

ELIXIR

By Christopher Buecheler

Elixir – First Three Chapters
By Christopher Buecheler

Copyright © 2018 Christopher Buecheler

All Rights Reserved

ISBN: 978-0-9884708-3-5

<http://elixirnovel.com>

<http://cwbuecheler.com/writing>

Elixir is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First Edition: December 2018

This PDF is a free excerpt of the novel. You can distribute it however you'd like!

Cover Design by Christopher Buecheler

Cover Imagery via 123RF.com

- Oleg Gavrilov
- Konstantin Kalishko
- isoga

Chapter 1

Brooklyn Beat

The kid on the rooftop was holding a shard of glass to the girl's throat, fingers clenched, pumped so full of Elixir that he didn't realize it had cut the living shit out of his hand. He just stared out with his dinner-plate eyes, shouting obscenities, threatening to let what was inside of her out all over the tar paper. The girl was probably high, too; she wasn't crying, didn't even look scared. She was just standing there, mute and confused, waiting for whatever end was coming.

Clay Foster clenched his teeth, kept his weapon extended, and chose his next words with care. "Buddy, you need to let her go or I'm going to shoot you in the face."

"Bull-*shit!*" The kid drew the first half of the word out and emphasized the second with bared teeth. "Fuck you and your fat friend. I know how this works! You put your fucking guns down or I will do this bitch right here."

Clay's partner, Kellen, heaved a huge sigh. "Oh, ain't I had just about enough of this?"

"If we lower our guns, you'll let her go?" Clay said. He got what he was expecting.

"Let her go right off the fucking side, man! She stole my shit!"

They'd taken a few turns on this merry-go-round already; the kid wasn't going to stand down. He'd been licking for too long, and if he'd ever had a brain rattling around in that skull of his, it was beyond fried. You could see it just by looking at him. Crazy eyes. Hair like he'd carved the hide from a mangy golden retriever and glued it to his head. Pants that looked like they'd been pissed more than once. Clay could smell him from twelve feet away.

"How you want to go about resolving this?" Kellen said.

"You ready for some paperwork?"

“Suppose I am.”

“The fuck you talking about paperwork?” the kid shouted, and Clay pulled the trigger. The bullet hit just below the kid’s left eye and punched that half of his skull in, sending his brains out over the side of the building and down into the street below. The kid’s hand jerked, squeezing the shard of glass so tightly that it cut his pinkie finger most of the way off. Clay thought he would drop it, but his seizing fingers held on, and as he began to fall backward the glass slid along the girl’s face, charting a jagged course that left a flap of skin dangling from her jaw.

Could be worse, Clay had time to think, and then realized it was—the kid’s momentum was going to take him and the girl both tumbling over and down to the sidewalk below. Eight-story drop.

“Shit, grab her!” Clay leaped forward, knowing even as he said it that there was no possible way his partner could keep up. The kid was already over, and the girl was going, her eyes just beginning to register that something, somewhere, was happening. *Christ, she must have dropped a whole ampule.*

The girl made a tiny sound—“oh”—as she flipped backward, and her little black foot with its ridiculous pink-plastic fuck-me heel kicked tar-paper sand in his face as it swung upward. Clay reached out for it, half blind from the sand, hoping for the best. He felt his hand close around something and grabbed tight, falling to his knees, throwing himself backward for leverage. The band dug deep into his fingers, but it held. He heard the girl make a startled “guh!” as her back collided with the bricks.

“Shit, man, I can’t believe you made that catch,” Kellen said from somewhere behind him.

“Shut up and help me, you fat asshole!” God knew how long the shoe was going to hold.

“Oh my gawd,” the girl said from the other side of the brick parapet. There was no fear in her voice, only something like surprise, or maybe amazement. Like she was enjoying some incredible new experience. As if to confirm this assessment, she began to laugh.

Kellen finally arrived, wheezing, and Clay heard slapping sounds as his partner wrapped his giant meaty hands around the girl’s ankles and planted his feet. “Got her, bro.”

“Great, can you ... Christ, just hold her.” Clay stood up and tried to rub the grit out of his eyes.

“What the fuck is even happening?” The girl’s voice was plaintive, a note of deep confusion running through it.

“That’s a good question, right there,” Kellen said, and Clay grunted out a laugh. He turned back to help, leaning over the low wall. The girl’s skirt had flopped up around her belly, revealing bruised thighs and an unkempt bush of jet-black pubic hair. Clay reached down, wrapped his fist into the cotton fabric of her T-shirt, and hauled upward.

When they had her back over the ledge, they let her go. The girl dropped immediately to her ass, making a grunting noise as she landed, and sat with her back against the wall. The blood from her jaw, which had run up her face and into her kinky hair, now began to soak her T-shirt.

“It’s fucking ... is it cold in here? I feel cold.” Her eyes rolled up, and she went to wherever it was that people went when they poured an entire ampule of Elixir down their throat. Sometimes that trip ended up at the morgue.

Kellen brushed his hands on his pants. “Well, this lady’s gonna have a story to tell.”

“If she remembers it.” Clay picked up the gun he’d dropped in order to catch the girl’s fall and holstered it.

His partner leaned down and inspected her face. “How old, you think?”

Clay glanced over at him. “Nineteen?”

“No way. I got sixteen. Bet you lunch.”

“Yeah? Tell you what—I’ll bet you the actual lunch. You lose, you go hungry.”

Kellen laughed. “Not a fucking chance.”

“Didn’t think so. Should we try to stop that bleeding?”

“Nah ... ain’t that bad. We should call us some EMTs and let them deal with it. You just filled the rest of *our* night with paperwork.”

“You said you were okay with that.”

Kellen nodded. “I am. There’s no way that asshole wasn’t gonna get himself shot ... You saved her life and saved us some extra paperwork.”

Clay nodded. That echoed his thoughts exactly. He glanced over the wall at the junkie lying splattered below. “You suppose he was somebody?”

His partner shrugged. “If he was, he took a long walk down Nobody Road way before he ever met you.”

* * *

“When the hell you going for lieutenant?” Kellen asked. They were doing the cop thing: sitting in a diner, drinking bad coffee, eating shitty food, filling out reports. They’d flirted with Maggie-the-waitress, thrown waves to Joe-the-cook, nodded to Steve-the-regular. It was like a bad television series, some cop show from a hundred years ago, back when “just the facts, ma’am” had meant something.

Kellen took a forkful of pancakes, dunked them in syrup, speared half a breakfast sausage, and shoved the entire mess into his mouth. The man ate like someone had dared him to. Forty-six, about five-eight, barrel-chested and strong-armed, Kellen was the product of a Puerto Rican father from Sunset Park and a redhead WASP from Massachusetts. He had close-cropped brown hair speckled with more than a little gray, green eyes, and skin that was both tanned and freckled.

Kellen was looking at him expectantly. Right, the question. Lieutenant.

“Been thinking about it.” Clay didn’t know how to explain to Kellen that he wasn’t sure they’d ever pass him and was afraid to find out.

His partner laughed. “Yeah? Best hurry up. How the fuck am I ever going to stop drawing these shit assignments without friends in high places?”

“Maybe someday.” Clay tabbed over to the next page full of form fields. He doodled concentric circles with his stylus while looking it over, hit “undo,” and began answering questions. “Guy was licking, right?”

“You do not have to worry even a little about anyone claiming that motherfucker wasn’t lit up,” Kellen said between bites.

Clay sighed. He had a long history of shooting people, and adding this prick to the list wasn’t a concern. What was happening to his city, though—that ate at him. Elixir was tearing Brooklyn apart like a tsunami, a relentless wave of destruction eating everything in its path.

“If we hadn’t-a got that call when we did, that girl would be dead right now,” Kellen said. Someone had seen the two kids up on the roof, fighting, and had actually given enough of a shit to call it in.

Clay nodded. “She’s lucky to be alive, but I don’t think they have any nanotreatments to help with the scar back where she comes from.”

The girl had turned up empty on the scanner—no prints, no DNA match, nothing. That meant she hadn’t been born in any hospital that shared data with what was left of the United States. That ruled out most of the hospitals in the industrialized world except China, and China wasn’t known for breeding tall black hookers and shipping them off to Brooklyn. No, the girl had probably been born and raised in The Hook, which was like being born and raised in hell, only wetter.

Kellen slugged down some coffee. “Still can’t believe you made that catch.”

Clay shrugged. He was younger than Kellen. Faster. Not nearly so fat. During his days in the shit, in North Carolina, he had been incredibly quick and agile. Most of that was still with him, and it had been enough to save the girl’s life.

Clay’s tablet chirped and he brought up the text, a note from his wife.

“Woman saying goodnight?” Kellen said, and Clay grunted an affirmative. He had three late shifts a week and Terry always texted him before she went to bed.

Clay sent her a quick response. *All’s fine. Sleep well. Love you.* He wasn’t going to tell her about the junkie and the girl. The less Terry knew about the things he had to do in the line of duty, the better. They both had blood on their hands, but hers had come only from the soldiers she’d spent years tending to, and she hated the ugliness of Clay’s world. She wouldn’t want to know he’d added one more name to the list.

Kellen put his tablet to sleep. “You about finished with that shit?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. Let’s settle and then make a run up Kingston. I want to see if Escobar’s already back to his old tricks.”

They’d put Escobar away for what was supposed to be a long time, but he’d been sprung a week ago. Overcrowding was the official explanation, but Chief Baker hadn’t been able to look them in the eyes when he gave it to them.

Escobar. Piece of shit handed out Elixir to kids. Once they were hooked he’d use them as runners, and every few weeks one of them would turn up dead, a little boy

playing at being a gangster, killed for the drugs he carried. It had taken ages to piece together enough evidence to link the dead kids back to Escobar, and the son of a bitch had only spent six months at Rikers. Hadn't even made it to trial. Brooklyn justice.

Outside, the wave of stink hit him like a solid wall, and Clay made an involuntary noise of disgust. A hundred and six at midnight and the whole city steaming, sweating out the poisons trapped in its bays and marshes. Brooklyn nights in July were like having your face jammed into the crotch of a wet, filthy dog.

"Jesus, Lord, I swear it's still getting worse," Kellen said, but Clay barely heard him, wasn't entirely there anymore. This stench ... He tried not think about struggling through the brackish swamp that had once been Greenville, North Carolina, dogs on his trail and men with guns intent on murdering him not far behind. It had smelled like this, there, on the night when he had shot that little girl.

"Unlock the fuckin' car, man," Kellen cried. "I'm dying, here!"

Clay pulled his thoughts away from Greenville and forced himself back to the present. Their car, a Mercury Z-Cell with an amped-up engine that could still burn gas if it needed to, bulletproof glass, and a reinforced frame, was set to respond to the proximity of the biometric fobs that he and Kellen carried. Only problem was that Kellen forgot his about 90 percent of the time. Clay took two steps forward and heard the doors unlatch.

"You should try to remember your—" he began, and Kellen overrode him.

"*You* should try getting the hell into the car and turning on the AC, brother. Save the lectures for someone who gives a shit."

Fair enough. Clay opened his door and sat down. He pressed the ignition button, listened to the faint hum as the electronics came on, eased the car out onto the road. Flatbush was falling apart—you could see it in the details. More junked cars, more junked lives. A girl on the corner raised two middle fingers at them as they drove by. Kellen waved to her, gave her a cheerful grin, called her a *puta* through his clenched teeth.

Flatbush was bad. Crown Heights was worse. Clay signaled a right turn and pointed them toward it.

The sign that they'd crossed into Escobar's territory was half a cinder block bouncing off their windshield, tossed from a roof or window high above. Other chunks of debris followed, and Clay could hear the occasional shouted obscenity, muted by the thick glass. The Brooklyn PD had lost its hold in Crown Heights, and the place had gone feral.

"Why the hell did we come here?" Kellen muttered.

Clay glanced over at him. "It was your idea."

"Doesn't answer my question."

"Guess not."

The rain of rocks and garbage eventually ended as people got bored and went back to whatever it was they did in this place. There was a woman headed down the street—well-dressed for the area, with a tailored blouse and a skirt that almost looked like real leather—and Kellen motioned toward her with one hand. Clay slowed down as Kellen rolled down the window.

"Oh, not *this* wetback motherfucker," the woman said to no one in particular as they pulled up, but she stopped walking and turned to face them.

"You would know your wetbacks," Kellen told her. "Escobar still putting it to you, or did you find some new daddy to buy you that fake Gucci trash while he was locked up?"

"Why don't you go fuck yourself?"

"How about you tell me where to find Arón and I won't bust your ass for soliciting?"

The girl sneered. "I ain't never solicited shit in my whole life and you know it. You best get up out of here before you get your ass shot."

"Where's he at, Janelle?"

"I don't even know *who* you're talking about."

"Sure you do. Short, scarred up, crazy eye ... bangs about fifteen other girls behind your back."

"Oh, you fucking fat shit—"

"You got fifteen seconds! After that, we haul your stupid ass downtown. I say she's soliciting, so that means she's soliciting, right, partner?"

“For fucking sure.” Clay didn’t even bother to look over at Janelle. This was Kellen’s play, and it was fine by him. Better than wasting time hunting for Escobar, and at least if they had to bring her in, it would mean going back to the station.

“Goddamn! He’s at the fucking Loco, all right? That’s where they all moved to. Can I go buy my smokes now, you wetback spic pig?”

“Hope you don’t think Escobar keeps you around for your personality.” Kellen rolled up the window, cutting off her retort. She kicked the car as Clay began driving again.

“Shoulda known,” Clay said, and Kellen murmured assent. The Loco—a bar that had been called Locomotive 18 in some distant past when its neon still worked—had been Escobar and his crew’s preferred hangout even before the man had been sent away and lost his previous headquarters to a rival gang. Clay and Kellen had been in the place more than once, after the bust, looking for Escobar’s underlings. If the drug lord had taken it over, getting in was no longer going to be a matter of walking up to the front door and showing their badges. Clay didn’t know if Kellen intended to try, but if he did, they would need backup first. Clay would have thought about calling the National Guard before storming that fortress from the front if the Guard still existed.

As if reading his mind, Kellen heaved a weary sigh. “Ain’t going in there ... but I want him to know we’re watching. If we have to put that piece of shit away six months at a time, that’s how it’ll be.”

Clay nodded. He wasn’t sure it mattered—even if they put Arón Escobar away for life, the vacuum would end up filled by some other thug or petty mafioso. The only thing that was consistent with crime was the crime; the names and faces changed with a rapidity that was mind-boggling. Escobar had lasted long enough for them to have learned who he was. That was a testament to the man’s survival instincts, but it didn’t mean he was irreplaceable. Still, Clay had to admit it had felt good when they’d finally rolled up on the man at a traffic light, dragged him out of his car, and put the cuffs on.

The Loco was set farther back from the street than the buildings that surrounded it, and its windows had been blackened, barred, and partially blocked with debris scavenged from the crumbling remains of the burned-out buildings that littered the neighborhood. Multiple concrete barriers were strewn about in front of it, and a dozen or so thugs, openly carrying heat, were standing around or leaning against the barriers.

Talking, smoking, looking tough. They watched as the police cruiser rolled forward, and one of them turned to the others to make some sneering joke. They were still laughing when Kellen rolled his window down again.

“Seen Escobar?” he asked the nearest gangbanger, and the man gave him a cool glance. He was tall and white, with the kind of skim milk-blue skin that can only be cultivated by long nights and little time under the sun. Built like a dumpster, thick and solid and square, he had a long brown ponytail, squinting eyes, and obvious Elixir blooms at the corners of his mouth. His clothes were mostly loose synthetics, popular among gangsters, but like all of Escobar’s men, he wore a black cotton bandanna tied around his left calf. Clay knew from experience that if you shone a black light on the bandanna, a hidden pattern of fleurs-de-lis would show up.

He spat on the pavement. “Ain’t seen shit except some stupid pig thinks he can roll into Crown Heights and ask me dumb questions.”

“My mother always did say I was hurting for brains.”

“Gonna be hurting for blood in a few more minutes, you don’t roll out.”

Clay could see several of the other thugs looking toward the cruiser, their anger and desire for violence visible on their brows like gathering thunderheads.

“You and your buddies aren’t dumb enough try and jump two armed police officers, are you?” Kellen said.

The man ran his gaze along their cruiser, unimpressed, and turned back to Kellen. “You got nothing that scares us. We heard all about you two from the boss. Couple-a pussies is all. Had to sneak up on him just to take him in. He said he’s got something for you if you ever get in his way again. Said he’ll make you regret ever hearing his name.”

“Motherfucker, I regret that every day already,” Kellen said.

The guy sneered but didn’t respond.

“Tell your boss we said hello. Tell him we’re watching.”

“Head on in and tell him yourself.”

“Maybe someday I will.”

The thug ran a hand along the butt of the revolver slung at his hip, a too-big piece of garbage that probably wasn’t accurate beyond twenty feet. Clay wondered how fast the man could draw something that size and thought it likely he could shoot the thug

dead three times over in that span of time. In the old days he would've tried it—just the attitude this piece of shit was throwing would've been enough. Clay's training had beaten some of that out of him, and Terry had helped, too, but the instinct was still there. Swing or shoot first, worry about the consequences after. It had served him well on occasion, kept him alive, but now wasn't the time.

He made a show of yawning and kept his voice pitched low. "Let's fuck off before the rest of his boys decide to come over here."

Kellen made a noise of assent. They weren't scared of these assholes, but a shootout in the streets of Crown Heights would piss off the brass.

"We're rolling on," Kellen told the thug. "You tell Escobar what I said."

"Go fuck yourself," the man replied. Clay put the car into gear and drove forward. The group of men stood staring until they had turned the corner.

"Think that guy will actually convey the message?" Clay said, and Kellen nodded.

"Come on ... Escobar owns these guys. They'da told him even if I hadn't given them anything to tell. Nothing happens in Crown Heights without him hearing about it. Hell, he probably saw it from upstairs."

"Right. So now he knows we're watching. Suppose he's scared?"

Kellen laughed, sighed, shook his head. "I doubt that drug-pushing pimp is scared of anything in the entire world. If he thought we were a threat, those boys would've just opened fire."

"What's the plan now?"

Kellen glanced at the time. "Clock out, go home, see if I can get an hour or two of sleep in before the kids wake up. Put on the disco show and let's get the fuck out of here."

Clay pushed the pedal down and took the car up to sixty. He turned on the flashers and burned through streetlights, heading for downtown.

* * *

Terry murmured as he slid into bed next to her. She was on her side, facing away from him, the bedspread and sheets pushed down, only covering the lower half of her naked body. Even with the AC cranked, it was still warm on the third floor. Clay didn't

mind, but Terry had grown up in houses with real insulation that could hold their cool air, far from the heat and stink of the city, let alone the Carolina swamps. She talked about moving back upstate someday, getting away from Brooklyn and all its bullshit, but Clay thought it was just idle daydreaming. They'd been here ten years now. The city was a part of them.

Clay rolled onto his side and moved up against her, putting one arm under his head and slinging the other over her, pressing his face to her hair and inhaling. Her shampoo was made with orange blossoms, a scent they both loved; the candles at their wedding had given off the same smell.

"Wh'time issit?" Terry said.

"Almost five. Sorry I woke you up."

"S'okay. I was dreaming."

"About what?"

Terry took his hand in hers. She led it down along her belly, past the little patch of reddish-brown curls, and pressed between her legs. She was a furnace down there, slick and wet, her clit poking out and begging for his fingers.

"Oh." Clay could feel himself growing hard. He began to rub gentle circles around that stiff little nub, and Terry made a sound that was half sigh, half moan. She reached back with her hand, found his erection, stroked him.

"I dreamed you were fucking me in the living room," she murmured. "You were sitting on the couch and I was kneeling on top of you, naked. All the windows were open and I knew people could look right in from the street, but I didn't care."

Clay made a noise of approval, pressed hard against her clit and made her gasp, went back to circling. He snaked his other hand under her and teased a nipple with his fingers, pinching and rolling it.

"You were grabbing my tits and saying the most dirty, awful things, and I was so hot, and I was just ... just *riding you*. You woke me up right as I was about to ... about ... oh, God."

Terry had stopped stroking him now, lost in what he was doing with his hands, and he felt her begin to tense, pressing forward hard with her hips. He pushed back with his fingers, circling rapidly, and he heard Terry make a sort of choked cooing noise—the sound she always made when she came. In another moment she pulled away from his

fingers, unable to take any more. They lay for a time not speaking, Terry panting and Clay running his hand along the freckled skin of her thigh and ass and back.

“That was fast,” he said at last.

Terry laughed. “Told you ... I was close when you woke me up.”

“Glad I was here for it.”

“Me, too.” She rolled over to face him, her deep brown eyes half-lidded, and reached down again to take him in her hands. She kissed him, and Clay put his hands in her curly red hair, kissing back, letting her do what she was doing. It didn’t take her long.

“That was pretty fast too, mister,” she said when he was done and smirked at him as he reached for tissues.

“Someone got me all riled up,” Clay said.

Terry snorted laughter and clapped her hands over her mouth in embarrassment. “I can’t believe I just snorted,” she said through her fingers.

“You do that all the time.”

Terry took her hands from her face and made a noise of mock outrage. “Well ... I couldn’t believe it any of those times, either!”

“When’s your alarm?”

She reached over to her nightstand, tapped her tablet, glanced at the clock. “Eight thirty.”

“You should get some more sleep.”

“Okay. Can I lie on you?”

“Sure.”

“Even though it’s hot?”

Clay nodded, lay back, took her in his arms. She closed her eyes and rested her head on his chest.

“I love you, baby,” Terry said. “You should go for lieutenant. I hate these night shifts, and I don’t think being on the street is helping any with ... everything else you have to deal with. It’s too close to what you did before.”

Clay smiled. “I’m okay. Maybe this winter.”

“All right.” Terry’s voice was drifting off. “I’ve got brunch with Cynthia tomorrow, so I won’t be around before you have to work. Let’s have a date night at Pascale’s ... maybe Sunday night? I’m craving puttanesca.”

Clay thought about mentioning that he had dragged a screaming line chef out of Pascale’s two weeks ago and booked him for distributing Elixir on the premises, but he decided it didn’t matter. “Sure, baby. Whatever you want.”

Terry gave a contented sigh and kissed his chest. In five minutes she was asleep, and in ten more she pulled away, returning to her side like always. Clay lay there on his back, trying to relax. The sex had helped, but for him sleep was always a long time coming. He was glad for Terry; before her, nights had been all but impossible, sleep arriving in little ten-minute bursts between what felt like hours of tossing and turning. She’d told him it was PTSD. He’d thought of it as penance.

Clay leaned forward and kissed the back of Terry’s head. He flipped over onto his belly, closed his eyes, and tried to empty his mind. Eventually sleep came. When he woke up six hours later, Terry was at brunch. Five hours after that, his life had changed forever.

Chapter 2

The Fall

Clay would forever remember the few seconds after it happened, when there was nothing but silence and the strange chill that wrapped around him like the arms of a malevolent ghost. It was almost interesting, in its own terrible way, this moment in which his body emptied so completely of feeling.

The news was squawked out at him over a dispatch radio in a room full of yammering cops. Brooklyn precincts had been crowded even before consolidation had moved most operations downtown. Now this central location was stuffed to the gills. The room held fifteen desks, with barely enough space between them to maneuver, and all were occupied. It was hot, under-lit, stinking of pastrami and old, sour coffee. Kellen's desk, next to Clay's, was heaped high with papers, binders, and discarded sandwich wrappings. The cleaning crew had given up trying to tend to it.

Sergeant McCarran—a textbook example of the fat, corrupt Irish cop, though he was at least five generations removed from the Emerald Isle—was in the middle of an unapologetic and brutally racist joke that Clay thought might get him socked in the eye when the dispatcher's words cut through and caught Clay's attention.

“Ten fifty-four at 145 Willow Street. Officers dispatched. Paramedics dispatched.”
I can't have heard that right.

He had, and a part of him knew it, and when he shouted at the other cops in the room to shut the fuck up, something of that knowledge must have come through in his voice. The whole place went graveyard silent, every eye turned on him. Clay sat and waited for the confirmation, and when the dispatcher said it again there could be no doubt.

One forty-five Willow Street. Ten fifty-four. Possible dead body.

That was when the cold feeling descended, and for a few moments it seemed as if everything were moving at a fraction of its normal speed. No one in the room was speaking, and the radio had fallen silent. Everyone was just staring, and Clay had time to wonder what his face must look like to cause such expressions of shocked concern. He heard his heart beat once, twice, and realized that the strange tightness he was feeling stemmed from the fact that he hadn't taken a breath in what seemed like months. He tried to take one now, couldn't, and for a moment was glad for it. Maybe it would just end here, and he would be spared the agony of learning the details.

It might not be her. With that everything snapped back into full speed. Kellen was opening his mouth to speak, but Clay cut him off, sucking in a deep, ragged breath. "That's my fucking house!"

And then he was moving, heading for the cruiser. Kellen was making a valiant effort to follow, but Clay rapidly outdistanced him. He heard Kellen giving up the chase and shouting to someone else for a ride. Clay never stopped moving, racing through the halls and shoving his way out the door through a group of officers standing outside.

"What the shit, Foster?!" someone shouted, but Clay just kept moving.

His cruiser was parked in a ready position, rear half up over the curb, nose facing out toward the street. Clay reached it at such speed that the car barely had time to detect him and unlock before he was hurling the door open. He dropped into the seat, pushed the ignition button, and slammed the car into gear. It lurched forward, tires shrieking on the hot asphalt, and he almost lost control of it. Clay cranked the wheel hard to the left, just missed the front bumper of another parked cruiser, and then straightened out, accelerating, flipping on the lights and the noise.

By the time he reached the end of the street he was doing eighty miles an hour, and he barely tapped the brakes as he swung a hard right. His house, and Terry, were less than a mile from the Eighty-fourth Precinct. The trip would take him four minutes at the most. To Clay, this seemed an eternity, an unacceptable ocean of time to be sailed on a foundering ship. Watching cars ahead of him pull over and people scatter from the streets, he kept the pedal pressed to the floor and tried not to think about his wife's still, silent form stretched out on some cold metal table somewhere deep in the bowels of the precinct.

* * *

They hadn't even started taping up a line yet when Clay screeched to a halt amid a cluster of four other squad cars. Down the block, he could see the lights of an approaching ambulance, and he leaped from the car cursing their lack of haste.

Clay's neighborhood was still the ritziest in Brooklyn, even as the city decayed around it. The quiet, tree-lined streets and stately brownstones had seen their share of lickers, but the money here allowed many of his neighbors to pursue their Elixir habit without resorting to violence and petty crime or losing their homes. Still, Clay had more than once found himself hauling stoned and sleeping people from his steps, and it was not always possible to tell whether they were transients or merely locals who'd been on a multi-day binge without showering or changing clothes.

He wasn't supposed to live here; cops didn't earn enough to rent a single-floor apartment in a Brooklyn Heights brownstone, let alone own the entire building, but Clay wasn't like other cops. Uncle Sam, what was left of him, had set Clay up for life after the things Clay had done for that bony, bearded, finger-pointing bastard. Clay was a cop not for the pay or the benefits or even the action but because Terry had thought it might help him ease back into civilian life, and because she hoped he might be able to do some good for the city. This latter ideal amused Kellen to no end, and Clay didn't blame him, but he'd found himself hoping Terry was right. He might have done more measurable work as a soldier, but he liked being a cop better.

There were four officers standing around his front steps, and when Clay pushed past them, one of the patrolmen grabbed at his shoulders. "Foster, don't."

"Get off me!" Clay pulled away from the man's grip, thrusting forward up the stairs and toward the door. Behind him, he heard another car pull up, heard Kellen call his name.

Clay kept moving. In through the front hallway, past the staircase, toward the rear of the building. He could see into the kitchen at the back and, past that, another group of officers standing on the iron stairs that led down to the concrete patio and postage-stamp backyard. One of them saw Clay coming and her eyes widened. She took three quick strides through the kitchen and stood blocking the doorway.

“You don’t want to come out here,” she said, and the words hit Clay like a volley of knives. He knew in an instant, from the tone and from her expression, that the paramedics would be worthless. They were required to call it in as a 10-54, but what was really outside was a 10-55. A coroner case. His wife was dead, and she wasn’t going to be revived.

Clay felt anger well up within him, anger like he had never before experienced, and another emotion that was foreign to him despite everything he had done in the past. For the first time in his life, Clay wanted to murder something. He could taste the desire for it rising within him, bitter, like bile at the back of his throat. He bared his teeth at the woman.

“Get out of my way, Mendez.”

“Foster, if you ever take one piece of advice in your entire fucking life, make it this one: Do not go out that door.”

She was short and stout, half his weight and no real threat if he decided to go through her. A crimson wave of rage surged within him, and for a moment he grappled with the desire to pick the woman up and hurl her across the kitchen. Then something seemed to snap inside him and the rage left him all at once. In its place was a kind of vacuum, a feeling of emptiness so profound it seemed as if his entire body would collapse into it, like stars dragged into a supermassive black hole. Before meeting Terry, he had never been able to imagine the kind of life he had built with her. Now the prospect of a life without her seemed impossible. What was he going to do?

“I have to see her,” Clay said, his voice jagged and broken, barely more than a whisper. Mendez shook her head.

“Not like that. No, you don’t.” She looked over Clay’s shoulder. “Ruiz, get your goddamn partner *out* of here.”

Clay felt Kellen’s meaty hand on his shoulder. “Come on, brother. Let’s let the medics help her.”

“Christ, Kel ...”

“I know, man. Come on.”

Clay allowed himself to be led back toward the front of the building. As they walked, Kellen glanced over his shoulder. “He knows that he owes you one, Mendez.”

Clay, who felt at that moment as if he knew nothing at all, kept his mouth shut.

* * *

Clay had first met Terry ten years earlier, in 2048. He'd been sitting in graying bed sheets at a shitty VA hospital in Virginia, three pieces of metal still embedded deep in his hip, awaiting a surgeon. Unlike the injuries to most of the civil war veterans in that place, so near the front lines, his was not life-threatening, and so he had been left to sit in his bed and watch the lying bullshit that the government called news, sucking down pain medication every few hours. The inability to sleep had only added to his convivial mood, and when Terry had first shown up in his room with the latest batch of pills, Clay had been bent over in agony, and his first words to her had been "It's about time, you cunt."

Terry, two and a half years into dealing with men who'd suffered indescribable trauma, had taken it in stride. She'd given him his meds, told him she hoped they would help, and moved on. The next time Clay had seen her, a few days later, he'd apologized. Terry had hit him with that broad smile of hers, and that was it: the end of everything that had come before. In the days and weeks that followed, as she waited with him for the surgery, nursed him back to health when it was over, and agreed to leave Virginia and come back to New York with him, Clay must have apologized fifty more times for what he'd called her. Every time, Terry had laughed and told him that, of all the people who had ever called her a cunt, he was by far her favorite.

They married three years later, a small civil ceremony in front of a few close friends and her parents, who'd made the trip from Rochester. Terry in a white gown, Clay in a rented tux. He'd just finished that morning with the legal wrangling that had made him rich and had waited to be alone with her so he could break the news. Terry had cried when he'd told her, when he'd promised that her parents would never have to worry about money again, and she'd thrown her arms around him and kissed him. They'd made love while streaks of eyeliner were drying on her cheeks, her white dress hiked up around her hips, breasts peeking out from above its strapless top.

Christ, she was beautiful, and Clay could still summon up that night in near-perfect detail, had done so a hundred thousand times since. When what was happening to Brooklyn seemed ready to overwhelm him, swallow him up, cast him into inescapable

despair, Clay needed only bring that image up to remind himself that there were still things that were good in the world.

His beautiful girl was lying in front of him now on a cold steel table under bare blue-white bulbs, her pale little feet poking out from under the sheet that was draped over the rest of her. She'd painted her toenails purple. In a minute, the coroner was going to pull down that sheet and he was going to have to look at her cold, dead face and say yes. Yes, that is my wife.

Others had volunteered to make the ID—Kellen had practically begged Clay to let him do it—but Clay wouldn't have it. He wanted to see her, wanted the reality and the finality of it, no matter how awful it was. It seemed to him the least he could do for Terry, after all she had done for him, to look at her like this, at the end.

She'd fallen from the third-floor balcony, the place where she kept her marigolds and tiger lilies and that goddamned unkillable spider plant she'd had since she was thirteen and hated but couldn't bring herself to abandon. She'd stepped onto a stool to water it, lost her balance, and toppled over the railing. The concrete below had done the rest. A neighbor, out on their own balcony, had seen Terry lying there, her body and limbs piled up in a pool of blood, and called the police.

The medics had briefed him. She went quick, they'd said. Probably didn't even have time to realize what was happening, they'd said. It didn't hurt, they'd said. At least he could feel good about that. As if it were possible for Clay to feel anything right now, let alone anything good.

No one had tried to tell him she was in a better place, and that was probably for the best. Clay thought he would hit a man who told him that, send him to the oral surgeon, but he would've been acting on principle, really, rather than out of rage. It seemed his ability to feel anything except a kind of helpless emptiness had abandoned him.

Truth was, no one had said much of anything to him, except that they were sorry. He'd heard that one a hundred times, a thousand, since the news had come in from the paramedics that there was nothing they could do. It was impossible to describe how little the words *I'm sorry* meant to him right now, and so he hadn't tried. Clay wasn't sure he'd spoken at all in the last four hours.

The coroner came into the room, and he was not what Clay had expected. Men like this were supposed to be balding, bespectacled, hunched and pale and sickly. This man was tall, blond, and good-looking. Young. Tan. He looked like the type who might spend the weekends golfing at a country club in Smithtown or Brentwood. His face was set in an expression of sympathy that Clay was certain the man had practiced in front of a mirror.

The coroner glanced at his tablet, then back up, and took in a slow, deep breath. Clay felt adrenaline flood his body. Here it was, and he wasn't ready. He could have spent a thousand hours sitting here in this cold room that smelled of antiseptics and preservatives and it wouldn't have made a difference. He would never be ready. Clay clenched his teeth, steeled himself, met the man's gaze.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" the coroner said.

"No. Get on with it."

The man nodded and stepped forward. He grasped the sheet and moved it quickly but without flourish, not pausing for suspense or theatrics. Clay was, for a moment, impressed with his professionalism, before the sight of his wife blew all other thoughts from his mind.

He had expected damage to her neck, and there was indeed some bruising visible, but it looked remarkably intact. What caught him off guard were the eyes—huge and puffy, standing out purple-black against skin that was otherwise waxen and pallid—and the large abrasion where the concrete had stripped a chunk of skin from her forehead. They had cleaned off the blood, and Clay supposed he should be thankful for that, but he had never in his life imagined that he might one day know what the bone that made up his wife's skull looked like.

He understood in an instant the terrible mistake he had made, understood why Kellen had fought so hard against it. He would never be able to wipe this image from his mind, and now whenever he thought of Terry's smile, her laugh, the way she had looked perched atop him on their wedding night, that beauty and joy would be followed in his mind by this atrocity.

"Oh, fucking hell." Clay's voice broke, and the coroner said nothing, eyes on the floor, giving Clay the time he needed to digest the blasphemous site before him.

"Put it ... Cover her up, please."

The man did so, glancing up now. "I'm sorry."

Clay couldn't seem to find a response to that, so he ignored it. After a moment, the coroner nodded. The man was a pro; he'd seen all of this before, knew not to take anything personally, probably even had a script to follow if things got aggressive.

"Will you make the ID?" he said.

"That's my wife. That's ... She's Terry Foster. Or Brooks. She used to be Brooks. Terry Elizabeth Brooks. Christ, I have to call her parents. Jesus Christ."

What was he going to tell them? Tim and Emily, people he had come to love more than he'd ever loved his own parents, would be devastated. What was he possibly going to tell them that could take away the pain of knowing what had become of their daughter, a beautiful and caring woman who had given all of herself to injured soldiers for more than three years? They had sent her off to Brooklyn with some useless man who had failed to protect her, who had let her go tumbling to a stupid, shitty death on a concrete patio. What could he possibly say, what could he possibly do, that would ever absolve him of this sin?

The coroner was looking at him, nodding in sympathy, an expression on his face that seemed to say, *It's OK if you need to cry. I've seen it before.*

"I have to get out of here," Clay said.

The coroner made a noise of assent. "We'll do everything we can for her."

"There's nothing left you can do," Clay said as he left.

* * *

The sun had set by the time Clay stepped out of the precinct, showered and changed into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Brooklyn was glowing; even with the city going to shit, and even with its much prettier sister shining across the East River, the place still had the capacity for beauty. Clay could usually see it, but at the moment it seemed the whole world was gray and ugly, coated in ash and decay. He felt exhausted. Defeated. Sucked dry. The thought of going home to his dark, empty building to make dinner and trying to fall asleep seemed as remote and impossible as growing wings and flying away.

“Chief says you’re on a mandatory two-week vacation,” Kellen said, stepping up beside him. “After that, you go talk to him. He’ll decide if you’re even ready for a psych eval or if you need another two weeks.”

“Terrific,” Clay said, not looking over at his partner.

“Listen, I got two offers. Your pick.”

Clay looked up the road, toward the cars flashing by on Tillary Street. “Let’s hear the first.”

“I can drive you home, spare you the walk, if you want to get started on ... you know, preparations.”

Clay grunted. Shook his head. “No fucking way. What’s the other one?”

“Shot of whiskey and a beer at Breaker’s. Then maybe another shot of whiskey and another beer. Then we evaluate our situation and determine if another shot of whiskey and another beer are required.”

“Angela going to let you get away with that?” Kellen’s wife didn’t typically enjoy it when her man came stumbling home drunk in the middle of the night.

“Angela spent the afternoon crying and told me I wasn’t allowed to come home until I was sure you were all right.”

Clay glanced over at him. “That the plan?”

Kellen gave him a sad, sorry grin and shook his head. “When you think you’re going to be ‘all right,’ bro?”

“Might be a while.”

“A long fucking while. I got your drinks, and your dinner if you can eat, and I will get you into a cab when you need it. That’s offer number two, but it’s all I got. I can’t ... If I could do anything more ...”

Clay pressed his thumbs to his temples. Closed his eyes. “It’s fine, Kel.”

Breaker’s was two blocks away, a pool hall whose tables might have been new at the start of the war back in thirty-five. Located so close to the precinct, it was popular with their fellow cops, and Clay considered requesting a different location where there wouldn’t be so many people around prone to staring or, worse, expressions of sympathy.

Kellen seemed to catch his hesitancy. “Ain’t no one going to bother you in there, brother. Everyone in the precinct knows to leave you be.”

“If you say so. First person to ask if I’m okay gets his nose broken.”

“Fair deal.” The two walked in silence for a bit.

Clay ran a hand through his hair. “I called her parents.”

Kellen winced, muttering some Spanish profanity under his breath. “How’d that go?”

“They’ll be in tonight, but late. I’ll see them tomorrow.”

“Yeah, but how’d they—”

“I had to tell them their baby girl fell off a balcony and broke her neck, man ... How do you think that went?”

Kellen nodded, gave a disgusted sigh, scratched his head. “I’m thinking not well.”

“You’re thinking right. You ever hear a sixty year-old man cry like a little kid?”

“I have not.”

“Try to keep it that way.”

They had arrived at the bar. Clay could hear music and the clack of pool balls, muted by the door, and even from outside he could smell the sour scent of stale beer. Through the few small windows, he could see televisions playing sports networks. He paused again and Kellen noticed.

“Your call, man,” he said.

Clay shrugged. Where else was he going to go? “Fuck it, let’s get drunk.”

Chapter 3

Dead Ends

Clay woke up in a cold, empty bed at four in the morning, head throbbing and guts roiling. He stumbled to the bathroom, hauled the toilet seat back, and vomited until all the muscles in his abdomen hurt. Afterward, he lay on his side on the cool tile of the bathroom floor, still half drunk, exhausted and sick and miserable. The unpleasant taste of bile, bourbon, and beer had coated his tongue. Somewhere outside in the dark, a dog barked once.

He wished then that he was still the man he had been before Terry. Wouldn't it be easier not to care? To go back to those days when he could zero in on a six-year-old's head through the scope of a rifle, consider for a final time not the moral implications of what he was about to do but instead the reliability of his planned escape route, and then pull the trigger? It would be easier, yes, but he was no longer that man.

He thrust himself up and got first to his knees and then to his feet. Standing at the sink, he tried to avoid looking at his reflection as he filled the glass they kept on the counter with cold water and drank the entire thing down. Clay filled the glass again and brought it back with him to the bedroom, where he set it on the end table and went to stand at the window, looking out into the yard in which Terry had died.

There wasn't much to it. The stairs, the patio, an eight-by-twelve plot of trimmed grass, vibrant green even in late July thanks to the frequent thunderstorms that had accompanied the rising ocean. There was a solar-powered pole lamp in the yard that bathed the area in a gentle glow. Clay could see moths batting against it. He watched them for a long time.

He almost missed it when he turned around, just as he had when he'd stumbled into the room, full of bourbon, to pass out in his clothes. He'd missed it again when he'd

awakened in those same clothes and ran to the bathroom to throw up. He was less drunk now, and not moving with such urgency. It was a small thing—a minuscule thing, really—but it stopped him in his tracks. Their wedding picture was turned to face toward the bed.

That wasn't right. Terry had a thing, a hang-up Clay had never understood, about that picture always facing the window. She bitched every single time the people from the cleaning service moved it while dusting, and the last such time had been less than four days ago. The cleaners hadn't been back since, and Clay had seen her move the thing with his own eyes, turning it to face the window. Why was it facing the bed?

He stepped over to look at it. Staring, he tried to will his addled brain to think. Was he sure? Was he goddamned positive about this? And if he wasn't, why that creeping feeling at the back of his spine? Why that certainty—which he hadn't felt since his days in Carolina, in those moments before a mission went suddenly bad and the shooting began—that something was not right?

Clay reached out to turn the picture back toward the window and stopped dead, arm outstretched, fingers trembling just a little. At the back, stuck to the wall only by the very tip and near to falling entirely behind the dresser, less than an inch of it exposed, there was a hair. Just a single hair, but it glowed silver in the moonlight streaming in from the bedroom window. At any other time, he might not even have noticed it, because it wasn't one of Terry's long red-brown curls and barely stood out against the white wall. If he even breathed the wrong way it was going to fall behind the dresser and be lost forever.

Carefully, very carefully, Clay reached forward and pinned the hair between two fingers. He drew it forth, holding it up in front of his eyes, confirming what he already knew: this was not his wife's hair. Eight or ten inches long, blond and straight, this was not the hair of anyone he knew, and certainly not anyone who had recently been in his bedroom.

At least, not that he was aware of.

Another man? He shook his head. *Impossible.*

No, not impossible ... but improbable. His relationship with Terry had been strong. They'd been happy, made love often, rarely fought, enjoyed spending time together. He didn't live at the office, hadn't treated her like shit, hadn't taken her for

granted. There were none of the hallmarks of a relationship in distress. Besides, he was a cop and a soldier, a man trained to notice things out of place. If Terry had been fucking some longhaired stranger in their bed, man or woman, he would have known something was amiss.

Had she had a friend over at some point? Why would they have been in the bedroom, and why would that person have moved a picture? That possibility made no sense. What else was there?

While you're asking questions, how likely do you really think it is that she fell over that railing?

His eyes narrowed and it seemed that the last of the alcohol fuzz slipped from his mind. The analytical, observant part of his brain, the part that had been trained for nearly two decades to notice every detail, was taking over. For the first time since he had heard the 10-54 come across the radio, Clay began to question the circumstances of Terry's death. The more questions he asked, the more came to mind, and there weren't enough answers to make him happy.

Still holding the hair between the thumb and index finger of his right hand, Clay turned on his heel and went to call the Forensics Unit.

* * *

"Couldn't find a damn thing, man."

The tech's name was Mike, and he'd been working on crime scene investigation for at least thirty years. He'd done just about every job there was to do in that area, but his specialty was DNA analysis, and Clay'd asked him to personally investigate the blond strand of hair. This was the conclusion, which meant that whole angle was a goddamned dead end. If Mike couldn't find anything, then no one could.

"Is it synthetic?" Clay asked, running a hand over his scruffy face. He wasn't even supposed to be here at the precinct, but no one ever came down to this dim, windowless set of offices full of chemicals and computers. At least no one who was going to give a shit if Clay was hanging around.

“Define *synthetic*,” Mike said with a shrug, glancing back at one of half a dozen holo monitors sitting on a desk behind him. “It’s real hair, not plastic, if that’s what you mean ... but it could be vat-grown. That’s how they make mid-price wigs.”

“Even if it’s vat-grown, it has to have DNA.”

“Sure, I mean, we’ve got matches, mostly ancient stuff from the USS public database, but nothing anywhere near a hundred percent. If that hair came off a real person and not out of a vat, about the best we could do is point you toward relatives ... but distant ones. Her closest match is from almost fifty years ago.”

“You know she’s female?”

Mike shook his head. “Guessing. The hair was ten inches long, dude.”

“There are plenty of guys with—” Clay stopped himself. Mike’s graying hair was pulled back in a ponytail and reached halfway down his back.

The other man favored him with a grin and turned back to his monitors, pointing to one. “If you look at the data, you can see that she’s haplogroup I-one. So if it’s not a wig, she comes from generic European stock, maybe Scandinavian, given how light the hair is.”

“It’s not bleached?”

“Nah, it’s legit.”

“Is that ... what the fuck did you call it? Haplogroup? Is it uncommon?”

Mike shook his head. “About 20 percent of white people around here. So you’re looking at a couple million in easy driving distance alone.”

“Why aren’t there any recent matches?”

Mike shrugged. He was a big guy—not fat but broad through the shoulders and ribs. When he hunched over his screens he seemed too big for his desk and chair. Now, though, he was leaning back, hands folded over his fiftysomething belly, chewing on his lower lip. “It’s weird. It’s like someone scrubbed the DNA group from the records past a certain point.”

“Why would someone do that?”

“The better question is ‘how?’”

“Okay, so—”

“I don’t know. That’s why it’s a better question. The ‘why’ seems obvious, man. If your DNA isn’t on the list, you can do ... stuff.”

“Like throw a woman off a balcony?” There was no point beating around the bush. By calling the investigation unit in for a full sweep of the house, Clay had all but announced that he suspected foul play in Terry’s death.

“Maybe?” Mike seemed unconvinced. “Or maybe about a zillion other reasons.”

“So what you’re telling me is you’ve got nothing for me.” Clay slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes. He’d already heard this from everyone else. It didn’t matter that the picture was out of place, or that the drawers in the bedroom had clearly been tossed. No one gave a shit about all the little things wrong with Terry’s office, the way all the random crap she’d collected and displayed on her shelves was just a bit off, the way her books were out of order.

“Well, not nothing,” Mike said, and he frowned. He turned to yet another holo monitor and tapped at his lightkeys, bringing up a gigantic image of what looked like a black swatch of cloth.

Clay raised an eyebrow. “How incredibly helpful.”

“Hang on. Filters.” Mike tapped at his keys and then swiped a hand in front of the hologram. It went blue, and suddenly there was an image, faint but visible, printed on the cloth. When he saw it, Clay fought to keep his cool, to not show the bright red streak of rage that ran through him. To most people, the design would have meant next to nothing, but to Clay it held a deep significance. He knew it very well.

“Where the fuck did you find that?”

“I didn’t find shit,” Mike said. “That was all Rogers. He found it in the kitchen, caught on a nail or something. Brought it down here for me to work my magic.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“That he found a random piece of black cloth in your million-year-old house that might not even have anything on it? Come on. He just filed it with everything else. Wasn’t worth a call.”

“Have you shown it to anyone else? O’Connor needs to see this.”

Mike gave him a cool glance. “You want to give me any other tips? I showed it to the detective. Showed it to the rest of the team down here, too. We tried to get prints or DNA off the cloth, but no dice.”

“I need to talk to O’Connor,” Clay said, standing.

Mike stayed seated, looking up at him. “You recognize it, don’t you?”

“Maybe. Listen, thanks for the hair thing. If you stumble on any more info ...”

“I’ll let you know. No worries. Buy me a beer sometime.”

Clay said he would and headed for the door. As he reached it, he glanced back over his shoulder. Mike had returned to his work but had left the image up on one of the screens. The image sat there, seeming almost to mock Clay. Just a little icon, no bigger than a thumbprint, but Clay knew it would be repeated across the entire cloth to which the swatch had once been attached. It was a fleur-de-lis, Arón Escobar’s symbol, worn by every single one of his thugs.

* * *

Detective Shereece O’Connor was an imposing presence, nearly six feet tall and built like a grizzly bear. She’d made the junior Olympic team as a weight lifter before coming to the force. Now in her mid-twenties, she still had plenty of muscle; it stretched the cloth of her uniform at her biceps and thighs. She had brown skin and curly hair that she dyed a deep auburn and kept pulled back in a tight bun. Her sunken eyes sat above a long nose that seemed too thin for her face. She was peering down at him with an expression of skepticism.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on leave, Officer Foster?”

Clay shrugged. “Let’s say I’m here informally.”

“Bet you’d prefer I not say you were here at all.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“All right, but this better not be some sit-down where you tell me I’m not working on your case hard enough.”

O’Connor could be intimidating when she needed to be, but her greatest talent was an impeccable eye for detail combined with a dogged work ethic. Her rise to detective had been meteoric by Brooklyn standards, and Clay doubted it would be long before she moved up the chain. “No way I’d ever accuse you of that, Detective.”

“Good. So why the visit?”

“You’ve seen the cloth that Mike found?”

“No, I saw the cloth that Rogers found and Mike stuck under a black light to show off a little picture of a Saints logo.”

Clay rolled his eyes. “Don’t play dumb. You know about those bandannas. They were in our reports on Escobar’s men. I’m sure you’ve read them.”

“More than once,” O’Connor said. She wrapped a massive hand around a mug Clay would’ve had a hard time gripping and took a long slug of coffee. “Listen, it’s an interesting little piece, but—”

“Interesting? Is that all it is?”

“If you’re looking for ‘conclusive,’ you should keep looking.”

“Jesus Christ, Shereece, one of Escobar’s men was *in my house*.”

“Were they? Foster, that design’s been around forever. It’s older than you and me combined, and that particular ink goes back at least thirty years. I know for a fact you’ve only owned that palace of yours for eight years. Hell, it could have come in stuck to your shoe. It’s not like you haven’t spent plenty of time in Crown Heights.”

“So you think that we left a piece of cloth lying around our kitchen for eight solid years and it just coincidentally happens to point a guy who hates me and recently threatened me?”

O’Connor raised an eyebrow. “Does that seem any less likely than that Arón Escobar, less than three months out of jail, decided to send one of his goons to your house to kill your wife? And that for some reason this guy didn’t notice that his gang marker got caught on your kitchen door? And that he failed to notice it even though he managed to rearrange all of your stuff while leaving exactly zero fingerprints or DNA evidence?”

“There was the hair.”

“Vat-grown wig, probably a previous tenant. Foster ... Clay ... I can’t pretend to understand what you’re going through, but—”

“But you’re ready to tell me I’m crazy anyway.”

The detective folded her hands and rested her chin against them, regarding him for a moment. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to get a fucking warrant, search the Loco from top to bottom, and haul Escobar in for questioning.”

“And you want me to do this based on a swatch of cloth that might be thirty years old and a hair that belongs to no one. You think I’m going to get a warrant out of that ...

how? Let's not even consider how connected Escobar is. Even if he were small-time, that is some thin fucking evidence."

Clay was silent for a moment, considering. "How far up the line did you take this before it got shot down?"

O'Connor regarded him for a time, lips pressed tight together, as if considering whether she wanted to answer the question. "Not that far," she finally said.

"So it didn't get to Baker?" The police chief was no fan of Clay's, but securing a warrant wouldn't require his permission.

"Not even close."

"Even if we can't get the search, we have enough to at least bring Escobar in for questioning. The threat, the fleur-de-lis, the rearranged shit in my house—"

"Maybe you think we do, and maybe so do I, but the higher-ups don't seem to agree."

"Who was it?" Clay leaned forward in his chair, looking her in the eyes. "At least let me know which one of our bosses is bought."

"What if they're not bought?" O'Connor said, taking another sip of coffee. "What if they just think that there's a simple, sad explanation and that you're grasping at straws because you don't want to accept that something so terrible could happen for no reason?"

"Does that sound like me?"

She shrugged. "Not really."

"So help me out here."

"I'm doing what I can, Clay. Forensics has spent more time on this than they would've on most other cases. I've been talking to Escobar insiders, seeing if they've heard anything. I've got friends undercover who are digging. If anything comes up, we'll reevaluate, but I'll tell you ... if this was Escobar's hit, he does *not* want anyone to know about it."

"Of course not. He killed a cop's wife."

"If you can prove that, I'll bring him in. Hell, if you can make the brass a little more suspicious, I'll bring him in. You want to talk to them, I'd start with a captain. That's a step higher on the chain than I got before getting shut down."

“By the time I’m allowed to talk to anyone on the record, it’ll be over. Escobar probably already knows we’re looking, and he’ll pay off whoever he needs to pay off to make sure it doesn’t go any further.”

O’Connor spread her hands. “That’s out of my control.”

“Christ.” Clay grabbed the back of his neck with his hand, squeezing, trying to relieve the tension.

“If it’s worth anything, I’m sorry. I’d like to at least haul the son of a bitch in. I don’t know if he killed your wife or not, but there’s enough that’s weird about this to make me want to find out for sure.”

“I’ll take it up with Captain Peters,” Clay said. “I’ll see if we can at least get him in for questioning, even if we can’t search that dump he calls a headquarters. Goddamn Escobar.”

“Baker won’t be happy that you’re chatting up half the department when you’re supposed to be on leave.”

“Chief Baker knows he’s got a standing invitation to kiss my ass.” Clay stood up. O’Connor laughed a little. “Everyone knows that. Good luck, Foster.”

“Thanks, Detective. Keep an ear open.”

“You know it.”

Clay turned and left the office. Peters wouldn’t be in right now, but it didn’t matter. He had no intention of talking to the man; the Brooklyn PD wasn’t going to be interested in Escobar unless Clay could come up with conclusive evidence that the thug had ordered Terry’s murder. Even then, the system would drag it out for ages and the eventual outcome would probably be another six-month stint at Rikers before Escobar got himself back on the streets.

There was only one real path left for him. If he wanted Arón Escobar to be held accountable for what he’d done, Clay was going to have to handle this himself.

Get the Whole Book

<http://elixirnovel.com>