

POLARITY

A ~~STRAY FILES~~ NOVELLA

by

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*“There are things known and there are things unknown,
and in between are the doors of perception.”*

— Aldous Huxley

*“Polarity, like tension, gives form to the invisible forces
beneath.”*

— Alan Watts

*For the ones who keep chasing, keep searching,
and never give up.*

PROLOGUE

NORTH

S eptember 9th, 1990

The Lodge was dead quiet.

Dana Reeves stood near the center of the great room, in front of red metal doors radiating increasing heat. In her palm, she rolled three fifty-cal bullets, each one slick with sweat and pulsing with a faint, unnatural buzz. The charge ran through her arm like a low, constant current. The rounds felt alive. Listening. Waiting.

She was still getting used to the whole I am the gun thing.

The villagers were coming.

Footsteps crunched over gravel and sodden pine

needles. Dana moved to the window and peered through warped, rain-lashed glass.

Figures shuffled in the dark. Too many.

Dozens, maybe more, wading in from the treeline with uncanny, lurching gaits. Their faces blurred—smeared like old photographs rubbed with an oily thumb.

The satchel at her side shifted, the contents knocking softly—metal, paper, something leathery, and something else.

The old man's severed hand, still wrapped in canvas. Still riding shotgun.

Why was she still carrying that, again?

Lightning flashed.

Dana tightened her grip around the bullets.

She exhaled, slow and steady, reaching for the tether she feared was gone. The one that had followed her across state lines and through shattered memories.

Her compass. Her guide. Her passenger.

Then, she asked the only question left:

"This time I want the truth. Why did you bring me here?"

CHAPTER 1

BACK/FORTH

S *eptember 5th, 1990*
1

“You enjoy catching people with their pants down, Miss Reeves?”

Dana Reeves glanced down at the black-and-white photos Sheriff Hank Ellis slapped down on the aluminum table. Photos of her former clientele in various compromising positions, which she’d taken the day before.

Then she glanced around the nicest interrogation room she’d ever seen. South Lake Minnetonka P.D. had spared no expense. No surprise, considering the sort of money that clung to places like Excelsior. Frosted windows. Padded chairs. Even working air conditioning.

The coffee still tasted like filtered ditch water, but she'd had worse.

"Well Hank," she muttered, smacking her lips. "Comes with the territory."

Sheriff Hank sighed. "And tends to cause a whole heap of mess for hardworking policemen like myself."

"I sympathize. And while I can't call it honest work, it is work—and this is America, last I checked. People can hire who they want for what they want."

The Sheriff cocked an eyebrow.

"Within reason," Dana added.

"Uh-huh. Seems you've been on the road a while. Tell me about that."

Dana wasn't sure what the angle was. All she knew was she had to play the game.

"Not much to tell," she lied.

Most weeks she was in a new town—sometimes longer—maybe a month for a case she had to put her back into. They always cracked eventually. Just had to find the chink in the armor, the angle that allowed for prying. Said prying, though, led to a distinct unpopularity with the locals, and she found most of her work in middling towns across the Corn Belt.

A few jobs had taken her through the greater Twin Cities area. The most recent one, ironically, involved the subjects in the photos—a pair of twins warring over their father's estate on Lake Minnetonka. Heirs to some MLM scheme, another faddish fountain of youth and vanity.

Harlan Dempsey's idea of subtlety was a custom yacht named *Alibi*, while his sister Briar dressed like a cross between Marie Antoinette and a QVC host.

Harlan had hired Dana to dig up dirt on the Briar—who, as it turned out, was cheating on her husband—and, unfortunately for the brother, her lover was the same attorney he'd hired to challenge the living will.

It ended with the Briar paying Dana off—after she'd been fronted half the fee by the Harlan, before he showed up at the mansion on the lake where Briar and the lawyer were bedded down. The two siblings later traded pitiful blows outside of one of Prince's famous parties at NPG Music Club, leading to aggravated assault and battery charges as well as public intoxication and disturbing whatever peace there was left to disturb between them.

Dana had a front-row seat to the whole thing through night-vision binocs out the driver's side window of her '74 Ford Fairlane.

Both heirs ended up in jail, and Dana—aside from the brief questioning she was currently enduring with the police—came out of it smelling like... well, not daisies, seeing as she hadn't showered in two days, pulling double-duty stakeouts and ducking into a bar in a lakeside town with pub-stained glass windows and a bar imported from the U.K.: a detail she had learned while fishing for information on the Dempsey twins from the bartender—who was clearly interested in more than serving her—hence the complimentary whiskey sour.

The setting suited a place like Excelsior, the name making her think of a sword in a stone tucked somewhere in the corner of her mind—and of her younger brother.

She felt a hum behind her eyes, just beneath the

surface. Not memory. Not quite. More like a whisper that hadn't formed words yet.

Stray flared up more when she was on the right track.

Closer to Jared maybe, or at least closer to finding him.

Which was what all of this was about.

Her roaming the country. Combing through county records in more police departments than she cared to step foot in.

Jared was why she became an investigator in the first place. Bail bonds back in Illinois, fresh out of high school, while everyone else moved on to college—two of her best friends to big universities in Chicago—because they'd moved on a long time ago.

She hadn't. Their hometown of Normal, IL was anything but its namesake to Dana after the incident. After Jared disappeared.

Dana cooperated well enough when the Sheriff had first stepped foot in the well-kempt interview room, cutely adorned with a houseplant on a side table—nothing like the dingy, podunk stations she'd passed through the last few years, where grime coated every surface and sweat-stink lingered from the stoners, drunks, and other small-time offenders. He apparently didn't want any more song and dance than necessary, especially with the Dempsey s about to post bail—funded by their go-between litigator.

“We done moralizing, Sheriff?”, she asked.

Sheriff Hank slapped flipped a hand lazily over on the table. “Depends. Anything else I should know that I don't already about this situation?”

“Nope.” Dana said, shaking her head. “But honestly, if those two had a telenovela, I’d watch the hell out of it. Call it ‘Twin City Tools.’”

Sheriff Hanks was unamused.

“Well, if that’s all you’ve got for me,” Dana said, placing her hands on the aluminum interview room table, the zippers of her faux-leather jacket sleeve rapping against the surface, “I wondered if I could ask a favor. Got a cold case I’m working. Need to take a look at some records. Shouldn’t be—”

He scraped his cork belly on the opposite edge of the table as he stood with a sigh.

“Yeah, fine.” he barked. “I’ve got some rich adult brats to deal with and bullshit PR to spout. Margo’ll help you out. Records room is to the left and straight back.” He grunted as he jerked open the door.

Dana stood, her bottom lip curling in pleasant surprise at how easy that had been. Usually she had to sweet-talk more, and sometimes she had to work around a hard no.

She reset her expression to keep that surprise buried. He held the door for her and gestured her through.

“And a gentleman too,” she said with a small flourish. Then dialed back her smirk half a click. *Too much.*

He pulled the door three-quarters shut, stopping her cold.

“I know your type,” he said, flat and low.

Standing at an awkward angle between the left door frame and his broad, taut light-blue uniform shirt, Dana weighed her words.

“Femme fatale blonde? Not as spiteful as you’ve heard,” she quipped. “Probably.”

Judging from his glower and tightly drawn lips, she hadn’t chosen well.

“No, I get enough of that at home,” he said. “P.I. stands for parasitic investigator in my book. But at least you didn’t withhold anything. Just make it quick and keep it quiet.”

He cracked the manila file folder in his hand against his thigh—for effect, clearly.

“Then get gone. We clear?”

Dana glanced up at his glistening bald head and felt the impulse to crack something about Mr. Clean and being crystal clear—but couldn’t quite land it. Even if she had, she figured she’d be shown the front door instead of the records room.

“Sure thing.”

He opened the door wider and dipped his head in an after-you-good-riddance stance.

2

Dana strode down the hall toward Margo, who glanced past her to where the Chief gave a cursory wave to confirm her clearance.

Small-town police informality at its finest.

After gleaning that Margo stood for Marjorie—and that she’d earned the nickname from her years with the Fargo, MN department before her husband won a major health lawsuit, and they relocated to a comely cabin on