

W H I S P E R S
of the
B A Y O U

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CLARK



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WHISPERS OF THE BAYOU

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ONE

*Dreamlike, and indistinct, and strange were all things around them;
And o'er their spirits there came a feeling of wonder and sadness—
Strange forebodings of ill, unseen and that cannot be compassed.*



The man appeared in the doorway of my studio unannounced, with a brown paper package tucked under his arm. He was younger than he had sounded on the phone, thirty at the most, with dark wavy hair, mottled skin, and a narrow caterpillar of a mustache along his upper lip.

“Miranda Miller?” he asked in what sounded like a thick Long Island accent. “Jimmy Smith. We spoke this morning?”

I was elbow deep in plaster and not in a position to shake hands, so I just smiled and told him to come on in. Ready for a break, I extricated myself from my project and rinsed off my arms and hands at the utility sink. I usually didn't see private clients, but he had been so persistent over the phone—and he had dropped enough important names, names of people who funded some of our grants—that I had made an exception. Now that he had unwrapped the picture and was holding it up, however, I was sorry I had relented. Even from a distance I could see I would be wasting my time, not to mention his money.

“Tell me again where you got this painting?” I asked as I slipped on a pair of handling gloves.

“At a flea market in the East Village. Only two hundred dollars! I’m thinking it was a real steal.”

I crossed the room, noticing as I got closer that the top of the man’s head barely came to my nose. At five nine I was tall for a woman, but next to this guy I felt like an Amazon. I took the painting from him and turned around to lean on the deep windowsill, the late-morning sunlight warming my shoulders. The painting in question was an 11 x 14 canvas framed in mahogany, a poorly done oil of a busy village market scene. The piece wasn’t nearly as dirty as he had described, just a bit dusty, especially around the edges. I’d be happy to clean it up for him, but it didn’t seem to need any restoration and I wasn’t going to charge him for my trouble. He’d already paid more than enough to get it—many times more than it was worth.

“So whatcha think?” he asked.

“Looks like it just needs a little cleaning,” I replied as I stood and carried it over to the work area. “No soot or stains or mildew. Just dust. And not even old dust. It doesn’t need restoration. I believe you could easily have taken care of this yourself.”

“I mean about the picture.”

I glanced at his eager face, hesitant to be the bearer of bad news.

“I’m not an estimator,” I hedged. “Just a restorer.”

I flipped on the light box and set the painting down on top of it. With the beam projecting through the image, I quickly scanned the canvas for irregularities. Satisfied that there were none, I turned off the box, moved the piece to my worktable, and clicked on the lamps there.

“You have surely had experience with enough fine art to know a good piece when you see one,” he said. “So at two hundred, was this a steal or what?”

Or what, I thought as I scanned the canvas again for problems, this time with overhead and directional lighting. Finding no real issues, I flipped the picture so that it was facedown and extracted a soft watercolor brush from the tool bucket nearby.

“Again, I’m no estimator, but ‘steal’ might be the right word for it.”

“I thought so!”

“Unfortunately, I’m sorry to say, you were probably the one who was robbed.”

Hoping my words weren’t too harsh, I pulled the Genvac hose from the wall and clicked on the machine with my foot. It sprang to life with a low humming noise, the suction through the flannel-covered hose just strong enough to gently draw away the dust I was loosening with the brush. When I finished cleaning the back, I carefully flipped the painting over, glancing at the man’s face as I did so. I was surprised to see that he didn’t seem disappointed or upset by my bad news. In fact, he looked just as enthusiastic and intrigued as before. The guy was probably rich, considering the names he’d dropped on the phone, not to mention the huge gemstone in the ring that adorned his pinky. Perhaps he regularly used C-notes as kindling or tissues or something, in which case a couple hundred tossed away on a piece of junk at a flea market was no big deal.

“Valuable or not, it’s a nice scene, don’t you think?”

“Hmm,” I mumbled, trying to avoid the question. “This will just take a minute.”

I gave the piece my full attention as I worked my way from the top down, brushing the dust loose with the brush and then sucking away that dust through the special hose. I liked silence to concentrate and I was used to working alone, but my guest turned out to be a regular chatterbox, asking questions about the frame, the paint, the artist. I would have thought he was just making conversation if he hadn’t been so eager about the whole thing, nervously crinkling the brown paper wrapping he still held clutched in his hands.

“I’ve been so curious about this scene,” he was saying as I finished and clicked off the vacuum with my foot. “Whatcha think that man is selling there?”

I looked where he indicated and shrugged, unable to muster the enthusiasm that he was obviously feeling.

“Tomatoes? Apples? Some kind of red produce, anyway.”

“And this architecture behind them. I can’t quite place the scene, but it looks European to me. A town square? Late seventeen hundreds, maybe?”

“Maybe.”

I slid the hose back into its holder and dropped the paintbrush into the tool bucket.

“What about this symbol here?” he prodded. “What do you make of that?”

I looked where he indicated and saw a strange shape painted in black on the back of a man’s overcoat. I was ready to send this fellow on his way and get back to my work, but something about that shape was intriguing. From the tool bucket, I removed a magnifying glass, and then I adjusted the light and bent over the painting to study it more closely.

The symbol appeared to be an elaborate sort of cross either inside the shape of a bell or an upside-down shield. I would have passed it off as a simple embellishment if something about it hadn’t made me pause.

“I’ve seen this shape before,” I said, though I couldn’t quite place it. “I don’t know where, but it’s awfully familiar.”

“Really?” he whispered, and from the corner of my eye, I could see him licking his lips, the caterpillar undulating.

“It was painted onto this picture later,” I added, not bothering to explain the subtle differences between the surface of the symbol and the texture of the surrounding area. “Looks like someone dabbed it on with acrylic. The rest of the work is in oil.”

“Ah.”

He was finally quiet for a moment, so I took the opportunity to scan the rest of the painting with the magnifying glass. Nothing else about it jumped out at me, and no other irregularities were present.

Finally, I returned to the symbol to take one last look. I had a mind for shapes, but the origin of this image eluded me. Finally, I stood up straight and tucked the magnifying glass away, determined to put it out of my mind. I had been working in art restoration since graduate school, and now by the age of thirty-two had probably seen thousands of symbols and shapes. It stood to reason that one or two had faded from my memory.

“If I had to take a guess, I’d say it’s probably a family’s coat of arms. That would explain why someone painted it in later. They probably bought

this picture and then decided to have it personalized. Like their own little private touch.”

“A coat of arms?” he replied doubtfully. “You say you’ve seen this symbol before?”

I reached for a cotton swab and a jar of mineral spirits.

“I think so. It looks kind of like a cross inside a bell,” I replied, dipping the swab into the liquid and then touching it along the bottom of the frame. Pleased with the response, I tossed the swab into the trash, reached for a rag, and dabbed it more liberally. “I can’t remember where I’ve seen it, but it’ll come to me later, I’m sure.”

Using mineral spirits on the rag, I wiped the wood in a circular motion, explaining to him that I was removing the buildup of several year’s worth of furniture polish.

“The frame’s not bad,” I said as I worked, still pained at the thought of this guy paying two hundred dollars for a twenty-dollar painting. Truly, the mahogany frame was worth far more than the “artwork” inside it. “Most people use a silicone-based polish on fine wood, which is a big mistake. Just regular weekly wiping with a dry rag will do.”

He didn’t seem interested in a lecture about ongoing care, so I stopped explaining and just finished the job of sprucing up the frame, following the mineral spirits with a fine layer of carnauba wax. By the time I was done, his inferior work of art looked as good as it possibly could.

“We’ll let it sit for a few minutes while the wax sets,” I told him, peeling off the gloves, “and then you can wrap it up again and take it with you. Should be as good as new.”

“I’d like to let it sit longer, if you don’t mind,” he said, glancing at his watch. “I’ll come back later. In the meantime, see if you can remember where you’ve seen that symbol.”

“Oh, don’t bother leaving it. Just take it with you now,” I said. “It’ll be fine.” I wondered if he had even heard me say that the painting was essentially worthless. Either that, or he had but didn’t care.

“Really, I’d rather come back. I have an appointment,” the man said, and then, before I could stop him, he had tossed the brown paper wrapping into the trash and raced out the door. I called after him, but by the

time I reached the doorway and looked out into the hall, he had already disappeared from sight.

What an odd man.

It was just as well. I had an appointment myself, a lunch date with my Aunt Janet—or “AJ,” as I called her—and if I didn’t hurry I would be late. I put away the materials I’d been working with before the man arrived, and then I removed my smock and grabbed the change of clothes I kept in a drawer and headed for a quick cleanup in the bathroom.

My aunt was pure Southern gentility, born and raised in Louisiana, and though she had been living in Manhattan for the past thirty years, she still maintained that a lady never went out in public without full makeup and hair, not to mention perfectly dressed. I did the best I could when I knew I’d be seeing her, but between a demanding job and a five-year-old daughter at home, I rarely bothered fixing myself up these days unless it was to schmooze a museum benefactor or dutifully play the corporate wife at one of Nathan’s business functions.

Nathan. Refusing to rehash this morning’s discussion in my mind yet again, I focused on freshening up instead, rinsing the last traces of plaster and the scent of mineral oil from my arms and hands. I dried off with some paper towels and then changed into black slacks and a blue top, both of which I’d paid a small fortune for at a travel store because they were virtually unwrinkleable and perfect for keeping stashed in the desk. After adding a chunky silver necklace and bracelet—mementoes of a trip with our curator to Ixtapa—I dabbed on some lipstick, blush, and mascara before letting down my clipped-up hair and running a brush through it.

Once I was finished I stepped back from the mirror, pleased with the result. I was nothing if not adaptable. If I could just get through this lunch without the intuitive AJ pressing me to tell her what was wrong, I’d be fine.

I returned to the studio, thinking that sometimes I wished I was the type of woman who could just bring her problems out into the open and talk about them, especially with my wise and loving aunt. It wasn’t that I had trouble with deep, soul-level discussions, it was that I had trouble with deep, soul-level discussions about myself. Friends always said I was

such a great listener, but I don't think it ever dawned on them that with me they never had to listen in return—and that's how I liked to keep it. The fact that my husband was unhappy in our marriage was between him and me. I just needed to find a way to work things out, and that I could do by myself. AJ would simply have to mind her own business.

I shoved my work clothes into the bottom drawer of the desk, gathered my purse and keys, and turned off the light. Weaving my way through the yellow maze of hallways that formed the network of museum administration, I continued down the hall until I reached the desk of our new receptionist, a museum studies grad student who was filling in while our regular receptionist was out on maternity leave. I explained to her about the man with the painting, his abrupt departure, and his promise to return.

"If he gets back before I do, just go get the painting from my studio and bring it out to him, would you?"

"No problem. I'll take care of it."

"And in the future, please buzz me before you send someone back. My department doesn't take visitors unannounced."

Her face turned bright red.

"Oh. Sure. Sorry."

"It's a security issue," I explained, feeling bad that I had embarrassed her. "We can't have strangers wandering around back there. It's not your fault. They should have taught you that on your very first day."

"Got it," she replied, smiling gratefully.

I thanked the girl and left, pushing open the door to step out into the warm June sunshine. Joining the flow of people on the sidewalk, I thought how good it felt to stretch my legs after a morning spent working in one position for far too long. I was ready for a break and looking forward to my standing Friday lunch date with AJ.

The restaurant wasn't far, and I covered the first three blocks quickly. To avoid the heavy pedestrian traffic of the square, I took my usual shortcut down the alley I had fondly come to think of as "odor row." Sandwiched between a seafood store and an Italian restaurant on one side and an Indian fast-food place and a dry cleaner on the other, the alley's cement walls caught and held all the smells of all four places, making it a veritable

stink fest, a gauntlet of olfactory overwhelm. Though it wasn't the most appetizing way to get to lunch, it was worth the trade-off in avoiding the bottleneck at the intersection.

I was just past the stench of eau-de-fish and about to walk into cloud-of-curry when a flash of movement off to the side caught my eye. Before I could even turn to look, a man was behind me, with one of his strong hands clamped over my mouth and the other pinning my arms to my waist. He pushed me through a narrow doorway into a small, dark cement room where a second person closed the door behind us and then joined in the struggle to force me to the floor. I fought violently against them, but to no avail. Other than landing a few solid kicks to what were probably shins, I was no match for their strength or their carefully laid ambush.

When they finally had me pinned to the floor, I felt a hand grabbing for my shirt, ripping it upward from my back, and I thought I knew what was about to happen next. Somewhere in the back of my mind I tried to divorce myself from the moment. There was a safe place in my head somewhere, if only I could find it soon enough.

Beyond the terror of what might happen next was also a desperate need to breathe. The hand was still clamped about my mouth and nose, blocking all air. With desperate force, I was able to shake my head free from the hand, but as soon as I took a breath to scream, something else went into my mouth, a wide strip of fabric which was tied roughly off at the back of my neck, gagging me so that I could breathe but not speak or scream.

I inhaled frantically through my nose, ignoring the stench as I desperately struggled to catch my breath. As I did, I realized that the room was no longer completely dark. At some point they had turned on a flashlight, and the shadows it created were dancing wildly along the cinderblock wall.

What happened next left me stunned and confused. After having pulled my shirt all the way up to my shoulders, they suddenly left it alone and grabbed the bottom hem of my pants leg instead, pulling it upward to reveal my ankle and calf. The flashlight beam jerked wildly up and down my lower legs, and then one of the men let out a low, frustrated growl. They did the same with the other leg then, and they ripped off both shoes

and socks, an act which was followed by more noises of frustration but no words.

Their final move was the strangest of all.

Leaving my bare feet alone, they next grabbed a fistful of my hair. While one of the men pressed my face onto the cold, slimy cement floor to hold it still, the other man kept running his hand back and forth through my hair as he played the flashlight against the back of my head.

“Wait!” said the one holding me down. “Go back.”

Reversing the direction of his fingers, the other guy moved back a few inches and then gasped.

“That’s it!” he cried.

Except for slight movements of his fingers in my hair, both men were perfectly still for a moment, as if they were studying something back there. Even the flashlight stopped moving around. I waited in silence, terrified of what might come next, the stench of the floor under my nose telling me we were in an empty garbage holding area—and that I was now intimately acquainted with the juices that had recently oozed out of the garbage bags.

“Got it?” the one holding my head said finally.

“Yeah.”

Finally, the guy with his fingers in my hair simply gripped a handful by the roots and leaned down to put his lips next to my ear.

“Thanks for your cooperation,” he whispered. “Sorry it had to be like this.”

With a final, sharp tug of my hair for emphasis, he let go. Then the door opened and they both took off, their footsteps sending a telltale echo through the alley as they ran away.