

Strays

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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It happened during Clinton's first hundred days. D.C. was a changed town. Arkania was in. So were strong women. Wife No. 3 had left me just after the inauguration, and Secretary No. 45 quit, vowing to file a sexual harassment suit. She was a great girl, with legs that wouldn't quit, and I was sorry to see her go. The secretary, that is. Not the wife.

My fancy-shmancy office was cold and empty without her. I no longer needed the front room with its oak desk, cool blue walls, and indoor-outdoor carpet. The phone system was too complicated for me to use, so one afternoon I pulled it from the wall, and reverted to my black rotary. The commissions I got from the Bush people for staking out Democrat parties vanished on November 4, and since Wife No. 3 cleared out half the savings, I couldn't hire Secretary No. 46. I spent January looking for new digs, and February advertising in the _Post's_ classifieds because I couldn't break the lease I had. The cases were few and far between. The money even scarcer. I followed a Democratic Senator's wife for three days before he found out I used to work for the Bush people. The commission wasn't bad, but it didn't make the rent. I scoped out a bunch of women for Senator Packwood, but that job ended when the press got wind of it.

I was reduced to insurance claims investigation when the call came in. Woman's voice, very concerned. Address fell in the middle of an upscale brownstone neighborhood in McLean. Lots of money, well hidden. Real money that didn't need the parade of wealth to prove it was rich. Bush country. Home.

I drove my silver Thunderbird on the George Washington Parkway, glad the car at least was paid off. Can't be a dick without wheels. Still, they don't make T-Birds like they used to. No pick-up in the new models, and the design looks like Sportscars For Suburbia. The baby had speed though once it got going. Sometimes I needed speed. Along the way I passed lots of non-descript blue sedans, most with vanity plates. I stared at one, DAN 1996, all the way into McLean. Some folks never gave up.

The brownstone was in a tree-lined neighborhood that had a hush so deep it seemed like all the occupants had died. I knew they hadn't though. Curtains moved all over the block when the T-Bird parked in front of 1256 (lettering neo-gothic, no name beneath the script). I felt like a cop in a whorehouse: couldn't see a thing, but knew lots of folks were seeing him.

The door chime was three soft tones designed to echo through the house without disturbing the occupants. The dame herself answered the door. Surprised me. I expected a genteel male butler with a voice as soft spoken as the chimes.

She had been a looker once. Still was, if truth be told. Mass of silver hair, expertly styled to curl and fall in a dignified way around her face. Her figure was trim, her undergarments firm so that her breasts poked out like an 18 year-old's. Her legs put No. 45's to shame. Her skin had that papery look brought on by age and good nutrition. She didn't look so much old as softened.

A white cat wound its way around her legs, peeking through at me like a flirtatious child. "Mr. Ransom?" the woman said. "I'm Beverly Conner."

I took the offered hand, felt the knobby knuckles that indicated arthritis, and did not squeeze. I stepped inside. The entry was done in browns, a deacon's bench by the door, a hand-carved mirror near the coatless coatrack, and a Rembrandt sketch -- original, judging by the framing -- near the closet. The faint odor of cat piss seemed out of place.

She led me through the hall to a kitchen that was made of windows. Sunlight dappled in from the garden, and the warmth enveloped me. The oak table was clean except for the German tea service waiting on the table top.

"Please sit," she said.

I sat.

Her obvious wealth didn't impress me as much as the cats. They watched like small sentries from the most unlikely of posts. A calico sat on top of the refrigerator. A black one slept on the chair opposite me. I had noticed another curled on the back of the couch as we passed the living room. She must have kept housekeepers employed full time just mopping up the cat hair.

I thought only poor old ladies kept a zillion cats. Guess I was wrong.

"What do you need, ma'am?"

She plopped a newspaper clipping in front of me. I recognized it. It had run in the Post just the day before, and I had read all the way to the end, even though it gagged me. The Post, bastion of the Washington elite, had run an obituary on page one.

Of a cat.

Granted, it was a famous cat, even by D.C. standards. Bob the Weather Cat, who had paraded in his cute little weather outfits -- yellow rain slicker for rain, sunglasses and Hawaiian print shorts for heatwaves -- on Fox 5 every night during the five o'clock news. Bob put up with it with an amazing dignity -- he was a cat after all -- but folks watched to see if this week Bob would rebel. He hated the snow parka, and bit it off during a two day storm that dumped five feet on the downtown last winter, and he destroyed the rain slicker after a particularly bad stretch of showers by, you guessed it, peeing on it.

Bob, D.C.'s favorite contrary character, had been brutally murdered. His obit, on the front page of a paper that put the death of first-term Congressmen in the Metro section, read with a seriousness usually reserved for Presidents. Memorials were to go to the D.C. Chapter of the Humane Society. Seems our pal Bob had started life as a stray. Something else he shared with most of Washington's power elite.

Murdered. And I was sitting in a houseful of cats.

I had a bad feeling about this.

I shoved the paper back to her. "Yeah. I seen this."

"Bob lived next door," she said. "He isn't the first cat do die in this neighborhood."

"Cats get murdered all the time," I said. "Poisoned meat, hit and runs, steel traps. No one thinks it's any kind of conspiracy."

She blanched. "Perhaps you're not the man for the job, Mr. Ransom," she said primly.

A tabby wound her way between my legs, motor running. A white cat jumped on my lap in a flurry of fur. A black kitten meowed from the top of the microwave. They looked like the guard for a South American junta -- charming on the surface with a bit too much animal underneath. "I usually do political jobs," I said.

"Well," she said, crossing her arms and turning her back on me, "this job is just humoring an old lady."

She walked over to the window and petted a graying black tom. He chirruped with pleasure and rolled onto his back, nearly dislodging the plastic screen covering a wealth of African violets.

Something in her movement suggested a loneliness that she couldn't completely hide. I had noticed no pictures of children when I walked in, no too-small wedding ring embedded into her left hand. This lady lived for her cats, and they seemed to love her.

My lack of employment was making me too sentimental.

"Okay," I said. "I'll humor you."

She turned. Her smile was radiant, transforming her elderly face into the face of a girl.

"For a five hundred buck retainer and a hundred bucks a day expenses," I said.

She didn't even flinch. Should have charged her my political rates in which everything got multiplied by ten -- and even that was cheap by government standards.

She reached for her billfold which sat by the grocery list pad on the counter. She picked it up, took a gold cross pen out of the Sigma Delta Chi mug next to the pad, and came over to the table. As I watched, she wrote a thousand dollar check in perfect cursive then handed it to me.

"You undercharge, Mr. Ransom."

Didn't I know it. It never was more clear than at that moment.

"Okay," I said. "I know about Bob. Give me the poop on the other murders."

She pushed her billfold aside and folded her hands on the oak tabletop. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Ransom," she said. "But I don't think you do know the -- poop -- on Bob. The papers didn't report it all. It was too horrible."

She shuddered, a dainty movement that made me think of romance novels and debutante balls. (The things a man sees in my profession...) She grabbed the teapot for support.

"Tea?" she asked, her voice shaking.

I nodded. She poured into two small, wafer thin cups, then set the pot down and opened the sugar jar. "One lump or two?"

"None," I said, taking my cup. My thumb nearly dwarfed it. I took a sip and drained it. I barely had a chance to taste it. "Bob?"

She nodded, flung the tea back like a strong brandy and poured herself another cup. "He was tied between four bushes in my garden like vets do when they spay, gutted from stem to stern, and his heart was removed. He was shaved before they strung him up, and the police say he was alive when he was gutted."

Vets. Vets. For a moment, I thought she meant Vietnam vets. Then I realized. Veterinarian.

She belted the second cup back, and poured a third. I stuck my tea cup under the pouring spout wishing for something strong. No wonder she was upset.

"The other cats, were they killed the same way?"

She shook her head. "Baggins was a victim of a hit and run. Seemed like an unfortunate accident, but he was shaved too. Then there was Sophie, whose throat was slit; Ridicio, who was hung; and Rin Tin Tin who was nailed to a tiny cross." She sighed and buried her head behind a wrinkled, ring studded hand. "The police think some crazy is on the loose, but they don't have time to look for him. They just want me to keep my babies indoors." She dropped her hand. Her mouth was a thin line, her blue eyes flashed. "I want him caught. No one should be allowed to menace innocents."

I had my doubts about whether cats were innocents -- I'd seen more than one torture a mouse -- but I wasn't about to let my opinion tamper with a much needed commission. I had almost made that mistake once today. "Who's the on-site officer?" I asked, and the case officially began.

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The precinct smelled like old, wet tennis shoes. The concrete walls had a layer of grime over them from poor heating systems and summer dampness. I sat on an ancient green office chair with springs missing in the middle, sipping on lukewarm watery coffee, and waiting for Lieutenant Thornton to get off the phone so that he could talk to me. He had been gesturing and swearing into the receiver for the last fifteen minutes. From what I could tell, he was dealing with a call from home.

Three transvestites in black fishnet were cuffed together and being dragged through by a female police officer. An elderly woman clutched her right arm and looked down as she spoke to a burly man at the desk beside me. She had been mugged and lost her social security check, all her identification, and the fifteen dollars that was going to carry her through the month. The officer was polite, but bored. He had seen it all before.

So had I.

I made it a practice to look away.

Thornton slammed the receiver down. "Stupid bitch," he muttered. I had been right. Wife. He leaned forward. "Long time no see, Ransom. I thought they were sending you home with Ronnie's boys."

"We'll be back in four more years," I chanted.

"Yeah, right." He leaned back and lit a cigarette with the filter broken off of it. "At the rate our friend Bill is screwing up, probably. What can I do you for?"

I set my paper coffee cup on the only bare spot on Thornton's desk. "Bob the weather cat."

He laughed and leaned back, smoke coming out of his mouth and nostrils. "Lord, how the mighty have fallen."

I grinned. "Hey, I'm not a big city copy who is handling a case outside his jurisdiction. The McLean homeboys sent me over to you. How come D.C. gets to handle a Virginia case?"

Thornton rolled his eyes. "McLean department is small. We usually take the famous as a favor to them. I guess that includes famous animals. So who hired you? The station or that crazy old bat next door?"

"The old bat."

He nodded. "She calls every day. I don't have the heart to tell her that the case is way down on our priority list -- like below the sub basement."

"She knows. That's why she hired me."

Thornton took another long drag off the cigarette, then stamped it out in the full ashtray near the phone. "She just needs to keep her precious babies inside. Then they won't get gutted by the neighborhood Satanists."

"You know that, and I know that. But if I can pin a face and a name to Bob's murder, then I get a \$5000 bonus."

Thornton gave me a half smile. "Seems to me that was a starting fee once upon a time."

"Yeah, well, the gravy train has retired to Kennebunkport."

Thornton stood up and stretched, his beefy arms straining against his regulation tee. "You should work for the District, man. Same old shit at the same old pay, but you don't have to worry when the rubes come to town."

"Maybe I like holding the hands of little old ladies."

"You just weren't smart enough to rig the election when you had the chance."

I ran a hand through my thinning hair. "I thought Gennifer Flowers was a good move."

"Maybe, if you were trying to trap a Kennedy. People expect a man with a wife like Hillary to get some on the side." Thornton took out another cigarette and pounded it against the desk top. "I'll get you the files on our friend Bob."

"Thanks."

He disappeared into the back. The old lady next to me burst into tears, her voice finally rising above the general din. "But how will I live for the next month?"

The cop was shaking his head. "You have to talk with the Social Security people."

"But I don't even have enough for dinner tonight!"

I stuck a hand in my pocket and fingered the crisp twenty I always carried there for emergencies. The woman stood and wiped her eyes with a crumpled handkerchief. Then she stuck the handkerchief back in her sleeve. "That's not your problem, is it?" she said to the officer. "I'm sorry."

I stood too, and blocked her way. She was tiny, about 4'9", and weighed less than a hundred pounds. The kind of woman I would expect to have a cat-filled house that smelled of piss. "Lady," I said, "I overheard. Can't do much about the mugging, but I can help with tonight."

I shoved the twenty at her. She stared at it for a moment. "I don't take charity, young man," she said. She handed it back to me, and walked around the desk, hunched and clutching her arm.

"It's not charity," I said, but she didn't turn. It was charity -- we both knew it -- but she didn't want it. So much for trickle down economics.

Thornton came back with the file. It was thick, filled with publicity stills of Bob in life and ugly shots of Bob in death. The cat's limbs had been stretched out of their sockets. The cat must have put up a hell of a racket while he was being killed. Someone had to have heard something.

But who paid attention to a howling cat?

Other than the details of the death, the file was useless. I took a sip of my now-cold coffee. It tasted like

colored swamp water. "Hey, Thornton! What about the other deaths?"

Thornton frowned. He was lighting one cigarette from another. I noticed a white band of skin on his left finger -- where his wedding ring used to be. "What other deaths?"

"The shaved hit and run, the cat nailed to a cross, all those?"

He shrugged. "No one called us on 'em. We only heard about them after the Weather Kitty bit it. Of course we're going to watch any other deaths, but the old ones just don't factor."

"Did you interview any neighbors?"

"Forchrissakes, Ransom. It was only a cat -- a famous cat, mind you, but still a cat."

He had a point. In a city with the highest murder rate per capita, where little old ladies got mugged at bus stops, where mayors thought nothing of sticking candy up their noses, one cat didn't matter a hell of a lot.

To anyone except a rich woman with too much time on her hands.

And me, because she was paying me.

I photocopied the report on the station's in-house copier. Black streaks marred the paper, but at least I could still read it. I thanked Thornton and left.

Two blocks away from the station, I saw the little old lady, walking as if her feet hurt, head bent, hand clutching that useless arm. I pressed the window button and the passenger window rolled down. I leaned across the leather upholstery. "At least let me drive you to a hospital."

She looked up. A bruise had started to form on her left cheek. "What are you so worried about me for?"

I couldn't answer that, not even to me. Maybe I saw myself in her shoes not too many years away. Maybe I had a soft spot. Maybe I wanted to focus on something else beside dead cats. Maybe I wanted to believe that in her youth she had great tits. I shrugged. "I was bad man in a previous life. The angel Gabrielle met me at the pearly gates and told me they would be locked forever unless I did one good deed. You're it. Now get in."

She smiled, revealing a mouthful of bad teeth. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"Do I look like the kind of guy who would be kind for the hell of it?"

"No." She pulled the car door open with her good hand. "When I saw you upstairs, I pegged you for a Republican."

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I dropped her at Washington General, helped her with the admittance forms, and promised to talk with the social security people. I also got the details of the mugging -- in broad daylight near the Jefferson Memorial (and the lovely tourists stood around and _snapped pictures_) -- and promised to keep an eye out for the creep. Muggers had a pattern, and if Dolores fit into that pattern, well then maybe I might clean one speck of dirt off the city streets.

Damn. Dems in office and everyone becomes a bleeding heart.

I was back in McLean by mid-afternoon. Fortunately for me, feminism is a token word there. Women of Beverly Conner's status did not work. They stayed home and baked cookies, in Hillary parlance. Of

course, that would change by '96, but we were still feeling the effects of Reaganism.

Thank god. Otherwise no one would have been home.

I parked on a sidestreet and canvassed the neighborhood on foot. I learned early in my career that to say I'm a private dick in D.C. was tantamount to getting a door slammed in my face. In this town, everyone had a secret. Even people who didn't have secrets liked to pretend they had one. The more secrets a person had, the more powerful. And the more they hated investigators.

They didn't mind the police though. Cops kept the neighborhood safe and were notoriously poor at closing cases.

I had some pretty good fake i.d. Had to. The folks in this town were also paranoid.

In each house, I got coffee and a sob story about poor Bob. The first three houses had an empty dog run in back and a kitten playing on the floor. The things people did to be trendy. Socks had made D.C. into a cat-person's heaven. Dogs were suddenly pets non grata. I didn't learn anything until house No. 5.

The woman who answered the door was considerably younger than her neighbors. An adult Siamese perched on her shoulder. She was slight and near the end of a pregnancy. Her t-shirt, which read BABY with a large red arrow pointing toward her stomach, was too tight.

I told her my spiel. She introduced herself as Suzanna Blackwell, and let me inside a house filled with children's toys, family photographs, and warm brown tones. A house she had decorated herself, obviously, but the first one I had walked into that actually felt lived-in.

She sat me at the kitchen table (formica that looked like faked marble) and wiped it off. Then she gave me a plate of cookies and offered coffee or milk. When I discovered that all she had was instant, I took the milk.

"I heard it, you know," she said. She had to push her chair away so that her distended stomach wouldn't brush the edge of the table. "About six in the morning, some cat was yowling. But it sounded like it was in pain, not in heat." She reached up and petted the cat on her shoulder. Its slanted eyes watched me with a cool appraisal. "I looked out the window and saw nothing. Then the yowling stopped and a man ran through my bushes, covered with blood. That's when I called the police."

"You called?"

She nodded. "I used to let Whiskers here go out, but not any more. Too many deaths in the neighborhood. We got him for the kids, but he's really closer to me."

Obviously. I had never seen a cat content to ride on someone's shoulders before. Especially shoulders as small as hers.

"Can you describe the man?"

She nodded. "He was wearing dark clothing, and he was white. He had a regulation haircut -- looked almost military -- and he was about tall -- taller than six feet because his head brushed that tree limb out there."

"The investigating officer didn't talk to you?"

Suzanna smiled and pulled the cat off her shoulder. She rubbed her chin against the top of its head. "He didn't think it all that important."

"You did tell him you saw a man, not a boy?"

"Oh, yeah," she said. "But he was so convinced that it's some gang that he wouldn't even listen to me. Now Whiskers doesn't go outside at all, and I don't even let the kids play in the yard after school. I hope you catch this guy because my husband is talking about finding a place outside the beltway. I don't want him to make the commute from the White House. The drive is long enough now as it is."

Suddenly all my meters started ticking. "Your husband's a political appointee?"

She shook her head. "He's actually detailed from State. He's been at the White House since '86. He's not an appointee so Clinton's people don't want to mess with him. They can't even fill the seats they're supposed to fill. No sense adding a few more -- at least for a while."

"Does everyone here work with the government?" I meant the comment as sarcasm, but she seemed to take me seriously.

"Sure. Except Mrs. Conner, and it seems to me her husband used to work for CIA."

"Her husband?" I had seen no evidence of a man's presence in that house.

"Oh, he's been dead for years. They say he died doing some work in Vietnam in the late sixties, but my husband says that Mr. Conner was actually in Red China when he died. All very hush-hush, even now." But clearly something she enjoyed gossiping about.

"But everyone else works for the government."

"Oh, yes." She bit the head off a gingerbread man and talked around the food. "Willis, next door, is Treasury. The Sanders just moved in. He's with HHS. I could go on."

"What about Bob's owner?"

"Oh, Julie! I forgot about her!" Suzanna bit off the gingerbread man's torso. "She just moved in a few months ago. She trains animals for local stunts and stuff. The house used to belong Senator Sims from Idaho. He sold it to a new woman appointee from Washington State, but she didn't like the neighborhood -- to chichi, she said -- so Julie got it."

I frowned. Old habits died hard. "How many Clinton people in the neighborhood?"

She laughed. "Too many, according to my husband. I think three-quarters of the houses turned over at the turn of the year."

That explained the dog runs and the cat filled households. Not political chauvinism but new owners reflecting the president's bias. Cat people, all of them.

"And no one is upset about the cat deaths?"

Suzanna shook her head. "Willis spoke to us all about gangs the other day, saying that they're not neighborhood oriented any more, that they go where the money is." She sighed. "You just have to put up with things living in the big city. I can't wait until my husband retires and we can get away from all this. Of course, by then, I probably won't think anything of living in fear. I hate it now though." She patted her stomach. "Doesn't seem right somehow."

"No, it doesn't." I said. I stood, having had my fill of gingerbread and milk. "Thanks again, Mrs. Blackwell."

She trailed me to the door, which didn't give me time to study the photographs. Some of them, I noted, were of a skinny man in a suit posed with Bush, or Reagan, or several better known Congressmen. The rest were snapshots of two tow-headed boys, going from smiling babies to gap-toothed children. Twins, it looked like, and at her size, she could be carrying two more.

Amazing the things pictures told about a family and its values. I said my good-byes and was walking to the next house before I remembered.

Snapshots.

How could I have been so dumb?

iv

The rest of the neighborhood proved a wash. Cool reception and even cooler interaction. Bob's owner, Julie, wasn't home, so I made a mental note to contact her later.

I had to clear my mind from the cat garbage. I went to my local information sources and left messages for that any tourists with pictures of that day's mugging at the Jefferson Memorial, promising to pay top dollar for a clear shot. That kept me from spending cash on the development charge, and also gave me a way out so that I wouldn't have to spend money on the naifs who would photograph a crime instead of stop it.

I stopped at Washington General on my way home to see Dolores. She was asleep when I got there, her skin a faint china blue against the crisp white sheets. Her bones looked brittle. Her right arm was in a cast and an IV was feeding into her left. I went and found the duty nurse who told me that Dolores would have to remain for a few days because her malnourishment made her injury more serious than a broken arm and a few cracked ribs would normally be.

"We see lots of this," the duty nurse said. "They can't afford to pay all their bills on Social Security, so they only eat a meal a day and even skip that at the end of the month."

I frowned. "I thought the government was supposed to cover her expenses."

The nurse laughed, a bitter sound. "The government probably won't even cover her hospital bill, since she waited a few hours before coming in. I think we're the only medical workers in the city who support Clinton's health care reform ideas. Maybe then we'll actually get paid for the work we do."

She trudged off, her well worn heels squeaking against the linoleum. Her legs were on par with #45's but the shoes did her no good. Didn't matter though. She kept trim by working crowded hospital corridors. #45 used an overpriced exercise bike.

I found the nurse's legs much more appealing.

v

The phone woke me up at six a.m. Beverly Conner sobbing into the line, "Please come, right away!"

As I turned on the light and rolled out of my waterbed, sliding on the black satin sheets, I wondered which one bit it: the little kitten mewing on top of the microwave? The big tom by the window? The white cat that twined its way around my ankles. I kicked aside piles of unwashed clothing, slid on a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt and stuffed my wallet in my back pocket. I hurried through the living room, narrowly avoiding all the electronics equipment which I too rarely used, and grabbed my raincoat off the credenza Wife #3 did not want. Then I hurried out the door.

I had forgotten that the GW Parkway was full this time of the morning. Commuters in their Beamers, car phones pasted to their ears, trying to be the earliest person in the office. That would change in the middle years of the Administration, when everything became routine, and change back just before the election in case Clinton managed to squeeze a second term out of the voters. Fortunately, I was heading _to_ McLean. My side of the GW Parkway was nearly empty.

I pulled up behind the Virginia police. They had two squads sitting in the middle of the road, lights flashing. Faces peered through curtained windows as they had done on my first visit. I strode up the stone steps to Beverly's house and knocked.

Her face was puffy and her eyes bloodshot. "Mr. Ransom," she said with such relief that I was tempted to put my arms around her. She stood aside to let me in.

The faint odor of vomit covered the scent of cat piss. But the house looked tidy as ever. Half a dozen cats watched warily from the hallway. Another four sat in the picture window, tails twitching.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I found another one, tossed in my rose bushes, shaved. Lieutenant Thornton thinks it is some kind of gang -- "

"Let me go talk to him," I said.

I slipped out the backdoor and joined the three policemen huddled around the rose bushes on Beverly's well manicured lawn. Clumps of black-and-white hair covered the dew-coated grass as if the shaving had occurred right there.

The cat's body looked naked and pathetic on its bed of thorns. "Anyone know who the cat belongs to?" I asked.

"The Reeds down the street," Thornton said, his hands stuck in his back pocket, the cigarette in his mouth unlit. "They've had the cat for two years. They're pretty broken up about it. I think they're even going to let their little girl stay home from school."

"Reed?" I said. "That a name I should know?"

"Doubt it," Thornton said. "They're old Friends of Bill. He was going to give Mrs. Reed a political appointment, but had to settle for a Schedule-C. That nanny thing again."

"How old's the girl?"

"Chelsea's age. Goes to Sidwell Friends, the same school."

I frowned. "You know, Mrs. Blackwell next door saw a man go through her bushes after the last murder."

"Murder?" Thornton said. "You're beginning to sound like the bat."

"Shhh." I glanced over my shoulder at the window. Six cats had crowded onto the sill, but there was no sign of Beverly. Thank god. "She said the man looked military. He sounded more Secret Service to me."

Thornton nodded. "I'll check it out."

I left the site. Something about that cat, discarded and pathetic in death made me think of Dolores, lying in the hospital bed and pasted to an IV she couldn't pay for.

I went back inside. Beverly was sitting at her polished dining room table, looking lost. I couldn't tell if she had overheard Thornton's burst of sensitivity or not. "How'd you get all these cats?"

She smiled, then. It was a sad smile that accompanied a glance out the window. "Most of them were strays," she said. "Dumped by former owners, or lost, or abandoned kittens. Funny thing about cats. They don't beg, no matter how hungry or injured they are." She swallowed hard. "I keep thinking about that. I didn't hear the little guy cry out. I didn't hear anything. I just imagine him trying to maintain his dignity while they were removing it..."

Her voice trailed off. I sat down across from her, trying to imagine how she had lived over the years. Husband with the CIA, always gone, always focused on work. No children. The cats were her life. They were her babies. A cat's death was the same to her as a child's.

Then it all went rocket clear. "Let me see that picture of Bob again."

She frowned, but stood obviously relieved to have something to do. She went into the study and came back clutching the newspaper clipping. I studied the photograph for a moment.

"How many children are on this block?"

"I don't know. Quite a few. They all play together."

"Young children?"

She shook her head. "Young teenagers. Mostly girls. One of them got invited up to the White House last week. It was quite a big deal." She pushed an orange cat off her chair and sat down. "What do you want with the picture of Bob?"

I showed it to her. "Does he look like anyone to you?"

She took it, then pulled a pair of half glasses out of her breast pocket and stared at it. "There are an awful lot of cats that look like Bob," she said. She glanced outside. The latest victim had shared Bob's coloring and general body shape. She glanced back at the photo. "Oh my god," she whispered. "He looks just like Socks!"

vj

The pound had a small herd of black and white cats. I took the friendliest one, who reached out at me through the little triangular holes in his cage each time I passed. The pound let me have him for free. Fortunately, he'd already had his nuts chopped off, or I would have had to wait a few days. I didn't have a few days. I was afraid Mrs. Conner would change her mind by the time I got back.

She hadn't. She had a room specially designed as a cat isolation ward. I guess she used it when a cat was pregnant or seriously ill. Socks II: The Sequel went into that room for the night, and I bunked down on the floor with my watch alarm set for 4 a.m. At that time, Sequel and I would hit the streets.

Mrs. Conner went to bed at nine. I watched the end of the third Indiana Jones movie on Channel 20, then joined Sequel in his little room, watch alarm set. I woke up at midnight with the cat sitting on my back, nuzzling its nose in the hair at the nape of my neck, purring like a souped up V-8 engine. I pushed him off and got him to settle, only to wake up an hour later as a scratchy tongue rubbed a hole in my chin. Finally I grabbed him, wrapped an arm around him (as much to hold him down as to give him comfort) and tried to sleep again. When the alarm went off at four, Sequel had one paw across my chest like a lover.

What was it Thornton had said? Some cliché about how the mighty had fallen?

He had no clue.

I had fixed a little homing device to Sequel's collar just in case. Then I picked him up and carried him to the back door. Together we went out. He prowled and I followed.

The sky was faintly pink at the horizon. The air had an early morning chill and dew had already formed on the grass. By the time Sequel had done his personal business, my tennis shoes were soaked.

I had never trailed a cat before. He didn't have a care for sidewalks, streets or the other amenities of civilization. He crawled under bushes and leapt over fences, ran around houses and hid behind drain pipes. I followed as quietly as I could. Once I lost him when he hid for forty minutes under a rose bush tracking a mouse. I scraped my finger on barbed wire, and stubbed my toe on a hidden brick. By mid-morning, Sequel was camped out on Mrs. Conner's backyard, snoozing in the sun. I was crouched in the bushes, trying to stay out of sight while dislodging the thorns I had picked up from the neighbor's rose bush.

The only thing I had learned all morning was that my fingernails were too short to act as a tweezers. That, and the fact that cats led dull little lives enhanced by their overactive imaginations. If people had that much fun doing mundane tasks, factory workers would be whistlin' while they worked.

Fat chance.

I was no better. I had gone from trailing Ted Kennedy in the pre-dawn hours to following a black-and-white cat who looked like Socks. Of course, if Sequel still had his nuts, the job wouldn't be all that much different.

vii

It took three days, two pair of tennis shoes and fifteen cuts to the right hand alone before I hit paydirt. Sequel and I headed out at our customary four a.m., and I marveled at the neighborhood. I had been prowling through bushes and climbing over fences for days now, and not a soul had called the cops. No wonder the upper class needed security systems. Anyone with a different social standing was beneath their notice -- whether that anyone looked like a thief or not.

The morning was foggy, and the only way I could tell dawn was approaching was because the mist took on a Stephen King/end of the world pink glow. I had discovered a hole in a trellis big enough to hide me but with enough view through the leaves to allow me to keep Sequel in sight most of the time.

Sequel had chased a squirrel under his favorite rose bush when I heard a car door slam a few blocks away. A chill ran down my back. Leather shoes clicked against the asphalt bike path. The wearer either belonged to the neighborhood or had learned what I did about the so-called Neighborhood Watch program.

He came out of the fog like a movie commando bursting through a haze of smoke. He looked just the way Suzanna Blackwell had described him: Over six feet, broad shoulders held with military precision, haircut so perfect it looked glued on. His clothing was invisible Washington blue and his tie was knotted so tight I wondered how he could breathe. He clutched a tape recorder in one hand, and a dish in the other. With the flick of his thumb, he turned the tape recorder on. It made a funny whirring sound that I could almost identify.

Sequel perked up his ears, squirrel forgotten.

"Here, kitty, kitty," the man said, voice soft.

Sequel ran toward him like the man was God himself. The man shut off the tape recorder and crouched, putting the dish on the ground. A half a beat too late, I realized what the sound was.

A can opener.

The man had recorded the sound of a can opener opening a can. Sequel approached, friendlier than I had seen him with anyone but me. Tail twitching in anticipation, yowling like he was about to get a great treat.

The food was probably drugged.

I burst out of the bushes, twigs scraping my thinning hair, trellis tottering, and launched myself at the man. Sequel screamed and darted for his rose bush as I caught the man in the middle. The dish went flying and landed with crash. that echoed in the fog-shrouded street.

The man was all muscle and as solid as the Lincoln Memorial. He landed on his back and grunted as the wind left his body. Lucky for me I had the element of surprise or I never would have taken him. I shoved a knee to his groin and put my whole weight on it as I yanked my cuffs off my belt.

"Stupid son of a bitch," I said, "what are you doing picking on cats?"

Then I looked down at him and knew. One of Quayle's men. They all had gone their own way when Danny returned to Indiana -- loose cannons without a brain cell between them. It had been charming in their boss, scary in men with bodies like Arnold Schwarzenegger. With a grunt, the man shoved me off him. I rolled away in time to push Sequel from the plate of overturned food.

"Beverly!" I cried. "Call 911! Beverly!"

I tucked Sequel under one arm and deposited him near the house as I ran after Mr. Macho. My tennis shoes gave me the advantage of silence, but his training gave him speed. He made it to the non-descript black sedan parked half a block away, slipped in and drove off.

But not before I saw the license plate.

DAN 1996

Dream on, asshole. With folks like him working on Quayle's re-election campaign, Bill and friends would have to be real incompetents to lose.

I stood in the middle of the street wheezing like an eighty-year old with one lung. Sequel twined himself around my legs, licking the remains of canned food off his whiskers.

"Great, buddy," I said, picking him up. "Now we got to get you to a vet and pump your stomach."

At that moment I knew it was too late. I had become a cat-loving bleeding heart with conservative aspirations.

Another Clinton democrat.

I guess it had only been a matter of time.

viii

Thornton tracked our man and brought him in. They don't know what they'll charge him with yet, but they'll make it a felony so the guy will have to spend some time behind bars.

Turns out Mr. Macho had worked for Quayle (my memory was as good as I thought it was) but had been fired for being too stupid -- and acting on those harebrained ideas during the 1992 Bush re-election campaign. Too stupid to work for Uncle Danny. I had been in Washington too long. I had finally seen everything.

This harebrained scheme was right up there with Dan's speech about canals on Mars. Mr. Macho decided to terrorize the little friends of Chelsea Clinton, killing the Socks look-alikes in hopes that word would get to Chelsea, and she would think Washington a horrible place. The pressure would wear on Bill and he would decide not to run in '96. Or something like that. The ultimate goals of the plan were as foggy as that last morning. Apparently Mr. Macho was not too good at future planning.

What a surprise.

I had more good news. My little messages left at strategic places had turned up several good prints of Dolores's mugging. The cops even knew the guy, a former informer for the DEA, cut loose after the Marion Barry deal. He was behind bars now. Dolores didn't get her purse back, but Justice Was Served.

Me, I go over to Beverly's house twice a week for tea and conversation. My apartment has the faint odor of cat piss, thanks to Sequel and my secretary's legs are for shit. But Dolores needed work and before her marriage in the early forties she used to be LBJ's personal secretary, back when he was an unknown Congressman from the Great State of Texas. She's a ball busting, no-holds barred Democrat with a long memory that has served me well on at least two occasions. Amazing how many sons in positions of power will work hard to keep their fathers' memories from being unscathed. Amazing how many Senator fathers have Senator sons. And then some.

I work for the Dems now. Scoping out H. Ross Perot isn't as much fun as going after the Kennedy's -- the little man with big ears doesn't quite have the appetite for parties that Ted has -- but it is work that pays well. Lord knows I'll need the money if Hillary's VAT tax goes through.

But I shouldn't complain. I'm an official FOB now, with a photograph behind my desk to prove it. But it's not the picture of me and Clinton that is my prize possession. It's the gift from Beverly -- a political cartoon clipped from the Washington Post. It's a picture of Socks walking down the street surrounded by cats in suits, obviously secret service. The cutline reads: "Socks Goes to Washington." Beverly stuck a photo of my face over one of the security cats with "My Hero!" scrawled in the side. Sappy sure. But someone has to make this city safe -- even if it is for a small subset of the population.

Besides, compassion is in these days. Compassion for cats is even better. Ever since the news broke, my phone has been ringing off the hook. I'm the only D.C. detective to get his photo in People Magazine -- right next to a picture of Bob the Weather Cat, of course. But whose complaining? He's the one wearing the ugly yellow rain slicker.