

*3-Chapter Excerpt*  
**Nica of Los Angeles**  
(Frames, Book 1)

by

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This is a work of fiction. If you find resemblance to actual persons, places, or events you have a terrific imagination!

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## 1. *Must Have Spooked Me*

The older I get, the more feral I become. I'd been inside all this fine day and if I didn't inhale some outdoor air soon, I couldn't be held responsible. The air didn't have to be fresh, just open. I tipped back in my chair, back so far my thighs squeezed the undersides of the desk to keep me upright. From this position, I caught a hint of breeze through the gaping skylight and spied a wisp of cloud idling in an unexpectedly blue sky.

"Are you like even listening to what I'm telling you?" the prospective client whined and flicked her hair, which lay like a doormat down her back. I pondered the chicken and egg of her. Which comes first, being a tweaker or being a moron? Whatever the answer it was a tight race.

I glanced up one last time before I answered, surprised by my yearning for that view. I'd spent many hours staring at this patch of sky. I didn't know it would be my last chance for a leisurely gaze. I didn't know that three pairs of clients were about to take over my life. I only knew that I wanted this creep out of my office. From somewhere I mustered a tone of professional *politesse*. "Every time, you bet. You want me to find the men who took your black duffel bag. You don't happen to remember what was in the bag, but the bag itself is what matters. It was inherited from your grandmother and that's why you want it back. You don't want to involve the police because you are kind-hearted. What if the men took the bag by mistake, why get them in trouble - should I get you a towel?"

She had swiped her forehead with her hand and then, to get the sweat off her fingers, ran them along the seat of my client chair, leaving tracks like a slug race. And that was the classiest thing about her. "This hot flash shit is a bitch," she chuckled. "Menopause. You know."

"I can't wait." I needed to get her out of my office before she crashed. *Ladies and gentlemen, the meth has left her building*. I walked to the outer door and, as intended, she followed me. "I'll be honest with you, Miss Fitzpatrick, this kind of work can be very expensive, you might prefer to - hi there."

Sitting on the floor across the hall was another one. Not exactly a matched set, though they had in common complexions like cheap stucco. This one was picking at the scabs on his bald spot. I'll spare you the rest of the description, no point ruining all our dinners. He stood when he saw us, looked to my would-be client for guidance about whether to return my greeting.

"How much per day?" she demanded.

"Three thousand plus expenses."

Sorry and surprised to say she didn't flinch. "How much up front?"

"Five days," I continued to ad-lib. Surely now we would say adieu.

"Three days here, the rest by tomorrow." She dragged a wad of bills from her purse. The outer bills were crusted with something that looked like dried puke. I didn't want to know and I certainly didn't want to touch that cash. But I hadn't priced myself out of the job, as intended. Instead, I had made it difficult to turn these creeps away. This was real and serious money, enough to help Jenn with her medical bills. I shouldn't say no just because the clients were shall we say repellent. And yet.

"By the way, how did you hear about my being in business here?" That would be a promotion route to avoid in future.

"I don't remember. Do you remember?" They shared a shrug and a smile to a secret punchline that I could tell wouldn't make me laugh.

I held the bills with my fingernails as I handed them back. "I couldn't start until I have the full advance, and anyway I couldn't start for several weeks because I have to finish another case first."

Mathead gave me a witch's smile. "We'll be back with the full amount tomorrow. You'll find a way to fit us in."

I had about 24 hours to devise a better turndown.

I just so happened to be going out too, I claimed, as I escorted them into the elevator. I wanted to see them exit my building. What creeped me out the most was the way Scabman made tiny sucking sounds like he had a hard candy in his mouth except he didn't.

"That must be quite a duffel bag," I said. "Now, I need to advise you, as I do all my clients, that a private investigator is just a hired hand, no special rights, nothing like attorney-client privilege." The tiny sucking sounds stopped and the air in the elevator got very still. "Should it turn out that the duffel bag contains illegal goods - such as if the guys who stole it put them there - I would have to notify the authorities."

"You won't have anything to tell anybody," the woman assured me, and for an instant her overworked pupils were windows to a very dark place.

If you take shit you'll eat shit. I knew enough about tweakers to know that I couldn't let them think she'd intimidated me. Although she had.

"Gee. That sounds like, I don't know, almost like a threat." My phony puzzlement ended in a smile like a bear trap. "Threats are not - recommended."

Her eyes flashed once then she bailed on our staredown.

The tiny sucking sounds resumed. I turned my back on the duo to watch our descent. The elevator indicated floors with a dial like a sundial. The sharp nose of the dial speared the 5, the 4, the 3. I felt Scabman's eyes exploring my back. I wondered what it feels like to get a knife in the kidney.

"We'll be back tomorrow with the rest of your retainer," Mathead said to the empty space where the door gaped open.

Love that ground floor. I had jumped out immediately and held the door for them like it was mine to control.

Maybe this detective thing wasn't such a fun idea after all. I watched them head down the street like parasites between hosts. The homeless guy at the alley looked down as they approached and did not ask them for change. I watched them until they were so far away as to be indistinguishable from the pedestrians who had good reason to be on this street. The instant I lost sight of the duo, I looked over my shoulder in case they were closing in. Behind me, sunlight flashed off the lenses of countless bobbing sunglasses and the smog shimmered in the July heat. I retreated inside my building, pretending I had decided against a walk because it was too hot. What I needed was to prop myself against a wall and hyperventilate. This was the first time I had met Mathead and Scabman, but it wasn't the first time I had encountered them. Now that they were gone, I felt safe to dwell on the previous

time. The disgusting duo had previously ruined a perfectly good dream. Yes, that is exactly what I mean. I dreamed about Mathead and Scabman before I met them.

I love dreams and it would be a kick to be psychic. But not if it means spending extra time with those two. And not if it means having pointless dreams. Dreaming of clients I won't take on - that's like dreaming of washing broken dishes.

It had been a peculiar snippet of nightmare in an otherwise luxurious dream. I ran through a field of soft amber grass under a sky colored like bruises. Around the field, in all directions, rose high-rise buildings vibrant with life. As I neared the buildings, a man and woman rose up to block my way. They resembled Mathead and Scabman, but the dream denizens were larger and edged in red like burning coals. I awoke at their snarls, to find myself sweating much as I was doing now, propped against this cool marble wall.

I don't like coincidences and there was no reasonable explanation for their appearance in my dream. Certainly, Mathead and Scabman deserved to be in nightmares, but I had only met them today. I must have backfilled my dream memories, adding their images. They must have spooked me more than I could admit.

Good thing I stopped smoking. This would have been a perfect time to light up fast, but my hands were shaking so hard I would have put out the flame. And that would have been frustrating.

Get a grip, Nica. The marble wall at my back was smooth and cool; the lobby was dim and quiet. A perfect antidote to the July streets. The lobby lights made a warm buzz like bees in lavender. In this moment, life was good. Stay in this moment. I needed to be physical. As a revised constitutional, I took the stairs, all ten flights, to the hidden garden on the roof. I can't yet make all ten flights in one gasp, but by the time winter restricts my outside activity, *ten flights* will be the new *one flight*. For now, I climb a couple flights, then walk through the building to the stairwell on the other side, then climb a couple more.

On one of the lateral treks, I heard three no two voices arguing in Spanish. Their discussion paused when they saw me turn the corner. The custodian who subs for Jay clenched the handle of the mop and looked everywhere but at the faces of a man and woman who had their backs to me but heads swiveled to watch my approach. I must have been dismissed as pure gringo because they resumed their discussion. Not so pure, as it turns out, and I understood enough Spanish to get that the man and woman were looking for a girl and they thought Jay's substitute knew where she was. They were accusing or pleading or maybe both. Jay's sub wasn't holding up his end of the conversation. *No. Si. No* and a venomous *lo siento*. So it wasn't just me he refused to converse with. As I passed them they stopped talking again. "Howdy, what up?" I offered, to reassure them that I couldn't possibly understand a word they were saying.

Jay's sub whispered that I was a private investigator. I considered turning back to introduce myself but instead pushed through the door to the south side stairs. Not the best time to reveal my comprehension.

Back in the stairwell, I slipped my sandals off and left them on the landing. Ah, that was what I needed. I loved the stairwells in my building. The white marble steps were sculpted moonlight and perennially cold. February's air always filled the

stairwells in summer; it was so welcome this afternoon. Everything changed on floor ten, though. The tenth story penthouse and the roof access had concrete steps in a separate stairwell, with separate doors, unattached to either of the stairwells that connected floors one through nine.

When I went through the door to the isolated concrete stairs on floor ten, I invariably felt like I had moved to another building. Today, the temperature leapt thirty degrees and I was panting by the time I opened the door to the roof. I squinted against the wind that always gusted across the roof and headed for the secret green rectangle, the garden hidden to all but air traffic. Someday this garden would be discovered as the source of water staining the south penthouse ceiling. Until then, it was known only to its creator, Jay, and his co-conspirators.

As soon as I got around the stairwell I could see the wall of fragrant vines, the only sign of life unless you count pigeon droppings. Sweet pea, wisteria, jasmine, clematis, and others I couldn't name. In that lush damp overgrown corner of the bed, Jay had planted so there would be scent for most of the year. It was like what the South would be if it weren't for the rednecks. A frayed lawn chair nestled under the vines in the shade.

In the past, when Jay left his lawn chair out, that meant he anticipated a short absence. But I hadn't seen him for three no four days. He must have underestimated this absence. More family trouble, I had to assume. On a good day, his family got along like boulders in a flooded creek. I had better start watering daily. Despite all Jay's water reclamation miracle contraptions, in this weather no plant could go more than a few days without help.

Summer in Los Angeles. From here you could see the mountains, except not until October when the air cleared. In the old days when smog was smog, the sky would have been a toasty brown. Today it was dingy. The euphemism was *hazy* and the haze did mute the sun, so with just a few steps to reach the garden, I might make it without heat stroke.

I could still feel the grit of Mathead's money on my fingertips, so I rubbed them in the loamy soil and then pulled them lightly across the marjoram, releasing a benign soothing scent which made it difficult to remember that noxious encounter.

Uh oh. Several plants had snapped and broken limbs. Had the hawk divebombed? Was the garden attracting rats? No - the destruction was too broad for those explanations. Entire plants were missing. What had been planted there? The orange cherry tomato? No, that was over here aaah look a tomato that was perfectly ripe and required picking. Eating. Delicious.

Focus, Nica. I keep mental snapshots of the garden to rifle through when I get annoyed, but I couldn't picture the missing plant. Even odder, the plants circling the empty patch were failing, with leaves in limp collapse as from blight.

Maybe the missing plants had left identifiable roots - I started to dig with my hands, hunting roots. At my disturbance, earwigs swarmed in and out of the soil. Just beneath the surface, the loam soil was soggy, laced with mold, and exuded a metallic odor. The entire empty patch was soggy and I didn't want to touch it anymore. It smelled like dirt might smell if a bucket of blood had emptied into it.

A helicopter churned the haze overhead and I ducked to slip behind a spider web that was a marvel of sophisticated symmetry. The web didn't look anything like the

Watts Towers but it reminded me of them, because the Towers had been constructed over decades and it must have taken the spider-time equivalent of decades to get the web to this size.

As I waited for the 'copter to pass, I tallied individual nights of spider work. At least five. I then held very still as a bee hiked my arm toward my yellow tanktop. I was flattered to be mistaken, even briefly, for a pollen source. I felt a tiny pressure as the bee pushed off my skin and flew toward the sage. I previously hated bees and spiders. Jay revised my thinking as he showed me how to encourage a healthy garden, how to create a complex ecosystem on the dusty scorched roof where only roaches and silverfish had previously foraged.

Jay would know what to do about the blood-?-soaked dirt. I sure the hell didn't. Calling the cops could lead to unfortunate revelations. The building owner would likely learn about the existence of the roof garden, which she might not consider an asset. The cops would question me and at some routine point request my home address, which was not supposed to match my office address. This building was not zoned residential. I'd only met the owner twice and she seemed like a good egg, but perhaps lacking in the imagination necessary to expand her building's potential beyond mundane barriers like zoning and safety regulations.

What would blood-soaked dirt really smell like? Maybe this wasn't blood but a fertilizer application that backfired in the sudden heat wave. How silly to involve police or building management in a gardening error.

I eased myself into Jay's vacant lawn chair. The heat smog chopper bees. Maybe I fell asleep. My eyes were still open, yet I no longer viewed what was in front of me. I only saw shadows in a world that was as cobalt as though the sun had long ago set. But the birds that were singing only sing during the day - and I could feel the sun's heat all over me. So it was daytime, but I was nearly blind. The plants were thick shadows in the dark air. A faint breeze tapped leaves together like whispers through silk. Across the garden, a ladybug rustled under fallen leaves and clicked its shell against a twig. A weight pressed evenly across my thighs and from this weight came an overpowering smell of dirt, as though I held invisible bags of soil amendment in my lap. Intermittently, off-pitch whistles came from a shadow that dipped left then right, left then right. As the dips changed direction, I heard thin scrapes. It sounded like Jay, whistling as he raked soil. The whistling stopped mid-note and my sensations became a barrage of intense impressions.

"What? No! Aaaaaaah. No! Unh! Please! No! Aaaurrrgg." It was Jay's voice and in a few seconds it changed from horrified surprise to terrified struggle. Grunts changed to chokes and gurgles. Plant branches snapped, leaves ripped. "Danny! I love you!" Jay sobbed. Danny was his son.

Warm liquid exploded from the direction of Jay's shadow, splashing and stinging when it hit me with force. I gasped and inhaled liquid, choking. I jumped from the chair, knocking it over. The choking eased. The metallic taste faded. I was back on a hot roof squinting in July sun.

First I added Mathead to a dream and now this, this, vision of Jay's demise. Did I mistakenly order my latte psychedelic this morning?

I needed to convince myself that Jay was okay. Heading downstairs, I exited the stairs at each floor and crossed the hall to the other stairs, in order to find the



substitute custodian and determine what he might know about Jay's absence. I walked every hall in my descent to the lobby, then checked the custodian's closet in the subbasement. Nobody nowhere. No how. I gave up looking for Jay's sub and stopped in the building office. The building manager had not heard from Jay since last time I asked and got no answer when she phoned again while I waited. Unlike me, the manager assumed Jay had found a better job and not bothered to give notice. I once worked at a cellular service provider, so I know how to get information I shouldn't have. As I returned to my office, I made some calls and determined that Jay's cell phone was last used four days prior, on the day he last worked. I set this knowledge aside until I knew what to do with it.

I realized it wasn't only Jay I should be concerned about. At a minimum, these Technicolor visions were telling me my subconscious needed my attention. In which case I needed to stop thinking. So as I walked, I focused on my building.

I love my building, although it is neither a friendly nor a welcoming place. If buildings were people, this one would be Margo Channing. I should warn you I don't make as many distinctions as some would like between fictional characters and beings who breathe. In this great big world over all this time, surely everyone who has been imagined could also actually exist, including that fabulous diva Margo. In its day, this building was a knockout, a head turner; or maybe a head craner, if you wanted to admire all ten stories of its elegant lines. The hall carpets were costly and tasteful enough to qualify as antique rather than threadbare. On this floor, each office entrance door was a luxurious mahogany with a milk glass insert for the firm name. Scrolled brass framed the inserts and the milk glass transoms above the doors. One more twist in the scrollwork would have been too much. These designs were just right.

The building, like the neighborhood, was past its prime but enjoying revival. Miraculously, over all the years of disrepair and disinterest by owners and tenants, no remodeling abomination had occurred on the premises. The penthouse was newer but done in matching style. From floor to floor, house paint smothered the occasional mahogany door or brass fixture, but that was the worst of it. Apparently I wasn't the only one who felt deferential to these halls. Not that there were many tenants nowadays. When a tenant vacated, the office stayed vacant, except for occasional lackluster signs of refurbishing. I guessed the current owner was biding time to make a killing in the next real estate boom.

The owner wouldn't make any money off me. My uncle had a 99-year lease and when he died, I learned that he put my name on the lease, too. All those times we went exploring in here - every floor has a different design, different craftsmanship, different materials - meant as much to him as to me. So here I was with a dirt-cheap perpetual lease: eternal unless I got it terminated because I ignored the clause that forbid tenants to live in the office. If that happened, then my suite would join the majority. Vacant.

I couldn't let that happen.

## 2. As Stable As Old Dynamite

I hadn't locked my outer office door but I had definitely shut it. Now it was ajar. I stopped jogging. Had Mathead and Scabman returned? Voices from inside reassured me. They didn't sound like the tweakers' voices, and whoever was in there wasn't trying to hide their presence. Good news and good news.

I stood for a moment just outside the door. The paint announcing my firm's name was fresh enough that it still released fumes to coat the back of my throat with a bad taste. I had been lying to myself for months, but only recently felt ready to lie to the world. S.T.A.T.Ic. and Watkins, Private Investigations. As it always did, seeing *Watkins*, my uncle's name, gave me a sudden douse of sadness followed by a quick spray of chutzpah. He had always been my staunchest supporter and I missed him every damn day. Private investigator. He'd love it. We'll see how long I stick with it. I've had more jobs than all my friends, combined. But this one feels different. It feels right. And I need one that feels right.

Correct, my last name is an acronym. My full name is Veronica Sheridan Taggart Ambrose Taggart Ickovic. Just about everybody calls me Nica. My acronymic identity is constructed of family, first love, big mistake, ever hopeful (wishful thinking) revisit of first love, tragic true love. The last couple years of my life have been as stable as old dynamite, so I was happy to discover this acronym, this promise of no more disruption. I adopted the acronym as part of my effort to find my next step - and a direction worth heading. Someday I might go back full circle and become S.T.A.T.Ic.S., but for now I don't want to move past Ickovic. I haven't washed Ick's last load of laundry, either.

My office is like Philip Marlowe's. My outer door is rarely locked and opens to a small outer waiting room for potential clients. In the waiting room perched a middle-aged couple who looked even more uncomfortable than they should have been from sitting on the no-frills wooden chairs. The couple seemed familiar, but I couldn't place them until the woman raised her chin, a gesture of pride as a defense against scrutiny. I had seen that gesture some minutes and halls ago. This was the couple that had been arguing with the substitute custodian.

"Good afternoon," I said noncommittally.

The man wore a loose embroidered overshirt, summer garb for a Mexican gentleman. He had a shy smile which he used in lieu of *umming* or *you knowing* as he spoke. He didn't seem confident speaking in English, although his grammar was good and his accent was weathered. "Are you [smile] *senorita Static*, we are in need of a [smile] private detective."

"Yup, that's me. Let's talk in here, it's more comfortable." I unlocked the door to the inner office, which was sparse but not Spartan. The desk matched the file cabinets and the chairs were upholstered. The couple looked around at the seating options, and of the four chairs, chose the pair closest to the door. A fifth seating option was my futon, currently folded into a lounge chair. I didn't want potential clients sitting on my bed, so during the day I kept it littered with papers as though that is where I sat to do my work.

"We are Aurelio and Norma Garcia. We are [smile] ... we must find ...[smile] we seek [smile] -"

Norma jutted her chin and interrupted. "Our goddaughter is missing. Please find her."

"How old is she?"

"She has fifteen years."

"How long has she been missing?"

"Six days."

"Did her parents send you here?"

"There is only her mother. And her mother says wait until Edith comes home, she will come back when she is ready. But the time is too long."

"I think you are right to be concerned. Do you know why she may have left?"

They paused to think about this. "We think [smile] she had a fight with her mother."

"I will need to speak with the mother."

"Does that mean you will help us?"

Rubber, meet road. I had had this debate internally, without resolution. I wanted to be a detective and thought I could be a good one. I had the right innate skills and personality. I simply lacked the license and okay experience and maybe training. I figured I could learn on the job. So I decided to call myself a detective and see what happened. But I hadn't anticipated such high stakes as searching for a missing child. I knew from watching *Without a Trace* that every hour was precious in such a search.

"Your first step should be to file a missing person's report with the police," I hedged.

"They will not accept one from us, only from the mother. And we cannot convince her to make the report."

"Alright, I will try to help you."

Their relief filled the room like helium from a leaking balloon pump. "How much please will we pay?"

"Two hundred a day plus expenses. But you will only pay me when and if I get results," I added, a futile effort to appease what was left of my conscience. "I saw you arguing with the custodian. What was that about?"

They looked at each other and Norma replied, "That is Karina's father. Karina is a friend of Edith. We tried to convince him to ask Karina what she knows."

"I'll start by talking with him."

"He does not speak good English. May we translate for him?"

"Good plan." That might help me get to know the Garcias a little better. I knew enough Spanish to detect bogus translations. Every client of every detective hides something. It would help to know what the Garcias opted to hide.

They believed Karina's father was on his lunch break. As we hammered arrangements for them to bring him to my office, the light above my door blinked, alerting me that the outer door had opened.

I had kept the inner office door ajar, so I saw him before he saw me. Thick brows, several shades darker than hair currently the color of MacDonald's fries. The bad haircut looked freshly sheared. He always had the same shaggy uneven cut that hugged his head like he'd slept on it wet. His anti-style. Today's ne'er-ironed cotton

shirt was taut over the hint of Buddha belly and across the well-pumped shoulders; it billowed like crepe paper across his back.

When he saw me, he reacted with one of his giant smiles that crinkled his cheeks then lit his eyes like a flashbulb light. I released my breath. Typically he was sober when he made that smile.

He entered the room like he always did, like this was the door, the entrance that would change everything. "Hey, kiddo, I been looking for you since - oh, pardon me," he discovered and greeted the Garcias, who had tensed like he might activate eject buttons.

"This is just my brother," I reassured them, and wondered whom they had feared would walk in.

"I'm Ben." He extended his hand to each Garcia, too briefly to find out whether they would reach out to shake. "Hate to interrupt, but may I talk to you for a short minute, please?"

As soon as we reached the hall, he launched his pitch. "Little sister," he began. I could tell I would nix whatever he was about to propose, so delayed the unpleasantness with an interruption. "I won't."

Pause. Rewind. Replay. Consider. Was I saying no already? "'S'cuse?"

"I won't do what my big sister done."

"Oh. Ha. Good one. Nica, let me crash with you. Just for this week. I can see you are busy. Just give me the key and the address and I'll have dinner waiting for you."

So few words, so much subtext. He hadn't figured out that I was living in my office. It continued to rankle him that I had secretly moved to my (now secretly previous) abode without telling him where that was. He was in a jam and needed a hideout. Or perhaps he just needed to know that I trusted him again. Trusted him enough to reveal my address to him. Except I don't.

"I can't, Ben."

"I'm good now, Neeks. I'll prove it to you. You'll see."

"Okay."

"You need to get back," and he was gone before we got awkward.

Heading back through the anteroom gave me time to lock the vault on my emotions before I faced the Garcias, who were standing and ready to depart. They dispatched themselves to fetch Karina's father and all too soon left me staring at the vault door. It was so easy to fall into Ben's version of reality, where life was always a gas. The first time I realized he needed help was when I tripped over him where he had passed out with a needle stuck in his arm. Ya think? I like to believe that I would never again be so foolable. But the only way I had a hope of not getting sucked into his whirlpools was to stay away from the water.

### 3. Wary Of Clouds

Something tickled my arm and when I rubbed my skin, I felt a hard knob of a critter. *Smash cut to fifth grade science camp and the tick that burrowed into my arm and needed three teachers to remove - I barely screamed then or now* and the crimson panic jolt smeared to pink blush. The critter was a ladybug, traversing my wrist. It must have hitched a ride from the roof garden. I cupped my hand to keep it from flying away and headed out to return it to its proper surroundings on the roof. I collided with two strangers at the door to my waiting room. Preoccupied with memories of tick hell, I hadn't noticed the flashing light that meant someone had opened my hall door. Maybe Marlowe did it right, maybe I should use a buzzer instead of a light.

People, be careful for what thou may wisheth. Only yesterday I had rued the fact that my office was always empty.

"I beg your pardon come in give me a moment please." I preceded them into my office and went to my window. If I freed the ladybug in the building hallway, it would never find its way outside. With a hand still cupped over the ladybug on my arm, I tried to open my window, but my sole available hand was not enough. The ancient window pulley had a broken weights mechanism and the window could only be opened with brute strength. One of the strangers was immediately beside me to provide the brute. The stranger's hands raised the window as though it weren't heavy and awkward. I leaned over the sill, uncupped my hand, and gave a quick blow at the ladybug's butt to propel it back toward the roof.

Curling back under the window into the room, I became aware that the air had changed. My office smelled like a forest just after a flash flood, when everything is power-washed and tree trunks are smeared with riverbed mud. Fresh and wild. It took much strength to gently lower that window, but the stranger's arms - all sinew and muscle - showed no strain and his lips maintained the hint of smile with which he had watched the ladybug depart. I took a step back to get a fuller look and to get farther away.

He was a wolf. I don't mean a predatory flirt, I mean he was long and lean and fast and dangerous: coarse black hair, ice-gray eyes, smile full of teeth, supreme confidence backed with survival instinct.

"Please sit down," I suggested or pleaded as I retreated behind my desk. As he complied, muscles flexed inside his garments, a loose cotton tunic and drawstring pants that were as gray as February.

She sat down, too. My other visitor was a princess: not as in daddy's spoiled girl, as in future queen of the fairies. She was as ethereal as he was earthy, exotic but I couldn't place the ethnic background. Cornsilk hair, slanted eyes like unpolished silver - now green now blue now pewter. She had thick Slavic cheekbones but was otherwise delicate unto frailty, her skin like the penny you've always kept in your pocket for luck. Her tunic looked handwoven and was white as a desert sunrise.

"We are in need of your detective arts," she said.

"That tends to be why people come to this office." The joke was stillborn. "I'm usually good with accents but I can't place yours." They sat as though I hadn't spoken. Okay. Scratch the indirect. "Where are you from?"

"I first arrived in the place you call Kansas," she told me.

"Huh." I've been to Kansas and there is nobody like her there. I decided I would not call her a liar and looked to him expectantly.

"Knowledge of my ancestry provides no value. We have need of your assistance," he said, in a voice that never needed help from anybody.

"Okay."

"The fate of the free worlds is at stake," she added with a calm that belied the words, in a voice like the first spring breeze on snow.

"Oh-kay. Um. Where did you hear about me, by the way? I haven't had the business long uh in this location."

Note to self, cancel ad in *Nutjob Quarterly*.

"We learned about you from your building."

"Excellent, I am so glad to hear that. At last! You wouldn't believe how long it takes to get a name added to the building directory!" They looked at me without comprehension. "By the elevator. It shows the names and room numbers. The list in the lobby."

I can be a babbler when I'm nervous. Devoid of expression, they continued to watch me babble. They exchanged a look and she made a slight nod.

She seemed to be giving him permission.

"We have need of your assistance," he repeated. "Tonight you must accompany us to a meeting."

"Tell me more. Where is the meeting? Who will be there?"

"That is not information I can relay at this time."

"Because you don't know or you don't want me to know?"

"Because -" he began, then stopped when her hand stiffened. The wrist stayed on the chair but the fingers poked into the space between their chairs, as though the conversation was a canal and she was the sluice gate. He looked at her hand and the wrist tilted so that the fingers pointed at the skylight.

The room darkened. I rocked back in my chair and through the skylight watched a voluptuous tower of a cloud slide across the sky, briefly blocking the sun. "Looks like we might get thunderstorms this afternoon," I acknowledged that we were all watching the sky. They nodded and spoke not a word. He stood and went to the window to keep tracking the sky. When the cloud cleared the skylight, he positioned himself so that he could watch it continue into the distance.

She watched me watch him watch the cloud. After it disappeared, he checked the other direction, pivoted, and strode to his seat with a blunt nod to her. He picked up the conversation as though there had been no gap.

"Tonight we will employ your guidance to reach an - associate. We will explain all when it is time to do so."

She continued to hold my gaze. When she blinked and looked over to him, I realized he had asked me a question. "Missed that one. Repeat please?"

"We have not told you - cannot tell you - what you seek to know. Will you trust us nonetheless?"

I looked from one to the other, she as languid as he was taut. And for reasons unknown, I found it easy to reply, "Yes. Yes I will." I was the only one surprised by my answer.

"Your remuneration will be one thousand for 24 hours. We understand you may require eight hours or more sleep. Is that amount acceptable?"

"Very much so." I had no clue what I was getting myself into here, with this pair who were wary of clouds. Yet as we made plans to meet here at 7 tonight, I felt calm and rational.

My bafflement surfaced after they left, like a turtle in a murky pond. I realized I hadn't confirmed she meant 1,000 dollars per day. No matter. I felt such a pull to see them again, I would have agreed to 1,000 cents. It was generous regardless. After all, I would be permitted to sleep every single day.

Wait. The building could be locked by 7, so my office could be inaccessible when they tried to return. We needed an alternate rendezvous plan. I vaulted over my desk and slammed out both doors to catch up and advise them. I caught up with them around the corner, right before they disappeared. I don't mean the elevator door closed between us to block them from view. I mean. I rounded the corner, found them standing about as far as I could throw an aspirin. They each held a small apparatus like an asthmatic's inhaler. They clenched these in their teeth, they inhaled, and they faded away.

As they disappeared, he saw me and lifted a hand in farewell. She began to do the same, then her fist clenched and she stared behind me with a look of bravado or fear. I turned around and found the object of her stare. It was the building cat, whose nametag listed an out-of-service phone number and a name I refused to use, *Queen Desdemona*.

"Hey, Dizzy," my voice sounded relieved. The cat headed toward me and I expected Dizzy to rub my legs in a figure eight - that would be her normal routine. But I did not feel that sleek shrug of fur against skin. Instead, the cat walked to the spot where the woman had stood, then sat like an Egyptian tomb carving, more still than when she heard a mouse in the walls.

I stomped over to the cat to pet her. I would have normalcy, dammit. Dizzy flopped and contorted in order to clean her butt. Now, that was business as usual - and gave me hope that I had not just witnessed what I had just witnessed.

Usually, when I pet Dizzy's belly she attacks my hand. I reached to pet her belly. Today, I would welcome the sting of claws, simply because it was expected. I didn't get the *usual* that I craved, though. As my hand reached for Dizzy, the elevator pinged. Nothing spooks Dizzy, really, but she can be dramatic. At the subdued ping she bounded away, leaving me stooped over reaching for nothing.