

A  
D*ame*  
T*o*  
D*ie*  
F*or*

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**(From the files of Neal Samson)**

**I could tell she was hiding something as soon as I saw her in the doorway of my office. But she wasn't hiding anything in the dress she wore. Short skirt with long legs, and a top that didn't leave enough room for either of us to breathe. Her wide-brimmed hat was lined with a black veil. She was in mourning, or wanted to look that way. I could smell money on her. Old money. But that wasn't what made me take the job before she spoke. Her skin was pale white against the black of her hair and her dress, and her eyes had forbidden knowledge. I knew that I was in.**

**"Detective Samson," she began with an accent that hinted at an Eastern European birth, "I have heard that you have done work for clients with unusual cases."**

**"Please, call me Neal," I replied, trying to sound as casual. I'd been a detective once, but that was long past. Too many cops didn't believe me, even when I had proof. I can't blame them. The world's hard enough to take without fish-men taking over small towns, or seeing wealthy families devolving into ape-men. The feds knew the truth, but they weren't going to back up a backwater beat cop. That's why I came to Chicago. The rest of the East Coast had gone downhill after the Crash of '29. Unfortunately, my reputation followed me like a starving mutt. I can't lose it, no matter how many missing persons I find in alley bars or in the arms of a young mistress. "I've taken a couple cases no one else would touch. Take a seat, tell me what you need."**

**She sat lightly into the wooden chair in front of my desk. The way she crossed her legs told me that she was looking for more than a private investigator. At least, that's what I hoped. "Neal," she complied with my request, "my husband met a rather strange end. They believe that it was murder, and that I am the one who killed him."**

**I leaned forward, and reached into my desk drawer for a glass and the flask of bourbon that I keep handy for special occasions. I offered her the glass, but she**

declined with a curt wave of her hand. I put the glass back, and tipped the flask back.

"Why aren't you in custody? If they think you killed him, shouldn't you be in jail?"

"I had money for bail. But I cannot afford to let this go to trial. You see, the social circles that we traveled in would not allow for such a thing."

I watched her closely. She didn't look like she was lying, but I've met some very good cons in my time. "What was the bail?"

"One hundred thousand dollars, American," she said without batting an eye.

That's not spare change. Some people who took the plunge after the Crash lost less than that. I did my best to take it in stride. "You're kidding."

"I assure you, I am not. We enjoyed a rather, how do you say, comfortable lifestyle. But, some of it was afforded by less than legal means. He had a profitable business, but he had some debts that need to be paid. With my husband gone, the lenders want the money he owed. I only wish that this business is done quickly."

She looked me in the eye while she spoke. I should have closed the book then, but something about the way that she looked at me made me stay. "Okay. So what exactly happened to your late husband?"

"He bled to death," she said simply.

"That's not unusual. It's practically natural causes these days. That and lead poisoning." The gangland wars had been pretty hot lately. Anyone involved in less than legal trades were bound to end up somewhere on the wrong end of dead.

She shook her head. "I found him two days ago. There was no blood left anywhere."

That qualified for unusual. "Were there any marks on him? Cuts, wounds, anything like that?"

"His neck was cut."

**I wanted to see the body, check the autopsy reports. Somebody with a throat wound, even a minor one, was bound to leave a trail. "What about on his neck? There had to be some blood."**

**"There was none. Just the wound. It was unpleasant to look at."**

**She seemed too calm to have just found her husband like that, then arrested, in just two days. But, she may have been in shock. By the look in her eyes, she was in control of herself. This was one tough bird. "I'll bet. When was the last time you saw him alive?"**

**"The morning before I found him. We ate breakfast together, then I went out to do some errands. When I came home, there he was."**

**"How long did these errands take, Mrs..."**

**"Preda. Aurelia Preda, as we are not being formal. Will you help me?"**

**I should have said no, but I couldn't. Maybe it was the look in her eyes. Maybe it was her stems. Maybe it was the hundred thou she had laying around for bail, and the fact that my rent was late. Whatever the reason, I lifted the flask in a toast to our new relationship. I wasn't too proud of myself for getting taken in by her, especially since her husband wasn't in the ground yet. But pride don't pay the bills.**

**She smiled with a sadness that broke my heart. We made an appointment to meet at her place the next afternoon, and she walked out of the office. For the minute that I could see her down the hall, nobody could steal her belt without me knowing. As soon as she was out of sight, I knew that I was already in too deep.**

**The next morning, I was at the morgue, staring at her former husband. After three days, he was a bit ripe. The coroner said he looked the same as when he first came in. Pale and quiet. "The thing is, Neal," he told me over his coffee as he pointed to the small cut in Mr. Preda's neck, "there wasn't any blood around the wound. Nothing inside. Like something sucked all of it out. I couldn't find one drop.**

**You want a sandwich or something?"**

**My stomach did a double-gainer at the thought. Seeing the bodies in the morgue usually didn't bother me. But something about someone with no blood made my skin crawl. "No thanks. I'm trying to cut back. Ever see anything like this before?"**

**He thought about it for a minute, then shook his head. "Nope. Even the guys they bring in that were hung upside-down and they tried to clean up had some residue. Most of them show signs of struggle. Bruises, lacerations, marks of some kind. Not this guy. He looked like he was smiling when they dropped him off. Real peaceful, like he just... You know. But there wasn't anything on the body or his clothes. Want to take a look?"**

**I wanted to get out of there. Helluva way to go. "No. Just... Could you have the report sent over to my office today or tomorrow? I want to have a look."**

**"Afraid not. It's been sealed. I shouldn't even be talking to you. Something about the guy's wife having ties to the speakeasies. You know, those guys."**

**I turned and started to leave. I couldn't take another minute in that place. It was too quiet, and I kept expecting one of them to stand up. "Yeah. She told me. I didn't see a thing, you didn't hear a thing, right?"**

**"Sure. The poker game still on Saturday night?"**

**"I don't know yet," I called back. "Depends on how things go with this dame."**

**Saying it that way left me a little ashamed. After all, it was her husband lying on the table back there. I meant to say, "how things go with this case," but I couldn't shake her from my head. Something was going on, and I had to get to the bottom of it while I could still climb out.**

**My next stop was a visit to my old pal Saul Foglioni's diner. He's an old Italian from the Old Country, clean as a whistle, but his customers aren't. If she was**

involved in the booze trade, he'd have the rumors to back it up. The pastrami on rye was almost good enough for the twenty I'd have to leave to clear his memory.

"I'm looking for the skinny on a bird. Her name's Preda. You hear anything?" I asked with a little help from Andrew Jackson. It hurt to give up the bill I'd been saving for the office rent, but I figured I could bill it to Aurelia. That only seemed fair.

He looked around the room. There were two men in suits in a corner table, but we were alone. "Si. She kill her husban' a couple days ago. Make it look like someone else did it."

I lowered my head, so he wouldn't notice my curse. "I know that much. I want to know about her."

"She an' her husban' from Romania. Came to America a few years ago. Dealt in jewelry on the coast. They move a lot. Boston, New York, everywhere. They come here, an' fin' out about the speakeasies. They make some contacts, some friends. They start movin' in on the big fish, then turn aroun' an' make nice with them. Owed some favors. She maybe get scared, or maybe do a favor an' get rid of him." He shrugged, and went to the other table to check on the two men. I sat and thought about what he'd said. It didn't add up. Why did they move so much? With the connections Saul implied, it made sense that sooner or later they'd get in over their heads. But they had the means to smooth things over. There's not much in this town that can't be bought. She had the motive of his money, but why go to so much trouble when she could have staged an accident? There had to be something more to it. The more I saw, the less I liked. When Saul returned, he dropped a bomb. He leaned close again, and whispered, "They was deep wit' a man name Nelson."

Lester M. Gillis, a.k.a. George "Baby Face" Nelson. He was a vicious little man with a conscience even smaller. Most people knew that he had no qualms about killing innocent people, but very few knew what I knew. The records show that he was

born in 1908. The people that I know told me that it was closer to 1808. A fake birth certificate and a little grease for the wheels of bureaucracy, and you get a new birthday, a new name. Late last year, he was gunned down by the cops. It took an impressive 17 bullets and at least an hour of bleeding to bring him down. He stole a dead Fed's car, and escaped with his wife. They found his body in a cemetery. What they didn't say was that he was wearing a new wooden stake in his chest. I guess his wife had enough of him. When the Feds took over, they got rid of the stake, and incinerated his heart. Kept it all hush-hush with the locals, but I still have a few friends in high places. They gave me the dope on his plans. He was trying to get Capone and Dillinger to join his team, deeper than the underground they were already running in. When he couldn't find any of the big boys who were willing to sell their souls, he went after the small fish. People like the Predas. It was sad, really. They come to America looking for the streets of gold, and find out that it's nothing but pyrite.

"Do you have any chopped garlic?" I asked Saul. Suddenly, I wasn't looking forward to seeing the widow, even though she'd been in my dreams since I first saw her. "I need a little extra kick."

My stomach was attempting a coup after that sandwich. I added enough garlic to burn a hole in lead. But, it was the only thing I could think of. Get the stuff in my blood, make it less tasty. Not the best plan, but I felt better. At least more secure. I kept some of it back in a little bag which I hid inside my trench coat. I knew the crucifix and holy water thing wasn't going to help, but I knew someone who had a better idea of what would. He was a priest. He doesn't follow any religion you'd heard of, but he claims it's older than Man. There were things practicing it before the world formed, from what he says. Claims to have proof, too. I've never had the nerve to see it for myself.

He could always be found in the basement of an old slaughterhouse. He's



got a nice deal worked out with the owners. They leave him where he's at, and he doesn't bring a plague on the cattle. They tested him once. He was out of the basement and in jail for all of two hours before they begged him to go back. Nobody's willing to share the whole story. Except for the one guy who saw what happened to the cattle up close. He's kept sedated in a quiet little asylum in Rockford.

At the entrance to the basement, he's got a guard posted all the time. The same guy. It's like he never sleeps. Just stands there. As long as you say the right things, you're in. Say anything wrong, and the place becomes Fort Knox. I walked up to the guard, and said, "I'm here to see Father West. Tell him it's an old friend from the new world."

The door opened behind the human statue, and he stepped aside. I looked in at the dark hall. Light slipped out from around a doorway that I knew was painted in some kind of symbol that was impossible to reproduce. I was glad that the lights were out, and the sun didn't shine down there. I knocked quietly. Half of me hoped that he was out getting groceries. A voice called from the other side, "Neal Samson. Enter and be welcome."

A shiver ran down my spine. The way he said that always made me nervous, like I was about to step into my own grave. "Father West," I said, then cleared my throat. "What's new?"

"There are some strange goings on among the stars. It looks like a change is coming. What troubles you?" He was dressed in a dark suit and hat, and carried a walking stick with a large clear ball on the top. I still can't tell where he's from. He's not black, white, oriental; his features are something like all of them, or none. He keeps the room lit so that there are shadows around him. When he moves, it looks like his face changes.

"Remember Baby Face Nelson last year? Looks like I might have a dame that got tangled up with him."



He smiled, which gave me an uneasy feeling. I should have waited until the pas-trami settled before I came here. "Ah, that is why you smell of garlic and cheap cologne. Your only hope is silver. I happen to have six bullets in your size. Shall I put them on your credit?"

I had no choice but to accept. "How is it that when I need something, you always just happen to have it?"

"Luck, my friend." He tapped his walking stick on the floor. For a second, it looked like it filled with smoke, then I saw a flash of me firing my gun inside the ball. I reeled, and caught myself on the wall. "Luck."

At sunset, I was ready for the meeting. I had to take a few back roads to get to the Preda estate, which didn't leave me feeling secure. My only comfort was the Saturday Night Special at my side. When I pulled into the long, gated driveway, I counted three luxury sedans parked beneath a large awning. All of a sudden, those six shots didn't seem like enough. The house itself was built like an old European castle. Stone walls, two floors. It had watchtowers and walkways along the walls, murder holes built near the entrance. I expected boiling oil to pour out from the mouths of the carved stone gargoyles above the heavy oak doors. Large brass doorknockers in the shape of dragons were attached to the doors. I felt more than a little out of place when I rapped the metal against the wood.

A woman dressed in a nightgown and a silk dressing robe answered the door. I couldn't help but stare. The image that I had of her from the office didn't compare to the reality. All that I could think of was that she didn't kill her husband. No woman that attractive could be a killer.

"Detective Samson," she said with a slight yawn. "Neal. I am sorry, but I was taking a nap. I suppose I overslept. Accept my apologies."

I forced myself to smile courteously. "No need to apologize. I might be early.

**May I come in?"**

**She stepped to one side. The light from the room behind her silhouetted her figure under the gown. I swore to find a way to prove her innocence. She was a dame to die for. "Please. Be welcome."**

**I walked into a large foyer. The ceiling rose to the roof, and the short hallways of the second floor were visible above. To one side, a stone staircase led to the upper floor. At its foot, there was a doorway to a library. To the other side, a large fireplace stood beside another doorway to the kitchen. There were electric lights along the walls. "Nice place," I said. As soon as I opened my mouth, I knew I wasn't going to say the right things.**

**"Thank you. It was brought from Romania stone by stone, and rebuilt. It was modernized during construction. Please, take a seat in the library. I will pour us some tea." She closed the door, and went into the kitchen.**

**I took off my coat and fedora, and put them on a chair. I looked at the books for a few moments, but the titles were all foreign. I gave up, and took a seat on a couch. It didn't take long for Aurelia to come back with two cups of strong tea. She placed the cups, on saucers, on a small table in front of the couch. "Do you like sugar or cream?"**

**"No, thanks."**

**She sat beside me. Too close for decorum, but I didn't complain. "Do you smell something unusual?" she asked with a turn of her head.**

**I tried to be glib as I replied, "I had Italian for lunch. A friend of mine says that I smell like garlic and cheap cologne now."**

**"Perhaps that is it." She leaned her left arm on the back of the couch, and turned to face me. "Have you discovered anything, Neal? Or do you have other questions?"**

**I shifted in my seat so that I wouldn't have to look her in the eye. Or smell the hint of perfume that she wore. "I know that there's a lot you're not saying." I couldn't**

help but turn back to her. "I saw your husband's body today. And I found out about your connection to George Nelson. Do you know what he really was?"

She turned away, and took a deep breath. "Yes. I did not think that you would have believed me."

I patted her wrist. "I know more than you think. If I'm going to prove your innocence, you need to trust me."

She smiled sadly, and took my hand in a firm grip. I thought that she was going to cry any second, but she was strong. "My husband, Viktor, only wanted to have a better life. He was a jeweler by trade, but it is not easy in these times. When we came to Chicago, he found a man who had the supply to open a speakeasy, but not the means. Viktor decided to help him. We did not know that such men as Mr. Nelson and Mr. Capone were in control of those things. When Mr. Capone sent Mr. Nelson to close Viktor's place, Viktor made a deal. In exchange for his life, he would pay Mr. Nelson money.

"One night, Mr. Nelson came by without warning, but Viktor had left. He demanded money, but there was not enough. He said that he would take Viktor's life unless we could make an arrangement. I..." She began crying, and couldn't go on. I pulled her close, and gave her a shoulder to cry on. I never could resist a damsel in distress.

A half-hour later, we were dressing. I felt like I'd been torn apart and sewn back together with a few pieces in the wrong places. It wasn't a bad kind of hurt, but it wasn't what I had expected. She knew how to do things that no human could do. I had also seen something that she probably wanted to keep secret. At one point, I saw her canines grow two inches.

"He took you, didn't he?" I asked as I buttoned my shirt. I reached into the pocket of my jacket and pulled out the garlic that Saul had given me, and tossed it onto the nightstand.

**She backed away from the pungent odor, and shook her head. "It wasn't like that. He wanted something in exchange for Viktor's life. I gave him the gift."**

**My mind reeled. "You... What about Viktor?"**

**She sat back onto the bed. "My only guess is that after Mr. Nelson was destroyed last year, his gang wanted revenge. I had promised him eternal life."**

**Before I could respond, I heard something at the window. It was unlatched, and open just a crack. As I reached for the gun, three men in cheap suits appeared in front of the window. Aurelia turned away, and said, "Please, just make it fast. Then, we are done. You have your compensation for your boss."**

**She sold me out to save her soft, slender neck. The three of them moved toward me, smiling in anticipation. They didn't look concerned with the .38 pistol in my hand. Then again, I knew something that they didn't. I fired without thinking. I kept pulling the trigger after the six rounds were gone. The cylinder kept turning, the hammer kept clicking. I didn't stop until I felt someone's hands wrap around mine.**

**"Forgive me," Aurelia sighed. "I did not have a choice. They wanted you gone. You're the only one in Chicago who would have found them. They would have killed me."**

**I should have walked away right then. Turned her in for attempted murder, or at least aiding and abetting. I should have left this one alone to begin with. "I'll let the locals know that I found your husband's killers. That they broke in again tonight to finish the job, but I happened to be here. I'll give them a good story. All you need to do is clam up and get lost." I kissed her deeply, and hoped that she wouldn't try anything funny. I looked at the three bodies on the floor. "You know what to do with them. If we're lucky, I can call in a favor with a federal agent I know, and we can get them out before the cops can get here. My advice is head west. I hear California's still pretty rugged. You might have luck out there."**

**It wasn't the best thing to do, but I couldn't help it. She was just a victim of cir**

**cumstance, a small fish surrounded by sharks. Besides, once things cooled off, she might come back. I know it's not love that gave me a soft spot for her, but it was something pretty damn close. I know I'm better off without that kind of trouble. Besides, dames will just suck the life right out of you.**



**The End**