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The Skin Collector

Written by Jeffery Deaver

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JEFFERY

DEAVER

THE SKIN COLLECTOR

HODDER &
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THE OUT-OF-PRINT BOOK

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NOON

CHAPTER 1

The basement.

She had to go to the basement.

Chloe hated it down there.

But they'd sold out of sizes ten and twelve Rue du Cannes – the tacky little floral number with scalloped hemline and plunging front – and she needed to replenish the racks, fill 'em up for the grazers. Chloe was an actress, not a retail fashion expert, and new to the store. So she hadn't fathomed why, in a November impersonating January, these particular dresses were selling out. Until her boss explained that, even though the store was in alternative SoHo in Manhattan, the ZIP codes of the purchasers situated them in Jersey, Westchester and Long Island.

'And?'

'Cruises, Chloe. Cruises.'

'Ah.'

Chloe Moore walked into the back of the store. Here the shop was the opposite of the sales floor and about as chic as a storage unit. She found the key among those dangling from her wrist and unlocked the basement door. She flicked on the lights and studied the unsteady stairs.

A sigh and she started down. The door, on a spring, swung shut behind her. Not a small woman, Chloe took the steps carefully. She was also on Vera Wang knockoffs. Pseudo-designer heels and hundred-year-old architecture can be a dangerous combination.

The basement.

Hated it.

Not that she worried about intruders. There was only one door in and out – the one she'd just come through. But the place was moldy, damp, cold . . . and booby-trapped with cobwebs.

Which meant sly, predatory spiders.

And Chloe knew she'd need a dog roller to remove the dust from the dark-green skirt and black blouse (Le Bordeaux and La Seine).

She stepped onto the uneven, cracked concrete floor, moving to the left to avoid a big web. But another one got her; a long clinging strand clutched her face, tickling. After a comic dance of trying to brush the damn thing off and not fall over, she continued her search. Five minutes later she found the shipments of Rue du Cannes, which may have looked French and sounded French but came in boxes printed largely with Chinese characters.

As she tugged the cartons off the shelf Chloe heard a scrape.

She froze. Tilted her head.

The sound didn't repeat. But then she was aware of another noise.

Drip, drip, drip.

Was there a leak?

Chloe came down here often, if reluctantly, and she'd never heard water. She stacked the faux French garments near the stairs and turned to investigate. Most of the inventory was on shelves but some cartons rested on the floor. A leak could be disastrous. And while, yes, Chloe was eventually headed for Broadway she nonetheless needed to keep her job here at Chez Nord for the foreseeable future. Stopping a leak before it ruined ten thousand dollars' worth of overpriced clothes might go a long way in keeping those paychecks dribbling into Chase.

She walked to the back of the cellar, determined to find the leak, though also on serious spider alert.

The dripping grew louder as she moved toward the rear of the room, even murkier than the front, near the stairs.

Chloe stepped behind a shelf, containing a huge supply of blouses so ugly even her mother wouldn't wear them – a major order by a buyer who, Chloe believed, had made the purchase because he knew he was going to be sacked.

Drip, drip . . .

Squinting.

Odd. What was that? In the far wall an access door was open. The sound of water was coming from there. The door, painted gray like the walls, was about three feet by four.

What did it lead to? Was there a sub-basement? She'd never seen the doorway but then she didn't believe she'd ever glanced at the wall behind the last shelf. There was no reason to.

And why was it open? The city was always doing construction work, especially in the older parts, such as here, SoHo. But nobody had talked to the clerks – her, at least – about a repair beneath the building.

Maybe that weird Polish or Rumanian or Russian janitor was doing some repairs. But, no, couldn't be. The manager didn't trust him; he didn't have keys to the basement door.

Okay, the creep factor was rising.

Don't bother figuring it out. Tell Marge about the drip. Tell her about the open doorway. Get Vlad or Mikhail or whoever he is down here and let him earn his salary.

Then another scrape. This time it seemed to be a foot shifting on gritty concrete.

Fuck. That's it. Get. Out.

But before she got out, before she even spun an eighth turn away, he was on her from behind, slamming her head into the wall. He pressed a cloth over her mouth to gag her. She nearly fainted from the shock. A burst of pain blossomed in her neck.

Chloe turned fast to face him.

God, God . . .

She nearly puked, seeing the yellowish latex full-head mask, with slots for eyes and mouth and ears, tight and distorting the flesh underneath, as if his face had melted. He was in worker's coveralls, some logo on them she couldn't read.

Crying, shaking her head, she was pleading through the gag, screaming through the gag, which he kept pressed firmly in place with a hand in a glove as tight and sickly yellow as the mask.

'Listen to me, please! Don't do this! You don't understand! Listen, listen . . .' But the words were just random sounds through the cloth.

Thinking: Why didn't I chock the door open? I thought about it . . . Furious with herself.

His calm eyes looked her over – but not her breasts or lips or hips or legs. Just the skin of her bare arms, her throat, her neck, where he focused intently on a small blue tattoo of a tulip.

'Not bad, not good,' he whispered.

She was whimpering, shivering, moaning. 'What, what, what do you want?'

But why did she even ask? She knew. Of course she knew.

And, with that thought, Chloe controlled the fear. She tightened her heart.

Okay, asshole, wanna play? You'll pay.

She went limp. His eyes, surrounded by yellow latex like sickly skin, seemed confused. The attacker, apparently not expecting her collapse, adjusted his grip to keep her from falling.

As soon as she felt his hands slacken Chloe lunged forward and grabbed the collar of his coveralls. The zipper popped and cloth tore – both the outer garment and whatever was under it.

Her grip and the blows aimed at his chest and face were fierce. She pumped her knee upward toward his groin. Again and once more.

But she didn't connect. Her aim was off. It seemed such an easy target but she was suddenly uncoordinated, dizzy. He was cutting off her air with the gag – that was it maybe. Or the aftermath of the shock.

Keep going, she raged. Don't stop. He's scared. You can see it. Fucking coward . . .

And tried to hit him again, claw at his flesh, but she now found her energy fading fast. Her hands tapped uselessly against him. Her head lolled and, looking down, she noticed that his sleeve had ridden up. Chloe caught sight of a weird tattoo, in red, some insect, dozens of little insect legs, insect fangs but human eyes. And then she focused on the floor of the cellar. A glint from the hypodermic syringe. *That* was the source of the pain in her neck – and of her fleeing strength. He'd injected her with something.

Whatever the drug, it was taking effect in a big way. She was growing exhausted. Her mind tumbled, as if dipping into and

out of a dream, and for some reason she found herself obsessing over the cheap perfume Chez Nord sold by the checkout counter.

Who'd buy that crap? Why didn't—?

What am I doing? she thought as clarity returned. Fight! Fight the son of a bitch!

But her hands were at her sides now, completely still, and her head heavy as stone.

She was sitting on the floor and then the room tilted and began to move. He was dragging her toward the access door.

No, not there, please!

Listen to me! I can explain why you shouldn't do this. Don't take me there! Listen!

Here in the cellar proper, at least there was still some hope that Marge would look down the stairs and see them both and she'd scream and he'd scramble off on his insect legs. But once Chloe was deep underground in his bug nest, it would be too late. The room was growing dark but an odd kind of dark, as if the ceiling bulbs, which were still on, were not *emitting* light but drawing in rays and extinguishing them.

Fight!

But she couldn't.

Closer to the black abyss.

Drip, drip, drip . . .

Scream!

She did.

But no sound came from her mouth beyond a hiss, a cricket click, a beetle hum.

Then he was easing her through the door into Wonderland, on the other side. Like that movie. Or cartoon. Or whatever.

She saw a small utility room below.

Chloe believed she was falling, over and over, and a moment later she was on the floor, the ground, the dirt, trying to breathe, the air kicked out of her lungs from the impact. But no pain, no pain at all. The sound of dripping water was more pronounced and she saw a trickle down the far wall, made of old stone and laced with pipes and wires, rusty and frayed and rotting.

Drip, drip . . .

A trickle of insect venom, of shiny clear insect blood.

Thinking, Alice, I'm Alice. Down the rabbit hole. The hookah-smoking caterpillar, the March Hare, the Red Queen, the red insect on his arm.

She never liked that goddamn story!

Chloe gave up on screaming. She wanted only to crawl away, to cry and huddle, to be left alone. But she couldn't move. She lay on her back, staring up at the faint light from the basement of the store that she hated working in, the store that she wanted with all her soul to be back inside right now, standing on sore feet and nodding with fake enthusiasm.

No, no, it makes you look sooo thin. Really . . .

Then the light grew dimmer yet as her attacker, the yellow-face insect, climbed into the hole, pulled the access door shut behind him, and came down the short ladder to where she lay. A moment later a piercing light filled the tunnel; he'd pulled a miner's lamp onto his forehead, clicked it on. The white beam blinded and she screamed, or didn't scream, at the piercing brilliance.

Which suddenly faded to complete darkness.

She awoke a few seconds or minutes or a year later.

Chloe was someplace else now, not the utility room, but in a larger room, no, a tunnel. Hard to see, since the only illumination was a weak light above her and the focused beam from the masked insect man's forehead. It blinded her every time he looked at her face. She was on her back again, staring upward, and he was kneeling over her.

But what she'd been expecting, dreading, wasn't happening. In a way, though, this was worse because *that* – ripping her clothes off and then what would follow – would at least have been understandable. It would have fallen into a known category of horror.

This was different.

Yes, her blouse was tugged up but only slightly, exposing her belly from navel to the bottom of her bra, which was still chastely in place. Her skirt was tucked tight around her thighs, almost as if he didn't want there to be any suggestion of impropriety.

Leaning forward, hunched, intent, he was staring with those calm eyes of his, those insect eyes, at her smooth, white belly skin the way somebody would look over a canvas at MoMA: head tilted, getting the right angle to appreciate Jackson Pollock's spatter, Magritte's green apple.

He then slowly extended his index finger and stroked her flesh. His yellow finger. He splayed his palm and brushed back and forth. He pinched and raised peaks of skin between his thumb and forefinger. He let go and watched the mounds flatten back.

His insect mouth curved into a faint smile.

She thought he said, 'Very nice.' Or maybe that was the smoke-ring caterpillar talking or the bug on his arm.

She heard a faint hum of vibration and he looked at his watch. Another hum, from elsewhere. Then he glanced at her face and saw her eyes. He seemed surprised, maybe, that she was awake. Turning, he tugged into view a backpack and removed from it a filled hypodermic syringe. He stabbed her again, this time in a vein in her arm.

The warmth flowed, the fear lessened. As darkness trickled around her, sounds vanishing, she saw his yellow fingers, his caterpillar fingers, his insect claws, reach into the backpack once more and carefully remove a small box. He set it beside her exposed skin with the same reverence she remembered her priest displaying as he'd placed the silver vessel holding the blood of Christ on the altar last Sunday during Holy Communion.