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Opening Extract from...

Body Work

Written by Sara Paretsky

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Sara
Paretsky
BODY WORK


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John Vishneski and Karen Buckley are winners of a charity auction to have
characters named for them. The names are all that the fictional Buckley and Vishneski
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For Jo Anne, Jolynn, and Kathryn

Thanks for helping keep the rickety C-Dog ship
afloat all these years

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The title of Chapter 55 is an old Russian proverb: 'Up a hill you push a cart; down a hill it rolls. There is some justice in this world, just not enough.'

1 DEAD IN THE ALLEY

Nadia Guaman died in my arms. Seconds after I left Club Gouge, I heard gunshots, screams, squealing tires, from the alley behind the building. I ran across the parking lot, slipping on gravel and ruts, and found Nadia crumpled on the dirty ice. Blood was flowing from her chest in a thick tide.

I ripped off my scarf and opened her coat. The wound was high in her chest – too high, I knew that – but I still made a pad of my scarf and pressed it against her. Keeping pressure on the pad, I struggled out of my coat and placed it under her. Left hand on chest, right hand underneath, pushing my coat against the exit wound. Without looking up or stopping the pressure, I shouted at the people surging around us to call 911, now, at once.

Nadia's eyes flickered open as I cradled her. The ghost of a smile flickered at the sides of her wide mouth. 'Alley. Alley.'

'Shhh, Nadia, save your strength.'

I thought it was a good sign, a hopeful sign, that she spoke, and I kept pushing against her wound, singing snatches of a cradle song, trying to keep us both calm. When the paramedics arrived, and pried my hands free from her wounds, they shook their heads. She'd been dead for several minutes already.

I started to shiver. It was only when the medics forced me to my feet that I felt the January wind cut into my bones. The medics brought me into the ambulance but left Nadia lying on the ground, waiting for a tech team to photograph her. The crew wrapped a blanket around me and gave me hot sweet coffee from their own thermos.

‘You did the best that could be done. No one could have done more.’ The tech was short and muscular, with wiry red hair. ‘She was bleeding out within minutes of being shot. I’m guessing the bullet nicked a major vein, but the ME will tell us more. Was she a friend?’

I shook my head. We’d barely spoken, and at that point, in fact, I only knew her first name.

A cop poked his head through the open ambulance door. ‘You the gal that put her coat on the dead girl?’

Dead woman, I started to say, but I was too exhausted to fight that battle tonight. Nadia was dead, and whatever one called her, it wouldn’t bring her back to life. I didn’t move from the bench facing the stretcher but croaked out a yes.

‘Can we talk inside, ma’am?’ the cop said. ‘The EMTs are going to take the dead girl to the morgue as soon as the photo team is through, and it’s five degrees here in the parking lot.’

I handed the blanket back to the ambulance crew and let the cop give me a hand as I jumped off the back. Nadia was lying where I’d left her, her face silver under the blue strobes, the blood on her chest black. My coat was still underneath her. I walked over and fished my car and house keys from the pockets, despite outcries from the evidence team. My handbag was lying a few feet from the ‘dead woman,’ I muttered out loud. I picked up the bag, also against the outraged shouts of the officer in charge.

‘That’s evidence.’

‘It’s my handbag, which I dropped when I was performing first aid.

You don't need it and I do.' I turned on my heel and walked back into the club. The bag was handmade from red leather, an apology of sorts from the friend of a dead missing person, and I wasn't going to risk losing it or my wallet in an evidence locker.

Everyone who'd been in the club or the parking lot, except those crafty enough to escape ahead of the team in blue, had been herded into the building. A minute before, I'd been too cold, but the club atmosphere, hot, nearly airless, made me ill. I started to sweat, and fought a rising tide of nausea.

The club staff, including my cousin Petra, were huddled by the bar. After a moment, when I decided I wasn't going to vomit, I shoved my way through the crowd to Petra's side.

'Vic, what happened?' Petra's blue eyes were wide with fear. 'You're covered with blood.'

I looked down and saw Nadia's blood on my jeans and sweater, on my hands. My scalp crawled: maybe her blood was in my hair.

'Someone shot a woman as she left the club,' I said.

'Was it – who was it?'

'I heard her called "Nadia,"' I said slowly, fixing Petra with a hard stare. 'I don't know if that's her name, and I don't know her last name. If the cops, or a reporter, ask you questions about what happened tonight, you can answer only truthfully about things you actually know and saw. You shouldn't answer questions about things that are just guesses, because that could mislead the cops.'

'It would be best if you don't consult the other witnesses,' a voice said.

A female officer had fought through the shouting, texting, Twittering chaos to appear at my side.

Under the club lights, I could see her face, narrow, with pronounced cheekbones, and lank black hair cut so short the ends only just appeared below her cap rim. I read her badge: E. Milkova. E. Milkova didn't look much older than my cousin, too young to be a cop, too

young to be telling me what to do. But – she had the badge. I let her guide me to the small stage at the back of the club, which the police had roped off with crime scene tape so they could use it for interrogations. She lifted the tape so I could crawl under, then dragged a couple of chairs from the nearest table. I reached a hand out and took one of them from her.

I was in that numb place you inhabit after you've been part of violence and death. It was hard to focus on Milkova's questions. I gave her my name. I told her I'd heard gunshots and run to see what the problem was. I told her I didn't know the dead woman.

'But you knew her name,' Milkova said.

'That was just from hearing someone call her "Nadia." I don't know her last name.'

'Most people run away from gunshots.'

I didn't say anything.

'You ran toward them.'

I still didn't say anything, and she frowned at me. 'Why?'

'Why, which?' I said.

'Why did you run toward danger?'

When I was younger and more insouciant, I would have quoted the great Philip Marlowe and said, 'Trouble is my business,' but tonight I was cold and apprehensive. 'I don't know.'

'Did you see anyone in the club threaten Nadia tonight?'

I shook my head. I hadn't seen anyone threaten her tonight. Earlier, that was another story, but my years as a public defender had taught me to answer only the question asked.

'Did you come here tonight because you thought there would be an attack on someone?'

'It's a club. I came because I wanted to see the acts.'

'You're a private investigator. They tell me you've been involved in a lot of high-profile investigations.'

Someone had ID'd me to the police. I wondered if it was the club's owner, out of malice. 'Thank you,' I said.

Milkova pushed her short hair back behind her ears, a nervous gesture – she wasn't sure how to proceed. 'But don't you think it's a strange coincidence, you being here the night someone got shot?'

'Cops have days off. Even doctors. And PIs have been known to take them, too.' I didn't want to throw Petra to the wolves, and that's what would happen if I said anything about wanting to keep an eye on my cousin's workplace.

No one had bothered to turn off the Body Artist's computer, and the plasma screens on the stage kept flashing images of flowers and jungle animals. It made a disturbing backdrop to the interrogation.

'Vic, what are you doing here?'

I looked around and saw Terry Finchley, a detective I've known for a long time. 'Terry! I might ask you the same question.'

Finchley's been out of the field for five or six years now, on the personal staff of my dad's old protégé, Captain Bobby Mallory. I was surprised to see the Finch at an active homicide investigation.

He gave a wry smile. 'Captain thought it was time I got my hands dirty again. And if you're anything to judge by, they're going to get mighty dirty indeed on this investigation.'

I looked again at my stained hands. I was beginning to feel twitchy, covered in Nadia's blood. Terry climbed the shallow step to the stage and told Milkova to get him a chair.

'What have you learned, Liz?' Finchley asked Officer Milkova. So the *E* stood for Elizabeth.

'She's not cooperating, sir. She won't say how she knew the vic or why she was here, or anything.'

'Officer Milkova, I've told you I didn't know the victim,' I said. 'It makes me cranky when people don't listen to me.'

'Pretty much any damn thing makes you cranky, Warshawski,'

Finchley said. 'But, out of curiosity, how did you get involved?'

'I was leaving the club, I heard gunshots. I ran across the parking lot and saw a woman on the ground. She was bleeding; I tried to block the wounds, so I didn't take time to follow the shooters. But on the principle that no good deed is left unpunished, I'm being treated as though I had something to do with the dead woman's murder.' My voice had risen to a shout.

'Vic, you're exhausted. And I don't blame you.' Terry's tone was unusually gentle, the sharp planes in his ebony cheeks softening with empathy. He'd felt angry with me for a lot of years – maybe I was finally forgiven. His voice sharpened. 'The techs are annoyed because you took evidence from the crime scene. And, for that, I not only don't blame them but need you to turn it over to them.'

Okay, not forgiven. He was just doing good-bad cop all in one paragraph.

'It wasn't evidence: these were my personal belongings that I dropped when I tried to administer first aid. I picked them up when Officer Milkova told me to leave the scene. I think your techs would be grateful to have extraneous items removed. Although I did abandon my coat.'

My throat contracted, and I looked involuntarily at my hand, my right hand, which had been pushing my coat against Nadia's bleeding back. 'You can keep the coat. I'll never wear it again.'

Finchley paused briefly, and decided to let my handbag ride.

'Did you know the dead woman?'

'No.'

'Why were you here?'

'It's a club. You can come in if you want a drink and want to see the show. I was doing both those things.'

Finchley sighed. 'You know, anyone else in this town, I'd nod and take your name and phone number and urge you to wash the blood off

and try to forget the horrors you witnessed. But V. I. Warshawski chooses to come to a club the one night in the year a woman gets murdered at their back door? You know what the captain's going to ask when he hears that. Why were you here tonight?'