

Glass Houses “excerpt”

Los Angeles, CA

Sunday, May 13

Thom Keane woke up hating himself. He was cocooned in unfamiliar sheets. His clothes stank of gardenias and cigarettes. Sugary smoke roiled his stomach as he tried to suppress the nausea. Stale scotch muck thickened his tongue and lined his cheeks. He smacked his mouth in search of moisture. Found none. Weepy eyelids fluttered, afraid to open fully, afraid of whom he might find. Maybe the blond with the Russian accent.

Thom wiped a hand across his eyes and rolled his aching body toward the center of the bed. The cool sheets relieved him of guilt. He flopped onto his back and praised the Lord for small miracles. He didn't need more trouble.

His life had become a cliché. The not-yet middle-aged, slightly overweight, gray-haired, old beyond his years, hard-drinking ass-chaser was a bad character in a bad pulp novel. He hated it. But not enough. Exercise more, lose ten pounds, eat right, improve his attitude? Too much work.

In the twilight of the still morning he retraced yesterday and remembered he was in the guestroom of his cousin's house—a safe harbor from the storm of home.

His pants vibrated. He wrestled with pockets to recover the cell.

“What?”

“Hey, partner, we got called out to play,” said George Silva, much too peppy for this time of morning. “I'll pick you up at home.”

“I'm at the Bird House.”

“Better still. Birdie's house isn't as far west. I don't want the division dicks to wait longer than they have to.”

“Aren't you considerate. What day is it?”

“Sunday.”

“Our names aren't on the callout board. What's up?”

“Multiple DBs.”

“Oh, goodie, a long-ass day and a long-ass investigation.”

“Shit happens. Get your butt out of bed and in the shower. I'll give you a wail from the street.”

The cold jolt of the bathroom tile floor on Thom's bare feet was the equivalent of a splash of water. An empty bladder, a shower, and a shave turned him into a sub-human. He leaned on the counter and pinched his temples. Looked at his eyes. His best feature. So he'd been told. Pale blue like a baby blanket, they were disarming, sexy in way that suggested he was always ready for a roll. This morning they were bloodshot. He rummaged through the medicine cabinet for drops. Found none.

Thom entered the massive built-in closet; empty except for a yard's length of hanging garments. He picked a suit at random and yanked off the dry cleaning plastic. Shirt, tie, belt, holster, firearm, personal cell, business cell, BUG, badge. Good to go.

He followed the mahogany hallway toward the stained glass window at the end. Backlit with a recently installed security light, he studied the scene as if seeing it for the first time. An iconic figure stood in a garden under a canopy of olive trees and flowering plants. He saw small details never before realized: bees buzzing the flowers, an orange butterfly in flight, a perched bird with a branch in its beak. Thom reflected briefly on the beauty of stained glass, of which this house had plenty.

Wood became marble at the end of the hall and Thom descended the service stairs. The moment he reached the landing and made a sharp turn, he smelled the coffee from the kitchen. It was just as refreshing as the shower. And it'd knock back the pounding headache.

His cousin, Birdie, sat at the bar, palms flat on the paper, enveloped in a man-sized, silk kimono robe, hair shower damp. Her legs dangled off the barstool, feet encased in ratty fuzzy slippers. Only she could make them look cool.

An antiquated transistor radio tuned to a classic rock station sat on the windowsill over the sink. Birdie had to be the only Hancock Park millionaire that listened to great music betrayed by mono. She hummed along to the rhythm of Led Zeppelin's *Kashmir*.

"Oh, God," he said, "you're a morning person like George."

Cocoa bean colored hair fluttered as she turned and flashed him a smile. At once unsentimental and easily imperiled by reality and yet exquisite as it stretched from her chin to the corners of her sky blue eyes. "This is my favorite time of day," she said. "It offers the promise of forgetfulness."

Forgetfulness. A concept worth embracing. She'd had more than a fair share of grief lately. The scars on her face daily proof.

He gave her a good morning peck on the lips.

"Christ," she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "You're still waxed. Johnny Walker was it?"

"Damn, you're good. Know a hangover cure?"

"Aspirin and lots of water."

"Boring. I'll take coffee instead."

"Put some milk in your eyes."

"No shit?"

"Good word. Describes how you look."

"Thanks." Thom opened his arms and twirled. "I work hard at this image." He opened the mostly empty fridge and removed a bottle of milk. "Where'd you get bottled?"

"An organic dairy. They deliver."

"Of course." Thom wouldn't ask how much it cost.

"Working today?"

"Yeah." He poured milk into a cup, dipped a finger, flicked the liquid at his eyes and blinked it in. "I hate missing Mass," he deadpanned.

"I'm sure you do," she echoed. "How was the first night in your temporary digs?"

"I didn't have a night. I had a few early morning hours."

“Do I want to know?”

“Not if you believe your eldest cousin has any dignity.”

She crossed her arms schoolmarm fashion, but said nothing.

He downed the leftover milk. “That’s good stuff.” He poured another cupful, shot it back then filled the cup with coffee.

“Who’s the dude on the window in the hall?”

Birdie rolled her eyes. “It’s Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.”

“Considering this manse was once owned by the Church, I should’ve known.”

“You should’ve known regardless. Eat something.”

“No thanks. I’ll take the sports section though.”

Birdie slid the front page instead. His eye went straight to the headline:

FORMER LAPD COMMANDER SUSPECTED OF RUNNING A RING OF ROBBERS

By Elizabeth Keane

Special to The Times

Part 1 of 2

So there it was. He knew it was coming. But actually seeing it in print made his heart jump, his breath catch. From here forward nothing would ever be the same.

Thom scanned the front page then flipped to the continuation inside. His eye lingered on the portraits. He folded it closed; not having the heart to continue. He pushed the paper away just as a truncated siren blew. “My ride’s here. Gotta go.”

“Today’s my first birthday,” said Birdie. “Ron’s coming to town. He’s making dinner. Join us. George, too.”

“And eat the healthy shit your boyfriend makes? No thanks. I prefer trans fat.”

He was already around the corner when she said, “Yeah, you look like it, too.”

“I heard that.”

“Dinner’s at seven. I expect you here!”

~

Thom noted that George had already been to Motor Transport Division to pick up his designated city car. On the first day of any investigation they always arrived together. Partners. Teammates. A practical construct considering they both lived in the city for which they served.

George was dressed in his usual triumph of fine tailoring. Today it was a black suit with a lilac shirt woven with shiny vertical threads. A paisley tie in a palette of pinks, dark browns, and a smattering of black anchored the ensemble. George was a flash dresser. *GQ* style. But he wore his wardrobe in a non-fussy way, never seeming to make a show of his appearance. On his feet he wore sturdy, rubber soled wingtips that he owned in four colors. Despite their high-end appearance, he could climb a mountain and give them a brand-new shine afterward. Good police shoes.

Compared to George, Thom felt like a rumbled slacker in an off-the-rack suit he bought on sale at a department store. His ties were devoid of patterns and matched the hue of his shirts. An adult version of Garanimals.

George tossed him a foil wrapped burrito. “Eggs, potato, bacon, rice, salsa, pinto beans, extra peppers.”

“Hosannas for Betty in her rolling coach of cuisine.” Thom ripped the foil and waxed paper from one end and dug his teeth into a thick layer of folded tortilla and mowed his way in.

“Why did I pick you up at Birdie’s?” said George.

“Anne kicked me out.”

“It’s about time your wife threw your cheating ass out of the house.”

Thom swallowed a mouthful of food, picked up the Styrofoam cup and took a burning sip of French roast to wash it down.

“Women aren’t the problem,” said Thom. “Anne wants to save face with her woman’s group. She’ll moan about my sullied reputation and pretend we’re in therapy. Before you know it, I’ll be a man reformed and move back in.”

“Don’t get cocky. She might make it permanent this time.”

“Not my wife.” Thom took another bite. “Where’re we going?”

“Hollywood Hills, baby.”

“Fancy. I hope we won’t miss Bird’s birthday dinner.”

“What?”

“Yeah, you’re invited. Ron’s gonna make one of those meals he’s famous for. Dinner bell rings at seven.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Why, Georgie boy? Still pinning for your ex-girlfriend? Is that why you wailed from the street? Can’t bear to look at her?”

“Screw off.”

Thom chortled and spit eggs onto the dash.

“You’re a pig,” said George, throwing napkins.

“Come on, it’s an important day. She’s one year sober. Did you ever think she’d get this far?”

“Still not going.”

Thom’s cell rang. He unclipped it from his belt and palmed it so George could hear as well. “L.A.’s finest detectives,” he said.

“I just love the tinny sound of the speaker,” said Lance Craig, their Lieutenant at Robbery/Homicide Division. “Suppose you can’t multitask, Keane?”

“G-man is driving, but you know it’s illegal, don’t you, LT?”

“Whatever. Where are you monkeys? SID is already here. If you want a look see before they mess up the scene with powder and chemicals you better get your asses here pronto.”

George flipped an auxiliary switch and stomped the accelerator. The blue and red LEDs on the windshield pulsed.

“What we looking at?” said Thom.

“Four bodies. Looks professional. One of the dead is a city attorney. Dominic Lawrence. High profile, boys. You’re point.”

“Roger that,” said Thom. “We’re bat speed.” He disconnected the call and continued scarfing his breakfast not knowing when he’d get another meal.

“We’re maxed on overtime,” said George.

“He’s a city guy. We’ll get paid.”

“That means media,” said George.

“Damn straight. It’s going to be double bad. Birdie’s article launched this morning. The second part comes out Tuesday.”

George’s face blanched. “She shouldn’t have done it.”

“She’s a journalist. That’s what she does. It’s her obligation to get in front of the shit storm.”

Thom glared out the window. Side streets passed in a blur as George ran one red light after another.

“No doubt it’s going to hurt. But it could be worse.” It was the most artful lie Thom could present under the circumstances.