

DEMON'S EYE

I never grew tired of the scene. Lorraine Beckley, clad only in a satin sheet, says nothing. She merely reaches into her pillow case and pulls out the necklace, a red diamond surrounded by tiny emeralds and white sapphires, all set in platinum.

Her lover, played by some actor who went on to made-for-cable movies, just stares. "Demon's Eye," he says in a whisper.

All Beckley says is, "So, Paris or Rio?"

Thus ends the movie, *Demon's Eye*. If American Movie Classics is showing it, Nick Clooney will say this was *The Maltese Falcon* of the eighties. Of course it was. The director, Guy Ackerman, Beckley's future ex-husband, couldn't get rights to *The Maltese Falcon*, so he did what any ethical director would do. He ripped it off anyway.

Instead of a bird, Ackerman used the red diamond necklace for both the title and the object of desire. Only the necklace wasn't a fake. The day the movie wrapped, Ackerman presented the necklace to Beckley as an engagement present.

Five years later, Beckley got it as part of the divorce settlement. Not a bad trade-off for losing one's career when you think about it.

Now, Guy Ackerman had ripped off Demon's Eye. Literally, or so Beckley thought.

TTG Specialty Insurance put Demon's Eye's present value at one million dollars. Lorraine Dunbar (formerly Ackerman, *nee* Beckley) took it with her when she dumped her abusive husband and married a Cleveland Browns running back. Alex Dunbar's obscene earnings from football, along with cash from a pair of car dealerships and a tony restaurant in Little Italy, afforded them a floor safe set into the foundation of their pricey

Shaker Heights home. The safe lay hidden behind a state-of-the-art security system monitored by a paranoid suburban police force. Lorraine wore it only to high profile charity functions. The rest of the time, it lay out of sight and out of reach.

Until two weeks ago. The necklace vanished and I'd gotten no closer to finding it than a late night showing of the movie on the Superstation. I yawned as the credits rolled. If I didn't find the bloody thing soon, I'd have to tell TTG to write off the claim.

Yeah, right. Just how long would they keep me on a monthly retainer after I told them that? I'd be working out of my apartment inside of a week.

Bored and mildly depressed, I turned off the tube and put on some music, some CD Margo had left me when she moved. I recognized the singer as Pamela West, who'd gone to a neighboring high school at the same time I was fighting acne and raging hormones. She pursued her dream to New York. I somehow missed that path, opting to save the world from cheating spouses, missing persons, and insurance fraud. By the time I finished my last beer, she was singing about "Little Miracles." I glared at the stereo.

"Easy for you to say, Pammie Sue," I muttered. I needed a little miracle right now. Producing Demon's Eye out of thin air would do nicely. Was that too much to ask? How about a real defense for the Browns? Okay, that would be a major miracle. I just wanted the necklace.

By the time the CD finished, my brain refused to focus on the necklace's whereabouts. All I wanted to do now was sleep. Was this how a newly-single man-about-Cleveland should spend his Friday nights?

I fell asleep on the couch, dreaming I was Humphrey Bogart romancing Lorraine Beckley and looking for Demon's Eye. I found it. It was hidden inside a Maltese Falcon.

The phone rang at around eight the next morning.

"Kepler," I moaned into the mouthpiece, not liking the taste that had settled on my tongue overnight.

"Nick, it's Lenny," said a voice more cheerful than was legal before ten on a weekend morning. "Still looking for that necklace? Did you try that pawn shop down in Akron?"

"Yes, I did," I mumbled. "I pawned my old .38 for nothing. Thanks, and where the hell have you been for the past week?"

"Putting my ear to the ground like you asked," he said. "I talked to some sources with my side business." Lenny worked as a mechanic, but he supplemented his income as a car thief.

"You do know I'm working with the Shaker Heights Police on this, right?" I sat up, horrified to see I'd worn my bunny boxers. Time to clean out my underwear drawer.

"Yeah, yeah," said Lenny. "So I'll phone it in to Shaker as an anonymous tip. You want the information or not?"

"Shoot."

"I have it on good authority that a guy named Dewey Watkins is a pretty good fence for big ticket items. He owns a bookstore in Mayfield Heights. Cheshire Books, right next to Shaunessy's Pub."

"How soon can you call Shaker with this?"

"Sooner than you can ditch those ugly boxers you dozed off wearing last night."

"How do you know what I wore last night?"

"Jesus, how many times have I driven you to the ER when you got the snot beat out of you?"

Not that many, but he had me. "Yeah, yeah, just call Shaker, ask for Torres and for God's sake, don't let them know it's you. I get enough grief just for listing you as an operative anymore."

"By your command," he said and hung up.

"By your command?" I mouthed. Lenny must have been watching his *Battlestar Galactica* videos again.

I spent Saturday in my car, sitting in a shopping center parking lot with an attractive thirty-something brunette. We kept the windows cracked to keep them from fogging up, not the best idea for a North Coast mid-November. She smoked, not the best idea when sitting in my car. She had a badge. I didn't. She pulled rank.

I popped Hendrix into the tape player and got a dirty look from my companion. I grinned. "You don't like Hendrix, Torres?"

Torres rolled her eyes and took a long drag on her cigarette.

I ejected Jimi and found another tape. Within moments, the late Layne Staley was leading Alice in Chains in a tome about how he'd end up a big ol' pile of dem bones. Torres just sighed and tossed her Newport out the window.

"So what are we looking for, anyway?" she asked, extracting another smoke and pushing in the dashboard cigarette lighter.

We sat two rows deep in the lot, almost directly in front of Cheshire Books. Around us, suburbanites milled about on various missions to max out their credit cards.

"Anything suspicious," I said. "Any known buyers or fences, maybe even Lorraine Beckley herself."

"You still think she stashed the necklace somewhere."

"I don't think it was her. She seems convinced her ex-husband somehow got to it, and that it's in Los Angeles right now."

"Yeah," said Torres, "but how do you catch a big director like that in the act?"

"They got OJ, didn't they?"

"And now he's searching every golf course in the country for the killer."

"That was the trial," I said. "They still busted him. Do you think the next big star will get off so easy? Anyway, how many times was Guy Ackerman arrested for beating Beckley? If he doesn't have that necklace, it'd be in his best interest to cooperate with the LAPD."

"You forget," she said. "He's rich and white. Such folks are above the law in Hollywood."

Layne was singing about sitting in an angry chair when a black Ford Expedition rolled up in front of Cheshire Books onto the sidewalk. A tall, skinny guy in a black trench coat and matching sunglasses jumped out of the driver's seat and opened the back door.

An even taller man emerged, pale, padded around the middle. He sported a tailored suit under his trench coat and a white scarf snaked around his neck and down his chest.

"Hello," I said, reaching down to grab my Nikon. "Guess who that is."

Torres fired up another Newport. "I have no idea. Ben Affleck?"

"No, the taller guy. According to his immigration papers and driver's license, he's Ivan Miranov. Ring a bell?"

She took a deep drag on her cigarette, held it for a second, and blew it out her nose. "Sort of. Someone Cleveland's been watching?"

"Better known as Ivan the Terrible, the number two guy in the Russian mob."

"Uh-huh. What do you want to do now?"

Miranov turned to say something to his driver, giving me a full view of his face. "Say cheese." I snapped a couple of shots, and followed him with the lens as he went around the truck and into the shop. "We wait. See how long he's inside."

She put on her sunglasses and tucked her hair up into a baseball cap. The Newport went out the window. "There's a new John Grisham out and I'm too cheap to buy it new."

I tucked the Nikon under the seat. "Of course you're cheap. You live on a cop's salary."

"A suburban cop's salary." She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "For cover. So they think I'm your wife."

"I hope you had better taste in men than that when you married." I turned and pecked her on the nose. "Honey."

"Don't push it, Kepler." She got out of the car and jogged over to the bookstore.

The Expedition left a few minutes later. Five minutes after that, Torres came out of the shop triumphantly holding three paperbacks over her head. I guessed none of them were the new John Grisham. As she jumped in the car, Alice in Chains' lead vocalist was asking if he was wrong, had he run too far to get home?

Torres shook her head. "Don't you listen to anything like Celine Dion?"

I cringed. "Do not blaspheme in my vehicle, Officer! It just so happens this is the last song on the tape." I whipped out Kenny Wayne Shepherd, his first with Noah Hunt on vocals. "Think you can handle some Texas white boy blues?"

"Absolutely." She fired up another weed and tossed the paperbacks in the back seat. "I positioned myself between the Romance and Science Fiction sections. Gave me a perfect view of the back office. Didn't see Miranov when I went in but he came out of the office five minutes later, shaking hands with Watkins."

"Balding, lanky guy? Looks like a rumpled English professor. Right?"

"Yeah. That's Watkins. Anyway, Miranov didn't have anything with him, unless he stashed it under his coat." She frowned. "This proves nothing, you know. Russian mobsters read, too, don't they?"

I popped in Kenny Wayne. "Not all of them, but it does lend a little credence to our anonymous tip, doesn't it?" I opened the car door. "I gotta go to the little boys room. Call me on my cell if anything happens."

"You want me to call you on the john?"

I shrugged. "I go the extra mile for my clients." I winked, got out, and strolled toward Shaunessy's, two doors down from Cheshire books.

She called me on the john. "Guess who just pulled into the lot."

"Drew Carey?" I said, trying to talk and zip my fly at the same time. I live dangerously. "See if you can get me his autograph."

"Very funny, Kepler. Alex Dunbar just drove up. He's looking for a parking... No, wait. He's parked. He's getting out. Looks like he's heading for Cheshire Books. He's got a really thick book under his arm."

I avoided any comments about thickening plots. "I'll intercept him as I come out of the pub. Buy him a beer."

"You think he knows something?"

"We get a tip about Watkins fencing big-ticket items, then the underboss of the Russian mob shows up, followed by Beckley's current husband. Do you believe in coincidence, Officer Torres?"

"I think his wife hasn't seen their credit report in a while. That, or it *is* coincidence."

"I don't like coincidence. Let me get him inside, wait five minutes, then go sit at the bar." I hung up and hustled to the door of the pub.

"Hey, Dunbar!" I jogged over from Shaunessy's entrance just as Dunbar reached the sidewalk in front of Cheshire Books. "Got a minute?"

He turned to face me and stopped when he recognized me. The eyes on that corn-fed farm boy face of his widened for just a second before his grin slid into place. "Kepler, what are you doing here?"

"Giving up on the Ohio State game." I cocked my head toward the door. "Doing some shopping?"

He looked down at his book and stared at it for a second. "Yeah, as matter of fact, I am. I'm going to see how much I can get for this." He held it up, a leather-bound copy of *War and Peace*.

"Tell you what," I said. "Let me buy you a beer first. I've had a break in the case."

"Is Ackerman behind it?"

"Well, he isn't still pining for her, that's for sure."

Dunbar glanced at his watch. "I guess I got time for a beer, but let's make it quick. Lorraine's expecting me home anytime."

"You're an ex-football player. You're expected to hang out with the guys."

"You've never been married, have you?"

"Well, sort of...."

Shaunessy's was a dark place, all paneled wood and subdued lighting. We took a booth in the back. I ordered a round of Foster's for us. Dunbar sat his book at the edge of the table and never lifted his arm from it. I studied it closely. It looked expensive enough.

"You read it?" I asked, pointing at it.

"What?" His eyes went wide for a split second. "Oh. God, no. I got this from the Cowboys GM as a bribe not to leave the team."

Dunbar struck me as more of a Tom Clancy fan. "Didn't work, did it?"

"I wanted to play closer to home, closer to Lorraine's family as well. That's why I signed with the Browns back in 1990. You said you had a break."

Our beer arrived. I took a sip. "Yes, I did. When the insurance company brought me aboard, I went through all the usual motions in a case like this. Background checks, police reports, credit checks...."

I watched him. His face never changed. I gave him points for not flinching when I said 'credit report.' His had started to make mine look respectable.

"The Shaker Heights force," I went on, "as you know, is very interested. The last thing they want in their town is some burglar with a talent for penetrating fortresses like yours."

"I noticed the security company over in my neighborhood a lot this week. Maybe they did it to sell security systems."

"I've thought of that, only because I remember reading it in a trade rag last year. The police didn't like that theory. Since I'm working with the police on this one, I used their pull. Detective Torres called some friends in Los Angeles."

His eyes sparkled as I said that. I could only imagine how ecstatic his wife would have been. "You roused that coked-up..."

I shook my head. "Would you roust James Cameron? Spielberg? No, but the LAPD was all too happy to tail him. Ackerman's clean, so to speak."

Dunbar rubbed his eyes. He looked tired. "What is the insurance company paying you for?"

I held up my hands. "Now just settle down, Alex, settle down. I didn't say we came up blank. Ackerman's not going to get his hands dirty. He's a Hollywood god, and anyway, if he were in Cleveland, we'd have known. A big shot like Ackerman's going to have a flunky do it for him. We looked at everyone working for him -- personal assistant, accountant, chauffeur, gardener. Even his dope dealer."

"Come up with anything?" Dunbar took another sip of beer.

"Not in LA. But something did pop up here in Cleveland. One of my...um...how shall I put this? Extralegal sources? He said a local fence was trying to move something big. Really big."

The sparkle returned to his eyes, but they widened just ever so slightly.

"Really? Do you think...?"

I took three big swallows of my beer and sat it down halfway between us.

"Oh, yes, I really think someone's trying to move it. Anyway, this guy runs into fences all the time."

"And you trust him? What is he, some kind of thief?"

"Something like that. He's also one of my informants. You know, like the police use. Anyway, he gave me a couple of leads. We staked a guy out this week. Turns out, there's a Russian interested in this thing."

He gripped his leather-bound book tightly, his knuckles whitening.

"Russian?"

My beer mug began to look mighty unstable. "Yeah, this guy is a businessman of sorts, financial consultant."

"Financial?" he said slowly, his hand still hovering over the book.

"Yeah. Real shark, as in loan shark. I hear he likes to shoot people in the face."

He looked genuinely surprised. He took a big gulp of his beer. "You're sure about this? A Russian gangster is trying to get my wife's necklace? And you think Ackerman's trying to sell it to him? Did you see this Russian?"

"Oh, yeah. Real dapper guy, like Al Capone or John Gotti. I suppose he's in that league if he's trying to buy Demon's Eye on the black market. You should have seen it. He had this big, black Ford Expedition. The thing's built like the Titanic. It's huge." I spread my hands wide, in a quick gesture that succeeded in toppling my beer.

Dunbar jumped out of his seat trying to avoid getting beer in his lap. I jumped up as well while a helpful waitress rushed over to clean up for us.

"Oh, man, Alex, I'm sorry. Here. Let me..."

In my attempt to clean up my mess, I knocked the book on the floor, where it opened, face down.

"You sonofa..." He stopped as he looked down. The waitress started to pick up the book and stopped. On the floor lay Demon's Eye, glittering in the darkness. I reached down and picked it up. The red diamond winked at me as it glittered, like the eye of a demon all right.

Dunbar's eyes darted to and fro, almost like his glory days with the Browns and the Cowboys. He bolted for the door but I tripped him, sending him into a neighboring

booth. As he untangled himself from an angry fat guy in a Buckeyes sweatshirt, Torres stepped up behind him. By the time he turned around, she had one of his wrists in cuffs and was reaching for the other. I stepped up behind Dunbar and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Be a good boy, Alex. If you make a scene here, the prosecutor will throw the book at you." I cringed at the pun as soon as I said it.

Torres slapped the cuffs on the other wrist and began reading him his rights. I shoved Demon's Eye in my pocket. Dunbar said nothing as Torres guided him to an empty booth. He sat near the wall. I sat between him and freedom. Torres called for a local squad to come and pick him up.

"Smile, Alex," I said. "A recovery means your insurance rates won't go up as much." I frowned. "Of course, filing a false claim might void your policy."

Dunbar just sat, looking at his cuffed hands.

"But then you said it was stolen, and you did steal it, so it's not really a false claim and.... Ah, never mind! It's not my job to figure out your policy."

He looked up at me and glared.

"So, what happened, Alex? Lorraine get sick of paying your gambling debts? Or propping up your car dealerships? What?"

Dunbar started muttering obscenities at me.

I started whistling a tune that suddenly popped into mind.

Torres looked at me. "What's that? Doesn't sound like anything you played in the car."

I shrugged. "Something a musician I once knew recorded a few years ago."

"What's it called?"

"'Little Miracles.'"

Torres smiled. "For once, Kepler, I like your choice in music."