

The door to the house cracked open, spilling red light onto the wet wooden porch of the trailer home. A pouty-faced young girl sized me up while I stood there getting soaked in the rain. “What do you want?” she said with a lilting southern drawl. I showed her my identification and said, “I’d like to ask you a few questions about your father.”

“No more cops. I’ve already told you everything I know.”

“I’m a private investigator, ma’am.”

“You the dick my brother hired?”

I touched the brim of my hat. “Mind if I come in? It’s pouring.”

The door slammed shut, and after some chain jangling it swung wide open. The young woman, wearing a tank top and pink sweatpants, dropped onto the couch to pick up where she left off with her television program.

The place was littered with dirty laundry, wadded Kleenexes, and crusty microwave food bowls. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have thought she had a kid. A shattered glass frame stood on a side-table, displaying a picture of the girl and two men I recognized: her brother and her father. It was her father’s violent death that her brother hired me to investigate. Their old man had been found in the bedroom of his ex-wife, completely naked, throat slit from ear to ear, and missing his sexual organs. It was a bloodbath and the cops didn’t have a single clue to go on.

“Nice to finally meet you, Maddy-Rose,” I said.

Her eyes rolled lazily to me. “You always come poking around people’s places in the middle of the night?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said.

Staring at the TV, she said, “Well, whatcha want to ask me?”

“Mind if I sit?”

“You’re soaking wet,” she declared, flipping channels with the remote.

I didn’t mind standing. This wasn’t going to take long.

“What do you know about cutlery?” I said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

“Instruments used to cut. Knives.”

“I know what cutlery means, Mr. Dick. But what does that have to do with anything?”

From my back pocket I produced a long carving knife.

Her eyes darted to me and pinned me to the wall. “Where did you get that?”

“Buried in a drawer of cutlery at your mother’s house.”

“It’s a knife. What about it,” she said, pretending to be absorbed in television.

“Well, I was poking around the scene of the crime, and I thought it was funny that all the other knives in the drawer were coated with dust, but this knife was immaculately clean. By the looks of it, neither you nor your brother cook much—TV dinners are probably what you grew up on since your mother’s never been much of a cook. She told me she hadn’t used a big knife in seven years, since the Thanksgiving before she divorced your father. And yet here was a newly cleaned knife at the bottom of the drawer. Strange. When I held it up to examine it in the light, she braced herself on the counter and asked me to go because she was feeling light headed. This was curious, I thought. But when I compared the forensic incisions with the length and angle of the blade, it was a match. This was the weapon that killed your father.”

“You can’t prove that,” hissed Maddy-Rose, her eyes forming slits.

“Mind if I smoke?” I said, sliding a cigarette from my pack. A book of matches lay on the kitchen counter and I folded it back to light one. “Let’s see if I can. The killer was right-handed. Your mother’s a lefty, so that ruled her out. And your brother didn’t seem dumb enough to commit murder and then call an investigator—although you could have done him the courtesy of telling him the truth so he wouldn’t hire a guy like me to go digging up your family’s skeletons. By the looks of that broken glass in that picture of your father, you didn’t have the best relationship with him. Let’s face it, all signs point to you, sister.”

I shook the flame from the match and looked up. Maddy-Rose was next to me, pressing the tip of the knife into my side.

“You’re not taking me in,” she whimpered, strings of hair falling in her eyes.

“Of course not,” I said, even though that’s exactly what I intended to do.

“Sit down there,” she ordered.

“Are you sure? I’m still wet.”

She pressed the knife harder into my side. My rear end complied and fell into the sofa.

“Hands behind your head!” She walked behind me, produced duct tape from somewhere, and fastened my wrists together.

“Do you have an ashtray?” I said. My cigarette had burned low, a finger of ash hanging from the end.

“Sorry,” she said, flicking the cigarette from my mouth. “This is a no smoking area.”

“You really are a monster.”

“Want to know why I did it?” she said softly.

“Cause you’re a femme fatale?”

Her breath was hot on my neck now. “I was staying with my mother like I do sometimes. My father showed up drunk...like he did sometimes, according to my mother. Usually she would lock the doors and windows and pretend like she wasn’t home, and he would loose steam and go away. But this time he was angry. I think he’d heard about mom’s new boyfriend, cause he was yelling at her, calling her slut and things like that. We were scared because he was kicking the door pretty hard. Mom wanted to protect me, though, so she went out to confront him. When she unlocked the door he seemed calm. She invited him inside and put on a kettle for coffee. I hid in my room because I didn’t know what to expect from him. Then I heard her scream. I heard banging on the walls as he dragged her down the hall to the bedroom. Dragged her by the hair! She still has patches missing.” Maddy-Rose sniffed. She was still leaning over me from behind the couch, knife no longer pressed to my side.

“I heard her screaming no, no, don’t. So I got a knife from the kitchen, the sharpest one I could find. When I went into the bedroom Mom was still screaming, but in a pathetic kind of way. She was bent forward over the top of a chair, her dress hiked over her head. My father’s pants were at his ankles and he had his hands clamped into her hips like lobster claws. His eyes were closed. I put my hand on his forehead and made drew the blade across his neck like playing a long note on a violin. He turned to me, croaking like a suffering frog, groping his throat, trying to keep the blood from pouring onto the carpet.”

“Then I cut off the part of him that hurt her.” Maddy-Rose’s tears fell onto my shoulder. “The same part that used to hurt me, before I was old enough to do anything about it.”

Maddy-Rose walked around the sofa and sat on the coffee table in front of me. Her face was red with crying, her eyes deeper and somehow more wise. She sniffed again. “I won’t let you take me in for killing him.” A smirk flashed in the corner of her mouth.

“Of course not,” I said.

She left the long knife on the coffee table and disappeared into the back room to pack a bag. When she left she didn’t even say goodbye. As soon as I was sure she wasn’t coming back for anything, I wriggled easily out of my duct tape manacles.

The rain was still coming down as I stood in the doorframe of the trailer, lighting another cigarette. Maddy-Rose’s brother, my employer, wasn’t going to like what I had to tell him. After breakfast, I would pay him a visit, collect the money for the work I’d done, and inform him that I didn’t have any more leads than the cops, that the case had gone cold.