

A vertical photograph of a narrow canal in Venice at night. The water in the foreground is dark, reflecting the warm yellow lights from the buildings on the left. The buildings are multi-story, with some windows lit up. A small boat or structure is visible in the middle ground. The overall atmosphere is quiet and atmospheric.

# ONE SOME DID

**MATTHEW C. McLEAN**

# One Sore Rib

Matthew C. McLean

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For more information, visit [matthewcmclean.com](http://matthewcmclean.com)

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## *Chapter One*

She was an old man's whore who didn't speak a lick of English. It was clear that I had woken her up, but even with her hair a mess, with no makeup and her eyes puffy from not enough sleep or too much drink the night before, she was beautiful. Beautiful, young and tall, and at least a half hand taller than me, which wasn't intimidating for a reason I've never been able to nail down.

The alleyway into the Venice apartment was narrow, gray and, even in the full light of that autumn morning, mostly dark. If this had been America, nobody would have opened the sturdy wooden door to an outsider banging on it, trying to wake up his sick wife, cold and hungry and hungover and trying to get inside with the pitiful breakfast I had managed to scrounge up. But she did, and not by a timid crack, but all the way like she was about to confront my screaming mess, tell me to shut up and go away. Then she recognized me as a fellow tenant, having passed me on the spiral staircase that wrapped itself around the central elevator shaft, leaving no room for mistaken identity when you squeezed past others.

I gestured to try and get across that I had forgotten my keys in what I hoped was something of a universal language. She just motioned me in, twirling her hand at the end of her wrist and wagging her head, understanding enough and not caring about the details, twittering away in friendly, dense, and completely indecipherable Italian. The elevator was used mostly for baggage and, like all things Venetian, was too cramped and slow for the American in me, so I thanked her a few times and started up the stairs to the third floor. To my surprise and discomfort, she followed me.

The stone stairs echoed our footsteps as we walked up, and her stream of Italian, the latter I responded to with a more extensive and bumbling explanation of having left my keys in the apartment I was renting with my wife. I used the word 'wife' defensively, which usually worked to scare off women that I found myself attracted to. Cheryl was going about the business of dying and had chosen to do so in Venice. And in that lonely cold box that was Venice in Autumn, with its ancient stone buildings, dirty canals and rainclouds, I didn't want to complicate things with an extramarital affair. I hadn't made it through nine years of marriage to break her heart at the end. Or at least that's what I thought at the time.

When we reached the door I didn't have any choice but to bang on it and yell for Cheryl, as the inner door, like its outside companion, locked automatically when it closed. As I shouted, hoping she would have the strength that morning to answer, my blonde companion hovered behind me, tittering quietly to herself, obviously amused at my percussional entry dance. I had half forgotten she was there, wondering what contingency plan I had if Cheryl didn't wake. Could I climb to the roof and get in through the balcony?

Almost completely hairless now, gaunt and pale, but with much of her beauty untouched, wrapped in a pearl colored sarong, Cheryl answered the door. She was as bleary-eyed as my escort, halfway through a sentence telling me to stop making so much noise when she noticed the other woman. Her surprise didn't chase all of the sleep away, but she smiled, looking past me but speaking to me, "Who's your friend?"

I 'oh'ed and 'uhm'ed for a second, not sure how to explain bringing home a local girl, while the girl used the moment to step forward and extend her hand to Cheryl as if she were introducing herself for a job interview – perfect posture, eyes bright, arm straight. Another stream of Italian came out, out of which I caught that her name was Sophie. Cheryl smiled, took Sophie's hand, and quickly, politely, and in perfect Italian introduced me and her. For what must have been the fiftieth time I kicked myself for letting my wife convince me to come to the one place where it

seemed like I was the only one who didn't speak the language.

To my surprise, Cheryl invited her in. She had very little energy these days, spending most of it on the couch, so the generous social gesture took me aback, but Sophie strolled right in, pleased, it seemed, with the invitation. We commenced a nickel tour, starting with the largest room (the living room) and proceeding into the rental, through its ever shrinking rooms, ending with the smallest, the roof garden. To call it a roof garden was an insult to my mother's garden, so small as to barely cover a postage stamp, really just a deck with potted plants, but it was just tall enough to overlook the stacked and jutting roofs of Venice, which to my eyes looked more like a playground for ninjas rather than one of the oldest cities in the world. Cheryl sat down at the table in the center of the deck, putting her elbow on the wooden, splintered surface, tilting her head into her stick-like hand, giving both of us a weary smile. Sophie walked the perimeter of the garden, spouting what sounded like very positive, enthusiastic things as she gazed out over the city. I think at some point she may have said, "You can even see the ocean," but I can't be sure. I was trying not to care that it was nice to have someone around with that much energy. She only stopped when she turned back to face us and realized Cheryl was asleep.

With a sympathetic coo, Sophie walked over and bent to examine her, then turned to me with questioning eyes. Not knowing how to explain 'cancer' and 'terminal' I could only shrug. Whatever darkness we had brought with us I didn't see the point in sharing it, but it was clear that Sophie had some idea of what was happening when she placed a gentle hand on Cheryl's cheek. The ability to feel for others was something that they shared in common.

I eventually announced that the visit was over in the only way I could, by picking up Cheryl (my knees buckled for the millionth time at feeling her reduced weight) and walking down the stairs to set her on the couch in the den. Sophie followed me down quiet as a child sneaking downstairs on Christmas Eve, but without all that pesky joy.

When I finished laying her out on the couch and Cheryl

hadn't woke up, Sophie made quiet questioning noises, which I dismissed with hand gestures as I watched my wife. But then Cheryl blinked awake and made what sounded like an apology. Sophie smiled and waved, waved like people do to babies behind the glass at maternity wards, which threatened my knees with buckling again, and turned to leave. This time I turned towards her and, despite all of the guilt in my dirty little soul, I couldn't help but watch her leave. Her beauty had set me back before, but now that she was leaving, I assumed forever, I could take a moment and drink it in. With her facing away from me and my wife behind me, I did so without fear of reproach and only my own conscious to hassle me.

Cheryl said, "She seems nice. We should invite her over sometime."

"She doesn't speak English." I said absently as I watched Sophie disappear over the threshold of the last home my wife would ever know.

"Maybe I could teach her."

I watched her hips swing out the door.

"Yeah."

## *Chapter Two*

Cheryl, in her own way, had already become a ghost.

In the beginning there was plenty to keep us busy, in frightened, double-quick time. There were oncologist visits to go to, appointments to make, advice to be sought, articles to read, surgeries to plan, and the poison of chemotherapy sessions. Like a quarterback learning a new playbook, I became very familiar with cancer very quickly; its conventional treatments, its alternative treatments, and how it bends and twists your own cells and genetics to eat away at you. Cancer has its own black bible and I wouldn't encourage anyone to become familiar with it unless they have to.

It was during those early days that I learned the simple but inescapable fact that someone with Cheryl's type of cancer (a particularly nasty, vicious, and aggressive breed of what I came to think of as the Beast) had little chance of survival. Slim to none. But Death wasn't knocking at the door right then. It was just a black figure on the horizon and you learn to live with it. But as the scars of surgery healed and the regime of chemotherapy started, little by little I watched my wife, a beautiful, shining woman, dim and dim until there was just a shell of her that rarely left the couch. Even then I was sure, with a certainty that I can't explain, that Cheryl would bounce back with the buoyancy that only Cheryl seemed to possess, would kick the Beast in the tail and order Death back to his distant horizon.

But there's that final doctor's visit, the one where they can't look you in the eye, the one that makes the doctor feel like a failure and makes you want to kill him for it. But you clench your fists and tell yourself it's not his fault as he tells you that the treatments aren't working, that the tumors have kept growing, and

there's nothing much left that they can do. Go home, make yourself comfortable. Or as the samurai used to say, "Wash your neck and wait."

But Cheryl being Cheryl said, "Fuck that." The declaration that her death was inevitable, even imminent, seemed to give her a burst of energy – there were places she had never seen, things she had never done and it was time to squeeze some of those in. In a short time we visited Alaska to see the Aurora Borealis, went to China to see the Great Wall, to Australia to see the Barrier Reef. But that burst of energy could only last so long and take her so far. Having to stop in the middle of the Sydney concourse to vomit showed us that.

She didn't want to go home, but we couldn't go on any more adventures. She had returned to the couch, not moving most days, and both of us had to accept the inevitable. It was then that Cheryl decided she wanted to die in Venice.

So now I'm here, waiting for the end, in this dark little apartment, in this gray city with its dark canals, waiting for Death and his Beast to come knocking on the door.

## *Chapter Three*

One thing about Venice is how tiny everything is. Even things that are meant to be big and impressive like the Basilica or the bell tower in front of it or, well, anything in St. Mark's Square, are small, 'specially to an American. Fortunately, not far from our tiny rooftop apartment, down a tiny alley, was a tiny bar with a tiny Australian in it. After years of making questionable decisions about driving after sinking one too many, it was good to have a bar within walking distance with a friendly face in it.

I felt guilty every time I stepped out while Cheryl was asleep, but a man can only be alone for so long, and Cheryl's condition left me alone most of the time. While taking a short walk one evening I had found the "il Mondiale di Calcio". Something else you have to know about Venice is that after all of the daytrippers get back on their cruise ships and night comes down, the place is dark and empty like there isn't a soul around. But when I stumbled on the Mondiale there was noise and light spilling out from it. The inside was an equal contradiction to the gray stone of Venice – with its polished brass fixtures and wooden walls, it looked warm and dry instead of cold and wet. A crowd was gathered around the only decently sized TV I had seen in ages, cheering for I don't know which team as a two-colored mass of players battled it out on the screen. Unlike Venice or the small apartment I rented in it, the Mondiale felt alive. So I pulled up a chair and ordered a beer.

That's how I met Dennis. I liked him right away. He spoke English – he was an Australian ex-pat tending bar in Italy for reasons of his own and I had just come from Australia to a place where I couldn't speak the language. He liked football, which despite the fact that I always called it soccer just to annoy him, I

enjoyed. But I had never really had anyone to talk about it with – in the Marines admitting that you liked soccer was like admitting you were half a fag. And Dennis was more than willing to educate me.

I liked him because any time that anyone asked him how he was (which I did when he handed me the first beer I ordered) he always replied, “It's got its moments.” He said it with a thin smile and a flash in his eyes that could have been merriment, but wasn't. No, it was too hard and too cold to be that, but it was a joke – an inside one he thought too cruel or too cold to be funny to anyone else. But I always thought that if he did share I'd get it, and we'd have a good laugh at ourselves and the world. But I never asked.

Dennis had my usual Urquell resting for me on the bar before I had finished walking through the door. A door I had to crouch slightly to get through, causing me to think about a tall blonde for not the last time that day. I sat down, putting my elbows on the bar at either side of the bottle. “How's it?” I asked.

“It's got its moments,” came the eternal answer.

I took a drink of the beer, taking a look at the TV to see who was playing and thinking that in September the summer and the soccer season were almost over and I should think about switching brews. Something darker.

“How're you?”

I blinked in surprise at the question and it took me a moment to realize that Dennis had asked it. Another thing I liked about him was he was a military man, reserved by nature and training, so I didn't have to worry about having a conversation unless I wanted to start one. In the few weeks I had been in Venice this marked the first time that Dennis had asked me a question without some kind of invitation. In the 'talk first, answer questions later' culture of Italy, I had wondered how he had managed to survive, more or less run a successful bar.

I paused with the beer halfway down to the tabletop from my lips. “I'm good.” A polite lie, but the best I could manage on being surprised.

“Good.” Dennis bowed and dipped behind the bar,

talking without looking at me, glancing every few moments at the television as he washed glasses out in the stainless steel sink. After a minute or so I went back to my beer, thinking that this freak blip of preemptive conversation was a fluke. Then, “Appreciate your help with the paralytics the other night.”

He seemed to be timing his sentences to catch me between drinks, but in this case I didn't mind. Dennis could have handled the three drunk Russians by himself, but when people deal with someone as diminutive as Dennis they frequently underestimate him (particularly if they're drunk) and when people underestimate people like Dennis, people get hurt. I was happy to pitch in. Actually doing something rather than just standing around watching was...well, it was fun. And a relief. The adrenaline crash that comes after a fight gave us both the chuckles as we watched the Russians hobble away and it had given us an excuse to talk. We had learned a little about each other and liked what we had learned and now I had a person to talk to at my new favorite bar.

“No problem. Any time.” I finished bringing the beer to my lips and Dennis stood up in front of me, putting gnarled hands palm down on the bar, looking directly at me for the first time that evening. “So what are you lookin' to grizzle about?”

I stopped and cocked my head at him, not real sure what he was asking. “What?”

“First time you come in 'ere I could tell you were carrying somethin' with you, but you looked like you just wanted a stool to sit on. But today's the first time you come in here to bend yer elbow and didn't finish off one of those bottles in less than five.”

From this sage observation he concluded, “You look like a man who's got something on his mind.”

There comes a time in every relationship when a man is asked a direct question by another man and he has the simple choice of being honest or brushing it off. That decision often dictates how the rest of the relationship will go. I thought about it a moment and went somewhere down the middle. Like I said, I was lonely.

“You mean more on my mind,” I answered, emphasizing 'more'.

“Ah, well then,” Dennis said, mock widening his eyes and dragging out the first vowel, “you'll need one of these.” He disappeared behind the bar again and came up with a dark, cleanskin bottle in one hand and two malt glasses in the other. He poured a dark liquid into both glasses without asking my permission or forgiveness. He took his own glass and held it up, “Cheers.”

He slung the glass to his mouth and I followed suit. My mouth went numb in a way that wasn't entirely unpleasant and I coughed. Dennis, still holding up his glass, winked at it, then set it down on the bartop and asked, “So what's her name?”

I stifled a second cough, the liquor shorting out a few unnameable parts of my brain. I replied, “I...I can't remember.”

The widening of Dennis' eyes wasn't mocked this time, “Oh then you do got it bad.”

I set the glass on the bar and shivered a bit as I shrugged my shoulders defensively, speaking without thinking. “No it's not like that. She spent most of the time talking to my wife.”

Dennis crossed his arms and leaned back against the rear shelf of the bar, eyes not just wide, but openly marveling at me now. “Oh, you mug, you are in a lot of trouble.”

“No, God damn it,” I shook what was left of the numbness out of my head, “I mean it's not like that. She's just a neighbor. She lives downstairs from the place I'm renting.”

Pursing his lips and narrowing his eyes, Dennis nodded as if he were weighing what I was saying. “Well, then, tell me about this neighbor.”

“Sophie,” I paused a moment to drown the aftertaste of the liquor out of my mouth with my beer. “Her name is Sophie.”

“This Sophie seems to have flustered you quite a bit.”

“Look,” I said, forcing my eyes from the TV to Dennis', “I locked myself out of my place this morning and she let me into the building. For whatever reason, I don't know why because she doesn't speak a word of English, she followed me to the apartment and when my wife answered the door, they met. That's it.” I rushed through those 49 words and then looked up at the TV, quietly hoping for the conversation to turn to soccer. The current

topic was making me very uncomfortable for reasons I didn't want to admit to myself, let alone Dennis.

“So you got a wife?”

“Yeah.”

“And a neighbor?”

“Yeah.”

“So when I asked you what her name was, why'd you start talking about the neighbor?”

I squinted at Dennis, not feeling like the Mondiale was such a friendly bar anymore and gave him a very solid, “Fuck you.”

To his credit, Dennis just chuckled and bounced his hips off the rear shelf. “Alright mate, I'll quit bustin' your balls,” he said and went back to washing glasses.

After a moment he asked, “So what's this neighbor look like?”

“Tall. Way tall. Blonde.” I bit off each of the words of the description, not wanting to mention the damn near flawless skin or green eyes or the fact that Dennis had said he'd drop the subject not more than a second ago.

Dennis' frame seemed to stiffen, then he went back to the sink. “You're over by the San Marco Osteria, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I replied, thinking the conversation was finally wandering away from my neighbor. Although his thin build didn't show it, next to drinking Dennis' favorite activity was eating – he always used the restaurants he liked as landmarks whenever giving directions.

Dennis went back to washing and I went back to watching the game.

“And your neighbor is a tall blonde,” he stood up to fully extend his arm and held it above his head with the hand bent horizontally, “about this high?”

I took my eyes away from the television and began to look around without making any sudden movements. It felt like I was searching for an ambush. After a moment I replied with a long, “Yeah?”

Dennis gave me a look I couldn't quite interpret, then

shrugged, never leaving his work. "Nothin'."

I gave him an angry shrug and went back to my Urquell. After a few Dennis stood up from the sink and stretched out his back in a motion that's familiar to old men everywhere. He turned to a boy that he paid to watch the bar and said a few words in a language that wasn't Italian. The boy was dark skinned and, I guessed, came from North Africa or Turkey. I supposed Dennis spoke more than two languages. After issuing his command he disappeared into the back.

One thing about the Mondiale, like much of Venice, while it may not have appeared big on the outside often the insides were dark and labyrinthine. For all I knew he had tunnels all the way to the French catacombs in the back.

I was just starting to relax and get into the game when I heard Dennis call my name. I yelled back, "What?"

"Come 'ere for a minute!" was the immediate response. My reaction was irate (I wanted just a few minutes to enjoy my beer and watch a game before I had to head back to Cheryl) but after a loud exchange that began to annoy the other customers he said, "I need help with something, you ingrate."

I let out a sigh, set down my beer, and walked into the darkness of the Mondiale's back. I couldn't see much in the backroom, but there was a light that I followed that led into a small storage closet, the light coming from a single bulb hanging from the ceiling by a thin cord. Dennis was waiting for me, facing the door I came in by, with an unreadable but grim expression on his face.

Before I had a chance to ask him what he wanted he said, "Your neighbor, you said she's named Sophie?"

I controlled the urge to let my eyes pan the room again, even though no one but me and Dennis could fit into this closet. I followed it with another long, "Yeah?"

Dennis shook his head emphatically and grabbed a box of booze, handing it to me. "You don't want to have anything to do with her."

I felt my head tilt to the side and the corner of my mouth curl up derisively. "Why not?"

“She's bad news, mate. Belongs to old Don Verdicchio.” He went about grabbing another box and laying it on top of the one I already had. Whatever was in those boxes was heavy and my knees bent under the weight.

“Belongs to? What the fuck does that mean?” The idea struck me as stupid and silly and weird in a place that had abolished slavery long before the freedom loving country I came from. I couldn't take it seriously. “And who's this Don guy?”

“Not Don as in Donald, you dill. Don, like Don Corleone.”

“You mean Mafia?”

Dennis looked up from the next box he had his hands on and blinked at me in a way that made me feel stupid in the way only a drill sergeant could. It simply said, “I am telling you the God's truth – why do you doubt me boy?”

“You're serious?” I asked, apparently wanting to make the credentials of my stupidity beyond question. I knew Dennis wouldn't fun me on something like this but the idea of a kingpin in *La Serenissima* was beyond odd to me. I hadn't seen so much as a weed dealer on the floating isle.

Dennis put the stare on me while stacking another crate on my arms. “Yeah.”

I leaned forward around the pile of crates he had on me and, despite our closed surroundings, spoke in a low conspiratorial whisper, “What's he into?”

“Whatever bad stuff makes the man money.” That same phrase could have been used to describe any number of American entrepreneurs, but coming from Dennis here in his back room it sounded somehow sinister.

“That a fact?” I groaned as he set one last box on me, and I turned away when he tried to set another, letting him know I was done with this errand. And also to hide the look on my face.

“It is.” He carried the last case of beer behind me. “So now you know. Stay away.”

“Alright.” I said, but my mind was already at work.

## *Chapter Four*

Anyone that's suffered from a chronic illness can tell you, there are two things you worry about in that situation: The first is your own mortality; the second is money. Watching Cheryl disappear into her illness was bad enough – other than driving to doctor's appointments and making sure my perpetually late wife made her appointments and remembered her medication, all I could do was stand on the sidelines with clenched fists. But the money was worse.

We had blown through my enlistment bonus with the first round of surgeries, and I watched guilt and disappointment mingle in her face as we saw the best shot we had of owning a home fold itself into a blur of white gowned professionals, green masks, machines, scalpels, and treatments. After that, the bills started piling up in numbers I had never seen the like of before – \$5000, \$7500, \$12000.

That's how I found myself up way too late one night, sitting in a second-hand leather chair, sweating over a whiskey bottle, with something besides the liquor burning a hole in my chest. I couldn't think and the situation seemed to form walls around me that were impossible to scale. I squeezed the bottle, willing it to burst in my hand, and when that didn't work I sent the electric impulse down my arm to hurl it against the wall, smash it, destroy it. But then my wife's hand, cool and soft, rested on my shoulder and I blinked before my shoulder cocked back to finish the throw.

“What are you doing up so late?” Concern and worry showed through her fatigue. The chemo had caused most of her hair to fall out by that point and I had helped her shave her head that afternoon. She had cried the entire time, then cried herself to

sleep. The cancer had taken her breasts, her ovaries, and that day, finally, inevitably, her hair, that last remnant of her womanhood. And she was as beautiful to me as she ever was or ever could be because after a day like she had had, she had pulled herself out of bed because she was worried about me.

I looked up at her and blinked rapidly – sweat was stinging my eyes. “Nothing. Just having a drink.”

She seemed to cluck without making a noise, her eyes softened and her head tilted and I knew she knew I was lying to her. It wasn't something I was very good at. I broke eye contact by wiping the sweat out of my eyes, “I'm just worried.”

She placed her hand gently under my chin and brought my face up to look at me. With all of the convictions her ill frame could muster she said, “We *will* get through this.”

I smiled weakly and tried to lie to her again. “I know.”

She examined my face with compassion in her own, trying to determine if I was lying again or not, whether she could go back to bed or needed to provide me with comfort, and that's when I saw that look from before, when I wrote the last check that the enrollment bonus would cover, and recognized it again: guilt. Cheryl, sick and dying, felt guilt for having brought the Beast and his master into our home.

I blinked, the realization rattling in my head. I shook it out and lied, this time with conviction, giving her a strong smile and brighter eyes. “I'm OK. Go back to bed.”

She looked into my eyes and, after a moment, chose to believe me. She bent down to kiss me, we said our 'I love you's and she floated back to bed. And for one moment I thought I could see a dark, four-legged creature following behind her.

So you really can't blame me for doing something stupid. The last \$5000 wasn't enough to carry even the smallest of our bills, so I went out and bet those last five dimes on the UT vs. LSU game with my money on the Vols since, in the words of a good friend, it was their game to lose.

Fucking Vols. They led the entire game, even up into the fourth quarter, where they led by four points, enough to make the spread, only to get penalized for having too many men on the

field, which gave LSU one more untimed down and a chance to win the game. Which they did.

How does that happen, I ask you? How does a damn near professional team go wandering in with too many men on the field? Aren't knowing the rules part of that job?

It didn't matter. I had very few options. I could give up the cash and try to figure something else out. I could re-up, but Cheryl might die while I was out of country. I could get some shit job that would never pay the bills.

Those walls felt even taller and closer and I couldn't stop kicking myself long enough to think straight. So I did the only thing I could think of.

I sat down and wrote out a \$5000 check to the the biggest bill holder we had. Then I put a stamp on it, kissed Cheryl goodbye, and dropped it in the mail as I went out to find my friend who had given me such wise advice as to bet on UT. I asked him who was holding my chit and, after a little persuading, he told me.

His name was Clarence Castardi (or just CC) and I could find him in the basement of a club called Shotgun Rum. So, like Cortez after he had burned his ships, I went to Shotgun Rum.

The Shotgun Rum was a brick of a building out past Broadway, that had all sorts of respectable people in and around it, but it was the sidewalk I was interested in. You ever go down into those doors that lead down into sidewalks? I wouldn't recommend it. The ones on the east side of Rum's went down a staircase lined with splintered wood and into a single room with a freezer in the back. And in front of that freezer was a desk, behind which, flanked by some men trying their best to look intimidating, sat Clarence Castardi.

He was a mountain of a man, more muscle than fat, whose bald head came to a bullet point. His mouth hung open slightly as he looked me up and down, one of his men leaning down to whisper in his ear my business here. CC's face continued to hang in its natural expression, which was not a happy one.

"You here to pay your chit?" He flicked expressionless eyes up at me as I stood, tossing some nuts from a bowl on his desk into his mouth. I wasn't offered a chair and I didn't ask for one.

“No,” I stated flatly. “I’m here to tell you I don’t have it.”

“Then go get it. The vig is six over five for every six past, starting Thursday.” He spit out the shell of one of the nuts and it arched through the air with the same carelessness as his tone.

I found myself standing at attention, as if I were prepared for a dressing down. “You don’t understand – I don’t have it.”

“Then go get it.”

“I don’t have it.”

He leaned forward, putting his elbows on the desk, rolling his shoulders forward, the skin around his ears and eyes flushing a bit, and said simply, “Then you shouldn’t have bet it.” For the first time since I had set out on this mission, looking at Castardi, sensing his rising anger, I felt that this might be a very bad idea.

I blinked, then broke my stance to look down at him, looking him in the eye and said, “I don’t have it, I’m not gonna have it, it’s not gonna happen.” I blinked again and went back to standing at attention.

Castardi pushed himself back off his elbows, causing the desk to rumble forward, in a calculated move to intimidate. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t work a little. But I didn’t flinch and I didn’t move and I sure as Hell didn’t run.

When I didn’t, the big man took a moment that seemed like forever to look at me again, this time with eyes that had an expression in them I couldn’t quite describe – he looked at me like he was trying to figure out if he had found a piece of shit or a diamond.

Abruptly, he asked, “You out of Fort Carson?”

“Pendleton,” I replied without thinking. “My wife and I moved out here after I was discharged.”

He went all the way back in his chair causing it to creak heavily. “Marines,” he seemed to roll the word around in his mouth like he was tasting it, not sure if he should spit it out, “always the first boots on the ground.”

“Oorah,” I said, without enthusiasm. The word seemed cold and empty down in that basement.

Castardi nearly laid back in that chair, causing some unknown, unoiled part to squeak for mercy. It sounded like a

mouse farting.

“You got some stones,” he said, nodding, “I’ll give you that – to come to my place and tell me that you don’t have the money and you’re not even gonna try to pay it.”

I looked at him again, this time feeling shame burning my cheeks, “It’s not like that.”

“Oh I don’t care, Marine.” He reached forward to grab another handful of nuts from the bowl and tossed a few into his mouth. Speaking around those bits as he crushed them, he said, “You know as well as I know, though, someone’s got to pay. The question is, who’s it’s gonna be?”

I stood there feeling a glimmer of hope, like feeling the sun poking out from behind an eclipse. But I was still in the dark of the moon. With uncertainty and trepidation mixing in me, I stood there.

After a moment Castardi said, “Tell you what, there’s a guy out east on Colfax, owes me more money than you. You get him to bring that in, we’ll forget all about yours.” He shrugged, whatever brief moment of admiration for me that showed on his face being washed away with the universal look of contempt shared by all pimps and pushers. “This time.”

When he spoke those sentences the tension in the room seemed to defuse with the two men flanking Castardi visibly relaxing. It felt like someone had let all the air back in and I realized I was shaking. Not wanting to show that, I just nodded.

Castardi brushed salt off his hands in broad clapping motions, then leaned forward to scribble on a little yellow pad. He ripped off the top sheet with a flourish of his wrist and handed it to the man on his right, a guy who bore a striking resemblance to Charles Manson, if Manson had been six feet tall. Charlie stepped forward to hand me the sheet and spoke in a surprisingly quiet voice, void of bluster or intimidation, “That’s his name and where you can find him.”

I look down at the sheet, its contents written out in perfectly legible block letters that read EDWARD SEXTON and gave an address. I read over it a few times, memorized the address, and handed the sheet of paper back to Charlie. This seemed to

please Castardi.

I got into my car and called Cheryl to tell her I'd be late. I deflected questions weakly telling her that an old friend had come into town and we were going to go for drinks. She was clearly suspicious, but chose to believe me. Then I headed out to the east side of Colfax.

The apartment complex the address was in was a bunch of rundown apartments, built God knows how many years ago in an area that had seen better days. The main selling point of which was probably the cheap rent. It certainly wasn't the amenities.

I found the apartment, which had a window facing the parking lot, and the darkness inside that window told me he was either out or asleep. I hoped he was out, 'cause it would make this easy. If he was in and asleep, he could have people in there with him, maybe a wife or kids, and that would make things hard. So I sat in my car, watching whenever people parked their cars and walked in the door of the building, waiting to see if the light in that apartment window went on.

After a couple hours, a skinny white dude pulled up in a car that said, 'My wife got the house and I got the car,' and I knew I had found my boy. He took a drunken lope up to the front door of the apartment building and, sure enough, a few moments later the window I had been watching lit up.

I never thought anything that had happened in Fallujah would come in handy in civilian life, but as I walked into the central corridor of the building and found Sexton's apartment number I could feel that familiar rush of adrenaline going through me. I knocked hard on the door just as I had a hundred times before and stood aside so anyone looking through the peephole wouldn't see me.

Despite the blood pounding in my ears I could hear footsteps come towards the door and then the tentative call of, "Who's there?" I wheeled around to face the door and put all my weight behind my foot to slam it in.

It sent a painful shiver up my leg and into my lower back as the door gave way, sending Edward back away from it, landing him on his ass onto some carpet that was ugly enough to have

been there since the '70s. Words started coming out of his mouth in phrases that meant nothing to me. I stepped through the entry, slamming pieces of wood out of my way as I pushed through.

I grabbed him by the collar as he made noises that could have been pleas or excuses while he scratched at my arms and reached for my face. I picked him up and slammed my fist into his face and kept pummeling him until he stopped struggling, but stopped before he stopped begging. After a few moments that seemed like eternity, I hoisted him off the ground and pinned him to the nearest wall, my fist cocked back to start laying into him again. By then, his words started making more sense against the blood in my ears, cajoling and pleading at various turns that went from one to another from one sentence to the next. When his legs gave way and he started to slide down the wall I had him pinned to, I picked him up and hit him again.

His nose was pouring out blood by then and he was feverishly looking at me, blubbering through sweat, tears, and blood, "It's not my fault, man! I din't do nothin'! Idin'tdonothin'!"

I pushed him into the wall and dragged his back up against it, looked him in the eye and told him:

"I don't care."

That's how I ended up driving back to the Shotgun Rum with a grand of Sexton's money in my pocket. I probably should have cleaned up first or gone home to see Cheryl, but I wanted to let Castardi know I could handle myself. He was exactly as I had left him a few hours before, leaning back in his chair and eating nuts out of that bowl. This time he had his feet up on the desk and as I walked back into the room his eyes tracked up towards me betraying more than a little surprise.

"Change your mind?" he asked, going to what was probably, in his world, the most likely outcome.

Without introduction or explanation I dropped the cash roll on his desk and said, "You'll have the rest in three days, plus the three extra points." I wasn't standing at attention anymore – I was tired and my fists hurt and I wasn't feeling too good about what I'd just done.

He pulled his feet off the desk and pivoted in the chair towards me. "That was fast."

"Didn't see a point in wasting time."

Castardi gave me a suspicious eye and looked at my bruised fists. I hadn't bothered washing all of the blood off – there was still a faint layer. "How do you know he'll pay?"

I looked at him, feeling like I was the intimidating one now. "I put the fear of God in him. Nothing scares a man so much as being hit without knowing why he's being hit. Now he knows why I was hitting him and he'll pay just about anything to make sure it doesn't happen again."

Castardi took a moment to probe for a piece of nut from between his canine and incisor. When he fished the offending bit out he smiled, but I couldn't tell if he was smiling at me or just from the satisfaction of having gotten rid of an annoyance. "Well, then, in three days time, if he pays up, you're a free man."

The bullet head came up as he leaned forward on his desk, Mr. Intimidation again, "And if he doesn't pay you'll be three more days down on your debt."

I resisted the urge to blink fatigue out of my eyes and looked down at Castardi with the confidence I felt. "He'll pay," I said, knowing Sexton would.

"Good." With that one syllable Castardi swiveled in his chair again and his feet went back up on his desk. I was dismissed.

I left and went home to Cheryl and our place. Three days later Castardi called me up and offered me a job.

Working for Castardi was how those hospital bills got paid and how I saved up for the trips we decided to take at the end. It wasn't pleasant or good work, but it gave me something to do and something to hit when I needed something to do and something to hit, and that might have saved my soul.

Of course, Castardi may have provided me with an opportunity but that didn't change the fact that he was a bastard and not the type of guy to pay sick leave. So when we did decide to take those trips we were working with what I had managed to save and nothing else. By the time we had decided to leave Sydney for Venice I was almost out of cash.

This became painfully clear to me going through security. I was waiting in line with the rest of the sheep, holding up Cheryl when she wasn't leaning on her crutches, watching bags go in and out of the X-ray machine when I noticed mine get pulled off the conveyor belt. I groaned internally as I realized I had left my KA-BAR in it.

I kissed Cheryl on the forehead and stepped through the metal detector, walking over to a security guard who was gesturing me towards him and holding my duffle bag. Setting the bag on a table and unsnapping the bindings he asked, "Do you have anything sharp or dangerous in your bag, sir?"

I shrugged and for some smart ass reason replied, "Probably."

The security man was not amused and immediately began rummaging through the bag with gusto. A few seconds later he found and pulled out the knife giving me an exasperated look with a tilt of his head.

"You can't take this with you on a carry-on bag, sir," his tone held equal parts threat and boredom.

I started to fumble words, put in a bind between my desire to keep the knife and my need to make the plane. As I did, the security guard's expression grew darker and more pinched, clearly tired of idiots like me making his job tougher and then making excuses about it.

What sounded like aluminum chairs from an old school crashing to the ground caught both of our attention, though, and a moment later I found myself bounding back through the security line to pick Cheryl up from the floor where she had fallen in a clatter of her metal crutches. There were several more minutes of confusion as Cheryl apologized and I tried to explain to the now crowd of security personnel that we didn't need to go to a hospital, that the hospital was no good, and what we needed was to get on that plane and get to Venice.

When the confusion had subsided and questions sufficiently answered panic and anger gave way to sympathy, and Cheryl and I were allowed to pass. As I walked with her to an electric cart that had pulled up for us, the security guard stopped

me to give me back my bag.

“You can't take this with you,” he said, still holding onto my KA-BAR. His hostility had been replaced by the all too familiar look of pity that I had come to hate.

“I know,” I nodded and shouldered my bag.

“Look, mate, I know what this thing is.” His expression was one of someone trying to reach out to a stranger, of someone trying to make a connection.

“Then you know what it means to me,” I said with an unexplained hostility in my manner, even while the unbidden emotion caused my left brain to tell me I was acting like an unhappy child who was having a favorite toy taken away.

“Sure, I saw your ID. But I can't let you on board with it.”

“Then what good are you to me?” I said in a rush of anger that I instantly regretted.

He blinked at me then, his own anger and something else warring in his eyes. After a moment he said, “I can post it to you. Give me the address you're headed to.”

At this unexpected gesture of generosity I felt my chest go tight and my throat try to lock up. I couldn't speak for a moment and when I could I choked out, “Yeah, that'd be great.”

I unbuckled my pack again and rummaged through it until I found the address of the place we'd be staying in Venice. He took down the address and gave me his best guess on how much it'd be to mail the knife.

That's when I realized I didn't even have the cash for the postage. He told me he'd post it anyway.

## *Chapter Five*

The next time I saw Sophie I saw her in a different light. Instead of seeing her as a beautiful woman I saw her as an opportunity. It helped a little.

If I leaned out over the edge of the rooftop garden I could see down into the alley where the main entrance to the building was. The next day after my talk with Dennis it was, gratefully, a little sunny, so I picked Cheryl up and walked her to the roof so she could sit out on the deck. In her moments of consciousness she looked out over the sprawling rooftops of Venice and seemed happy.

A chill wind was blowing off the ocean so I had her wrapped up in her favorite blanket, a ratty purple thing that she refused to part with no matter how many holes it sprang, and put a knit cap on her head that my sister had made for me before her husband had killed her. I held her when she wanted and talked about the history of Venice I had been reading up on, which seemed to lull her into sleep every few minutes. When she wasn't awake I leaned out and watched the alley waiting to see if I could see Sophie come or go. Sometime around lunch I saw her blonde head walk out and not long after she came back carrying what looked like a grocery bag.

“What are you looking at?” Cheryl asked from behind me.

I nearly jumped with guilt at her voice, but I just I looked over my shoulder at her and said, “I think I just saw that woman who helped us out the other day come in.”

When she nodded without reply I asked, “You two seemed to get on. Did you want me to invite her up?”

Cheryl gave me a weak, wispy smile then, “That'd be nice.”

I carried her back down to the apartment, laid her on the couch and then bounded down the stairs hoping to catch Sophie before she got to her door.

My feet echoed loudly through the stone stairwell and I found Sophie hurrying with her keys to get inside her apartment. When I approached she got the door open and swiveled her body through, keeping a crack open to look cautiously through to me. We stood there for a moment, her staring at me in the gray light of the stairwell, trying to get a good look at me. Her timidity struck me as odd after the warm welcome she had given me as a stranger just the day before, but before I puzzled on that anymore she recognized me. She threw the door open completely and she greeted me with the warm smile. I couldn't help but notice the nearly flawless skin exposed by the white, sleeveless shirt she was wearing, only marred by an ugly black bruise on her upper left forearm.

I grinned like a schoolboy and made gestures, still not trusting the little Italian I had mastered to convey why I was there. After some rudimentary charades of greeting, I moved onto to making chewing motions with my jaw and pointed upstairs, hoping she wouldn't misinterpret it as some kind of invitation to come up and be cannibalized. But her smile just grew a notch and she disappeared back inside momentarily and then came out carrying what I assumed was the same sack she had carried into her apartment from the alleyway not long ago.

I led the way with her following, speaking in sing-song Italian that made the staircase a less drab place to be. When we got in Cheryl was sleeping again and Sophie made her way into the tiny kitchen, setting the bag on the center island table, and immediately began pulling groceries out of it and laying them out on its butcher block surface. I thought about trying to tell her that she was the guest and that she didn't need to be cooking, but then worried I'd bungle it and seem ungrateful for her generous gesture. After a few moments of being unsure as to what to do, I stepped the four feet back into the living room to check on Cheryl.

She was awake then. After her eyes focused, they shifted towards the kitchen. When she heard Sophie's Italian she said

simply, "She's here."

Sitting down on the edge of the couch next to her I started to say something, but Sophie popped out of the kitchen and smiled at Cheryl. I think a part of me started to love her then, just because of that smile. It was genuine and even though I couldn't understand what she was saying, it was clear she was happy to see Cheryl.

Most people had stopped being glad to see Cheryl a long time ago. Sure, some came to see her, and yes, they smiled, but it was the timid, reluctant smile of people who didn't want to be near her, the smile of obligation, the smile of fear that they might upset a fragile balance, or one that said they were uncomfortable being around someone that reminded them of their own mortality and the fragility of existence.

The two of them started to talk in slow Italian, slow enough that even I could understand a word or two and I caught the word "pranzo." After reaching some conclusion that I missed, Sophie stood, smiled, then turned and darted back into the kitchen. Cheryl settled back into her pillow, smiling as she closed her eyes, saying, "She's going to make us lunch."

Not for the first time since the Venetian adventure had begun I sat uselessly, staring at Cheryl. Sophie moved about in the kitchen chopping, opening packages and speaking loudly, like an old relative who comes to your house, commandeers your kitchen, and yells at you from it, making their presence known in every room in the house. It gave a warmth to the place that I was grateful for even as her prattle meant nothing and I wondered if she realized the futility of it.

Time dilated in that tiny den and for a moment I felt as if I were living in an elapsed-time photograph, but then Sophie popped that self-involved bubble by slicing into the room, carrying a knife and a tray filled with delicious smelling fruits and meats. She laid it down in between Cheryl and me with professional-seeming flourish, and disappeared back into the kitchen. I hadn't eaten since the breakfast I had scrounged together and I snatched up a piece of prosciutto like a starving man.

Politely and gingerly Cheryl reached out and took the

tinest piece of melon between thumb and forefinger and brought it to her lips. Before she got it their, though, the smell of it hit her nose and she crinkled it up. I could see the nausea push her back down onto the couch as she reached out to put the melon back out on the plate.

A now familiar coo came from the kitchen threshold and I looked up to see Sophie looking on with a mixture of sympathy and disappointment. I began to attempt to explain that Cheryl hadn't had much of an appetite in awhile, but Cheryl, seeing Sophie's crushed, expectant expression, spoke something in quick Italian, holding her stomach, showing her fluency in the second great Italian language, gesticulation with speech.

Understanding immediately, Sophie swept down on the offending tray and removed it from the room. My stomach growled instantly and I sheepishly watched it go, chastising myself for my selfish desires. I began to eat my one piece of pork in smaller bites.

When Sophie burst into the room again, as if my hunger had given me some sort of clarity, I could see her energy was somewhat forced, as if there was a negative current in the room that she was trying to balance out. With me sitting on the coffee table across from Cheryl on the couch, she perched her fine bottom on one of the chairs catty-corner from Cheryl. Putting her elbow on her thigh and her hand on her chin, she looked at us like a host might look at an audience of children and spoke to Cheryl, seeming to ask, "What shall we do now?"

Cheryl gave her one of her best smiles and spoke to Sophie in their secret language. When Sophie seemed to answer affirmatively, Cheryl looked at me with that old familiar mischievousness and said, "You may go."

"What?" My utterly dumbfounded expression only seemed to increase her enjoyment.

"Go on," she repeated, weakly gesturing towards the door in a mock imitation of some illing monarch, "scoot."

"But, I can't just..."

"You," Cheryl dropped the mock expression, replacing it one with concern, "need to get out of here for awhile. If anything

happens, Sophie will be here to help me.”

“But what if...” I wasn't able to finish the sentence and the words choked in my throat.

She read my mind though and put a hand on my cheek, the touch of mercy. “It'll be fine.”

Sophie had moved to the kitchen and was holding up the white receiver to the ground line, something that looked like it had come out of the '70s, but functioned just as well as any phone. She was miming its use in an exaggerated manner, having seemed to understand our conversation and offering to call if I was needed.

“I, ah,” in trying to understand her I forgot for a moment about our language barrier, “I don't have a phone. Our cells don't work over here, the networks...” Then I trailed off as realized that I couldn't explain and looked to Cheryl.

But she just looked at me, gestured towards the door again and said, “I'll be fine for an hour or two.”

So that's how I ended up walking down Piscina De Frezzaria alone in the middle of the day. Up to that point, I hadn't got out into the island much except at night, but once I got out past the Hard Rock Café near Saint Mark's Square, I realized why the locals hated the daytrippers so much. Even the narrow canals near what must have been to the Venetians an annoyingly American restaurant were lined up with boats filled with tourists, guided by gondoliers who past the time singing songs that were probably older than my country. The normally small, quiet streets had become filled with God-knows-how-many people all squeezing and pushing and, most of all, rushing, looking at maps, blaring into cell phones or trying to squeeze in a family picture. No one seemed to be trying to appreciate the quiet ghosts of this place that said more than all of their blaring and stomping ever could.

While I understood it, it wasn't the reason I disliked these massive crowds of foreigners in a foreign land. I had a much simpler reason – there's not a whole lot worse than being trapped in your own mind when stuck in a crowd. It's a special kind of isolation that would make for a great enhanced interrogation technique if you could patent it.

What had I been thinking? Why had I invited Sophie up? I had a plan, but now that I reflected on it, it seemed insane. The one person who had shown Cheryl any kindness and I was going to use her to...what? Kidnap? Extort?

I felt those walls again, high and closing in, and for a moment, in the middle of all those honest people just trying to enjoy a small piece of an Italian vacation, I felt I might scream and rend at my clothes like some old Jew from the Old Testament.

That'd make for a story for these folks back home. I had to get out of the streets. I considered heading to Dennis', thought better of it, then reversed course and headed in the direction of il Mondiale.

I walked through the wooden, stooped entrance and my Urquell was already waiting for me on the bar. Dennis was behind the counter, busy with something and I had the feeling he was pointedly ignoring me, but I decided that was probably my own paranoia, guilt at having ignored his well-intentioned advice. I took a pull off the bottle and asked, "How's it?"

"It's got its moments," he replied, finishing up whatever he was doing behind the bar. He dried his hands on a towel and looked up at me. "You?"

"Good," I lied. "Might have more than my allotted share of these today." I paused for another drink, "I've got time off for good behavior." I guess I thought luring him into thinking I'd spend more than usual might improve the disapproval I imagined he was leveling at me.

"That a fact? And where's the wife you've told me about?" He picked up a remote and idly flipped the television's channels.

"With a friend." I tried to sound casual.

But he turned to me and the look in his eyes told me the disapproval wasn't entirely imaginary. "With a friend? Who's that then? Didn't think you knew anyone around 'ere."

"You know...the girl."

"The blonde you're all doe-eyed over?"

"Hey now," I felt my own guilt rising at the truth in his words and it threatened to turn into anger. But Dennis raised a palm towards me, stopping me before I got started.

“Fine then, mate. How about a game of darts?”

Then sudden change in conversational direction left me a bit stumped, so I just said, “Sure, yeah.”

“Great,” Dennis said without much enthusiasm, then turned to speak to the haji boy, gesturing to the front door. I wondered about leaving someone clearly not of the legal drinking age in charge, but the bar seemed emptier than usual, occupied with only the three or four sad-looking locals that always seemed to be there. Before I could give it much more thought Dennis had hopped out from behind the bar and led me through the backroom door, flicking on a light as he walked through it.

I had never seen the backroom of il Mondiale with the lights on and I had to take a moment to blink the retina burns out of my eyes. It was a contrast to the well lit front with its shiny brass. Even though it was only a few feet away, the back had a claustrophobic feel to it, with no windows and dark corners that the lights didn't seem to reach. The walls were planked wood that made it feel as if we had just stepped into the hull of an old ship and the furniture seemed to complement this with low set, small wooden chairs and tables. Strange wire decorations hung from the ceiling that could be mistaken for rigging out of the corner of the eye.

Dennis opened a small cabinet on the wall and removed a set of darts with each hand. He handed me one, gestured towards the dartboard in the cabinet and said, “Throw for first.”

I stepped up, squared myself against the board and threw, lousily. Dennis casually won the first throw, collected the darts and started to work destroying me at the first game of darts I had played since before boot camp.

After a few lessons in humility in which neither of us spoke, other than some quiet cussing from me, Dennis lined up for another throw and said offhandedly, “So you've left your wife with the woman I warned you about associating with?”

I rolled my eyes. I knew there had been some reason Dennis had pulled me into the back – he didn't want to discuss Sophie and her mysterious man in front of the house. “Come on, man. She seems nice enough and the two of them seem to be

really getting on.”

“Of course they're getting on,” he said matter-of-factly as he stepped aside to let me make my throw. I couldn't tell if I heard anger in his voice or if it was guilty conscious getting the better of me again. “Verdicchio doesn't let her out of that box he's got her in – I'd think she's desperate for real company.”

“So let her have some company,” I replied, sinking a dart into the 17.

I felt him pull on my elbow with a hand that felt like a hook. Even though I was taller than him by far and outweighed him, my feet swung towards him without me having much say in it. When I looked at him then there wasn't any doubt that he was angry. I couldn't tell if he was getting angry because I had ignored his advice or because he couldn't stand the general stupidity of his own species.

“Why?” A simple, direct question from a simple, direct man and one I felt I didn't have a good answer for.

“I thought it was a good idea. Like I said, they seemed to be getting along.”

“Bullshit.”

“What's it matter?”

“What's it matter? I can understand a man's eyes straying a bit, but I'm dead serious when I tell you it's bad news.”

“It's not important.”

“Not important? Man! How can you say putting your lovely in danger for no good goddamn reason isn't important?”

I turned away from him and sunk another dart into the board, the needle all the way in, filling the room with a loud, hollow thunk. “Because she's dying.”

Dennis looked for a moment like I had physically struck him, his head tilting like a rung bell with a dazed look in his eyes. I regretted saying it instantly.

“Wha?” He managed after a moment.

Regret or not, there wasn't any going back, so I laid it out all on the line for him – the Beast, his Master and how they had chased us here for Cheryl to wait out her final days. I threw my darts at the board as I spoke. When the story kept coming out of

me I marched straight over to the board, pulled out the darts, and started again. I didn't look at Dennis, which made it a bit easier.

I could feel him staring at me the entire time, though. But when the stretching seconds made it clear I was done talking, Dennis didn't jump in to fill the silence or make empty apologies or feign some great heartache for a woman he had never met. Instead, quietly, after a minute only punctuated by the sound of darts sticking into the board, he said, "Well, right then, you drink for free tonight."

I couldn't help but laugh at that, my head hanging so my chin almost touched my chest, letting out little hiccups of chuckles that were honest and pure enough that they almost felt like tears. Dennis joined me with his own uncomfortable laughter and when it had gone on long enough I only said, "Thanks."

We stopped playing darts then and Dennis disappeared and came back with a bottle of wine, set it in between us on one of his little tables and we started to drink in earnest. The dark recesses of *il Mondiale* made it easy to forget that it was still early in the day and Dennis had the boy bring us some plates of cheese and salumi, and then later on some *piadines*. For a short time we forgot about the world outside and joked and drank and ate, and when I did think of Cheryl it was to hope that she was enjoying herself as much as I was.

## *Chapter Six*

Sometime well into the third bottle of wine I realized it was getting on towards dinner. My conscious and my worries got the better of me and I excused myself from Dennis, quickly enough that I felt rude about it, but he was in better spirits that I had ever seen him in the short time I'd known him, and he merely smiled and waved me out of his bar.

“Sorry about the backroom waltz, mate,” he said, then disappeared back into the warm light and brass fixtures of il Mondiale to get ready for whatever crowd might make up his dinner rush.

It had started to rain in Venice, impossible to notice while in the bowels of the bar. The cold, autumn mist caused the narrow streets and bridges to go a slick, deeper gray, matching the sky above. But even the city as a box of gloom couldn't hamper my mood, and I turned up my coat collar, hunched my shoulders and set back towards Saint Mark's. I pushed my way into the crowds of retreating daytrippers, all huddling back towards their cruise ships and, I hoped for them, some sunnier, warmer clime. I passed by the richly decorated shops of Venice's main causeways, though, and saw shoes worth hundreds and suits worth thousands, which brought the worry of money back into my mind, and my hope for their warmer destination became Basra. I laughed at my own bitterness and wore a smirk back to the apartment.

The stone entryway into the building was only lit by a few small windows and a skylight, which cast the gray drab of the sky in, giving the old building the stillness and quiet of an empty cathedral.

That is, until I heard the angry pounding, fists on wood, interspersed with even angrier yelling. I had stopped in the

entryway to shake the damp from my coat when I heard the sound travel down the stairwell. I groaned a bit, knowing I'd have to walk past whatever angry drunk was arguing with his wife, but my own drunken shroud gave me a bit of courage. So I headed up the stairs, still with enough caution to be quiet.

On the second floor two men were at one of the two doors on that floor. The one doing the banging and yelling remained intent on the door, spewing what could only be profanities at whoever was inside, while the other leaned casually against the wall next to it. He was shorter and stockier than the other, but the cigarette he was smoking gave off enough light in the dim that I couldn't see his face past it. But I knew he was watching me as I turned on the stairwell and kept heading up to the apartment. I brushed aside a bad feeling as paranoia and just hoped that they hadn't been making this much noise for very long.

The noise and the look I had gotten from the smoker had started to take the soft edge off my good mood, settling on me a faint sense of unease. But then I went into the apartment and my uneasiness jumped up to complete defense readiness. For a moment I thought the entire place was empty. I clicked the door closed behind me quietly and surveyed the room with minimum of movement. I was torn between not moving and tearing up the entire place when I saw Cheryl poke her head up from behind the couch to look at me. I smiled, laughing at myself for letting the tough boys downstairs set me on edge.

I walked over to the couch, getting close enough so I could see Cheryl over the back with her head laying on the armrest. Crumpled into the corner between the couch and the wall Sophie had squeezed herself like a child playing hide'n'seek. And for a moment, when she flashed me what seemed to be an abashed smile, I thought they were playing a game. But Cheryl looked worried in a way that I knew and when I looked at Sophie I could see a real and terrible fear trying its best to hide under the embarrassment. One of Cheryl's hands dangled off the edge of the couch and Sophie held onto it tightly.

“What's going on?” The boozey good mood evaporated off from me in a burning that I felt rise behind my eyes, in a place

far back in my head that was just out of reach.

Cheryl turned her head to try to look at Sophie, but the girl had buried herself too far into the upholstery and wall paneling for her to make eye contact with. After a moment Cheryl looked back at me and with concerned confusion in her eyes said simply, "I don't know."

I looked at Sophie until she looked at me. This took a moment as she seemed to shake with every echo of the relentless beat that traveled up the stairwell. When it did happen I hooked a thumb over my shoulder back at the entrance and asked, "Are they at your apartment?" Apartment is, fortunately, one of those words that you can just put an 'o' on the end of and you can sound like some asshole from Jersey trying to fake Italian. I knew the answer, of course, and felt stupider for asking the question.

Sophie just nodded and I looked back at Cheryl who seemed worried and exasperated. It seemed to me that she had nodded off and woke up to this, so she didn't have much more idea of what was happening. The entire affair was making me angrier than I knew was reasonable and my own irrationality only made it worse.

"So what the fuck should I do?" I asked with an exaggerated shrug of my shoulders, raising my hands in the air, "Call the cops?"

Directing my anger at Cheryl only seemed to confuse her further and a pleading came into her eyes. Her face was a mixture of a lot of things: fear, concern, and not least of all confusion at having what had started as a pleasant day take an unexpected and thoroughly unpleasant turn. "I don't know."

She looked at me, reaching out to place a gentle hand on Sophie, her eyes appealing for mercy, I felt my anger turn inexorably on her, on Sophie, a flash of hatred for their weakness and my own. I felt some horrible, irrational beast moving to get outside of me and onto them, to destroy this, all of it, so it could never be rebuilt.

Then another knock came, loud and primitive, followed by a voice that could have been swearing or calling out to some god for exoneration. And I felt the burning in my eyes turn

towards it, to answer that call. When I turned my head back to Cheryl I realized, now, her fear was at least in part stemming from my anger.

“Fuck it,” I shrugged back into my coat, shaking droplets of water onto the floor. I heard Cheryl asking after me as I stepped out of the room, but I just closed the door behind me.

At the top of the stairs I stopped and listened again to the pounding, populated by pauses filled with mad Italian yells and, for a moment, an internal voice tried to speak to me in a different language. One of logic, it blended Dennis' advice and all the good advice I had ever gotten in my life. It was smooth and soft and tried to calm the hateful burning behind my eyes. So I crushed it into a ball so small that I could barely hear it anymore and went downstairs.

I moved carefully, slowly, and without a sound down the stairwell, hoping to get down to the second floor unnoticed, but the cigarette smoker watched me the entire way down and had his eyes leveled at me when I came to the landing. I stood there for a moment, not sure what to say, just watching him watch me as his friend banged ceaselessly on the door.

I stood there, not sure why, letting him pound on the door, letting the drumming push into my head and feed my anger. I was about to open my mouth to say something when the one with cigarette seemed to shake his head at me and gave a long sigh.

I could see now he was older, with close cropped dark hair that was receding away from his temples, and that he looked very tired. He didn't seem particularly put off that I was standing there, just weary, like my presence somehow drained him. Without moving away from the wall he was leaning on he spoke in short, sharp Italian to the other one who snapped away from the door to look at his companion. He was the younger of the two, taller and lankier. With the sweat darkening his light hair, dripping down his face, he stood there looking at the older man, panting from his yelling. That sweet internal voice told me to be afraid, but I only stood there.

Still looking at his young associate the older man spoke and nodded in my direction. The young one's eyes slid towards me

and with his panting mouth formed into a leer. He turned so the carriage of his frame was straight to mine and stepped away from the door, crossing the short distance to the stairs. He gave me a malicious smile that I recognized from a thousand young boys and asked, "Why do you want, turista?"

I looked down on him from what felt like a very great height. A calm stillness seemed to fill me and the stairwell now that the drumming had stopped. "You're making a great deal of noise," I said simply. "It's bothering my wife."

He laughed at me and bobbed up and down, making gestures towards me, up the stairs, then back to me. "Man, you the man of your woman? Go upstairs and tell that bitch to be quiet." He kept talking in another string of Italian that sounded similar to the bits he had been shouting at the door.

I stepped closer. "She's very ill. She needs her rest."

The close proximity, the insults, and his constant movement seemed to be all the kid had in his arsenal and now that it had only made me move closer to him he was taken aback. Uncertain, the slightest shine of fear in his eyes, he looked back at the older man who shrugged while taking a drag from his cigarette. He blew out the smoke and waved the cigarette at me, flatly speaking. But I could tell it meant something to the one in front me as his entire demeanor changed from doubt to savage glee.

When he started to turn back to me his right hand was behind him, so I made a grab for his wrist and kept him from bringing the knife into play. The move pulled him closer, so I could smell the cloying smoke on his breath, and the slam into my larger body stunned him for a moment, his mouth going from malicious to agape. I used that moment to hook my leg around his knee and push on his chest with my free hand, pulling his feet out from under him and sending him down onto the floor, his legs pointing into the air.

He scrambled to get up, but stopped on his knees when he realized he didn't have the knife anymore. He looked at me, wearing a deeply satisfying look of astonishment. I connected to his jaw with a right cross that sent him back down to the floor.

The quick, violent action, the pain in my knuckles, and the knife washed the stillness in me away by the coarse movement in my veins. I took a breath that made my chest swell and turned to the other man with heat in my eyes that felt like it should have incinerated him. I raised my hand up to eye level and opened it, dropping the knife next to the boy, its metal clattering on the marble of the stairwell.

The older man just made a slight cluck while scratching the space in between his ample eyebrows. I waited to see if he would speak, but he only took one last puff and tossed his smoke to the ground, grinding it into the floor with his foot. Then he went to the descending stairwell without a word or glance in my direction.

The heat in my eyes became a blistering anger at being summarily dismissed. I moved over to him faster than his indifference would allow him to escape and grabbed him by the back of his collar. Stepping on the back of his ankle and pulling him up by his shirt, I took him off balance and then slammed him into the bannister, feeling all of his soft flesh grind into his bones. When I pulled him back by his collar again, he wasn't ignoring me, his eyes wide and bloodshot, shocked and uncertain. I gave him one last kidney punch and all of his weight went out from under him.

“Don't come back,” I said in a vicious whisper that I enjoyed too much. Then I tossed him down the stairs and watched him roll. I had to restrain myself from howling after him.

I took a couple of the deep, gulping breathes I had been wanting since I came down the stairs and let the adrenaline recede from me a little bit at a time. I had a familiar sense of detachment that I didn't want to take back upstairs and to Cheryl. I watched the puddle of blood that had formed around the boy's head spread out over a few centimeters until I felt that the reality of all it sink into my chest. I blinked the sweat out of my eyes and rubbed my face, then went upstairs.

Cheryl was sitting up on the couch. She had coaxed Sophie off the floor and she was now sitting on the coffee table in the middle of the den, hunched over, looking directly at the door.

Both of them watched me enter, Sophie with a mixture of hope and fear, Cheryl with concern and something that might have been suspicion.

Before either of them could ask me anything I raised my eyebrows and shrugged my shoulders, feigning puzzlement. "They're gone," I said simply. A true statement crafted into a lie to make it seem as if they had just up and walked away.

Cheryl turned to speak to Sophie for a moment ("sono andati")

then turned back to me. "They just left?" She seemed confused – I don't know how long she had been awake to hear their pounding, but the look she gave me said that their sudden, inexplicable departure seemed unlikely to her.

I made my way around the couch, giving a brief smile to Sophie, all the better not to have to maintain eye contact with Cheryl as I spoke, "They took off when I came down the stairs. I guess they thought I was trouble." I coupled the last statement with a smile that said, "Who me?"

Cheryl smiled back, at the beginning of another sentence, clearly not completely convinced, when Sophie interrupted her with a hand on her shoulder. She asked Cheryl a barrage of questions, all of the answers to which seemed to be "Si." With each affirmative answer she became happier and more relieved, the fear tears being replaced with happy ones, that she wiped away. She finished by hugging my wife like they were fellow survivors. I smiled at that, as did Cheryl, looking at me over Sophie's shoulder. She made an exaggerated noise at the pressure of Sophie's hug, who then apologetically laughed, smoothing out Cheryl's blankets and smoothing the hair on her head. She gave me a quick hug as well and then gathered what few things she had and began heading towards the door.

Turning towards Cheryl I jerked a thumb towards our exiting neighbor, "I'll walk her down."

"Sure thing, hero." Even in her dilapidated state Cheryl could still muster a bit of appreciative sarcasm.

Following Sophie to the door I just smiled and nodded at her. Her questioning look turned to one of understanding and

gratitude, and the warmth of her expression pulled on my dead face a little and I couldn't help but genuinely smile. She gathered up the few things she had brought with her and we headed out the door.

Sophie went down the stairs with short staccato steps, punctuating the music of her heels with happy Italian. I glided behind her, keeping an eye on the shadows in case the either of our intruders had an inadvisable attack of courage and decided to plan something. But no one was there and the stairwell only echoed with the enthusiasm of Sophie's steps and the liveliness of her voice.

Three steps up from the second landing, she came to a dead stop. I had looked down from the third landing and knew that the kid wasn't still there, so I walked up behind her to see what had halted her. She was as rigid as a board, her hands bunching up the things she had been carrying to her chest, her eyes nailed to the landing in front of her. Following her gaze, I saw the small puddle of blood the boy had left behind, still red and wet.

I stood behind her, not sure what to say. Without a word, she broke her gaze from the blood, snapped her eyes to the floor, and marched around it, in what could have passed for perfect regimental step, right to her door, then quickly disappeared inside.

I sat down on the stairs, deflated. Her reaction to the remains of the violence robbed me of what Neanderthal joy I had gotten out of it. And thinking about that led me to think about what Cheryl would think if she found out. What would happen if the men came back? What if their beef was legitimate and they called the police? What if it wasn't and they came back with more men? What if Sophie wasn't the warm, wonderful person she seemed to be? Or what if she was and I couldn't protect her? Was it even my place to do so? And finally, of course, what the hell had I gotten myself into?

Suddenly, Dennis' advice made a lot more sense. After sitting on the steps long enough that I was sure I wasn't going to be sick, I headed back upstairs.

The afternoon's excitement had clearly drained Cheryl –

she wasn't sitting up anymore, but lying back, her face looking pale and hollow, her eyes deep set and far away as she watched me sit down. I felt the corners of my mouth turn down as regret at going to il Mondiale replaced everything else.

“How are you?”

She gave me a smile, a wicked half-grin and said bluntly, “I'm dying.”

“Oh sure. But besides that?” I replied, quickly and lightly.

She giggled slightly at that, “Well, the pain pills are working today, so that's something.”

I reached out to the table and picked up the prescription bottle, giving it an exploratory shake. “Looks like we need to get you a refill soon.” That opened up a new box of worries, but then I noticed a small brown box. “What's this?”

“Dunno, it came for you after you went out this morning.”

I pulled open the box and looked inside.

I took out the KA-BAR and held it up against the dying afternoon light. I stared at it awhile, unsure what to do with it.

## *Preview - Thank You*

*You have reached the end of the preview.*

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