

# THE ROOK

THE BOWERS FILES #2

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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

## PROLOGUE

Thursday, November 5, 2008  
Washington, DC  
5:32 p.m.

The Chevy Tahoe slogged to a stop in the soggy patch of unseasonably thick snow, and Creighton Melice stepped into the twilight.

He scanned the decrepit Washington DC neighborhood. Drug dealers on the corners. A few blank faces staring at him through the windows of dead buildings. Thick shadows spreading across the street. Creighton drew in a breath of the stale air. Ah yes. Being in the rotting core of the city as the day died around him made Creighton Melice feel right at home.

His lawyer, Jacob Weldon, whispered nervously out the window of the SUV. “So, do you want me to wait for you, then?”

Creighton glanced at him. Weldon. A timid little man with over-ripe eyes.

“No. I’ll be all right.”

“Be careful.” Weldon sounded relieved.

“I always am.”

Less than three hours ago Creighton had been in custody. Dank cell. Second-degree murder charges — and most likely a long prison sentence. But then, just as Creighton was rehearsing his story, Weldon showed up and announced he’d made bail. “You’re a free man,” he said.

“Don’t screw with me.”

“I’m serious.”

“Who? Who paid it?”

Weldon shook his head. “I don’t know. Someone. A friend.”

Creighton scowled. “How could you not know? Didn’t he have to sign for it?”

“Sent someone. A big guy, I’ve seen him before, sitting in on the preliminaries. But he was just a delivery boy. Someone else footed the bill.”

“A friend, huh? Well, none of my friends have that kind of money.”

“Maybe you made a new one. C’mon, let’s get you out of this place. Whoever it was wants to see you.”

So they left the jail, drove around long enough to make sure no cops were trying to keep an eye on him, and then ended up here at 1311 Donovan Street in front of this vacant gray building wearing a tilted sign that read “The Blue Lizard Lounge.”

The place Creighton’s new friend had chosen for the meeting.

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After Weldon’s Tahoe had disappeared around the corner, Creighton scoured the ground for a weapon, snagged a broken beer bottle, and leaned his hand against the dilapidated dance club’s metal door. It clung to its latch for a moment and then creaked open.

A hallway stretched before him, lit only by a meager network of lightbulbs dangling at odd angles every six feet or so.

He didn’t like any of this. The meeting. The confined space. Some guy he didn’t even know paying his bail. Creighton tightened his grip on the neck of the bottle. He’d only used a broken bottle as a weapon once. That night had ended well for him, not so well for the guy who’d been hitting on the woman who was about to become his girlfriend. He figured he could do at least as much damage tonight if he needed to.

As Creighton approached the end of the hallway, he could see two doors, one on each side. A single word had been scrawled on each door. And, while it was hard to tell for sure in the dim light,

the words looked like they might have been painted with blood. He reached out his hand. Felt the word *Pain*.

Still damp.

Tasted it.

Yes. Blood.

The word *Freedom* had been painted on the door across the hall.

Creighton glanced behind him. Only an empty hallway. Then he inspected the doors, checked for light seeping beneath them. Nothing. Looked around the hallway one more time.

Nothing. Just an empty hallway that terminated here. At these two doors.

Freedom or pain.

Creighton pressed his ear up to each door in turn. Listened. Not a sound.

He needed to make a choice.

The decision was easy.

Creighton chose pain.

With a soft click, the door mouthed open into a narrow entryway. Maybe fifteen feet ahead of him, a tightly focused light sliced through the center of an adjoining room, probably the abandoned club's dance floor. A spotlight?

Why a spotlight?

Creighton smelled cigarette smoke. Someone was waiting for him.

His new friend.

Creighton crossed the entryway, and as he stepped into the harsh light, a voice halted him. "That's far enough." The voice was electronically altered, but to Creighton, the speaker sounded male.

Creighton paused.

At the other end of the room, about twenty-five feet away, sat a figure with an industrial-strength halogen work lamp glowing behind

his chair. Even though the person was starkly backlit, Creighton could clearly see that whoever it was had a gun.

“You chose the correct door, Creighton.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see.” He shielded his eyes, then gestured toward the gun. “So, did you set me free just so you could shoot me?”

Electronic laughter ricocheted around the room. The person motioned his gun toward the bottle Creighton was holding. “And did you come here just so you could slice me?”

“Maybe.”

A pause. “I want to offer you something.”

“I don’t work for anyone, and you can’t buy me off. So, if you’re gonna shoot me, make it a good shot because if you just wound me, I’m coming for you.” Creighton raised the cruelly tipped weapon. “I’m pretty quick, and if I make it across the room, I’m going to bury this in your belly. How’s that for an offer?”

“Now, now. Don’t I even get a thank-you? Your bail was no small sum, and we both know you won’t show up for the trial. That’s quite a little chunk of change I paid just to have you come here and threaten me.”

Creighton tried to catch the tenor of the person’s real voice, but whoever it was, he must have had a microphone up to his mouth that changed the pitch and tone of every word as he spoke.

“Well,” said Creighton. “I never asked for your help.”

A coarse voice coming through the mic. “Mr. Melice, I’ve been, how shall I say, following your career.”

“So, you’re a fan. Well, that’s just great.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. I am a fan. You have a great gift.”

“Oh, is that what you call it.” It wasn’t really a question. Silence stained the room. Creighton waited for the guy to reply, and when he didn’t, Creighton turned his head and tapped the broken bottle against the back of his neck. “The base of the neck, right there, or maybe the back of the head, would be your best choice. Although

from that range you better know what you're doing. I'm turning to go now. Take your best shot." Creighton expected to hear the click as the guy snapped off the safety; it would tell him a lot if he did. None of the guys he'd worked with ever used a safety.

Creighton took two steps. Then heard the voice again.

"I know why you chose this door."

Creighton paused.

"I can get you what you want."

Creighton turned. "No one can get me what I want."

"My friend, you wouldn't be here unless I could. I never would have bothered with you. You're the one who posted the videos. I read your blog. I know what you want."

Creighton wanted to ask how he'd been able to link the videos and blog to him, but obviously it had happened, and at this point that was all that mattered. "I'm listening."

"There's something I would like you to help me procure. Your background, skill set, and . . . unique tastes . . . make you eminently qualified for this job. When I have it in hand, I'll give you the one thing no one else on the planet can give you."

"What do you want me to 'procure'?"

A dismissive wave of the gun barrel. "More in due time, my friend. For now, I'd simply like to know if you're interested enough to continue this discussion. If not, you're free to go. I'll just consider the bail money an investment that didn't pay off."

"Free to go, huh? The next time I turn my back, you'll put a bullet in my brain."

"No," said the voice. "I choose the base of the neck instead."

A sudden chill. Miscalculation. "What?"

An instant later, Creighton heard the simultaneous crack of the gun and the bright explosion of glass beside him. He didn't feel the bullet's impact but quickly scanned his body for an entry wound, for a growing stain of blood. Found none.

It was only the bottle. The guy had shot the bottle out of Creighton's hand.

Right at the base of the neck.

"That," Creighton said, holding up what little remained of the bottle, "was an impressive shot."

"If I wanted you dead," the voice said, "you'd be dead. I want your help."

As Creighton threw the remains of the bottle to the ground, he noticed a spray of glass shards embedded in his thigh. Blood began to creep from a dozen wounds. He reached down and started wrenching the pieces of glass from his leg, thinking about how badly it should have hurt. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't. And I can't trust you either. But that's the nature of these relationships, isn't it?"

Lately, Creighton had been working alone, but it hadn't always been that way. "Yeah," he said. "It is."

"So, are you in?"

Creighton didn't answer, just finished removing the glass from his leg and dropping it to the floor. But he didn't turn to go either.

"All right. Good. Then I have a surprise for you."

"And that is?"

"Your girlfriend. She's waiting for you out back, in the car."

Creighton straightened up. "My girlfriend?"

"Mmm-hmm."

He glanced around the room. "Where?"

The man waved the gun toward the far wall. "Door's over there. Keys are in the car. So is your plane ticket, driver's license, FBI identification badge, and a little spending money, Mr. Neville Lewis."

Creighton let out a harsh sigh. "Neville Lewis? That the best you could do?"

A crackle of electronic laughter. "Go on. We'll talk soon. I know you must be anxious to see her."

"Wait. You know my name, what am I supposed to call you?"

“You can call me Shade.”

The light blinked off, and Creighton found that he couldn't see a thing except for the flashing residue of color swirling through his vision. The passageway he'd come from spit out a tiny pool of light, but other than that the room was pitch black.

He heard a faint brush of movement beside the chair and realized that if he couldn't see the shooter, the shooter couldn't see him.

So.

One chance.

*Take care of this guy now. Then you won't have to worry about trusting him, or working for him, or paying him back for any favors.*

Creighton crouched low and skittered along the wall. Rushed toward the chair.

Groping through the dark, he knocked over the work lamp, and it clattered to the ground, the hot bulbs exploding on impact. Creighton's hands found the chair and he lifted it, swung it, hoping to find the person who'd shot the bottle from his hand, but he found only empty air instead.

He swung again. Shuffled around.

Nothing.

He prodded at the emptiness with the chair for a couple more minutes but found no sign of the man who'd invited him there. Finally, he decided the guy must have slipped away somehow, perhaps out another door.

Rather than waste any more time stumbling around in the dark trying to attack a phantom, he threw the chair to the ground and started for the far wall. The guy had promised that his girlfriend was waiting for him. He wasn't sure what to think about that, but he definitely wanted to find out.

Creighton found the door, eased it open. Stepped into the alley behind the club. A sedan with tinted windows sat beside a reeking

dumpster. Night had fallen, but a jaundiced street lamp at the end of the alley managed to give Creighton just enough light to see.

He made sure no one else was in the alley, then approached the car and tried to peer through the windows. Too dark.

He didn't trust the guy with the gun, and he wasn't sure what to expect when he opened the car door.

A car bomb?

But why? Why waste the bail money? Besides, the guy could have killed him inside the building.

Sounds, soft sounds from inside the car. He reached for the door handle. Clicked it open. "Hello?" he said.

No one in the front seat. He slipped into the car. "Hello?" Turned around.

And found her, lying in the backseat.

A woman he had never met.

Bound and tightly gagged.

He pulled the door shut. Her pleading eyes grew large with terror when she saw him, saw that he made no attempt to free her. They had never met, but he'd seen her face. He knew who she was. She squirmed. Couldn't get free. "So," he said, eyeing her, smiling at her, fondling her soft blonde hair. "Maybe I can trust him after all."

Creighton swiveled around and started the engine. "C'mon, my dear. It's time we got to know each other. I'm going to be your new boyfriend."

As he pulled out of the alley, Creighton could hear desperate, muffled cries coming from the backseat. He didn't need to turn around to know what they were. He knew those sounds well. He'd heard them before.

She was trying to scream beneath her gag.

Yes, he knew those sounds well.

It looked like Weldon had been right after all.

Creighton Melice had made a new friend.

# 1

Three months later

Monday, February 16, 2009  
San Diego, California  
5:46 p.m.

I stared at the array of silverware surrounding my plate. “I can never remember which fork to use for the salad.”

My stepdaughter Tessa pointed. “The outside one, Patrick. You start there and work your way in.”

“You sure?”

She picked up my forks one at a time, a family of leather bracelets riding up and down her wrist, over the four rubber bands she wore beneath them. “Salad, main dish, then dessert.”

As she set down my dessert fork, I realized how much we both stuck out at this restaurant. Everyone else wore a dinner jacket or an evening gown; we both had on T-shirts—mine, a faded athletic shirt from Marquette University, hers, a black, long-sleeve DeathNail 13 tee with the band’s logo of an eyeball with a nail stuck through it. Beside the picture she wore a small pin: Save Darfur. Now.

Tessa had chosen light pink lipstick tonight, but black fingernail polish and black eye shadow to match her raven-black hair. I hadn’t been too thrilled about the eyebrow ring and pierced nose she’d gotten last month without my permission, but I had to admit they were cute. And with her three-quarter-length black tights under a crinkly fabric skirt, she looked slightly Goth, a little edgy and dark, yet still girlish and innocent at seventeen.

“So, how do you know so much about table settings?” I asked.

“I worked at La Saritas, remember? Before Mom died.”

Her comment blindsided me, took me back to Christie’s funeral. I glanced out the window. The wind had been kicking up all afternoon, and now, just after dusk, the ocean looked ragged and gray. The remaining sunlight drained slowly into the sea as a few gulls meandered beneath the clouds, occasionally diving to retrieve a fish that had wandered too close to the water’s rough, leathery surface. “Yeah, sorry,” I said. “I guess I forgot. How long did you work there again?”

“Two days. The manager said I didn’t have a ‘team-oriented attitude.’” She took a sip of her ice water. “Jerk.”

I’d chosen a table in the back of the restaurant, my back to the wall. Force of habit. For a moment I watched the servers maneuver through the maze of tables, observing the routes they took, the choices they made. Habit again.

A few minutes earlier, the girl who’d seated us had placed a platter of crusty bread in front of me. She’d set a bowl of some kind of oil next to it, and the people at the tables all around us were dipping their bread into the sour-yellow lubricant and then eating it. I decided to pass.

Our server, a slim-boned man with a beak for a nose, arrived to take our order. “Sir,” he said. Then he faced Tessa. “Mademoiselle. Would you like to hear the specials? Tonight we are offering a lovely pork tenderloin finished off with a mango and pineapple reduction—”

Tessa gave him an iron stare. “Do you have any idea what kind of conditions those pigs are forced to live in before being shipped to the slaughterhouses? Wire cages. Tiny wire cages—”

“Tessa,” I said.

“Where they’re force-fed, drugged with growth hormones until they’re too fat to stand—”

“Tessa Bernice Ellis.”

“I’m just saying—”

I gave her my best, be-quiet-right-now-or-we’re-going-to-Burger-King look. Our eyes wrestled for a moment, and at last she gave in. “OK, OK. I want a house salad.” She pointed to the menu. “And no apple-wood smoked bacon.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He turned to me, tilted his head, offered a fabricated smile. He might have been a robot. “And you, sir?”

I noticed Tessa glaring at me. “I guess I’ll have a salad too,” I said. “But I’m hungry though. Make it a double.”

“A double, sir? I’m afraid our dinner salad only comes in one size, but I assure you it’s a most generous portion.”

I’d seen some of those “generous portions” when Tessa and I had walked to our booth. “Well, I’ll take two of those, then. Just dump them into one great big bowl. That’ll work.”

He scribbled something on his notepad, although I didn’t think our order had been all that complex. Tessa cleared her throat. “Patrick, seriously, you can order the pork tenderloin if you want, and I promise I won’t say anything about how the pigs are crammed into feces-ridden crates where they can’t even turn around, taken to a slaughterhouse where they’re hit with a stun gun that leaves them alive and squealing and bleeding to death while they’re dropped alive into the scalding water that’s supposed to remove their hair and soften up the meat so that restaurants like this can glaze them with mangos and serve them to their patrons. I promise not to say a word.”

The woman at the table beside us slowly lowered her main-dish fork to the table.

“How thoughtful of you, Tessa,” I said. *Slaughterhouses. Great. Just the thing I need to be thinking about right now.*

I noticed that our server’s face had turned pasty white. “Just bring me those two salads in one big bowl and a cup of coffee—wait. What kind of coffee do you have?”

He tried to compose himself. “We serve a variety of fine espressos and cappuccinos as well as both regular and decaffeinated—”

“No, no, no. I mean like a Ruiru 11 blend from Kenya, or Costa Rican La Magnolia, or something from the Cerrado region of Brazil. What kind of coffee? What country is it from?”

“I believe we buy it here in America—”

Oh boy. “When you get the coffee from the store, does it come in a great big metal can?”

He beamed. “Absolutely.”

That was all I needed to hear. “Tea. A cup of tea.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I glanced at the bowl of oil. “And some butter too.”

“Tea . . .” He mouthed the words as he wrote them on his pad. “And butter.” Then he turned hesitantly toward Tessa. “And your drink, ma’am?”

“Root beer. And don’t put any cheese in my salad, anything like that.”

He gave her a small nod.

“Or ranch dressing. Ranch is disgusting.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Or eggs.”

One more brisk nod, and then he disappeared.

“Well,” I said. “Nothing like visiting a fancy restaurant. We should do this more often.”

“Yup,” she said, dipping a piece of bread into the oil and holding it up to the light. Globes of vomit-colored oil plopped onto her plate. “Nothing like it.”

I tried to relax and just enjoy the next few minutes. Tried to engage in a coherent conversation, tried to listen to her talk about a club she’d heard about that she wanted to visit but that I would never let her go to anyway, tried to think of clever things to say about the birdlike waiter.

Tried to, but couldn't. The image of a slaughterhouse had landed in my mind and refused to leave.

I could hear squealing coming from the inside. Sharp desperate cries. But neither this slaughterhouse nor the squealing had anything to do with pigs.