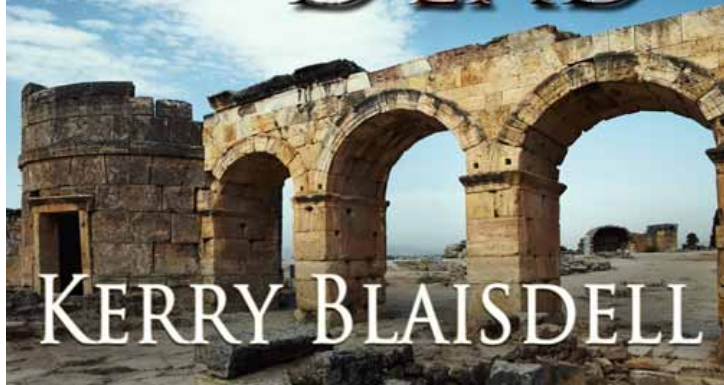




DEBRIEFING THE DEAD



KERRY BLAISDELL

I thought I'd gotten everything,

until my fingers brushed against something hard, wrapped in cloth, and oddly warm to the touch. I grabbed it and heaved myself out of the crate, then examined the bundle. It felt like a rock, heavy and solid. Most of the items in this crate were broken pottery shards, from vases and the like. Hard, maybe, but not heavy. Careful not to touch the item's surface, in case it was valuable after all, I turned it over and shook the covering loose.

Sure enough, it was a rock. Plain, gray, ordinary. About half the size of an American football, shaped like an irregular pyramid, with jagged edges and flat-but-rough surfaces. The only unusual thing about it was its warmth. Like Claude Rousseau. Which is maybe why, against my better judgment, I reached out and touched the very tip of the rock's pyramid.

And then it *shrieked* at me, the agony of centuries piercing my ears till I thought my skull would burst, electric shocks searing through my fingers, hand, arm, ripping through my whole body, gripping my lungs and squeezing until I couldn't breathe. I flung the rock away, covering my ears and dropping to the floor, shaking, gasping for air, while still it screamed, on and on and on and on, until I lay huddled on the concrete, red fire burning in my head, blackness filling my soul.

Then everything went silent.

Praise for Kerry Blaisdell

“*DEBRIEFING THE DEAD* is everything I want in a book: a smart, wise-cracking heroine on a witty, sexy, can’t-guess-the-next-twist ride. Trust me, Kerry Blaisdell is your new obsession. I’m a huge fan!”

~Lenora Bell, USA Today bestselling author

~*~

“Filled with quirky characters, gorgeous locations and madcap mystery, it’s easy to overlook that at the heart of Kerry Blasdell’s delicious, rollicking romp of a story is a whip-smart protagonist whose love for her family leads her to strike a bargain with the angel of death. Archeology meets international intrigue in this dazzling debut by an author to watch.”

~Teri Brown, award-winning author

Debriefing the Dead

by

Kerry Blaisdell

Book One of The Dead Series

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Debriefing the Dead

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Book One of The Dead Series
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family, without whose support I could never have written it:

~*~

To my husband,
you have been amazingly patient over the years,
even when it looked like all I ever did was sit and write.

~*~

To my children,
thanks for all the times you wore headphones,
or accepted yet another fend-for-yourself-night for
dinner, so I could get a few more words in.

~*~

To my mother,
who always said I could and should do
whatever I wanted, and then helped me figure out how.

~*~

And last but not least, to my father,
who wrote down those first stories for me,
until I could do it for myself.
I miss you every day and wish you could read
your little girl's stories now!

Chapter One

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”

~The Bible, 1 Peter 5:8

I smelled Death on the two men who walked into my shop that day. I should have listened to my nose.

Of course, death is an everyday part of my life, which is probably why I ignored it. I’m a dealer in rare artifacts, particularly those that haven’t been acquired through, um, *normal* channels. Okay, I’m a fence, and before that, I robbed graves. But only those already being robbed, by “professional” archaeologists. And frankly, I know as much or more as they do about the care and preservation of ancient relics.

In any case, my shop, *Hyacinth Finch’s Boutique des Antiquités*, now stocks items that are either stolen, or are being stolen back, by one or another of my usual clients, members of the Marseille elite who enjoy stabbing each other in the back, art-collection-wise. They pay well, and leave me to live my life the rest of the time, so I guess you’d call it a symbiotic relationship.

But these guys weren’t from my client base. Until they arrived unannounced in my office above the shop, and sat, uninvited, in the chairs in front of my desk, I’d

never seen them before. Which made their interest in this *exact* batch of goods even more suspect.

“Who are you again?” I asked, more to buy time than anything else.

The one on the left smiled genially. He was larger than his companion, not exactly fat, but taller and more...spread out, for lack of a better description. His dark blue eyes were rimmed with thick lashes, and his hair was oiled into a slick black shell. His tanned skin cracked and peeled in places, like he'd had one too many sunburns, and he had a heavy French accent, but as it was late August, and we were in southern France, neither was exactly remarkable. I myself spoke fluent French, but he'd begun in Franglish, and I hadn't corrected him.

“Mademoiselle Finch.” He leaned forward, the flimsy wooden chair legs groaning and spreading under his bulk, making it look as if he had six legs instead of the usual two. “*Je vous assure*, nothing would please me more than to provide our *bona fides*. But the time, it is lacking.” He glanced at his companion, equally dark and oily, but not as talkative. Oily Two smiled, close-mouthed, and gave a Gallic shrug. *We're all pals here, right?*

Yeah, right.

“Look,” I said, suppressing a shiver of unease, despite the heat, “even if I wanted to, I'm not sure I could find this particular lot.” I pretended to check a leather-covered log book I had open on my desk. “Where did you say it originated?”

“Turkey.” Oily One's smile said he knew I knew that, his yellowed teeth big and sharp behind his dry, cracked lips.

I ran a finger down a column on the page. Look at me—organized, professional, absolutely-*not*-lying business woman extraordinaire. “Nope. Nothing’s come in from Turkey.”

His gaze flicked to the log, then around my office. Books filled wood-and-glass cases along the walls, and papers crowded the floor. The window stood open behind me, letting in the Mediterranean breeze and the slanted late afternoon sunlight. Also, *un fourmilion*—an antlion—a long, thin-bodied insect with lacy wings, that my seven-year-old nephew, Geordi, would have been fascinated by. He loves bugs. Me, not so much, but I’m a vegetarian, and a live-and-let-live kinda gal, and this guy wasn’t doing anything besides buzzing lazily around my office, looking for ants to trap. At least, that’s what Geordi says they do. I hate ants, so if there were any to chow on, more power to him.

Oily One and Two didn’t seem bothered by him, but I rather wished they were, so we could hurry this along. The bell on the downstairs door had only rung once since lunch—when these two entered—and it seemed like a good day to close early. One of the perks of being an independent “art dealer” such as myself. The downside is, I can’t afford to alienate potential clients. I have my regulars, but business ebbs and flows, and extra cash is always handy. Especially now.

I forced a smile of my own. “I want to help you—I do. But I have no idea where to find...something like this.” Technically, this was true. I’m a big believer in technicalities.

Oily One leaned in closer, waistband straining, hands on his knees, palms up. Open. Friendly. I didn’t buy it, but apparently, the antlion did. It landed on his

shoulder, black body silhouetted crisply as it crawled unnoticed over the expensive white of his suit.

He smiled again. “Surely a businesswoman of your reputation...?”

“*Messieurs*. I’m not sure what you’ve heard”—*or from whom*—“but I am merely a dealer. I buy. I sell. I don’t find.”

“*Vous me surprenez*. It is said you are *très accomplie* at these things.”

I tilted back in my chair. “You flatter me. I’ve had good luck. And good clients. I can only sell what they bring in. Speaking of which—who did you say referred you?”

Touché. Point à moi. But he wasn’t giving up. “A shipment from Colossae, in southwestern Turkey—*près de la rivière Lycus*. A region in which you specialize, *non*? Perhaps you have contacts. You will make some calls. We will, of course, reward your efforts.”

He took out a business card and wrote on the back, the movement causing the antlion to take flight, hovering between him and his companion. Oily Two waved it away, then caught my eye and lifted a hand, as though asking if he should squash it. His full-lipped, sharp-toothed grin was creepier even than his friend’s, and I shook my head hastily, noting that the insect—no dummy—was already out of reach.

His friend passed the card to me, and though our fingers never touched, I suddenly felt...*heat*...burning off him in sharp waves. I jerked my hand away, taking the card with me. It was as cool as paper usually is, and I gave a mental shake and glanced at the number he’d written, then had to hide my shock. This would be enough for me to take a year off—or pay for Geordi

and his mother, my sister Lily, to get *really* far away from her ex. Some place where he could *never* hurt them, ever again.

I flipped the card over. *Les Rousseaux* was printed on it in plain type, with a cell number below. When I looked up, he smiled. Again.

“Claude Rousseau.” He indicated Oily Two, who gave a slight bow. “*Mon frère*, Jacques. We are most pleased to make your acquaintance. If you hear of anything, you will call. Yes?”

“Yes,” I said, the interview’s end finally in sight. “Of course.”

They rose to go, their tread surprisingly silent on the stairs, given their combined bulk. I waited until I heard the bell on the front door tinkle one last time. Then I ran down and shot the bolt. I flipped the sign in the window to read *Fermé*, then pulled down the shade. Next, I went to the back door and locked it as well. Only when I was alone in the dark store, so familiar and comforting in its clutter, did I take a deep breath and blow it out.

The whole experience bothered me on a number of levels, not the least of which was the timing. You see, I wasn’t exactly upfront with the Rousseaux. Not only would I be able to locate the lot they wanted, I already *had* it—in storage, where it’d been for several months. The thing is, only two people should have known its origins.

One of them was me.

And the other was dead.

An hour later, I’d left the shop, wandering home via my usual circuitous route, past various markets,

plein air or otherwise, where I picked up the parts of my dinner. One of the reasons I prefer Europe to the States is the whole notion of buying your food the day you cook it. I'm not exactly a health nut, but I am a vegetarian, and a sucker for anything fresh.

Walking and shopping also gives me a chance to process my day. And today, I had a lot to process. It occurred to me the Rousseaux could be cops. La Boutique has been investigated a time or two, but I always come away clean. The thing is, if they were *les flics*, asking after *this* lot, then they already knew it was stolen. But it came from Colossae, a site which has never officially been excavated, so how could anyone know part of it was gone?

I'd "inherited" the catch from my business partner, Vadim, after he died in a boating accident. A lump rose in my throat, hot and sharp, and I swallowed it back down. Though we weren't "together" romantically, Vadim was more than a partner, he was my friend. His death was so unexpected; even half a year later, I still couldn't believe he was gone. I'd never even opened the crates he left me, just locked them up to deal with later. But...was my reluctance now because of my grief? Or were my instincts right and something was off?

Unlocking the iron gate leading to my building's interior stairwell, I saw my neighbor on his way down. Jason Jones is a little younger than me and a lot taller—at least a foot, and I'm five-five. He tends bar at one of the gay cabarets in Marseille, so he's frequently on his way out when I'm coming home. In theory, he moved here to pursue a theater career, but in practice, I think he likes the bar better. Rehearsals would mess too much

with his “party all night, sleep all day” schedule.

“Hyacinth!”

He broke into a grin and finished coming down the steps, then gave a low theatrical bow and pretended to kiss my hand. He wore a black dress shirt, gray slacks, Italian leather shoes, and ridiculously large sunglasses that made him look like a very large insect hovering over my wrist. He can rock a pair of jeans, too, but today he was the perfect image of the playboy bartender, a look he cultivates with great care and uses to great advantage—and he has the tips to prove it. He’s not actually gay, but he doesn’t advertise the fact. However, he’s never once tried to hit on me, which is not as insulting as you might think. I don’t have the best track record with relationships, and with Lily and everything else, I had no desire to start one now.

As soon as I had the thought, I realized he was lingering over my wrist, turning it up and inhaling deeply. The heat of his breath tickled my skin, his fingers caressed my palm, and my knees wobbled. Apparently, I’m not immune to his charms after all.

He let go and straightened, examining my face. I couldn’t read his expression behind the shiny glasses, but he must have seen something in mine that made him ask, “What’s up? Something wrong at the shop?”

“It’s nothing. Not really. Some new clients came in and wanted to chat. Actually...they might be a good fit for Vadim’s last shipment.”

He flipped the sunglasses up, blue eyes wide. He’s never asked how I acquire my goods, and I’ve never asked what happens when he disappears for days with some girl he’s met on the metro. He’s entitled to his secrets, too. But he moved in right after Lily left her

creepazoid husband and just before Vadim died. I couldn't burden Lily with my grief, and our parents died more than twenty years ago. If we have other family, I've never met them. I don't trust easily, but it turns out Jason has a strong, relatively safe shoulder to cry on, for which I'm eternally grateful.

That doesn't stop him from being opinionated about what I should do with my life. He gave a low whistle. "Are you going to sell it to them?"

"I...don't know." I moved up the steps, so I could look him in the eye without needing a chiropractor.

"You *have* to sell it. It's what Vadim wanted—why he *brought* it to you, for God's sake."

"I know. You're right. It's just—do I have to sell it to *these* guys?"

He planted his hands on his hips, glaring. "Hyacinth. It. Is. Time. *Let go.*"

His face was close, his breath warm, and despite it all, I found his earnestness vaguely attractive. He filled the narrow stairwell with his long, lean body, and I resisted the urge to back up another step.

"Okay, fine. I'll call them." He stood, unmoving, and I sighed. "What? I said I'd do it. Is something wrong?"

His gaze dropped to my sandals, then moved slowly up my legs, lingering on my hips, and from there over my chest and the sleeveless blouse that was all I could tolerate in this heat. By the time his gaze travelled up my throat to linger again at my mouth, before finally meeting my eyes, I had goose bumps in several inappropriate places, and was hoping the dark stairwell hid my blush.

His eyes flashed dark for a moment—almost

black—then he gave an odd little shake of his head and took a step back himself. He dropped the sunglasses over his eyes, and when he spoke, his tone was light and friendly as ever. “Just checking it’s really you. You never agree with me in under five minutes.”

Before I could gather my wits for a decent retort, he gave a mock salute, then buzzed the gate open and vanished up the block. I blew out a breath and finished the climb to my third-floor apartment—second, if you count European style.

Jason’s only a little younger than me—late twenties or so—but I think he gets that whole *joie de vivre* thing better than I do. He’s a hard worker, don’t get me wrong. But he also plays hard, and flits from one activity to the next with an easy metamorphosis I admire. I didn’t know what to make of his sudden inexplicable interest, but he had helped me feel better. And he was right. Holding onto Vadim’s last catch wouldn’t bring him back. It would only hold *me* back.

The apartment stairs lead to a short breezeway, open on both ends. There’s one apartment on each corner, and mine’s the first on the left. I unlocked the door and stepped in. My place is tiny, but less cluttered than the shop. In a complete reversal of the stereotypical antiques dealer, I am not a pack rat. Give me open space and tidy end tables and I’m a happy camper. Wood floors, throw rugs, small table and chairs in the dining nook. A kitchen that used to be a closet, as near as I can tell—only one person can stand in it at a time, and if the oven’s open, nobody can. One window in the main room, another in the bedroom, and finally, a bathroom that’s bigger than the kitchen, but not by much.

I have pretty basic needs, possibly due to growing up in foster care. But that's a whole other story, and I'm well-adjusted enough to know I can't blame all my idiosyncrasies on my parentless childhood. Some, but not all. The bottom line is I don't need a lot of junk to be happy. I do need a certain amount of cash, though. Lily's custody battle over Geordi wasn't only with her ex, Nick. It was with his entire family. And I do mean Family—as in organized, with a capital F. The Sicilian Mob. Which Lily swears she didn't know until after they were married, though how either of us were naïve enough to believe Nick was just “a” Dioguardi, and not one of *the* Dioguardis, is beyond me.

Worse, since Geordi's the first son of an *only* son, Nick's family weren't about to let him go, even if Lily found the one judge in Paris brave enough to side with her. It took serious guts for her to leave, and if I had any say in it, neither she nor Geordi would ever go back.

So, if the Oily Brothers' money could facilitate that, who was I to quibble?

The next day was Sunday, and not only is my shop closed, most of the other shops in my area are as well. I figured the Rousseaux could wait another day before I told them of the shipment. For one thing, it would lend credibility to my claim of needing to find it first. For another, as noted, I wasn't exactly anxious to call them.

But first thing Monday, I dragged myself out of bed, showered, and drove to the warehouse I rent at the docks, near the Bassin d'Arenc. I use it to store unsorted catches or big items I can't cram into the shop. Or, let's be honest, things I don't want out in plain

sight.

Ordinarily I'd walk—it's only twenty blocks—but I had to move Vadim's stuff to the shop before calling the Rousseaux. Unfortunately, my car's a Peapod prototype, and about the size of a mini-Mini Cooper. It was a gift from a grateful client, and tops out at forty-five kilometers per hour, so no *autobahn* for me. But it's electric, costs around two cents a kilometer for gas, and is perfect for getting around town.

Not so perfect for hauling stuff.

I could've asked Claude and Jacques to meet me with a truck. Since the catch was currently in three large shipping crates, this would save tons of time and effort. But though I'd decided to unload the stuff, showing these guys where I kept my stock—or what I still had on hand—might not be the smartest idea. Besides, I was curious about the contents. Vadim had never told me what he'd found, and in our line of work, it could be anything from thousands-of-years-old “junk” to priceless relics. I was guessing at least some of the latter, or why would the Rousseaux care?

In order to find out, I'd have to move everything to smaller boxes, cart it to the store, go back to the warehouse, rinse, repeat. Part of me wondered if I should just hand it over as-is and be done.

I suppressed yet another twinge at the memory of yesterday's interview. Especially Jacques, sitting still and spider-like across from me. I had a feeling he didn't miss much and wondered what I might have unconsciously revealed while Claude distracted me.

I pulled into a parking space near my unit, and my cell rang, the cheery notes of Beethoven's *Für Élise* telling me Lily was calling for our weekly chat. For a

second, I thought about answering. Lily might be Geordi's mother, but I have to say, he's pretty much the light of my life. Certainly, the best male relationship I've had, even counting Jason and Vadim. Who wouldn't love a guy who brings you dead bugs he's found in someone *else's* yard, then offers to split the last éclair because you're his "favoritest *tata* ever"? He's a smart kid, too. I'm his *only* auntie, and the flattery still works.

I sent the call to voicemail. It almost killed me, but it'd be hard enough opening the crates, knowing how excited Vadim was when he landed this catch. You can't get much fresher than an unexcavated site. If I spent even a half hour catching up with Lily and Geordi, I'd chicken out. And I had to know what was in those crates, or I'd never be able to let them, or Vadim, go.

I screwed up my courage, got out of the car, and unlocked the unit's roll door. Yep. Three large crates.

Very large.

I went back to the Peapod, opened the hatch, and extracted the paltry pile of produce boxes I'd scrounged from my favorite markets. I'd have to empty them again at the store for subsequent trips, or else go beg more boxes. This was ridiculous. But necessary.

Must let go. Must move on.

As is so often the case, once I got going, it wasn't so bad. Opening the first crate was tough, and I won't say I didn't cry at all. Vadim was a good partner, and a better friend. At least he'd died doing what he loved—sailing the Mediterranean, with a drink in his hand and two beautiful women at his side. He was a devout

atheist, but if there's any kind of afterlife, I'd like to think he's still sailing and drinking, and looking for the next big catch.

I found a roll of paper towels on a shelf and blew my nose, then metaphorically rolled up my non-existent sleeves and dug in.

The more valuable items were wrapped in acid-free paper and sealed in airtight containers, which I didn't bother to open, because Vadim had helpfully labeled them. His clear, bold printing noted statuary and relics, both Pagan and Christian, from the ancient Phrygian city of Colossae, near what is now Denizli, in southwestern Turkey. The general period was the first century, so any Christian items were very early. While this fascinated me intellectually, and I did have some experience with artifacts from Turkey, it was mainly because Vadim brought them to me. My own interests lie more in the Egyptians, one of the reasons we'd complemented each other professionally. But it meant I had little personal experience with anything of this kind.

It took several trips to move the best items, and a few more for the midlevel stuff, plus getting more boxes. By the time I got to the third crate, the sun was well past its zenith, but I'd reached the dregs. Items down here were either unwrapped, loose in the packing straw, or else carelessly covered with rough cloth to prevent scratching.

This crate wasn't as full as the others, and it looked like I was on my final trip. Thank God. I'd had a quick lunch—veggies, hummus, cheese, and bread—but otherwise worked straight through. Lily'd called twice more, but I didn't pick up. I'd call her back over dinner,

when we'd have time to chat, and I could tell her of my sudden windfall.

I plopped my last empty box on the warehouse floor, then hung over the side of the crate to excavate the bottom. I found a few more canvas bundles and pulled them out, setting them in the box, then went back once more.

I thought I'd gotten everything, until my fingers brushed against something hard, wrapped in cloth, and oddly warm to the touch. I grabbed it and heaved myself out of the crate, then examined the bundle. It felt like a rock, heavy and solid. Most of the items in this crate were broken pottery shards, from vases and the like. Hard, maybe, but not heavy. Careful not to touch the item's surface, in case it was valuable after all, I turned it over and shook the covering loose.

Sure enough, it was a rock. Plain, gray, ordinary. About half the size of an American football, shaped like an irregular pyramid, with jagged edges and flat-but-rough surfaces. The only unusual thing about it was its warmth. Like Claude Rousseau. Which is maybe why, against my better judgment, I reached out and touched the very tip of the rock's pyramid.

And then it *shrieked* at me, the agony of centuries piercing my ears till I thought my skull would burst, electric shocks searing through my fingers, hand, arm, ripping through my whole body, gripping my lungs and squeezing until I couldn't breathe. I flung the rock away, covering my ears and dropping to the floor, shaking, gasping for air, while still it screamed, on and on and on and on, until I lay huddled on the concrete, red fire burning in my head, blackness filling my soul.

Then everything went silent.

Chapter Two

“Then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation.”

~The Bible, Deuteronomy 32:15

My heart thundered as it raced to restore oxygen to my brain and limbs. Slowly, I sat up and eyed the rock where it had landed a few feet away, next to the empty crate. It still looked totally uninteresting. It was also not screaming anymore. I took a shaky breath and tried to clear my head.

Had it screamed at all? Maybe a boat got too close to the docks, and what I'd heard was a warning blast from the harbor tower. And...I was weak from hunger, which would explain the whole “vibrate until you pass out” thing.

Yeah, that made sense. It was a rock. Rocks do not scream.

I crawled over and put out my hand. No heat came off it, and when I got up the nerve to touch it, it felt cool and hard. Nothing—not a peep—came from it, and I relaxed.

A little.

Still, I wondered how it got in the crate. Like most kids his age, Geordi's addicted to “edutainment” type TV shows, especially those sporting some version of the game, *Which of These Items Doesn't Belong?* Next

to the bugs, he's never happier than when telling his onscreen "friends" that the fish does not, in fact, belong with the shoes, coat, pants, and shirt.

That's what this was like. Gold statues? Check. Ancient Phrygian vases? Check. Boring old rock with possible vocal prowess? Bing-go.

I grabbed the cloth and re-covered it. The fact that it *was* wrapped meant its inclusion was deliberate. And it was the same cloth Vadim used on all the other pieces, so it was likely him that included it. But why?

My cell phone buzzed, this time with a text from Lily: *Call me!!!*

I glanced at the clock, then out at the sinking sun. Damn. I'd wanted to hand the goods over to the Rousseaux before closing up shop for the day. Not that I'd ever opened. Another perk of sole proprietorship—the sign in my window reads "Approximate Hours," and I mean it. But I didn't want all this inventory sitting in the shop overnight, tempting Fate. Or, more likely, thieves. Plus, the longer I waited, the more time I had to change my mind.

Careful not to break the more expensive items, I set the rock in the last box and carried it to my car, closed the hatch, then locked up the storage unit. I got in the driver's seat, took out Claude's card, and dialed while backing out of the parking space. I was sure they'd want to meet right away, and I wasn't disappointed.

"*Mais, c'est merveilleux!*" Claude said when I told him I'd lucked out and "found" the shipment they wanted. I could almost hear him drooling across the line. "We will leave at once."

"Perfect. And, er, it'll be cash only."

Occasionally, I accept wire transfers to a Swiss

bank account, which I opened in mine and Lily's names a few months ago, after she filed for divorce from Nick. It sounds clichéd, but they're easy to get, and very...convenient, especially when hiding money from one's Mafia in-laws. I did it for Lily and Geordi, but it simplifies my, um, finances, also. In this case, however, I thought the Rousseaux, like the Dioguardis, might not be the best electronic business partners.

I half expected Claude to balk, since this was a *very* big price tag, but he said, "*Bien sûr*. That will not be a problem."

"Great. I'll be at the store in five minutes."

I hung up and pushed away another stab of unease. Jason was right. I needed to let go and begin the healing process. And when had I ever been this picky in the past? A few of my clients have questionable business practices—hell, *I* have them—but it's never bothered me before. Why now, when I didn't actually know anything bad about the Rousseaux?

Maybe the experience with the rock put me on edge. I didn't really believe I'd imagined it, and the false reassurance I got from pretending otherwise had worn off, partly because a low humming noise now came from the back of my car, faint, but noticeable, and having nothing to do with the engine. Which is in the front, in any case.

I reached the Rue de Lyon and made a snap decision. Instead of turning right toward the shop, I went left and aimed for my apartment. Vadim had included that rock in this shipment against all rational explanation. It was important to him, which made it important to me. Besides, those kiddie shows can't *all* be wrong: when an item doesn't belong, you take it out

of the equation. I may be mixing my metaphors, but you get the drift.

My apartment building is tucked away off a side street, off another couple of side streets, in the Quartier Saint Louis. It's an older, quiet neighborhood, and my building's no exception. Jason's probably the loudest tenant, and his main offense is listening to jazz until nine at night. Today as I ran upstairs, the lack of noise felt oppressive. Or maybe it was a rare attack of conscience. I'd agreed to sell the *whole* shipment, and the rock was clearly part of it. But the Rousseaux wouldn't want a boring old rock, would they?

My conscience piped up, *If they know it screams, they sure as hell will.*

Yeah, that would do it.

I unlocked my door, then stepped into the dim interior. I needed to be fast, but I couldn't just drop the rock on the floor. Luckily, I am a smart and savvy businesswoman, with a healthy suspicion of non-Swiss banks, who had a wall safe installed a while back.

Okay, I'm not that smart—I hid it behind a painting over the futon, because that's the only interior wall. And I felt kind of stupid, hiding a rock in a concealed, fireproof safe. Like using a machete on mushrooms. But I had the safe, and the rock, so I went with it.

The rock still hummed—a slight disturbance, barely detectable in the atmosphere. It wasn't exactly unpleasant. More persistent, and somehow urgent. It had started to feel warm again, and I had no desire to touch it and accidentally set off another round of screams. Careful to keep the wrapping intact, I placed it inside the safe with my stash of cash.

I make a comfortable living, both from the shop and my “extra-curricular” activities. The safe was small, but fairly full. I could tap into my resources and live the high life, like my clients do, but it’s not my style. Besides, I get a lot less attention from *les autorités* this way.

My cell buzzed with another text from Lily: *Where r u?* Which was weird, because she’s one of those texters who spell out every word, no matter what.

I’m not. I texted back, *Call u l8r. Bg sale!!!* Then I locked the apartment and ran downstairs, passing Jason on his way up. He still wore his clothes from Saturday, including the shades, and looked like he’d been up since then, too. His dark hair stood out at all angles from his head, and two days’ stubble gave him a feral look.

“Hi,” he said on a yawn. “Where’re you off to?”

“Shop—meeting the buyers for Vadim’s stuff.”

“Sounds nice.” He took off the sunglasses, then squinted blearily. “Have fun.”

I gave him a once over. “Looks like you had fun last night.”

“Yeah—you should’ve been there.” His gaze flicked to my mouth, eyes darkening, and I resisted the urge to fan myself.

Abruptly, he seemed to become aware of what he was doing. An odd look crossed his face—regret?—and he turned and stumbled toward his door. Maybe he was just a little drunk. Yeah, that made more sense than that he would suddenly start flirting with me. I have to say, though, I’ve only ever seen him tipsy once or twice, and never drunk. Being a bartender, he knows how to keep his hands off the merchandise, so to speak.

I started to move past, but he turned and reached for my arm. “Wait—something came for you on Saturday, before I left. It’s a letter, for Lily.”

We have mailboxes on the ground floor, but anything too big or needing a signature is supposed to be brought to our doors. It’s a six-story building, though, with no elevator, and lately *la poste* has a tendency to make it up one flight to Jason’s door, then stop. He doesn’t seem to mind, though. He says it gives him an excuse to be neighborly, and I have to admit, he knows every other tenant by name, age, and occupation, which is more than I can say.

“Oh—okay,” I said. “I’ll get it when I come back.”

“Sure.” He held my arm a moment, searching my face. I don’t know for what, or if he found anything, but for a fraction of a second, he looked stone-cold sober, and more than a little worried. I opened my mouth to ask what was wrong, but then he released my arm and looked all bleary and tipsy again, and I was sure I’d imagined it.

Then a new question popped into my head. “You mean *from* Lily, right?”

Jason looked up from fumbling his key at his lock and grinned. “Hyacinth. Last night was fun, but not *that* fun. Plain white envelope with *To Lily Finch* on it, care of your address. No return, but the postmark was Paris.”

Shit. No wonder Lily’d been calling me. *Shit, shit, shit.* “You’re sure it was Paris?”

“Positive.” He’d finally gotten his door open. “I can get it for you. Only take a sec.”

The sun was even lower now, and the Rousseaux probably wondered where the hell I was. “I’ve got to get to the shop before I blow this sale. Can you slide it

under my door?”

“Kay.”

That’s Jason. Sometimes he’s so laid-back, I’m afraid he’ll melt. Unlike me. I’m not laid-back. Especially when it comes to letters *for* Lily, *from* Paris, sent to *my* address.

Shit. Damn. *Merde*.

I can swear creatively in a number of languages. When you drift around Europe and Africa for a decade or so, you pick up a lot. But sometimes the feeling is just too much. I *had* to get to the shop, now more than ever. I needed that cash, and what was in my safe, and I needed to find Lily. Because the letter could only mean one thing.

She’d lost custody of Geordi. Which wasn’t surprising. If there’s a judge in France who’s not in the Dioguardis’ pocket, it’s because said judge hasn’t been “informed” yet on which side the bread gets buttered. But Lily wouldn’t let a judge or anyone else stop her. She’d snatched Geordi—the letter was our prearranged signal, telling me where to meet her. She must have been frantic when she didn’t hear from me. She wouldn’t say or text anything on her phone, though, in case Nick had it bugged.

It hardly mattered. No matter how big her head start, he’d be right behind. And if he found her, he wouldn’t let her or Geordi go, ever.

Not alive, anyway.

I made it to my rendezvous with the Rousseaux in record time, luckily not passing any *flics* because I drove way over the speed limit. Which in my car is a rare feat.

A black Maybach 62 sedan was parked in front of my shop, looking like an expensive beetle with dead, unlit eyes. I only know the make because Nick coveted one, but couldn't afford the half-mil price tag, despite his nefarious "business dealings." The thing took up half the narrow street, and behind it, a good-sized box truck took up the rest. Even in my cracker-box Peapod, I had to jump the curb to get by, and then there was barely room to park.

The Maybach's windows were so dark I couldn't see anyone inside except the chauffeur, a stone-faced thug I wouldn't want to meet alone after dark. Or before, for that matter. The driver of the truck wasn't much better—or maybe it was the huge black cockroach painted on the side panel, surrounded by spidery lettering that read *Les Rousseaux—Exterminateurs*. At least now I knew how the brothers earned their keep. The knowledge wasn't reassuring.

Good thing Jason knew I was here and would notice if I didn't come back. Remembering his inebriated state, I tacked on an "eventually," and hoped it wouldn't come to that.

I climbed out of my car, opened the hatch, and unloaded the last of the filled produce boxes. The Rousseaux got out of the Maybach, oily as ever, and I felt another twinge of anxiety. Evidently Claude was still the spokesman.

"Mademoiselle Finch. We had begun to doubt you were coming."

"Sorry—got stuck in a construction zone. Let's get this over with. You have the cash?"

"*Mais oui*." If he was put off by my bluntness, he didn't show it. He also didn't whip out the cash. Not

that I really expected him to. “I am sure you will not object if we verify the merchandise?”

“Of course. My, um, contact assures me this is the entire lot. But feel free to take a look.”

Claude signaled the truck driver and the chauffeur, who got out of their respective vehicles and grabbed a box each off the curb. The whole Band of Creepy Men waited while I unlocked the shop, then filed in behind me. My *this-is-not-right* feeling ratcheted up another notch, but what could I do? Inside or out, I was no match for four large men. Hell, one of them alone could “exterminate” me and dump my body off the Vieux Port into the Bay, without breaking a sweat.

I’d pushed back the display cases and shelves that took up the bulk of my floor space, to make room for the dozen neatly stacked boxes the shipping crates had dispersed to. The truck driver had a box cutter, while the chauffeur produced a pocket knife, and they went to work, slicing the boxes open and rummaging through them. So much for my careful packaging.

Like Jacques, neither spoke, their faces devoid of emotion in the dim light. They hardly seemed human, their movements robotic: slice the box open, lift an item, hold for inspection, drop it carelessly into a new box, turn back. They obviously didn’t know what they were looking for and didn’t care. As soon as Claude or Jacques gave a negative shake of the head, the item ceased to matter, and I winced as several relics cracked on impact. More and more it seemed the money I already had was enough to keep Lily and Geordi safe. But I’d made a deal.

As each box was emptied, Claude’s expression grew grimmer. They wanted the rock. I knew it. The

question was, what would they do when they realized it was missing?

Jacques' expression was impassive, worse than Claude's frowns. That silent offer to kill the antlion still creeped me out, and now I knew how the poor bug felt.

When the two thugs had tossed their way through the last box, Claude turned on me, all pretense of civility gone. "*Putain!*" He shoved me so hard, my side slammed into the counter's sharp metal corner. I wheezed and doubled over, but he yanked me up by my shirt and shook me hard. "*Where is it?*"

"Where is what?" I managed, fighting for breath, and he backhanded me across the cheek, pain exploding in my jaw, blood filling my mouth. My vision grayed, and I swayed, grabbing the counter, then gave up and slid to the floor, my back against a display case. Through my pain-red haze, I saw Jacques murmuring to his brother, and I thought, *so he can speak*.

It's funny what the mind does in dire circumstances. For one thing, who the hell cared if Jacques spoke or not? For another, when he glanced at me, I could swear his eyes glowed black, like coals in the deepest pit of a fire. Then Claude punched me between the eyes, white hot pain splitting my forehead, my skull bouncing off the cabinet, cracking the glass, blood trickling behind my ears. Dull throbbing from the back of my head pulsed forward to meet the sharp pain between my eyes, and when Claude raised his fist again, I held up my hands.

"Wait. Stop. I'll get it."

I'm not proud of the fact, but I'm basically a wimp. A rock—even a talking one—isn't worth dying over. I only hoped the Rousseaux would let me live once they

got it back. I wasn't at all sure they would.

"*Bon*. You see reason." Claude released the fist and instead hauled me to my feet. "Where is it?"

"Somewhere safe. I'll bring it to you."

His laugh was utterly without mirth, his voice hollow. "*Ça me doute*. You will not get a second chance to cheat us. I will come with you, and if you try anything, I will kill you."

The last thing I wanted was them knowing where I lived, but I had no choice. He shoved me, and I stumbled to the door just as it opened, the bell tinkling cheerily.

"Tata Hyhy!" squealed my nephew, running inside and flinging his arms around my aching side.

Chapter Three

*“When my father and my mother forsake me,
then the Lord will take me up.”*

~The Bible, Psalm 27:10

Geordi smelled sweet and boyish and so-so *good*, and it was so-so *wrong* that he was in the middle of this. I inhaled the earthy scent of him, my heart freezing even as I clutched him close and prayed for a way to get him back out. He looked up from under curly black bangs, blue eyes hopeful. He’s the spitting image of his father, except where Nick is the Devil Incarnate, Geordi’s a little angel. Even when he’s trying to get something from me.

“Tata Hyhy—do you have any sugary slugs?”

Apricot delight is his favorite treat, but when I first offered him one, he was highly suspicious. Knowing his bug obsession, I’d made up the moniker, and to this day, I doubt he knows their real name.

“Maybe in my car,” I said, thinking fast. If I got him outside, maybe the Rousseaux would let him go.

Then Lily came in, her eyes clearly not adjusted from the bright, low sun to the dim of the shop. Her light hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail, and her jeans and white blouse looked like they’d been slept in. Geordi sported his favorite Spider-Man backpack, and Lily wheeled an overstuffed pink carry-on behind her.

Whatever safe haven she'd counted on, Nick must have found it.

"Hey, sis—sorry to barge in on your sale. We tried to wait in the cab, but we're low on cash, and Geordi has to go potty."

Even with everything going on, I heard the strain in her voice. Lily and I are close, but not a lot alike, except for the blue-gray of our eyes. She's blonde and willowy, where I'm a brunette and more solid. Not fat by any stretch, but I'll never be a size two. On a good day I'm an eight, after a pint of ice cream, a ten, and I'm okay with that.

I tried unsuccessfully to dislodge Geordi. I had to get them out of here before the Rousseaux went ballistic or Lily noticed anything was up.

Too late. She caught sight of my battered face. "Oh my God! Hyacinth—what happened?"

"Get out of here!" I yelled, pushing Geordi at her, but at a signal from Jacques, the truck driver yanked Lily into the shop and slammed the door while Claude snatched Geordi and held him in an iron grip. Geordi's eyes widened in terror, and he used all his seven-year-old strength, trying to get to his mother. Lily gouged the truck driver's arm with her nails and kicked his shins, which only pissed him off. He outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds, and looked ready to choke her in a heartbeat.

Claude yanked Geordi's head back to examine his face. "*Qu'est-ce qu'y a?*"

Geordi shrieked and Lily flailed harder, and the driver pulled a big-ass gun out of his waistband, aiming it at her head. The soft *click* as he cocked it was almost inaudible over the racket in the shop, but it did the trick

for me.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Stop! Lily—calm down!” I moved forward to reassure Geordi, but the chauffeur’s hands clamped down on my shoulders. “Let me go! I won’t do anything, I swear—at least let Geordi go to his mother—*please*.”

Claude’s grip on Geordi tightened, and he exchanged a look with his brother. Jacques lifted a shoulder negligently, as if to say *the child is unimportant—don’t bother me with details*.

Claude pursed his lips, but all he said was, “By all means, the child and his mother may go. When you have returned what you stole from us.”

I hadn’t thought anything could be worse than Claude invading my apartment, but I was wrong. Lily’s eyes were huge. Geordi’d stopped shrieking and trembled miserably in Claude’s grasp. And through it all, the two thugs stood silent and unblinking.

“Okay,” I said. “All right. You don’t have to do this—I said I’d get it.”

Claude pushed Geordi at Lily, so that the driver could train the gun on them both at the same time. “A little security, to ensure your cooperation. I will still accompany you, of course.”

Lily clutched Geordi tight and looked at me. “Hyacinth—what is this? What’s going on?”

“I’ll explain later.” I tried to keep my voice calm, to make myself believe there’d *be* a later—that I’d hand over the rock, and Claude and his entourage would crawl back to whatever maggot-infested lair they came from, letting me and my family go. But deep down, I didn’t believe it. Here I’d thought Lily’s biggest danger was from Nick, when in fact, it was from me.

“Just do what they say,” I said. “I have to get something from the apartment. We’ll be back in fifteen minutes. It’ll be okay.”

Lily gave a quick nod, and Claude held the door open. Outside, the day was still hot. After the chaos of the shop, it was surreal to find the rest of the world running along like normal. Claude followed me to the Peapod and got in, his bulk out of place in the small car. I didn’t like the proximity. He smelled...*off*. Not unclean—elementally rotten. He had no gun or knife, but it didn’t matter. Lily and Geordi were all he needed to make me comply with his every demand.

I’d like to say I had a plan—that I knew a place where I could speed up and kick him out of the car, to fall off a cliff and never be seen again. Or a panic button to call one of my shadier clients to my rescue. But I didn’t. Not a damn thing. So, I made a tight K-turn and drove to my apartment, all the while trying to stop my heart from beating out of my chest, my stomach from kicking up my lunch.

Claude was silent, which was good, because it took everything I had to grip the wheel and force myself to drive. The route from my shop to home gives glimpses of the ocean, and by the time we reached my street, the sun rested on the horizon.

We got out, and Claude waited while I unlocked the gate, then trailed me up the stairs. Jason’s door was shut. I longed for him to stick his head out, so I could see his face. He couldn’t help me—even if he overpowered Claude, Lily and Geordi were still in Jacques’ control. But maybe on the way out I could get a message to him, to call the cops. As we climbed to the second landing, I felt a glimmer of hope. I wouldn’t

give up—I *couldn't* give up.

My burst of resolve lasted until I reached the top of the stairs and saw the man standing by my door, pointing a gun at us.

“Nick,” I said, strangely unsurprised. Somehow, it made sense on this utterly horrific day.

He was so close I smelled his expensive aftershave. He was lean and muscled, wearing a Swiss watch, French jeans, and Italian shoes, with a black tee under his leather coat. His wavy dark hair had been cropped, but his hard-blue eyes were the same. He still wore his family’s signet ring on his right hand, a big gold sucker I recognized from the falcon imprint it left on Lily’s cheek the last time he hit her. He also still wore his wedding ring. Since the Dioguardis are strict Catholics who simply ignore pesky little things like divorce papers, this didn’t surprise me.

He would *not* take Geordi. I would never let that happen. But at the moment, it wasn’t up to me. Frying pan, meet fire. And where did that leave me?

“Where the *hell* is my son?” Nick demanded. He was as pissed as the last time I’d seen him, running after my car, shooting at Lily, Geordi, and me on the day she left him. His gaze landed on Claude. “And who the hell is your boyfriend?”

Claude only smiled. “*Mais, c’est merveilleux*. You must be Geordi’s father.”

Nicholas Dioguardi is pretty much a tool, and a violent one at that. He brought the gun up and pressed it between Claude’s eyes. “You know my son. Tell me where the fuck he is or I shoot.”

Not very creative, but it got the point across. It didn’t faze Claude, though. His tone was

conversational, even with the gun making a dent in his too-dark tan. “*Mais bien sûr je le connais*. A charming child. He waits with his mother, at the shop.”

“Lily’s there?” Nick frowned, considering, then lowered the gun.

Damn. I didn’t know what Claude’s game was, but in a non-weaponed fight, my money was on the Rousseaux. The Dioguardis are bad, don’t get me wrong. But by now I’d finally decided to trust my instincts, which screamed that the Rousseaux were flat out *evil*. Even though the Dioguardis were currently up one, thanks to the gun, Claude was smarter than Nick, so I held my breath and waited, trying to figure out some way this wouldn’t end with all of us dead, or maimed, or any of a hundred other unpleasant scenarios running rampant through my head.

Meanwhile, Nick decided Claude had something—or *someone*—he wanted. “Take me there. Now.”

“Of course.” Claude put a hand on my shoulder, squeezing possessively as though I really were his girlfriend. His fingers were hot, the light contact scalding, and I fought back a gasp while he continued genially, “We will be happy to reunite you with your son. Please—we had forgotten something and returned to retrieve it. Allow us to get it, and we will be on our way.”

Nick frowned again. “What is it?”

Claude shrugged. “Nothing of great import. A rock—it has sentimental value, that is all.”

Nick might be a cog in the great Dioguardi wheel, but he wasn’t entirely stupid. “Why do you need it *now*?”

“It is our anniversary.” Claude turned and smiled

into my eyes. “The rock is from the place where we had our first date, is it not, *chérie*?”

To Nick, I’m sure it appeared we were lovers, sharing a private moment. But I could see Claude’s eyes—so completely devoid of...*anything*...that a shudder passed through me. They held no emotion, no anger, just...emptiness. I looked away to find Nick watching us.

“Yes,” I managed, the searing pressure of Claude’s fingers reminding me that my first priority was getting the rock back. “That’s right. The rock is from the...beach...where we had our first date.”

Nick, creep though he was, thought himself a romantic. It was how he justified beating Lily up—he “loved her too much.” Disgusting, but today, it worked in my favor. His gaze took in the bruises covering my face, and he shot Claude an approving look. Claude smiled and shrugged, and I tried not to vomit.

“Fine,” Nick said. “You can get it. But only that, and I’ll shoot if you try anything.”

I nodded, then unlocked my door and led our little trio inside. I removed the painting from in front of the safe, ignoring the *I-can’t-believe-you’re-this-dumb* looks from both Claude and Nick. In another life, they might’ve been pals. And wasn’t that frightening?

I dialed the combination and took out the rock, careful not to unwrap it. Not only did it feel warm again, it seemed *agitated*. Frightened or upset or—I can’t explain it. I just got this vibe that something was wrong in Rockville. I had my own troubles, though. I’d tried to be surreptitious while opening the safe, but Nick got suspicious and shoved me aside.

“Well, well. Guess the antiques business pays

better than I thought. You won't mind helping your brother-in-law out, will you?" He reached inside and started stuffing his coat pockets with my hard-earned cash.

"No!" I grabbed his arm, but he laughed and shook me off.

"Now, now, *chérie*." Claude pulled me firmly away. "It is good to share with family. We have our...souvenir. Let your charming *beau-frère* take his due."

I'd had about enough of him, but I had to play along. Lily and Geordi were more important than the cash, and besides, there was still the Swiss account.

When Nick had cleaned me out, he gestured with the gun and we all paraded back to the landing and down the stairs, me clutching the wrapped, jittery rock, Nick with wads of cash bulging out of his pockets, and Claude acting like we were out for a stroll in the park.

Of course, that's when Jason decided to poke his head out and say hi. His gaze took in my split lip and the shiner I was sure blossomed between my eyes, then moved to Claude and Nick, grouped behind me like bodyguards. I don't think he saw the gun, as Nick had it pressed into my back, but he suddenly drew back into the shadow of his doorway, looking a little stunned.

Surely, he'd guessed something was up. If my face wasn't enough, I rarely have men up to my place, and never two at a time. I needed help, but if he confronted Claude or Nick directly, he'd be shot. He looked at me uncertainly, and I stared back hard, willing him to call the cops, not try to be a hero himself.

"What're you up to?" he asked at last, still keeping back, as though hoping no one else would notice him.

“Nothing.” I slowed, but Nick wasn’t having any, and pushed the gun harder into my spine, scowling at Jason.

For some reason, neither Jason nor the gun bothered Claude. He smiled casually at Jason and walked alongside Nick, neither helping nor hindering his quest to kidnap us.

We were at the top of the stairs—I had to do something. Desperately I twisted around. “Jason! Thanks again—for dropping that package off at the shop.”

His eyebrows rose, and I’m sure Claude knew what I was up to. But whatever his plan, he clearly thought he had it in the bag. Nick ignored my outburst, using his whole body to herd me onto the stairs.

“No problem,” Jason called as we disappeared into the stairwell. I didn’t know if he got that I wanted him to call the cops, but surely he knew I’d tried to tell him *something*.

Now that I had two badasses, instead of one, dragging me all over Marseille, there was no way we’d fit in the Peapod. In theory, it’s a four-seater, but in reality, the only person who fits in the back is Geordi, and at seven, even he’s getting too big. Luckily, Nick had a decent-sized BMW. Not as nice as the Maybach, but big enough for Claude to sit in the back while Nick drove one-handed, training the gun on me in the passenger seat. Mr. Macho.

Of course he’d popped for the leather interior. Besides not eating meat, I also don’t wear animals, or support making them into furniture. Nick’s coat was bad enough, but at least I wasn’t forced to touch it. Luckily, the trip was short, and I didn’t get too

nauseous. Unluckily, no *flics* with lights flashing and sirens blaring magically appeared along the route, so either Jason didn't get the message, or the cops didn't believe him.

Which left me with...nothing.

I got out of Nick's car, retrieving the rock from the floor, and Nick and Claude followed me into the shop. Jacques looked up when he heard the bell, his impassive black gaze immediately going to the canvas bundle clutched in my hands. As near as I could tell, the two drivers were in the exact same positions as when we'd left thirty minutes ago, but Lily and Geordi had moved, now huddling against the front of the counter, quiet if not calm. Relief washed over Lily's face when she saw me, and Geordi sat up straighter, trying to be brave.

My heart broke to see them. Surely the Rousseaux could let us go—I hadn't witnessed anything illegal and wouldn't call the police if I had. But my limited knowledge of "evil" was that it annihilated first and asked questions, well, never.

"We found it," Claude announced. "And something else."

"Hi, honey, I'm home," Nick growled, hot on Claude's heels.

Apparently, he was stupider than I thought. He walked right into the shop, with no idea what the situation was, gun out, thinking he'd grab Lily and Geordi and go. Lily had other ideas. She took one look at him, screamed louder than the rock had, then grabbed Geordi and dove behind the counter.

Nick roared and dove after them as they scrambled toward the back of the store. Neither the Rousseaux nor

their thugs seemed disturbed by any of this. Jacques walked to me and gently removed my burden. He shook the covering loose, careful not to touch the rock's surface with his thin, elegant fingers, then exhaled sharply.

For my part, I felt a strange regret—an emptiness that the rock was no longer mine. I thought I heard it give a faint wail, as though it missed me.

Lily and Geordi rounded the counter, Nick close behind, and without looking up, Jacques murmured to no one in particular, "*Tuez-les.*"

Kill them.

The truck driver aimed and fired at Nick's head, killing him instantly, his body dropping to the floor. Lily screamed and hid Geordi's face, and I ran to them, shouting, "*Go—out the back! Now!*"

I pushed and shoved, herding them forward, knowing the driver must be taking aim again. If I could get them out the door, maybe they'd be safe. Lily wrenched the knob open—improbably, Jason was on the other side.

"Take him!" she shrieked, shoving a frantic Geordi into his arms.

Jason took one look at us and scooped Geordi up, then hauled ass down the alley and around the corner. Lily was out the door, me right behind, and still no other shots were fired.

We started to run, and I realized why we weren't shot inside. There, it was crowded and dark. Out here, even in the waning light, we were sitting—or running—ducks.

We'd made it about halfway up the block when I finally heard the gun's silencer go off. A bullet whizzed

past my cheek and hit Lily's leg. She started to fall, and another went into the back of her head. I screamed and then something hit my own back, between my shoulder blades.

I'd like to tell you what I felt or saw or thought in that instant, but I don't remember much. I don't think there was any pain, but I did know I was shot. I might even have seen the bullet exiting through my chest, but I could be imagining that part.

All I know is suddenly my legs didn't work. They felt heavy and rubbery, and no matter how I focused, I couldn't control them. My arms were next, then my vision dimmed. Then all thought started to drain away like liquid from a broken vessel. I crumpled to the ground but didn't feel the impact. I lay there a moment, maybe two, while my heart pumped blood through arteries that could no longer contain it.

And then...

I died.