

Chapter Nine—Cold Storage

The next morning I walked the two blocks to Bob and Barney's house to borrow their Jeep. Barney greeted me at the door with a small bag of Apple Fritters and a thermos of Hazelnut coffee for the trip. Such a sweet guy. He also offered to come help me, which I politely declined. No better way to lose a new friend than by exposing him to your massive compilation of collectibles.

So with Fritters and thermos in hand, I hopped in the Jeep and was soon on my way to the city. It had been months since I'd set foot in Manhattan, and I was a little nervous about how I'd feel. My life was definitely on the upswing since I moved to New Jersey, but I still considered myself a New Yorker at heart.

The storage locker I rented was located in a big warehouse on the west side of Manhattan, a location you would never refer to as populated. I wasn't afraid to walk through the area, but it definitely had a very seedy and dangerous look about it. One might imagine scenes from "Three Penny Opera" playing out amongst the decaying buildings and abandoned trucks.

When I arrived at the storage facility, the loading docks were empty. I parked Barney's Jeep to the right of the docks and went inside to sign in. The hallways were clear, except for a few men standing by their carts of African artifacts.

Apparently a storage warehouse is the perfect venue in which to sell African art. Or so I surmised. Because every time I went to my locker, the art dealers were there too. Standing in little groups talking, surrounded by numerous carts of masks and statues and other authentic artifacts. I never saw anyone buying any of the stuff, but that didn't stop the sellers from continually displaying it.

Today there were only two art dealers, so I was able to quickly sign in and grab one of the empty carts to go upstairs. As I waited for the elevator, a group of men wearing business suits emerged at the other end of the hallway. They looked out of place in the dirty environment, but perhaps they were here to purchase a nice mask or a fertility statue. As I pushed my cart onto the elevator, one of the men looked at me and immediately stopped talking.

The elevator door shut with a loud bang, instantly reminding me how much I hated coming here. It was gray and dingy and incredibly depressing. Too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer.

All the individual floors of the storage warehouse were divided into rows and rows of lockers, forming a huge labyrinth. The building conserved energy by giving each section of the labyrinth its own individual lighting unit. This meant that the lights would only

turn on when you passed by a special motion sensor. So when a certain area wasn't in use, the lights wouldn't be turned on in that section. And though this made it a rather scary place to be, there was also something sexually arousing about it. At least to me.

When the elevator doors opened on my floor, there were no lights on at all. I pushed my cart out into the darkness, and was barely out of the elevator before the massive metal doors slammed shut behind me. Feeling immediately alone and isolated, I pushed the creaking cart down the center aisle, causing the lights to begin flickering on all around me. I couldn't believe how quiet and desolate it seemed. The only sound was the distant cranking of the elevator equipment, and the incessant creaking of my cart. It's a good thing I wasn't trying to sneak up on anyone, because the element of surprise would be sadly lacking.

When I finally opened my locker for the first time in a year, I was surprised to find it literally packed to the brim. I'd forgotten how full it had become over the years. Maybe that's why I'd stopped coming. Not because I'd lost interest, but because I'd lost space.

The boxes were wedged in so tight that some boxes appeared to merge with other boxes, and smaller items were stuffed in every imaginable air pocket between them. It was a puzzle of mass proportions. I soon realized there was simply too much stuff to fit into the Jeep on one trip. I was going to have to come back. Which meant this simple task was quickly becoming an all day affair.

I began pulling boxes gently from the pile as if I was playing a giant game of Chenga. One wrong move and the whole stack would topple down. Luckily that didn't happen, and the cart was filled within a matter of minutes. What a pain. The process of closing up the locker, taking the cart downstairs, emptying the contents into the Jeep, then coming back up for another load was going to be tedious. But what choice did I have?

When I reached the elevator to go downstairs, I was surprised to find somebody else already there waiting for it. One of the businessmen I'd seen earlier. He was tall and very beefy, like a bodyguard. I wondered what he was doing on my floor. I hadn't heard anyone moving around, and there were no other lights on except the ones in my section. So how did he get up here?

The businessman didn't react to my presence, or look at me at all. Not even the loud squeaking of the cart peeked his attention.

When the elevator arrived, the businessman got on and moved towards the back. I pushed my cart in next and had barely crossed the threshold when the door snapped shut, and the painful whirr of the motor began. I didn't envy the elevator operator. And from the way he was looking at my cart full of collectibles, he didn't envy me much either.

When we arrived downstairs, there was no one in sight. I moved to one of the loading docks and hopped out to open the Jeep. When I came back to start unloading, I noticed that the businessman was standing directly across from my cart, watching it. Was he

casing the items to see if there was anything worth stealing? And why would someone dressed in an Armani suit care what trivial items I might have in my storage locker?

Apparently he didn't. Because as I unloaded my cart, the businessman never moved from his spot or looked at the items again. He appeared to be waiting for someone.

The elevator was still downstairs when I got back inside. I smiled at the attendant as I pulled my cart aboard, and once again he snapped the doors shut as soon as I cleared the entrance. It must have been a game to him. To see how many customers he could nearly decapitate with his swinging doors of death. I was glad I would soon be rid of this place. It didn't have very good karma. Especially today. There was something almost sinister in the air.

When I got off the elevator, I was extremely conscious of my surroundings. Even though I couldn't see or hear anyone, I knew there must be other people on the floor. I could tell because a row of lights was already turned on, lighting a path to a locker area somewhere on the other side of the building. I was glad it wasn't a locker near mine. I didn't like it when other people were around. You'd inevitably catch them staring at your stuff and making horrible value judgments about what you're storing. (Or am I the only one that does that?)

I'd nearly filled a second cart with boxes, when I thought I heard someone whispering in the next aisle. I wasn't sure why anyone would need to whisper, but it gave me the creeps. I quickly put the padlock on my locker door and began the painfully noisy process of pushing my cart down the hallway to the elevator. Every few seconds, I would turn around to make sure I wasn't about to get jumped. But nothing ever happened.

I got on the elevator just in time to save my head from the metal doors, and then quickly loaded the boxes into the Jeep. I was back before the elevator operator had a chance to sit down, which made him extra cranky for our return trip up. I wisely decided to *pull* my cart into the elevator this time, rather than *pushing* it in as I normally did. Therefore, if the doors shut too quickly, they would only smash the cart and not my head.

When we reached my floor, I was surprised to find that all the lights were on, as if the entire floor was abuzz with activity. Yet on my way to the locker, the only sound I could hear was the screeching wheels of my handcart.

So imagine my shock to find someone waiting for me in front of my locker. Another one of the businessmen I'd seen downstairs. He looked very similar to the other guy who had been on this floor earlier, but a little bigger. And a little more intimidating.

"Hello, sir," he said, as I rolled the cart up to my locker.

"Uh, hi," I responded.

"Is this yours?" he asked, pointing to my locker.

I looked at my locker, which had apparently been splattered with streaks of red paint. And it looked like fresh paint too, so it must have happened while I was emptying my cart into the Jeep.

“Yes, it is my locker,” I said. “But I didn’t put that red paint on it. I was up here ten minutes ago, and there wasn’t any paint on it when I left. So that paint is not my fault.”

Why was I being so defensive? And why was I trying to explain myself to this person? Who was he, anyway? Someone who worked for the building? Was this some kind of scam, so the building wouldn’t have to give me my security deposit back? While all these questions whirled around in my head, the businessman continued our conversation uninterrupted.

“That’s not paint, Sir,” The businessman said bluntly. “It’s blood. There was an altercation up here while you were gone. Someone was trying to break into your locker.”

“Why would anyone want to do that?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” He started sounding like one of those guys on Dragnet, speaking in short, clipped sentences, with little or no emotion.

“Who are you, anyway?” I asked, wondering why he was questioning me. “Do you work for the building?”

“No, Sir. I have no affiliation with this building whatsoever.”

“Who are you then?”

“Just a concerned citizen.”

“Uh-huh. Why is there blood? Did someone get hurt trying to break the lock?”

“You might say that.” The businessman cracked a slight smile.

I was starting to get irritated with the businessman’s glib answers. Not to mention suspicious. Anyone who uses words like “altercation” and “citizen” in normal conversation is not to be trusted.

“So where is he?” I asked, hoping my questions would eventually get some informative answers.

“What makes you think it’s a he?” The businessman eyed me curiously. “Did you see something?”

“Yes. I saw something. I saw YOU. And you’re standing in front of my bloody locker, telling me that someone just tried to break into it. But other than *you*, there doesn’t seem to be anyone else around. So I’m not really sure what’s going on here.”

The businessman took a step forward, which caused me to unconsciously jump into one of those stereotypical karate stances you see on old movies. I don’t know what I was planning to do exactly, as I was certainly no match for this gorilla in a business suit. But I felt like I needed to defend myself. Maybe he was planning on having an “altercation” with me as well.

“Mr. Ray, I...” The businessman blurted out, before stopping himself.

How did he know my name? The businessman stopped moving and put his hand up to his ear for a moment. Then without another word he turned and left. I heard the sounds of footsteps walking away, and then all of a sudden they stopped. Was he coming back? I held my breathe in anticipation.

When nothing happened after several minutes, I walked to the end of my row and looked down the hallway. There was no one in sight. But where did he go? Did he just disappear into thin air?

I waited another ten minutes, but it didn’t seem like he was coming back. So I finally opened my locker, found an old Star Wars pillowcase and began wiping the blood off the outside of the locker.

I couldn’t imagine who would want to break into my locker. Maybe it was the person I heard whispering before I went downstairs. But why? What did they think was in there? And how did the businessman fit into the picture? And even more importantly, how did he know my name? I was tired of having all these questions that didn’t appear to have immediate answers.

The rest of the afternoon was spent hauling things from the storage locker to the Jeep. And then from the Jeep into my house. And then another trip back to the city to get the remaining boxes and bags. Thank God for Barney’s bag of apple fritters and the thermos of coffee. They provided me with right amount of sugar and caffeine to keep me going.

It was a long day, but I was glad to finally have all my possessions in one place, under one roof. The sorting and selling and dismantling would come later, but for now I was whole.

I never saw the businessmen again that day, nor did I see anyone who might want to do me harm. On my second trip to the facility, the place had become much more crowded, and there was a flurry of activity among the art dealers.

Many new carts of African art were on display, though it seemed like the sellers were the only people actually looking at them. Looking and touching and sorting and changing and

removing and adjusting. Two of the sellers appeared to be arguing over the handiwork on a particular set of wooden knives. When one of the men pulled out a large machete and began dancing about with it, I knew it was time to go. Like I said, the place was filled with sexual tension.

By the time I got home, unloaded the Jeep, and returned the keys to Bob and Barney, I was exhausted. Bob invited me to join them for dinner, but I told him I was just too tired. All I wanted to do was sit in front of my television and vegetate.

Luckily there was a very campy Celia Westend movie on cable, which provided just the right amount of mind-numbing escapism to make me happy. It also provided more than a few laughs, mostly because it was so bad.

The movie was “Cluck of the Irish,” in which Celia played an upstart fairy who wanted to become the first female leprechaun. In order to do this, she is challenged to help a struggling chicken farmer revitalize his business before the next St. Patrick’s Day. Which, as fate would have it, is only two weeks later.

The premise was ridiculous, of course, but Celia looked stunning in her fairy costume. Wearing little more than a glittery bodice and some computer-enhanced wings, Celia flitted about the screen like a trampy Tinker Bell. And even though she was only supposed to be three inches tall, every male character in the movie still wanted to have sex with her. How they thought that would work out, I don’t know. But they still wanted it.

I felt sorry for Celia Westend. She was so beautiful, and yet she always ended up in these horrible movies. Her acting wasn’t that bad. Sure, she could use a little refining, but you could tell she had some talent. It just never seemed to be showcased very well. Her body was certainly showcased, but that was about it.

As I drifted off to sleep watching the movie, I remember having a dream about Celia Westend. She was following me for some reason. How ironic that in a few short months, that dream would actually become a reality.

Next Episode: The Binds that Tie