

Billionaire's Accidental Wife by C.ELLICA

Chapter 76 Three hours later, Doctor Lanna, Catherine, and Shawn were seated in the old doctor's white SUV as it eased into a parking spot in front of the orphanage administration officer's house just next to the massive old building of Julia and Mason Orphanage. The three got out and looked around; the neighbourhood was completely lifeless. After all, it was almost nine in the evening, save for the stereotypical random dog barking in the distance. Even for a Friday, it was unusually inactive.

"The children must be asleep now." The doctor murmured as if answering his silent questions. Shawn supposed the outrageous late-night board games would have to wait for the weekend for the administrator and her family. It was not a life he'd been interested in pursuing, but with Catherine, he might want to consider his option soon. Shawn saw some of those people on the rare occasion when they could find a babysitter. – They were continually bugging him with the same questions: "When are you going to settle down and have children?" "Don't you want children? Isn't it past time for you to tie the knot?" "He was, indeed, but under different circumstances. His comments, on the other hand, had always been direct and unflinching. Though Shawn was not a harsh or cruel person, the subject of marriage and family simply irritated him. He was keen to point out that if he wanted to see a movie, he just looked up the show times online and went. If he wanted to go out to supper, he just got in his car and drove to the restaurant of his choice. He always said that freedom was far superior to changing diapers or watching those obnoxious kids' TV shows. There was also the same argument every time. "Don't you want your name to live on?" they'd ask To which he would invariably respond, "There are plenty of Richmonds in the world to take care of that problem." ' He wasn't a lone wolf, but rather an enclave of sorts. Maybe he hadn't met the right woman yet. Among the most vexing annoyances was Shawn's grandfather, who was continually harping on the injustice Shawn was doing to him by not giving them any grandkids. It's no surprise that the old guy was overjoyed when he told him about Catherine and their accidental Vegas marriage. This, while annoying, always made him laugh a little. The old guy accused Shawn of being overly self-centered, which he readily admitted. Ironically, the old man would always ask, "Don't you want any children so that when you become older, you'll have someone to look after you?" Odd, now he was thinking the same thing. Shawn didn't feel the need to point out the ironic absurdity of that argument. The conversations always ended with the old man not understanding and Shawn being content to let the older man remain frustrated. The need to procreate was something the younger Richmond did not possess or simply ignored. Now, he stood in the middle of what surely must have been the capital of the center of unwanted children. Catherine interrupted his thoughts. "This orphanage looks so bleak and so boring. Is this the right place?" she asked and pointed to a three-story old stone building style home that stuck out like a sore thumb in the midst of nowhere.

"I think so. The doctor knows this place better than I do. So maybe this is it." He left the car and strode purposefully up the walkway toward the front door behind the doctor. Catherine followed less confidently behind.

Lights were still on in what he assumed to be the receiving room and in a few other windows upstairs. As the doctor approached the porch, he could see a television inside. "Looks like the admin guy is awake," Catherine observed.

"Oh yes dear, I called him earlier and we were welcome to visit. After all, Anthony was a celebrity among the children." The doctor replied and rang the bell. Shawn empathized, "He probably won't sleep well for a while."

As the three stepped up to the door, a ginger cat appeared in the glass partition of the doorframe. The feline looked at the visitors as if it was a butler receiving guests. The doctor rang the doorbell again, and a few moments later, the door cracked open slightly. An older man, probably in his mid-sixties, judging by the streaks of grey in his thick brown hair, peeked around the corner just below a latched chain.

"Oh, Lanna, dear?" His voice was strained, like it was an effort to speak, much less be cordial. "Welcome, come inside." He was casually dressed, wearing a pair of brown khaki pants and an old green sweater.

As they went inside, the old man kept on glancing at Catherine. That made the latter uncomfortable, so Shawn held her hand. "Sir, this is my wife and my name is." "I know who you are, Mr. Richmond. Anthony had been so proud of you that he even left me a picture before he died and told me about you and your wife. I'm j-just curious. In the newspaper, they say that she was dead after the bombing incident, but just a few hours ago, I saw her picture on the wanted list on the police precinct website" "What?!?" Catherine grumbled, obviously surprised by the old man's words. "Jesus!" "Catherine, relax, let me handle it." Shawn kissed her forehead, held her hands and murmured something in her ears that made her blush. While the doctor smiled and watched the window view of the parking lot as if expecting someone. "Oh I thought you knew, dear?" the old man replied and gestured for them to come to the receiving area. "Wanted for what?" Shawn asked, clearly shocked but trying to put things together. This must be Javier's doing "Of course, the bombing at the cafe." The old man added that his slight French accent had become more prevalent since her mood seemed to have lifted slightly.

Catherine panicked again, "F**k, this is not good. I didn't, Jesus! I did not." "Oh, I know dear, it's the Thai after the tablet I guess." The doctor said with a slight smile. After all, Doctor Lanna told him everything earlier. The old man murmured, "Please excuse the mess, quite a lot of things to do in the last week or so, since the closure of this institution." "Closure?" Shawn asked and surveyed the place, "why?"

"Financial problems and -".

"You don't have to worry about it, sir, I will call my assistant later and a cheque will be donated here shortly. Don't close this orphanage."

The old man halted for a minute and paused, staring at him disbelievingly, as if thinking about if he was serious or not. After all, it would take more than half a hundred thousands pounds per year to run this orphanage. Shawn added, "I'm serious sire, don't close this institution. My old man will be disappointed. The children need this."

"I don't know how to thank you, young man." The old man murmured and wiped a single tear on his cheeks as he stood to the side to let the three visitors in. The man must have been a neat freak. There were a few boxes lying around, a small stack of letters on the table, and a small array of baking pans filled with various foods, presumably brought over by the locals who donate food for the children.

Shawn asked, "About my wife's name on the wanted list, do you have any contact at the police precinct?"

"I have someone in mind," He replied and closed and shut the door behind them, leading the visitors to a sitting area with a fireplace and motioning to a very nice, creamy-looking couch. The décor may best be described as erratic. While the front of the building resembled a neo classical northwest style, the interior appeared to be more of a mosque than a Chilgren residence. Except for a heavy, mahogany table that complemented the flooring in the living room and corridors, there was virtually no furniture. The walls were adorned with many religious symbols and images from various theologies. Each wall seems to be dedicated to a separate historical culture or faith.

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Chapter 77 "This is a very charming residence you have here, Sir." Catherine broke the proverbial ice with her ambiguous compliment. "Thank you, dear." The old man's smile was sincere. "I and my wife appreciated all religions and cultures and appreciated each one's contributions to the world." He drifted off in thought, then returned from his office, where he took the number of his precinct officer's contact." Here, this is the calling card of my dear friend. Sgt. Vasquez."

"Thank you, sir," Shawn replied as he held the card. "I agree with my wife, sir, you have a very interesting residence here. It would be a shame if you closed this orphanage."

"I know, Mr. Richmond." He sighed and added, "To some, this decoration might be confusing, but I believe that we all came from one place in history and that what had once been a singular view has become twisted and changed over the years. But remaining in every religion and every cultural morality system, a fraction of the truth still existed." He stood and asked if the three guests would like tea or coffee. "It's too late in the day for me to have any. That stuff would keep me up 'til the morning. But I can make a pot if you'd like." He waited expectantly. His thoughtful smile was overwhelming. "That would be great, dear if it's not too much trouble," the doctor answered and yawned. The man smiled down at her. "No trouble at all, doctor." She spoke like he had known him for years.

While he was in the little mini kitchen, Shawn decided to continue the conversation. "Did you know about the other flank of the tablet, sir? and its location?"

Sounds of pots being filled with water and dishes being moved around came before the answer. "Yes, a little more than a month before your grandfather died, he sent me a package, I don't know what it was, but..." There was a pause before he proceeded. But I lost it... I-well put it in my collection as a remembrance, I thought the old man had given me a gift and so I put it on display. And when Doc Lanna here told me about it and it's significant, I couldn't find it anywhere. He pointed to an empty glass box near the statue of some Chinese deities, "There... I put it there, but it's gone now and I don't know who took it."

Everyone looked to where the old man pointed as he sighed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Richmond. I didn't know it was that important. I should have been more careful." "Oh, it's okay, sir, you didn't know." There was a minute of silence before he reappeared from the mini kitchen.

Catherine smiled at him as he came through the half-glass doorway, a small container of cookies in his right hand.

The old man returned the smile. "I wish I knew what it was though. Anthony didn't leave me a note, but he knew for sure I love ancient artifacts and old things," he began, "When it's gone, I told the police about it, but I doubt those incompetents at the police department will ever find it. They thought I was delusional when I told them about its value."

"You told them everything?" Catherine asked.

"Well, yes. A few myths and all," he paused, "It was a bad idea, wasn't it?"

The three nodded while the doctor yawned again.

"Oh, fool, me and my mouth again." The old man sighed, "Do you think the bombing incident is all because of it? I was there having coffee when it happened, and the doctor as well. I saw her when the chaos began." He looked at the doctor and shook his head. "I'll be damned!" His face became resolute.

"Coincidence?" Catherine asked.

"Nothing is a coincidence about it. Someone wanted you to be silent. We had the same incident as well."

"Oh, hell... This is not good." Rather than breaking down, an odd sort of anger had taken over his demeanor. "Who could take the other side of the tablet anyway?" "That's a question I can't answer." The doctor replied, "Here, have a look at the other side," She took the seven-inch broken tablet from her bag and showed it to the old man, "That's it,

this is the other side of it.” the old man accepted it and held it like it was a delicate baby, “This is a guess with the time! It is indeed from the 14th century BCE. This is one of the other portions. This small but precise votive tablet or plaque is made of fired clay with traces of red paint or lacquer and is gilded with gold leaf. It dates to the late Ayutthaya or early Bangkok period (18th or early 19th century), and possibly earlier but Anthony mentioned that it was older than or somewhere late in the 14th century.”

The three listened as the old began its story. “These cuneiform symbols here are something important,” he paused, “Actually, I have taken a picture of the one that is missing. Maybe we can decipher this one and it might lead us to find the key.” He stood immediately and went to his drawer. The three looked at each other as the old man continued, this time with a picture of the other broken piece of the tablet, “Here... If we put it together, it’s like one.” The old man continued. “According to rumors, such tablets were obtained by Buddhist devotees and left in sacred cave retreats and shrines as acts of merit, or they were acquired at religious sites as mementos. Within Buddhist Southeast Asia, the practice was most prevalent in Thailand and Burma. The tablets were often made in one location and then carried by pilgrims to be left at a site in another location, but this one is unique because it was like a map.”

“How did you know any of this?” Catherine asked.

“When it’s gone, I did my research. If this was just an ordinary tablet, no one would steal it. But what I found out was indeed special. Maybe you have an expert to decipher this?” “I did. I have to employ a historian.” “Then that’s very good. Maybe this picture can help. I’m sorry for not taking care of it.” “Don’t worry, sir; at the very least, we have this photograph,” Shawn added, while Catherine had taken a cookie and was nibbling on it, listening intently. “You said the police came by a couple of times?” Shawn acknowledged the question when it felt like the old man could

answer.

He snapped out of his daze with a start, “Yes.” underlining an anomaly about the answer. “It seemed strange to me that the investigators that came to visit me were, on each occasion, a different person.” It was Shawn’s turn to perk up. “What did they look like, sir, the two officers?” A barely disturbed look appeared on his face. “The first officer was very thoughtful. He was possibly just under six feet tall, bald-headed, Asian white guy.” Then, his thoughts wrapped around the details. “Now, the second cohort was taller, probably 6 feet or more or so. He had an expensive trench coat on, but I could tell he must have been pretty strong. His behavior was anxious, though not very thoughtful. I heard his name is Javier.” = Catherine and Shawn looked at each other as he continued, “Not the same as from his ID, but he said it was just his middle name. Odd really. I much preferred the other policeman.” The old man’s words sounded like a child speaking about an appreciation for tarts and candies. Catherine and Shawn had finished their snacks while the doctor fell asleep on the single couch, holding a cookie. The old man continued, “This second man, did he produce any identification?” Shawn had become more curious.

He gave a look of confirmation. "Yes, he said his name was Detective Zeus Morpheus." He stood and walked back into the mini kitchen to retrieve the coffee. "Cream or sugar?" she called to them from the half-glass doorway. "Both." The two of them responded at the same time, which he acknowledged by adding the substances to the drinks." He continued speaking while stirring the cups, "...he presented his badge and ID. Of course, I have never seen those things before. It looked real enough, I suppose. I had to go by what I'd seen on television. But he was an invasive young man, I must say. He went through all of my ancient stuff in the upstairs office and pretty much everywhere else."

"Did you notice if he took anything when he left?" "No. I made sure that nothing was taken. I was the victim, so there would be no need to confiscate anything of mine." He sat thoughtfully. I don't think the man found what he was looking for anyway. After he was done tearing the place apart, he began asking me more questions. His queries didn't strike me as weird until later." "What exactly did he inquire about?". He returned with a silver serving tray containing two large latte cups. "Well, he seemed very interested in Anthony's orphanage donation, then asked about the tablet more than anything else. While Detective Zeus appeared to be genuinely concerned about who might have had it, he assumed it was a local theft, a sort of gang. Detective Zeus only asked questions about it

and anyone who may have been interested in it." There was a pause. Catherine and Shawn exchanged a brief glimpse of intrigue before gracefully accepting their too large cups of coffee with a polite "thank you." Shawn returned his gaze to the man, who was now sitting attentively staring at his folded hands in his lap. "Did this man have any scars or an unusual accent, anything that would mark him apart?"

Her head slanted to the right a few inches. "Now that you mention it, I thought I heard something strange in his speech. I didn't think much of it, but some of his statements were almost too controlled as if he was trying to hide his accent, almost Thai, and the other man had a massive scar on his face." He hesitated for a second, visibly recognizing something was clearly out of place in this entire scenario."

But why would he..?" "Sir," Shawn answered before she could finish. "I don't believe that guy was a cop." The statement struck him, even though now it was becoming obvious. "I don't understand."

"Earlier this week, we were ambushed in the airport, then targeted in a remote town, and finally bombed in the nearby cities. It had to be a coincidence, but I know it wasn't." His face was dazed. "That is, oh my god, were the bad guys after me?" "I guess not anymore. You lost something important and for them, you are no longer useful." Catherine replied. She looked down thoughtfully. The poor man had been through too much in the last week. "And do you believe this man had anything to do with the bombing in the cafe? Not just random terrorism?"

"Maybe," Catherine leaned closer to her, setting her mug down on the wooden table in between. "Is there anything you can tell us about what Sir Anthony was working on? What did you and he discuss? If we can figure out where he hid the key, maybe we can find the Buddha

sooner and end this whole mess?" His face changed from confused to resolute. The look was a little scary for both of the visitors. "I cannot say for certain what Anthony had mentioned, we talk about everything after all, but I do know what he was after for." The older man stood and started walking towards the stairs on the other side of the room. "I may know where we can find what you are looking for, though after thinking about the tablet, I guess..." he smiled and motioned for them to follow. "I know where to find the key." Shawn shared a skeptical glance with Catherine.

Shawn and Catherine followed him up the carpeted stairs into a corridor packed with children's portraits and mementos from the past. Though the old man had no offspring of his own, there was no shortage of children. There were images of boys and girls with what appeared to be siblings or relatives. A few black and white images, some of which appeared to be rather ancient, peppered the wall space, one of which was a wedding photograph. A date was scribbled in the corner with what seemed to be faded black ink. It said something about June 20th, 19-something. He couldn't make out the final two digits.

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"A photo of my parents on their wedding day," he replied, perplexed by Shawn's baffled look at the wall. "That's my favorite," he smiled, engrossed in the etchings of time. They went down the corridor until they reached the last doorway on the right. The door to the small office was open. It was simply furnished with a few black and white nature images in dark wooden frames. The desk was a deep black hue, yet it was far from modern or stylish. It could nearly have been mistaken for an antique. On the surface, a laptop computer sat silently. The silent PC was accompanied by a few pieces of mail, most likely invoices.

A raven bookcase stood next to the desk. Its decks contained only a few books: the Bible, the Torah, the Koran, and a few works on ancient secrets. There was one book that appeared out of place among the collection of spiritual and historical reading. "You must have really enjoyed studying religion," Shawn broke the silence again. It must have been difficult for the newly widowed man to re-enter a room where his wife surely spent a great deal of his time.

"Yes," he replied thoughtfully. "I loved to read by candlelight. Sometimes, we would read together downstairs, but after I would go to bed, my late wife would come in here and continue." "Sounds like quite a nice hobby," Shawn continued.

"Most people spend their whole lives believing what they were taught as children. I love to read, I did not simply just accept what was given to me. And Anthony and I share the

same belief.” “So he believed there was a real Buddha?” Catherine’s comment was uncertain.

“Not exactly, dear,” the old man said, his gray-blue eyes weary as he looked fondly at the books on the shelf. “You see, I and Anthony share the same principle that there is a small piece of truth inside each religion. At one point, thousands of years ago, we all came from one place. Most people know it as Eden. The many different stories you read in the Koran, Bible, and Torah came from what was at one point a single truth. Even all of the pagan religions had bits of the truth within, but the Buddha was among the most unique and almost non-fictional. Anthony wanted an answer. He doesn’t need the wealth of it, but somehow he believes that there is something inside the Buddha that could answer his questions about his theory.” “He never mentioned that to me before,” Shawn said. Sure, he didn’t. He was skeptical at first, but believed he didn’t just look for the Buddha because of its wealth.” “You mean he doesn’t know where the Buddha is?” “Exactly. He was almost at the end of the search, but he knew his life was about to end.” “So he gave me the task of finishing it?” Sean asked. “I believe yes.” The old man added that it made the couple look at each other. “Jesus! How could my grandfather be this obsessed about something impossible?”

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Chapter 78 “What theory are we talking about here?” Catherine asked. The old man answered, “Well...he believed that there was one God, but he wasn’t sure which one though. Don’t ask me. I shared his sentiments. This is where the search for the Buddha started. He believes that there is something inside the statue that may answer his questions. I thought he had given it up. I never thought he was still obsessed with it.” “So he is monotheism,” Shawn said with a nod and went to see the nearby statues and deities.

“What is that?” Catherine asked and followed Shawn’s gaze.

“Monotheism is simply defined as the belief in one god and is usually positioned as the polar opposite of polytheism, which is the belief in many gods.”

The old man agreed and added, “However, in the ancient world, the concept of monotheism as we understand it today did not exist; all ancient people were polytheists. They may have elevated one god as higher than the others (henotheism) but recognized the existence of divine multiplicity.” “You mean Sir Anthony had been into many beliefs and religions and ended up believing that the golden buddha had the answer to it?”

“Yes.”

“That is insane,” Catherine muttered at their back.

"Yes and no, truth be told, he seeks more than just the religion itself, even the concept of the universe, though for the ancients it consisted of three realms: the sky (the heavens); earth (humans); and the underworld (sometimes known as the netherworld or simply 'the land of the dead'). The sky was the domain of the gods and was crowded with a host of divinities understood in a gradient of powers. Many ancient civilizations had a dominant god, or a king of the gods, with other divinities being in charge of various aspects of life, serving as a court of advisers, or simply as messengers to humans below. Many of these powers could transcend (cross over) to the earth below in various manifestations and Anthony wanted to know if they too were real. He truly believes that whatever inside the Buddha is the answer to all of his questions."

"I think I remember Sir Anthony mentioning that to me before. He said that the modern concept of monotheism also assumes two other concepts, those of 'belief' and 'faith.' The problem in understanding religions in antiquity is not that they did not believe in things or that they lacked faith in the gods and goddesses." Catherine said.

"Agree Mrs. Richmond, however, this was not often articulated or manifested in the same way that we now assume in our religious systems. Unlike the later creeds of Christianity, there was no comparable creed in the various ethnic cults in the Mediterranean basin." The old man added, as he caressed the statues of some known deities, "Just like, the foundational story for the idea that Jews were monotheistic is when Moses receives the commandments of God on Mt. Sinai: "I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods before me." The Hebrew could actually be translated as "no other gods beside me." This does not indicate that other gods do not exist; it is a commandment that the Jews were not to worship any other gods. Worship in the ancient world always meant sacrifices. Jews could pray to angels and other powers in heaven, but they were only to offer sacrifices to the god of Israel."

"Seriously? Shawn asked, clearly absurd by the old man's belief.

"And now, early Christianity became complicated with the concept of one god when a new concept was introduced. From the very beginning, Christians began to claim that along with Jesus's resurrection from the dead, he had also been "exalted" to heaven and given a seat "at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). 1 Peter 3:21-22 states that: "It (baptism) saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him." "So he studied almost all of mankind's known religions?" Shawn asked, and shook his head.

"Yes, and he believes the golden Buddha has the answer. But the thing is, followers of Buddhism don't acknowledge a supreme god or deity. They instead focus on achieving enlightenment—a state of inner peace and wisdom. When followers reach this spiritual echelon, they're said to have experienced nirvana."

Catherine nodded, "Agree, I know that because I have a friend who said that their religion's founder, Buddha, is considered an extraordinary being, but not a god. The word Buddha means "enlightened."

"Oh yes." The old man nodded and added. "The path to enlightenment is attained by utilizing morality, meditation, and wisdom. Buddhists often meditate because they believe it helps awaken the truth. There are many philosophies and interpretations within Buddhism, making it a tolerant and evolving religion. Some scholars don't recognize Buddhism as an organized religion, but rather, as a "way of life" or a "spiritual tradition."

"So I suppose my grandfather knew this: what's with the search for the golden Buddha if he was not after its wealth but the knowledge it contains," Shawn asked as he held the tablet tightly on his chest and the picture copy of the other missing part of it.

"I wish I knew, young man, I wish I knew. Because for me, I have already found my inner peace. This orphanage is my inner peace. As long as children are being saved from the street, my life is complete."

Shawn sighed, "Just like when I was a kid, my grandfather loved to hide something, and he would urge me to find it for him. And here I am now doing exactly the same for the old man, and I thought those days were done. I'm back to square one again, not to mention he used to play unfairly. How could he be so obsessed? This search is impossible."

Catherine and the old man gave him a similar look of confusion. He explained, "Let's put it this way, there is a lecturer who had a class of about twenty people and made them stand in a circle. He then went to one individual and told them to repeat what he had told them to the next person in line. After murmuring the secret in the person's ear, that person leaned over and whispered to the next student in line. This process was repeated around the room until the last student had heard the professor's message. At that point, he asked the last pupil what the phrase was. Although it was comparable to what he had told the first person in line, what he had whispered into the first ear had changed to something very different in mere minutes."

"That's exactly what your grandfather thought happened with the original religion," Shawn smiled at him.

The old man nodded, "I am not sure what it is he was looking for, but if there is something to help us read the tablet, it would be in this room... we don't have time to give it to your expert if those men were after the tablet as well, you need to decipher those runes on the tablet asap."

His hand waved carelessly towards the desk and the rest of the contents of the room.

The two visitors exchanged a puzzled look. Shawn said what they were thinking, "Didn't the officer come to look through this stuff?"

"They came up here and went through everything. The first group of police was very thoughtful of my things. They were comprehensive but were thorough to leave everything the way they found it." His sweet face turned into a sort of scowl, "That Javier one was quite the opposite, though. He tore through everything, leaving books lying around all over the place. The garage was an even larger mess. He went through our waste, leaving junk all over the place. The building was total trash after that gentleman left. It took many hours to put everything back in its place, but it gave me a chance to look back on some fond memories."

The old man clearly seemed to be a "glass-half-full" kind.

His eyes returned from a distant gaze to the present. "Mr. Richmond, you and the young wife may look through any of my or my wife's things that you wish. I trust you, but I'm too old and frail for such a task. My wife knew all of this stuff, but it's been years and my memories have gone to the edge where I mostly forget the where and how, so if you can find someone who can help you decipher the tablet, you may keep it."

"If we do find something..." Catherine started.

"You may keep it," the old man recited for her. "Whatever you find, I hope it helps you find the golden Buddha and answer my old friend's many questions." He smiled again and disappeared around the door into the aisle.

"Can he not just tell us what we are looking for and where it is?" Catherine mulled over this out loud.

Shawn had to laugh. Sometimes historians can be a little socially uncomfortable. He presumed this couple was no different. Those types of people spend their whole lives studying and analyzing the lives of other people from many different cultures and periods. That was bound to affect one's social abilities. He couldn't help but wonder if the old man knew more than he was letting on.

Shawn contemplated the events of the last 72 hours. He had to find a way to read the tablet. Apparently, the old man downstairs wasn't going to assist any more than tell him that the first step to unfolding this puzzle might be somewhere in this room.

"What are we looking for?" Catherine asked, interrupting his thoughts. "I'm not sure... maybe something like some old runic text with the same symbols with modern counterparts," he answered, and began looking at the old religious texts, flipping through pages, scanning for some kind of bookmark that someone else might have missed. Catherine, too, began looking through some of the old man's wife's things. She joined Shawn at the bookshelf, picking up the manuscript of some old poem. She opened it and looked through the table of contents.

“Maybe it isn’t here.” She brushed against him slightly as she continued thumbing through the pages.

The touch of her skin sent an electric chill up and down Shawn’s spine. He looked up and smiled at her. “I’m sorry you’re involved in this.” His gaze was serious. She smirked back at

him. “I have to say, I don’t enjoy being shot at,” she paused, “but this is our fight. Me and you.” She kissed him on the cheeks. Shawn grinned, “do you think we can have a little time for a quick...”

“No, Shawn! No!”

“Worth a try,” he winked. She rolled her eyes.

He snorted a laugh. Shaking his head, he continued his search.

Fifteen minutes went by and still, the couple had found nothing that they thought to be what the wife had been working on. It was starting to feel like a dead end.

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“You know what? I think this is just an ordinary rune symbol. Let me see it on your tablet. We can perhaps decipher this.” Catherine said after she held the tablet when Shawn had given up looking for something.

“I think you’re right.” Shawn spun the chair at the desk around and plopped down while she perused the pages as she paced the small room.

Catherine had only begun to pace back from the window in the room when, suddenly, she stopped. Lifting her head, she smiled at Shawn. “This is just a simple conversation. This is futhark.”

“What?” He asked and went to her side as she read. “Futhark was a Scandinavian runic alphabet that evolved from the Younger Futhark after the introduction of stung (or dotted) runes at the end of the Viking Age. These stung runes were regular runes with the addition of either a dot diacritic or bar diacritic to indicate that the rune stood for one of its secondary sounds (so an i rune could become an e rune or a j rune when stung).

“Makes sense, it was the same.”

Her smile was joined by a nod. “I think I know what we’re looking for.” She took a step over to the desk and set the tablet down on the shiny black surface. Shawn took a piece of paper and a pen, and they did their conversion for twenty minutes.

"This is nonsense. These are just some scabbled letters."

"F**k! Maybe we should convert it again." She asked him as her hand reached down for the envelopes on the table and saw something that took her interest on the far end of the old man's desk, a book about. "A polyalphabetic cipher." "Worth a try?" Shawn responded as Catherine tapped the tablet and scrolled for something more.

Catherine murmured under her breath, clearly relieved to have finally accomplished something. "Shawn, you can start substituting the letters as I read this..." "OK."

"The Vigenère cipher is probably the best-known example of a polyalphabetic cipher, though it is a simplified special case. The idea was to encipher the first letter of the message using the first shifted alphabet, so A became B, B became C, etc. The second letter of the message was enciphered using the second shifted alphabet, etc."

Two hours later.

"I think we just found what we were looking for... this is the map."

Dave Brown's Residence

Eddie left the car parked on the road in a parallel spot about a half-block from Dave's residence. Bringing the captive Javier's man along would have been impossible. Rather, leaving him behind in the care of his subordinates seemed the more practical thing to do. Seventy-two hours ago, everything went into chaos. Shawn Richmond was still missing with

his wife and when he contacted him again his tracking beacon was lost, and the only way to know where the couple had gone was at Dave's home. Any clue would be helpful, and eying Javier's men sneaking was just a bonus. As he reached the house, Eddie strode stealthily from the open view of the freeway to the cover of a neighbor's residence a couple of gates down. More than likely, if the authorities were there, they would be posted at the front and back of the building. He crawled around the back veranda of the first house, careful to stay low and in the shadows. Inside, a tremendous flat-screen box was illumined with some late-night Korean movie. Eddie lunged into the nook and juggled to the house directly next to Dave's. There, he leaned behind a wooden railing and waited next to a tiny entrance. He reached up and cautiously loosened the latch, careful not to cause any disturbance. The last thing he needed right now was a dog to wake up. Fortunately, no dog appeared. Keeping near to the back wall, Eddie strode closer to his target. He could see the shadow of what had to be an officer standing on the back veranda smoking a cigarette. Novices. Any moron could have seen the warden from a mile away.

The man was pacing back and forth, obviously exhausted with his task for the night. As he turned the opposite path, Eddie silently scraped under the veranda, squatting as he hurried. Fortunately, the terrace was about six feet high. Crickets twittered their night songs loudly. There was barely enough sound cover, but he didn't need much. To get into the building, he would have to take out the warden. Maybe he didn't need to murder the man. Knocking him unconscious could have the same effect.

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Eddie preferred not to leave any loose ends, though. The killing was something he'd been doing for a long time, and over the years he had become entirely competent at it.

Above him, through the breaks of wood, the warden halted his action and swiveled slowly back the way he'd just come. With his minute at hand, Eddie was on the strides, flying up to them in twos, careful not to trip. Unfortunately for the police officer, none of the pillars made a sound, and in one swift action, the long blade was shoved through the back of the officer's neck and out the front of his throat. A disturbing gurgle was the only noise he made before falling to the terrace, shock imprinted lifelessly on his large eyes. Blood poured freely from the injury and trickled in between the holes in the wood to the ground below.

Eddie scrubbed the blade clean on the man's shirt, then took a quick inventory, making certain there was no one standing directly inside. There wasn't. He trudged to the door. It was unlocked. He imagined that if he had shown up twenty minutes later, the "guards" might have been found blacked out on the couch with the Discovery Channel playing in the background.

Carefully opening the door, he stumbled into what appeared to be the dining area. The dwelling was dark and not too small, except for a fluorescent light in the kitchen, which shaped a pale flicker in the adjoining little rooms nearby. Eddie walked stealthily across the hardwood floor. Rounding the dining room corner, he could make out the silhouette of the other policeman through the front window, standing obviously unaware of what had just happened to his colleague. A few peaceful steps up the stairs, and Eddie was standing in Dave's study.

He had to survey quickly. It would only be a matter of time before the other authorities went back to check on their colleague. Javier's men had said there was an envelope on Dave's desk that contained what he needed. After all, the b*****d betrayed his boss for his life, and now he

knew that Dave was in Alfonso and Javier's hands.

What the hell was he looking at anyway?

Eddie scanned the workstation for the envelope. He'd taken a big chance by coming here. A poem! He was really looking for a poem. How pathetic. But if it was the only way

to know where Shawn Richmond was, then he didn't have a choice to be picky. He knew by now that Shawn was on his way to look for some clue about the treasure of his grandmother. He knew him better than anyone else in the world anyway.

A bundle of envelopes sat at the edge of the desk. Setting the blade down on the black wooden surface, he picked up the letters and shuffled them through his gloved fingers, not sure what he was looking for. He completed at the bottom of the stack, having found nothing but ordinary junk mail and statements from many assistance art organizations. Disheartened, he let the bunch fall back to the surface of the desk next to his knife.
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Have Javier and Alfonso been duped by Dave? He would not be surprised. He'd considered the possibility that Dave had sent Javier's men here, knowing full well that there would be police around the area. Perhaps Alfonso had underestimated the talents that Dave possessed. Then also, certainly his captive would not be so foolish as to trust that the police would be able to subdue them. He was just unlucky that Eddie was waiting for him in the parking lot.

Not at all. It had to be here. He picked up the envelopes again and scanned them more meticulously. About halfway through the stack, he halted at one that seemed peculiar. It was from a monetary organization he'd never heard of. He agreed. There were a million monetary consultants out there, but this one blew him away as unusual, It had already been cleared, whereas the rest were still sealed. Unconsciously dropping the other mail, he eliminated a piece of paper from the frayed top. At the bottom of the correspondence, he recognized the name of the historian Shawn had employed a few weeks earlier. It was a letter from the historian. It was the translation of the poem from the gibberish rune in the tablet that he knew Shawn and Catherine would be looking for, and it was a map.

Hell!

Suddenly, a noise came from downstairs. The front door closed. Eddie pleated the paper into a cargo pocket in his green old pants as he shifted over to the door of the study. Below, he could hear the excessive footsteps of someone who had no notion of what had transpired and what was about to. As the sound of the shoes on the hardwood moved toward the kitchen, Eddie took a few precipitous steps below, pressing close to the wall. Even though this flatfooted beat officer was certainly no match for his level of ability, he still wanted to always use the element of surprise if it was available, a policy that had probably saved his hide more than once. In the kitchen, the refrigerator door opened, the light flooding the kitchen with a mixture of natural and fluorescent light as he slowly worked his way down the stairs to the veranda, and he disappeared into the night.