



SNOWBALL

By: Jared Shipley

Snowball

We met outside a coffee shop in Silver Lake. I was halfway through an Americano when he sat down across from me. His hair was thick and dark, but his looks were less-than-average and he had bad posture. About twenty-four years old, by my estimate, but an old twenty-four. His rough skin and gray eyes told me he had experience. He lit a cigarette and offered his hand. I shook it.

“Terry Rawlins,” he said.

“Marshall Santone.”

He blew a puff of smoke, making minimal effort to turn his head and blow it away from my face. Not that I minded a little cigarette smoke. I hoped he would offer me one, but he didn't, and I didn't bother asking. “So how does this work?”

“First you tell me why you called and what kind of work you need done.” I had a yellow pad in my leather day planner next to me on the table. I opened it and removed a pen.

Terry took another drag – a long one. “I had a roommate. She packed up and moved to Vegas about three months ago. Her name is on the lease, and it don't expire until December. Problem is, when she left, she didn't find a replacement or leave me any money, so she's stiffed me on three months of rent!” His demeanor was shaky. I wondered if he was nervous or if he'd just smoked too many cigs today. His eyes darted around, never meeting my own.

“What's your rent?”

“Eighteen fifty.”

“Nine twenty-five each then?”

“Yeah. I've had to cover it all since she left. That's an extra three grand she owes me at this point.”

“Why not just call her?”

“You don't think I tried that? She won't answer my calls. She knows why I'm calling. So I went to a lawyer, about taking her to small claims court. But the thing is, I don't what her new address is, and the lawyer said without the address they can't serve her a subpoena. So he recommended hiring a private detective, and he gave me your number.”

“Who was the lawyer?”

“Mike Winchell.”

“In Burbank?”

Terry nodded.

“I’ll be sure to thank him. That’s where you live then?”

“Yeah. The Slocum Apartments on Glenoaks.”

“Why did you ask me to meet you down here?”

“The body shop where I work is just a few blocks over.”

I sipped my Americano, Lukewarm now. “What’s her name?”

“Sarah Tulley.” I wrote it down.

“She your girlfriend?”

“No!” He jumped at the answer too quickly to make it wholly true. “Hell no.” His eyes darted around some more, this time with an air of suppressed shame. “We were in rehab together. We were helping each other.”

“I see.”

“But that’s all behind me now. I’m clean and sober eight months.”

“Good for you.”

“Yeah.” His cig was burned to the filter. He stamped it out and lit another.

“Why did Sarah go to Vegas?”

“She got a job there. Friend of hers works for one of the Cirque du Soleil shows. That’s all she told me. Didn’t even leave a forwarding address at the post office. Who does that?”

I shrugged. “You know the name of her friend?”

“No.”

I had a name and a place of work. That was enough to start. From the back of my planner, I produced a contract. “This is a standard contract. My fee is a hundred and fifty per day, plus expenses. For something like this, I’d say we’re looking at around three days. But the expenses may run pretty high if I have to go to Vegas. Overall, you’re looking at between five and eight hundred dollars.”

“That’s fine.”

I slid the contract over to him. He signed it. I tore off his yellow carbon copy.

We stood and shook hands again. I drove away in my car while he lit up another cigarette and cracked his knuckles.

It was around lunchtime. I stopped into a soup and sandwich place on Sunset and sat at a booth. While I waited for my chicken pesto Panini with tomato soup, I whipped out my iPhone and looked up Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. Their hiring site said “Our Resident Shows Division Office in Las Vegas is the nerve center for our American theater shows.” There was no address listed, only a link to job applications. Another search brought up an address and phone number. I called it.

The automated message gave me options to be connected to a list of different production offices. Mystere, O, Zumanity, Love. Terry hadn’t mentioned which show Sarah was now working on, so I pressed the option for the headquarters. A woman answered.

“Resident shows division office.” Her voice was like wind chimes. I imagined she had red hair and wore tight shoes.

“Hello. I’m looking for someone who was recently hired there.”

“All right. Which production?”

“I don’t know. I only have her name.”

“I’ll transfer you to human resources.”

“Thank you.”

While the line dialed, my Panini and soup arrived. I tried to get a sip in before someone answered and burned my tongue.

“Jane Reynolds speaking.”

I took a swig of ice water to cool the stinging.

“Hello?”

“Yes,” I said finally. “Excuse me. My name is Marshall Santone. I’m looking for someone who was hired by you recently. Sarah Tulley.”

She paused. Had she also burnt her tongue? “May I ask why?” her voice trembled.

“I’m a private investigator. It seems Ms. Tulley left her previous residence here in L.A. without notice and owes my client some money.”

“I see. Um...well, sir, I regret to inform you that Sarah Tulley is dead.”

The weight dropped out from under me. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“We all were.”

“What were the circumstances?”

“An exact cause was not determined, at least not disclosed to us, but it’s believed to have been an overdose. She was found unconscious in her house.”

“When did this happen?”

“Just last week.” She sniffed, she was crying. “So sad. I interviewed her just a few months ago. She was very kind and genuine. I knew she was recovering, but she seemed to have a good handle on it.”

“As I understand, she was recommended by a friend of hers that also works there. Is that correct?”

“Yes. Yes, Marta Colter. She works in costumes on the Zumanity show. She’s the one who found Sarah. They were living together.”

“May I have a phone number to reach her?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not allowed to give out that kind of information, but I could transfer you to the production office. She may be there. It’s attached to the theater and there’s a special matinee show today.”

“I would appreciate that. Thank you.”

I was transferred again. This time a man answered. “Yeah?”

“Oh, uh...” the lack of formality threw me off, “Hi. I’m looking for Marta Colter in costumes.”

“None of the backstage staff is here yet. Call time’s in an hour.”

“Would you please have her call me as soon as possible? I need to talk to her about Sarah Tulley.” I gave him my cell number.

“Probably won’t be till after the show, about four-thirty.”

“That’s fine. Thank you.”

We hung up. I put in another call, this time to the Clark County Coroner’s Office, but that got me nowhere. Without being the next of kin or possessing a court order, the investigation reports were off limits.

Technically, my case was now closed. Terry hired me to find Sarah Tulley so he could serve her a subpoena, but you can't take a dead girl to court.

I felt it would be callous, however, to give him the bad news over the phone. Terry had told me he worked at a body shop near where we met. I went back to the area and found three on Sunset alone, within a mile of each other. The first two places hadn't heard of him. The third, Shine Auto, had his picture on the wall as part of the "Shining Staff of Shine Auto." I asked the guy at the desk if he was there.

"Came in this morning. Said he wasn't feeling well, took a sick day."

He seemed fine when he met with me.

"You his sponsor?" the guy asked.

"No. No, I just have some news for him."

"He won't be back until...let's see...Tuesday, but I could leave a message for him, if you'd like."

"He took till Tuesday off?"

"No, he works part time. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday."

"Has he always worked part time?"

"Yeah. I don't know if he has another job. I don't see him much. Tuesday's my day off."

"He a good employee?" I wasn't sure why I asked him this. Curious, I guess.

"Never had a complaint. Hadn't even taken a sick day until today."

I pondered for a minute. Another customer walked in.

"So...do you want me to give him the message?"

"That won't be necessary. Thank you." I noted the store hours on the door when I left: Mon – Fri
9 AM – 7 PM

Sat 9 AM – 2 PM

On the way up to Burbank, I wondered how he had been able to cover Sarah's half of the rent. I doubted earning a mechanic's part time income would cut it, and with only eight months of sobriety under his belt, he probably didn't have much in the way of savings.

The Slocum Apartments looked out over Griffith Park. The view was beautiful, but the air stunk. It was a combination I was used to, working in my line of work, dealing with the people I dealt with.

Terry Rawlins' name didn't appear on any of the buzzers, but a stop into the super's office, a flash of my license and an explanation got me up to room 217. I knocked and waited. Sounds of stumbling came from behind the door, a thump and a groan. Banged his shin on the coffee table, I thought. He opened the door in a huff. His hair was rustled and his cheeks were puffy. His pants were vacant, and he stood there in blue boxer-briefs.

"Bad time?" I asked.

"Hmm?"

"Your work told me you came home sick."

"Yeah." He faked a cough.

"I'll only take a minute. Can I come in?"

He glanced behind him. "Let's talk out here."

"In your underwear?"

"Yeah, so?"

"I'm afraid I have some heavy news. You might want to sit down."

He hesitated then moved aside. I stepped in.

The place looked like the aftermath of frat party, followed by two more. A small living room, no TV, fed into the kitchen and dining room. A hall in the back led to the bathroom. A closed door was next to it.

Terry opened the fridge and rummaged around.

Something rubbed up against my leg. I looked down to find a white cat weaving between my legs. "Who's your guest?"

He closed the fridge door holding a carton of orange juice and drank from it. "That's Snowball. Sarah left him here when she left. I've tried to get rid of him twice, but he keeps coming back."

"May I sit?" I said. Terry nodded. I lifted a shirt and a pair of socks off of a dining room chair and set them down next to it, next to a spoon that was dusted with a white residue. Probably not soap scum. In the center was a dark spot, almost black.

"I know what happened to Sarah," I said.

“That was fast. I thought you said it would take a couple days.”

“I thought so too, but...well...”

“What?” He was leaning against the fridge, his hip cocked, with a smug expression on his face like James Dean.

“Well, I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Sarah is dead. About a week ago.”

His expression didn’t change, his hip remained cocked. His lips didn’t tremble. Only his eyes moved. They were darting again. “How?”

“Unofficially, an overdose.”

“Unofficially?”

“I don’t have access to the reports without authorization, but that’s the belief.”

His manner bothered me, how still he was. How unresponsive. On one hand, it may not have been surprising to him. A drug addict had died from drugs. Happens every day and he had probably known others who died the same way.

On the other hand, his stone face had the look of someone being told something he already knew; telling him the grass was green and cows go moo and what else you got? Is that all you came to tell me?

“Sorry for the trouble,” he said. “What do I owe you?” he travelled down the hall and opened the closed door. A glimpse revealed that it was the bedroom, the only bedroom. A pair of legs lied on top of the covers.

He came back with his wallet, searching through his cash.

“That won’t be necessary,” I said.

“I must owe you something for your time.”

“It was just a couple of phone calls during a lunch I would’ve eaten at a place I would’ve been anyway.”

“I insist,” he started digging out cash. “Let me at least pay you your day’s rate.” He held a stack of twenties in front of me.

“Sure,” I said, taking them reluctantly. “Thank you.”

“Thank you.” He started for the door and I picked up on the cue that it was time to leave. As I stood, I saw into the bedroom. A woman was getting off the bed. She was roughly the same age

as Terry, maybe a few years older, and naked, with curves as smooth as fine scotch. Her hair was the color of wet sand.

Her eyes caught mine. They didn't turn away or fill with shame. They were reaching out, searching for something to grasp onto.

I stepped out. Snowball rushed past me and down the hall. I started to go after him, but Terry said "It's okay. He always comes back."

We said our parting words, and I walked back into the yellow afternoon. The air still stunk. It had gotten worse.

I'd just made a whole day's wages in two hours. Enjoy it, Marshall. Take a day, go to the beach, go to the movies. But something held me back.

Taking the money didn't seem right. It had a feel about it, like I was holding something cursed. It felt like a payoff, not for services rendered, but for secrets kept. Only I didn't know what those secrets were.

A number of things disturbed me about that visit:

That spoon on the floor had been held over a lighter, recently. And the woman in the bedroom had no track marks anywhere on her body.

Terry told me Sarah wasn't his girlfriend, but he'd been living with her in a one bedroom apartment.

And most disturbing of all: He told me that he and Sarah had gone through rehab together, an intimate experience, I'd imagine, yet he shook off the news of her death like a fly on his shoulder.

A few minutes passed as I wondered what to do with myself. A post-lunch sleepiness had snuck up on me and I started to drift... Then snapped back awake at the sound of broken glass, followed by something shattering. I looked up. Someone had thrown a bedside lamp through a window. A voice, Terry's it sounded like, yelled "Goddamnit!"

I bolted out of the car and back into the building. More yelling came from behind the door to room 217.

In the glove box of my car I kept a .32 Beretta pistol. I forgot to grab it and wondered if I should go back but decided against it. I didn't want to miss anything.

I raised my fist to knock but held it when I heard Terry yell, "What's he gonna do, huh? He didn't see anything!"

“He saw me! Here!”

“So what? He doesn’t know who you are!”

I lowered my hand. My feeling was right.

“Sarah’s dead,” he said. “Case closed.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“He’ll just forget about it?”

“What does he care? He got his money.”

“You should’ve told me you were doing this! That was so stupid!”

“What’s stupid was you throwing my lamp out the window.”

“You selfish prick. You did that to protect yourself.”

“Hey!” He slapped her. There was silence. “Don’t you forget about what I did for you. I saved your life, or don’t you remember? If it weren’t for me, you’d have been dead long before Sarah. Jimmy would’ve seen to that.”

Another silence.

“I needed to,” he said. “Understand? You just need to calm down.”

“I can’t,” she said. “I can’t.” Then fast, quick footsteps headed right for me. I turned quickly and darted around a corner. Waited for a minute, but the door didn’t open. Nobody came storming out like I’d expected. And the yelling had stopped.

I stepped out from the corner and approached the door again. There was shuffling and grunt, like a bodybuilder dropping a couple of hundred-pound barbells.

Then the door opened, fast.

I was staring directly into the red, wide eyes of Terry Rawlins. They were wild as they were, but finding me in his way sent him into a sprawling panic.

He screamed and shoved me against the door of the apartment across the hall. The force of it sent the back of my head into the wood. I couldn’t tell if the cracking sound was from my head or the door. Terry sprinted down the hall, into the stairwell.

I didn't follow him. I meant to, but couldn't when I saw the girl on Terry's floor. Her body was still. Her eyes were open, but they weren't reaching anymore. They had fallen.

She was alive, but wouldn't be for long if I didn't move quickly. She was barely breathing, her pulse was slow. She was slipping into shock.

The lady at 911 asked what was wrong with her. The syringe under the coffee table made it pretty clear.

"Looks like a drug overdose," I said. "Heroin, I think."

"An ambulance is on the way, sir. We've pinpointed your location from your phone. Just stay calm, okay?"

I thought I was being calm, or maybe I just remember it that way.

She was clothed now, in a flower print sundress. The flowers were blue, except for one on the back of her right shoulder, which was purple. And wet. Blood was seeping out from inside it.

"Excuse me, miss," I said and pulled the shoulder strap down. The blood came from a needle prick. No doubt, the needle under the coffee table.

There was something else on her back: A long scar on her left side, stretching from below her shoulder down to her hip. It was crooked and purple, definitely not a surgical scar.

Paramedics arrived about ten minutes later. The front door was locked so they called the super, who followed them up to the room.

I'd been holding her still, checking her pulse every minute. It was dropping fast.

They shot her full of Naloxone and put her on the stretcher. I followed the ambulance to St. Vincent's. After they wheeled her to the ICU (I wasn't admitted, not being a relative), two detectives with the Burbank PD approached me in the waiting room. They had some questions for me. I had few answers.

I told them about my whole morning, about Terry and Sarah and the woman in treatment. She was unconscious now and would be for a while. I didn't even know her name.

"Any idea what her relationship was to Mr. Rawlins?" said one of the detectives. Jenkins, I came to find out. He was young and naïve with a nice haircut. The other introduced himself as Dornan. He was seasoned, with a loose tie and three days of stubble. I felt more comfortable talking to him.

“She was naked in his bed,” I responded. “I assume they were seeing each other.”

“Why would Rawlins run away?”

“Isn’t it obvious? He tried to kill her.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The OD shot was on the back of her shoulder blade. She was on her way to the door when she was stopped. She would’ve had her back to him.” They looked at each other, skeptical, then back at me. “She has no other track marks anywhere on her body. Trust me, I got a good look. And besides, if she injected herself, why would she go to the back of her shoulder?”

“But why would Rawlins want to kill her?”

My answer was a leap over the mountain, but it’s all I had. “I think he killed Sarah and this girl knew about it.”

Dornan’s look was neutral, knowing it was possible, but refusing to believe anything without proof. But Jenkins perked up like a puppy, eager to catch a multiple murderer within the first six months of his promotion.

Dornan spoke up: “Why the hell would Rawlins hire you to find Sarah if he had killed her?”

“Maybe to cover his tracks. Make it look like he didn’t know anything in case he was questioned about it.”

Dornan looked away. His lips scrunched together in agitation. “But why kill her? Over the rent money?”

“I doubt it. He mentioned someone named Jimmy up in the apartment. Rawlins seems to have saved this girl’s life once upon a time. Said she would’ve been dead before Sarah and Jimmy would’ve seen to it. I’m guessing Sarah’s death has something to do with him.”

“Jimmy? Jimmy who?”

Exactly.

We went back to the Slocum Apartments where a thorough search of Terry’s apartment was under way. We questioned the super. Sarah he’d seen once or twice coming or going, but never spoke to her. Terry had lived there for eight months, right out of rehab, and he knew all about it.

“What kind of car does he drive?” asked Dornan.

“Old Toyota Camry. I don’t know the year.”

“What color?”

“Green. Has a COEXIST sticker on the bumper.” Dorman sent Jenkins out to put an APB on the car and Terry’s description.

“Was he ever behind on his rent?” I asked.

“No,” said the super. “Never had a problem.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” said Dorman.

“Just curious.”

The super wasn’t much help beyond that. We thanked him and took our leave.

“I’m wondering if you could do me a favor, Detective,” I said. “I had no luck with the Clark County Coroner’s Office in obtaining the records of Sarah Tulley’s death. I think it would be helpful to both of us if you gave them a call.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

I gave him my business card. He didn’t have any on him, told me to call the station if I needed him.

There was a rustle in the bushes outside the front door. I took a peek and found Snowball poking around. He slipped back through the bushes and dashed through the parking lot. I went after him. On the other side of the lot was a line of more bushes along a rod iron fence and houses behind them. Snowball leaped over the bushes and squeezed through the rods. He looked back at me, stared at me waiting for me to follow. Then he was gone.

It was after seven when I got back in my car. Marta Colter hadn’t called me. I called the number I called that morning, pressed the option to send me to the Zumanity production office.

“Our office is currently closed. Please call back between the hours of 9 AM and 5 PM Monday through--”

I hung up. “Shit.”

I searched the show on my phone. There was a performance that night at 9:30. If I left immediately, I would be there around 11, just as the show was finishing and I could speak to her in person. My tank was over half full. I wouldn’t have to fill up until Barstow.

It was a long drive. I spent the first part of it racking my brain and it was making me tired. After I filled up I rolled the windows down, turned on Garth Brooks and tried to enjoy the desert air. It didn't smell so bad out here.

Zumanity played in the New York-New York hotel. I got there shortly after 10. I pulled off the 5 onto Tropicana and went to the south entrance, avoiding the Strip, thank God.

I was worried about the time and how long it would take to park, so I valeted and hurried inside.

The theater was on the north side of the hotel. I had a hell of a time finding it. Casinos are designed that way, giving you no path to anything without steering you past every slot machine, every black jack table, but I found it.

A horde of people were exiting the doors. Some of the scantily clad cast members – one woman was topless except for the shoulder straps from her plaid skirt coverings her nipples -- were in the hall signing autographs and taking pictures. I wanted to ask one where the stage door was, but I couldn't get to them. I approached an usher instead.

“Can't tell you that, sir, only cast and staff are allowed.”

I pulled out my license. “I need to speak to Marta Colter. She might have some information regarding a murder investigation.” Was it a murder investigation? Technically, no, but it got me backstage.

The usher pointed me to the costumes department. I thanked him and approached the door. Two women were there. They were grabbing costumes from a bin and putting each individual piece onto hangers, then putting them into dry cleaning bags.

“Excuse me?” I said. They looked at me. Both of them were older, pushing fifty. One of them was smoking. “My name is Marshall Santone. I'm looking for Marta Colter. Is she available?”

“She ain't here,” said the one with the cigarette, then went back to work as if I never existed.

“Did she go home?”

The other lady spoke up with a much friendlier disposition. “She took some time off. It's been really hard for her since her friend died. She worked over at the Mystere show. Marta's the one who found her, you know. Went home between shows that night and didn't come back. I was so worried. We didn't know what happened until the next day.”

“Between shows?”

“Yes. There's a 7 and a 9:30.”

“Are those the times for the Mystere show, as well?”

“I don’t know. The times are set by the hotels. Different owners, different rules.”

“I see.”

“Marta was like a sister to her. But heaven knows she had her weaknesses. Poor girl.”

“Poor?” said the smoking one. “Was her own damn fault, you ask me. She was a junkie.”

“Do you know where I might find Marta?” I asked the friendly one. “Could you tell me where she lives?”

She backed away in a sudden distrust. “Oh...well, she--”

“Janet,” said the smoking one, “you talk too damn much.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’m a detective. I’m just looking to get some information from her.”

“Detective with who? I don’t see a badge.”

I pulled my license again. “I’m private. I was hired to find out where Sarah Tulley lived. It was my understanding that she and Marta lived together.”

“The dead girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Why you need to know where she lived if she’s dead?” She blew a puff and looked at me with arrogant eyes.

“Because that’s where she was murdered.” It was forward, maybe rude, but I wanted to counter her attitude.

It worked. Her arrogant eyes turned defeated. “Murdered? I thought she overdosed.”

“I wish she would’ve. Might’ve been simpler that way.”

She stamped her cigarette out in a sink on the wall. Janet, the friendly one had her hands over her mouth. “Did Marta kill her?” she choked.

“I don’t think so. I’ve probably already told you more than I’m admitted. If you could provide me with her address, I would appreciate it. Otherwise, I’ll be on my way.”

The smoking lady lit up another and stayed where she was. Janet picked a pen up from the counter and pulled a slip of paper from a tray in the corner. She wrote something down and handed it to me: 142 Cervantes St. “I hope she’s all right.”

“Thank you for your help,” I said and started out of the room. Before I was through the door, I caught something, pictures on the wall. In one of them, two cast members – the topless girl in a plaid skirt, and a man in spandex and a leather vest – were posing with the two costume ladies and another woman, a woman with smooth curves and hair the color of wet sand.

“Who is this?” I asked and pointed her out. Janet saw from where she was.

“Why, that’s Marta. Poor girl.”

Poor girl, indeed.

Cervantes Street was north of the Strip, in a suburb near Fremont Street. Marta wouldn’t be there, of course, but I wanted to check the place out, it being a possible crime scene and all. It was dark, and I had a hard time reading the numbers but found the place easy enough. I pulled over to the curb.

It was the housing equivalent of an old catcher’s mitt – a small, single story house with no garage and dead grass. A short walkway led to the porch covered in cheap green turf. It matched the green car in the driveway. A Toyota, with a COEXIST sticker on the back bumper. Terry Rawlins was here.

This time I didn’t forget. I opened the glove compartment and removed my gun, kept it tucked into my belt behind my back. When I approached the front door, a light went on inside. I ducked against the wall by the door and hid in the shadow.

Terry appeared at the window, looking out into the street. He was talking into his cell phone, his head turning side to side, his eyes doing their trademark darting. They were looking for something, someone perhaps, and not finding them. He hung up his cell phone and almost turned away, but his eyes caught something. My car, I assumed. It was on the curb, close to the end of the driveway. He vanished from the window, only to re-emerge seconds later. The front door swung open and he stepped onto the porch, keeping his gaze on my car.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Hey, who are you?!”

“Keep your voice down,” I said. He jumped and turned to find me with a .32 Beretta pistol pointed at him. We went inside.

“I would’ve thought you’d go south,” I said. “Mexico perhaps, or hop a boat to Chile.”

He was silent. We were walking down the main hallway, him in front and me with the gun at his back. We came to the dining room. “Have a seat,” I said. He did.

“Is this how you treat all your clients?” he said.

“Only the ones who kill people.”

“You’ve changed your attitude, haven’t you?”

I looked at him. “What does that mean?”

“Mike Winchell told me about you,” he said. “Told me you used to be the best defense lawyer in the state. How many murderers did you suck up to, take money from and put back on the street? I bet you never sat them in a chair with a gun to their head.”

“I was doing my job.”

“Just like you are now, right?” He scoffed.

“What’s your job, Terry?”

“I’m a mechanic, I told you.”

“You pay almost two grand every month working as a mechanic? Part time? Plus utilities, food, gas, and have an extra few hundred available to hire me?”

He didn’t answer.

“You’re dealing, aren’t you? And using again. I saw the syringe at your apartment. You thought I would walk away, didn’t you? Just take the money and move on.”

His leg was bouncing up and down. His eyes darted. He was nervous.

I pulled a chair up across from him and sat down. I smiled. “The funny thing is, this is the exact place you hired me to find. But you didn’t need me, did you? You knew where Sarah was all along. You killed her here.”

No answer. But no refusal.

“No blood stains anywhere, though. Probably did it like you tried to do to Marta. Yeah? Taking the fifth? That’s fine. Who’s Jimmy?”

His eyes jumped onto mine, wondering how the hell I knew about Jimmy, then darted around the room some more.

“Is he your supplier?”

“Go to Hell.”

“After I make a call. Excuse me.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket, keeping the gun on him, and dialed information.

“Burbank Police Department, please.”

Terry didn't move. A voice on the other end said: “Burbank police.”

“Detective Dornan, please, is he in?”

“He's not here right now. Would you like his cell phone?”

“Please.” I was transferred again, thinking I'd never spent so much time being transferred to different phones a single day in my life. Dornan's phone rang, and rang, and rang. No answer except for this message: “You've reached the voicemail of Detective James Dornan with the Burbank police. Please leave your name, phone number, the time you're calling and case number if applicable, and I will return your call as soon as possible.” Beep.

“Detective, this is Marshall Santone. I found Terry Rawlins. I have him in my custody—” I stopped. Something dawned on me. Dornan arrived at the hospital no more than ten minutes after I did. I hadn't thought about how they knew to be there. Nobody had called them. At least, nobody I was with. Terry was the only other person who would've known it was an attempted homicide. And Dornan's first name was James.

I hung up. Terry was smiling, it turned into laughter.

The front door opened. Footsteps echoed on the tile floor as if we were in a deep cavern. My heart rate rose with every increasing breath. Terry was still laughing.

Dornan emerged around the corner, his gun drawn, aimed at me. “Hello, Detective.”

“Hello, Jimmy.”

We held our positions: My gun on Terry, Dornan's gun on me. He didn't even step into the room.

“Where's your partner?” I asked.

“Chasing his own tail.”

I smirked. “So how are we gonna get out of this?”

“It starts with you putting your gun down.”

“That wouldn't be very fair. How about you put your gun down too?”

“Or else what? You'll shoot him? Be my guest.” His face was calm and solid like he'd been in this position a thousand times. “Kid's a fuck-up.”

“Hey!” Terry yelled.

“Shut your mouth,” said Dornan. “I’ve already had to clean up one mess of yours today.”

“That bitch was losin’ it, man! She was gonna give us up! I had to do it!”

“She would’ve been out of the picture months ago if you hadn’t stuck your neck in and just did your damn job! Your dick has gotten us in more trouble than the money’s worth. It’s no wonder Sarah left you.”

“Fuck you, man! I never should’ve gotten into this. You crooked shit!” He leapt out of his chair and slammed into Dornan, knocked him into the wall and ran to the front door. Dornan turned and fired three shots down the hallway. Terry’s body thumped against the wall and slid to the floor.

I was now aimed at Dornan. He turned and aimed at me. Both of our lives were racing to the precipice of death, but stopped just before the edge. Neither of us fired.

“I’m not going to shoot you, Santone. I had reasonable cause for shooting Terry. You saw that, but not you. You shouldn’t have been involved in this. You were right. He was trying to protect himself.” His manner had changed. He hadn’t planned on shooting Terry, and it shook him up. “If you put your gun away, you can go home. It’ll be like you were never here.”

“You expect me to keep quiet?”

“I expect you to let me take care of this.”

“And what about Marta Colter?”

“What about her?”

“You gonna take care of her too? Like you tried to take care of her before? I saw the scar. Did you do that to her?”

He licked his lips. He was sweating.

“There’s no way out of this, Jimmy. Not unless you give yourself up, right now.” He didn’t answer, only trembled. His trigger finger trembled too. “I was a defense attorney for thirteen years. I know people. I’ll make sure you get a fair trial. Maybe even a reduced sentence, you being a cop.”

He shook his head, “I’m not going to jail.”

“Put the gun down, Detective.”

“Do what I told you!”

“Jimmy—”

“Do it!” His hand was shaking. His eyes were manic. I sensed it coming. I moved.

He fired.

I felt the sting all over my left arm, though the bullet only hit the outside of my shoulder. It would later be found lodged in the wall behind me, proving that the shot I fired back was in self-defense.

It hit Dorman in the neck. He fell like a stiff board and was dead before I reached him.

Sleep wouldn't come until much later, after the local police had searched the place, dusted for fingerprints, taken hundreds of photographs, and asked me the same questions a thousand times over. My shoulder was cleaned, treated and wrapped, and I was asked to stick around town for a few days. I convinced them to let me make a statement, take my information and let me go back home. Investigators were reluctant, but there was no evidence suggesting anything except what I had told them, and they agreed.

Before I left, I asked one of them about Sarah Tulley. Neither of them had been dispatched on that case, but one of the uniformed officers overheard me asking. “I was here,” he said. “It was last week.”

“What day?” I asked.

“Call came in on Wednesday night.”

“Do you remember the time?”

“I remember the news had just come on. Around ten-thirty. Very sad.”

“Yeah.”

I crashed at a Motel 6 and was on my way to L.A. the next morning.

As I waited for the nurse at St. Vincent's to get me the status on Marta Colter, I looked something up on my phone. *Mystere* played in the Treasure Island Hotel and Casino, every Wednesday through Sunday night at 6:30 PM and 8:30 PM.

The nurse came back. Marta had woken up and was set to be released later that day after another examination.

The door to her room was slightly open. She was on the bed, looking out the window. Her face was much older and gaunt than only the day before. The heart monitor pulsed with low, steady beeps.

“Ms. Colter?” I said. She didn’t answer, didn’t turn away from the window.

I stepped into the room and closed the door. The click of it got her attention. She turned, startled.

“It’s all right,” I said. “I just want to talk to you.”

“You...you were there yesterday.”

I nodded.

“You saw me.”

“Yes.”

“I was on the ground. You were with me.”

I sat down in the chair next to the bed. “Ms. Colter, my name is Marshall Santone, the private detective your boyfriend Terry Rawlins hired.”

She sneered. “He isn’t my boyfriend.”

“But you were seeing each other, is that correct?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’m curious as to why he tried to kill you. Was it because you planned to expose him?”

She looked me in the eyes for the first time. Hers were hard and cold. “I’m not telling you shit.”

“You knew about Terry and Dornan’s arrangement. Or should I say Jimmy?” Her mouth stayed closed. She turned away. “I’ve seen it before. Terry deals drugs to some unsuspecting kid, he feeds Dornan the lead. Dornan makes the arrest and takes a cut of the dough while Terry gets off scot-free. And I bet you helped. Maybe enticed some nice guy or girl then sent them Terry’s way. Maybe took your own cut or dealt a little on your own. Am I right?”

She said as much as a stone.

“I guess we’ll find out sooner or later,” I said, “With both Terry and Dornan being dead, the truth is bound to come out about you.”

The hardness and cold was replaced with shock and a dash of sadness. “What?”

“Last night. If you want the whole story, you can read it in the papers, but the gist is Dornan killed Terry, and I killed Dornan. That makes you the only one left in this little quartet I’ve found myself stuck in the middle of. But I can’t seem to figure out how Sarah Tulley played into all of this. I was hoping you could help me. Maybe tell me why you killed her.”

Her whole body tensed. The heart monitor started beeping faster.

“I thought Terry had done it, but he was working the night she died. Two hundred miles away. He couldn’t have made it to Vegas by the time you called the police. Did he make you do it? Or Jimmy? Or maybe you thought it up all by yourself?”

Desperate tears welled and tumbled down her cheeks.

“You went home after your first show that night. It’s only a fifteen minute drive to your place from the theater. That would put you home about 8:45. You didn’t make it back for the second show, supposedly because you’d found your roommate dead. But you didn’t put in the call until 10:30. That’s almost two hours you waited. Why would you wait?”

“Stop.”

“Because she wasn’t dead when you got home, was she? You had to wait until she came home herself, an hour before your show ended. I don’t know how you did it. Maybe hid inside the front door and poked her in the neck as she walked in. Or maybe she was tired and went to bed, and then you snuck in and got her in the arm. I don’t know. The details will all come out in the courts, I’m sure.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I hope not. But you know what really happened that night. And you don’t strike me as the kind who can harbor a dark secret for too long before cracking.”

We held our gaze like two gunfighters. “You should have let me die.”

The door opened. A doctor came in with a nurse by his side. “Excuse me, who are you?”

“He’s nobody,” Marta said, her voice defiant, but quivering. “Nobody at all.”

I stood, and left without saying goodbye.

Walking back to my car, I thought about Snowball. I wondered if he knew the truth, if that’s why he ran away, if he would come back again.