Either that or a small, furry toddler. Did you check out the diaper?”

“Yeah. Talk about pampering your pets.”

I tucked my gun back under my blazer and fished a pair of latex gloves from my pocket.

“We’ve got an hour,” I told Herb, indicating when the CSU would arrive.

Davi’s bedroom was the bedroom of a typical young woman, albeit one with money. Her unmade bed had a stuffed animal infestation, over a dozen of them swarming on top of the pink comforter. A framed Nagel print hung on the far wall. The near wall was obscured by a collage of pictures, most of them Davi, snipped from magazines.

A large pile of clothing rested near the closet, and a make-up mirror—the kind movie stars have with bare lightbulbs surrounding the frame—hung above the dresser. Cosmetics rested on every flat surface in the room.

On the nightstand, next to the bed, a phone/answering machine combo blinked, indicating twelve messages. I scrolled through the Caller ID numbers. Four of them were ‘blocked call’ messages, the last from 4:33pm Sunday night.

I played the messages. All were from Pulitzer but one; a long distance call from Davi’s mother. The blocked calls didn’t seem to correspond to any messages.

Davi’s walk-in closet was so crammed full of clothing I could barely walk in. Some of it occupied hangers, but most of it rested in large heaps on the floor. Rummaging through the piles yielded nothing but an empty cat-carrier.

A quick search of her drawers found more clothes, make-up, and a nickle bag of cocaine. I placed it in one of the evidence baggies I always keep in my pocket. Then I pulled every drawer completely out and checked to see if anything was hidden behind them or taped under them. I’d been doing that ever since seeing a Hill Street Blues episode where a cop found a clue that way. Maybe someone somewhere saw the same episode.

No such luck today.

Under the bed I discovered two stray stuffed animals, a cat toy, and several years’ worth of dust. Nothing hidden between the mattress and box spring. Nothing behind the Nagel print.

I returned to the phone and hit *redial*, copying down the last number called and disconnecting before it went through. Then I copied down all of the numbers on the Caller ID.

“Jack!”

I’ve been partners with Herb for over a decade, but had never heard such raw panic in his voice before. I rushed out of the bedroom, gun drawn.

Herb stood in the living room, stock-still. Tears ran down his cheeks.

Perched on Herb’s head was Mr. Friskers, claws dug in tight.

“He leapt off the curtains. His claws are like fish hooks.”

I took a step closer. Mr. Friskers hissed and arched his back.

Herb screamed.

“Get it off before he scalps me, Jack!”

“You can’t pull him off?”

“His claws are stuck in my skull bone.”

Only years of training and consummate professionalism prevented me from breaking down in hysterical laughter.

“You want me to call Animal Control?” I tried to say it straight, but a giggle escaped.

“No. I want you to shoot him.”

“Herb...”

“Shoot the cat, Jack. Please. I’m begging you. It’s not just the pain. There’s gotta be a several days’ worth of cat mess in that diaper. The smell is making my eyes water.”

I’d never owned a cat and had zero experience with the species. But I did recall an old TV commercial where the cat came running when it got fed. Couldn’t hurt to try.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t leave me, Jack.”

“I’m just going to get my camera.”

“That’s not even close to being funny.”

I located the canned cat food in a cabinet. When I opened one of the tins, Herb screamed again. Mr. Friskers appeared in the kitchen a heartbeat later.

“You were just hungry, weren’t you, kitty?”

The cat yowled at me. I set the can on the floor and watched it inhale the food.

Herb came through the doorway. His gun was out, pointing at Mr. Friskers.

“Herb, put that away.”

“It’s evil, Jack. It has to die.”

Mr. Friskers looked at Herb, hissed, then bolted out of the room. Herb holstered his weapon.

“Am I bleeding?”

“A little.” I handed him some paper towels. “Find anything?”

“Bank and credit card statements, phone bills, a few personal letters. You?”

“A few grams of cocaine.”

“Give it to the cat. Maybe it will calm down.”

I gave Herb a fake smile. “Funny, for someone bleeding to death. Want to stop by the ER on the way back for your rabies shot?”

Herb narrowed his eyes, then looked past me, through the kitchen.

“The crime scene unit will be here soon.”

“So?”

A yowl pierced the room, and Mr. Friskers shot past us and pounced its diaper-clad ass onto the counter. He sat there, hissing. His tail, which poked out through the center of the diaper, swished back and forth like a cobra.

“I’ll try Animal Control.” I took out my cell.

The news wasn’t good.

“Sorry, Lieutenant. The heat wave has all of us doing triple time. Soonest we could pick it up is Monday.”

“We might all be eaten by then.”

“It’s the best I can do. You can try the Humane Society.”

I tried the Humane Society.

“Sorry, Officer. We couldn’t come for at least a week. When the temperature gets this high, animals are hit hardest. We don’t even have any room for another.”

Herb nudged me.

“Tell them this cat is evil. If you shaved its head, you’d see a 666.”

I relayed the info, but they weren’t swayed. Herb suggested calling the Crocodile Hunter,

but neither of us knew his number.

“We can’t let it stay here, Jack.”

I agreed. A cat could mess up a scene in a dozen ways. Not just by destroying evidence--it could get in the team’s way, hurt someone, or even get hurt itself if it inhaled the wrong chemical.

“You want him?” I asked.

Herb frowned and tore off another paper towel to blot his scalp.

I reached a tentative hand out to stroke the cat, and it bared claws and took a swipe at me.

“Try offering him your head,” Herb suggested. “He’ll jump on and we can walk him out.”

I left the kitchen and went into Davi’s bedroom, returning a moment later with the cat-carrier and some ski gloves.

Herb raised an eyebrow. “Should I start calling 911 now?”

“No need to worry. Animals love me, because they can sense my pure heart.”

Without hesitating, I grabbed Mr. Friskers around the body. He countered by screaming louder than humanly possible and locking his fangs onto my right index finger. The gloves protected me, and I managed to get him in the carrier without losing a digit.

“So now we throw him in Lake Michigan, right?”

“I’m sure one of Davi’s friends will take him.”

“And in the meantime?”

I let out a big, dramatic sigh.

“I guess I’ll have to keep him for a few days.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Jack. I don’t want the next murder I investigate to be yours.”

“He’s just scared and grumpy. You’d be grumpy too if you had the same diaper on for four days. Right, little guy?”

I poked my gloved finger into the cat carrier, and Mr. Friskers pounced on it, biting and scratching.

“Try showing him your pure heart,” Herb suggested.

The cat screamed for the entire ride back to the office.

### JA Konrath on Jack Daniels

Whiskey Sour, the first Jack Daniels novel, was written because I couldn't make up my mind. I grew up reading the police procedure novels of Ed McBain, and the first-person mysteries of Robert B. Parker and John D. MacDonald, and the humorous Donald Westlake. Later, I got into Janet Evanovich, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky.

But I had an equal love for Thomas Harris, Patricia Cornwell, and Ridley Pearson. These people wrote thrillers about serial killers, and they scared the crap out of me. This tradition was carried on by James Patterson, Robert W. Walker, David Wiltse, and many others.

Unable to decide whether to write a traditional mystery with humorous elements, or a frightening thriller, I decided to do both in the same book.

I chose a female lead for several reasons, some artistic, some business. I wanted an underdog hero, someone with the same problems that we all have. Jack's mother, her insomnia, and her trouble with men, are things that I can relate to. I can't relate to being stalked by a serial killer, as that (thankfully) hasn't happened to me. Since Chicago has the second largest police

department in the US, and it's mostly male-dominated, I thought a high-ranking female cop would fit the underdog bill.

It also didn't escape my attention that 80% of all fiction is bought by women. I'm "J.A." Konrath rather than "Joe" on my book covers so readers don't judge me by my Y chromosome. Some men read only male authors. Some women read only female authors. The ambiguous "J.A." hopefully means people will pick up the book based on the content, without any sexual prejudice.

I find it a wonderful challenge to write for a female character. And if I ever get any details wrong, my wife, mom, agent, and editor (all women) pounce on me. I get email all the time of people who think I'm a woman, and I take that as a high compliment.

Once I decided on a female hero, I wanted to take her, and the reader, on a rollercoaster ride. Rollercoasters (and haunted houses around Halloween) provoke two responses: Screams and laughter. To my knowledge, no mystery author had ever tried to do both in the same book.

Some people (mostly critics) didn't "get" *Whiskey Sour*. They couldn't decide if I was trying to write a comedic mystery or a thriller. I don't see why it has to be one or the other. Life is both funny and scary. And ask any police officer what they think is the most realistic cop show on TV, and you'll be surprised how many pick the 1970's sitcom *Barney Miller*.

Even though *Whiskey Sour* is a strange hybrid of Patterson and Evanovich, the plot is pretty straightforward. Cop tries to catch killer, gets him at the end. It's a formula, and has been done a zillion times before.

With *Bloody Mary* I wanted to try something different. What if a cop chased a killer, but caught him in the middle of the book instead of the end? Would the book still be interesting to

the reader? Where would the suspense come from? What twists and turns could I throw in? As some suggested, *Bloody Mary* is really two books in one. The first half is a mystery, the second half a thriller. It's always fun to hear from readers who finish half the book and wonder who it can possibly continue for another 150 pages.

I'm glad that people seem to like Jack as a character, but many prefer some of the supporting characters to her. Her boyfriend Latham, her partner Herb, her ex-partner Harry McGlade, her cat Mr. Friskers, her mother Mary (the book is named after Jack's mom, did anyone catch that?) and many of the other minor characters return in the other books, and also appear in many short stories. One of my favorite supporting characters, Phineas Troutt, appears in both the *Thriller* anthology edited by James Patterson and the *These Guns for Hire* anthology edited by me, as well as *Whiskey Sour* and *Rusty Nail*, but he's conspicuously missing from *Bloody Mary*.

*Bloody Mary* had an open ending, where everything wasn't completely resolved, on purpose. It wasn't because I wanted readers to rush out and buy the next book (even though I do want that!) I left Jack's mom in a coma, and Jack's love life in limbo, because that fit in with the theme of the book.

I don't like books that preach, and I'm not a fan of heavy-handedness in light entertainment, but the *Jack Daniels* series is a thinly disguised metaphor for my philosophy about life. Namely: Things don't always work out, but we still should try our best.

Lots of folks comment on the gore in the series, especially in *Rusty Nail*, which has some really over-the-top scenes. But, if you go back and read the gory parts, you'll realize they really aren't gory.

Don't get me wrong---some really awful things happen in these books. But I don't go into graphic detail. I don't describe the atrocities in depth. I merely suggest what happened, using as few words as possible, and let the reader's imagination fill in the blanks.

Bloody Mary features torture, mutilation, cannibalism, and necrophilia, among other atrocities. But there are no lingering descriptions of those things. They happen off the page.

Rusty Nail amps up the violence even further. Again, it isn't gratuitous, or even particularly detailed. But it still seems to freak some people out, and is the one book of mine that readers tend to quit on because it's too much for them.

Remember: It's only a book. It's make-believe. No one was hurt in real life.

Also, Santa Claus isn't real either.

For those who are really turned off by even the suggestion of anything violent, the fourth Jack Daniels book, Dirty Martini, has zero violence. No gore. No blood. No crazy serial killers. Even so, I'm pretty confident that Dirty Martini is my scariest book. It freaks people out.

The fifth Jack Daniels book, Fuzzy Navel, is a direct sequel to Rusty Nail (which is a semi-direct sequel to Whiskey Sour) and brings back one of my favorite villains. I believe it's important for series books to each stand alone, because you never know where in a series a reader is going to begin. But I also believe it's a lot of fun to have a story arc that goes through several books.

This arc ends with Cherry Bomb, coming in June of 2009.