

Salamander by Deborah J Ledford

“Salamander called.”

I stopped the coffee mug mid-way to my mouth. I stared at Mitch, unable to speak, forgetting how to breathe.

“He didn’t leave a message. Said he’d call back. I know you don’t want me to answer your phone, but I thought the call might be important.” Mitch winced. “Sorry. Habit.”

I took in the man I’d shared a life with for the past six months. Thought about going to him, running my fingers through his dark curls flecked with gray, kiss the lips that had always met mine without a hint of hesitation, take his hand and lead him down the hall to the bedroom. One last time. My heartbeat thudded in my chest as I searched for a way to make this situation right.

“When did he call?” I asked.

“A few minutes ago. You were in the shower.”

I studied him, but he didn’t seem suspicious. Then he said, “Who is Salamander?” and my apprehension intensified.

Salamander. My safe word. The one with a single meaning: *Get out, now!*

“Nobody important, babe. You’re going to be late.”

Mitch shrugged, reached for his briefcase on the kitchen counter, leaned in for a kiss and a stroke of my cheek. “Dinner tonight, remember? Eight o’clock.” His eyes danced with amusement. “Try to remember to clean the paint from under your fingernails, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, remembering the night before when he caught me standing at my easel in the spare bedroom, lost in the work nearing completion at two A.M.

“Love you,” he chirped as he closed the door behind him that led to the garage.

Releasing the trapped air from my lungs, I went to the bedroom closet, pushed aside a stack of blankets, reached to the back corner and pulled out the heavy duffel. I unzipped my escape bag and took inventory of the contents: Passport, North Carolina driver’s license, banded bundles of \$100 bills that totaled four thousand dollars, black wig, travel-size toiletries, sneakers, sweater, change of clothes. All I would need to take leave of the life I had come to love.

I stepped to my bedside table, pulled the charger to my cell phone from the wall and tucked it in the bag. Mobile in hand, I dialed and when the line picked up, said, “Meet me in two hours,” then I clicked off without waiting for a response.

Caressing the hand-stitched quilt atop the bed, I remembered the first time my naked back had met the Double Wedding Ring pattern. Mitch lying beside me, telling me his great grandmother would roll over in her grave if she knew what he was about to do to me on top of the heirloom.

I reluctantly cast the memory aside and went across the hall into the spare bedroom that met me with the comforting aromas of linseed oil and paint. I selected a detail brush from an assorted jumble on the paint stippled-table and signed SARAH COMPTON, the name adopted for what turned out to be a short stint. Admiring the lush Costa Rica landscape I had created, I thought of all the other names and lost count at eight.

Taking up the duffel, I pondered leaving a note for Mitch, then decided against it—his safety was as important as my own. The less he knew the better. Instead, I settled on scribbling out instructions where he could pick up the car he had leased specifically for me.

I walked out into the crisp morning and noticed the bushes along the front path ready to burst with blooms. Fresh yellow-green leaves had popped on the trees that lined the neighborhood. Spring had sprung, seemingly overnight.

My belly roiled with dread as I swatted away a tear. I never intended to become so close to a place,

look forward to returning to a house after being away only for an hour. Leaving forever seemed an impossibility, one I had hoped never needed to be considered. Yet here I was, facing renewal and all its obstacles. Again.

Relieved not to see any non-descript dark vehicles parked at the curb, I pulled the gleaming BMW from the driveway and headed toward the Raleigh-Durham airport where I would rent a car.

Precisely two hours later I arrived at a long forgotten graveyard, remote from any town. Markers of varying size and shapes leaned in the clearing overgrown with grass and weeds, high as my knees in places. Some of the sites were adorned with plastic flowers so faded they held no color. I cut a swath as I passed row after short row. Some of the designations stirred recognition. ELAINE JANE NORWALK, CASSIE HAZLETON, CAROLINE ANN SHIPLEY. I halted my steps at the engraved headstone where I had stopped the last time here: SARAH COMPTON.

The name had served me well. Until now.

My six year journey had been exhausting. One I had taken upon myself with the hope of exorcising the taint of my father's iniquity. After all these years of being away from the glass high-rise in Chicago, I still dreamed of Excel spreadsheets, columns of numbers, the actual financial logs that confirmed over three hundred million dollar profits. Another set of books for show—the one for investors, auditors, lawyers, which revealed the company to be in the red by twenty million dollars.

My unwitting participation in the fraud still shamed me. I hadn't regretted a single move since I'd discovered my father and his partner's intent to pocket their clients' funds. I smiled every time I sent cashier's checks of never less than ten thousand dollars, left care packages on front porches, imagining the individuals' delight when they discovered \$10,000 in cash amidst the cans of food and pasta boxes.

These "good deeds" weren't meant to redeem my father, but rather to ease my guilt and horror of an injustice. Something died inside me when I discovered the false accountings of people tricked into investing money meant to see them through their last days, and unsuspecting victims of three retirement funds. My father and his partner knew from day one that none of those investors would ever receive the overblown interest promised, and certainly not a nickel of their initial investment in what actually turned out to be a carefully calculated Ponzi scheme.

I raised my head and let out an exhausted sigh. Something about the vines intertwined amongst the cracked bricks ahead drew me to an area of the graveyard I had never visited. The single wall with an arched opening called out for me to walk beyond the remains.

Rubble from the fallen structure strewn about the overgrown greenery made me cautious of where to walk. I kept my eyes focused on the ground. A glint caught my attention and I bent down to my discovery. A medallion the size of a quarter attached to a tarnished chain of what I suppose once sparkled silver. The pendant, I discovered, was actually a coin after I rubbed off the detritus and barely made out the date: 1908. I slipped the necklace on, hoping it would bring me luck.

The scent of mildewed soil and decaying leaves awakened ancient memories. I had the feeling I'd been here before, but that couldn't be true. I unconsciously ducked through the opening, although the top stone towered over my head. Inside the private space, weeds and brush thrived in thickets. I moved farther into the area bordered by pines, trunks large as my waist. The air grew thick and measurably cooler. What's missing? I wondered, as fear clutched my chest. Silence. No birds chattered, not even a breeze rippled the needles.

My mind screamed, *Flee*, but my body urged my legs forward. Two more strides and I caught the vision this enclosed universe surely wanted me to find. Amid the brush stood a two-foot tall headstone covered in moss, chipped from weathering, the wet stone weeping slimy tears, engraved with the words:

ANNABELLE SIMMS – FLY LITTLE ANGEL FLY – 1906-1908.

The sound of footsteps alerted me. I wasn't alone. Squeezing my eyes shut, I turned to face the intruder who could either take me out, or deliver me. I wasn't sure which would be more welcome.

"Are you well, Daniella?"

The low rumble of a familiar voice made me smile and calmed my racing heartbeat. I opened my eyes to take in the sight of the only relative welcome in my life. "I'm well, Uncle Enzo. But safe . . .? You tell me."

He dropped a leather case large enough to hold a toddler to the ground beside him then swatted twigs and leaves from the legs of his sharply creased slacks. A sudden wind tore through the trees and he wound a scarf tighter around his throat, its bright red weave the only color that adorned his black suit.

"Yes. Safe for now," he said, opening his arms.

I ran to him and collided against his body, frailer than the last time we met in this same place. Worry creased my brow when I looked into his eyes, light blue marred by red veins, lacking the glint and mischief that usually held my gaze.

My vision settled on the bag he had brought which I knew contained stacks of currency, the same transaction we had made more than a dozen times in the past six years. The North Carolina graveyard had been our meeting place to return to from all the places where I had escaped: Arizona, California, Kansas, Florida. So many states, cities big and small. All a blur.

"How much is left in the offshore account?" Enzo asked, looking off into the trees.

His avoidance sent off a ping of suspicion straight to my soul. I studied him for a moment before I said, "Not nearly enough to compensate everyone. I've been wiring funds to the people who invested the least amount. Figure they're the ones most in trouble of losing a roof over their heads. There's so many . . . I hope I'm not too late to make things right."

"It's a big job. I wish you would let me help."

"Thank you, Uncle, but this is my burden."

He began to protest, but I held up my open palm for him to stop.

"The list of those most in need of immediate assistance is in the bag." He handed over the heavy case. "Where will you go?"

"Well, I thought a small town, low profile and no residence or property in my name would work . . . but apparently not."

"No, my dear. He found you quite quickly this time. Your father's people are getting better at tracking you."

"I'm now thinking I need to truly disappear. Get lost in a big city."

"Have you found a new name?" he asked.

My eyes fell on the Annabelle Simms gravestone. A flutter in my chest halted me from saying the name. Instead, I looked to the nearest marker where I stood and said, "Loretta Evans."

He took out a notepad and pen then jotted down the name. "I'll arrange for your new identification right away. For now, keep your escape simple."

"Is there anything you need to tell me, Uncle?"

He hesitated a moment, then shook his head and said nothing else as we exchanged car keys.

I held Enzo's arm when we descended the uneven path to our vehicles. Winded, he slumped into my rented Ford and gulped air as he swept his hands through his lush white hair.

"I'm worried about you, Uncle. Are you all right?"

"Sure, of course. No need to worry about me."

Normally he would chuckle at the remark, reach out and pat my shoulder, wink, dispelling my fears. But not this time and my worry tipped near to panic. I wondered if I would ever see Enzo again, then wondered why I hadn't told him where I planned to go. The betrayal would be unbearable if my treasured uncle was the one instrumental in alerting my father of my whereabouts. A piece of my heart shut down when I realized there was no one to trust any longer.

Enzo started the rental's engine and I kept my hand raised in goodbye until the car disappeared around the bend. Tears blurring my vision, I took out my cell phone and removed its back panel, withdrew the battery then the SIM card and put them in my pocket. Then I crushed the mobile with the heel of my shoe, picked up the ruined unit and threw it to a row of blackberry vines covered in brambles.

I got into Enzo's Mercedes and sat behind the wheel of the plush seat that still held the heat from his

body. I stroked the leather dashboard and wished I could enjoy driving the expensive vehicle, but knew it was equipped with GPS tracking. To be safe, I would need to abandon the Mercedes and settle on paying cash for a non-descript car before travelling too far.

The medallion felt warm on my chest and I grasp it between my fingers, as if the talisman could guide me. No peace presented itself.

I repeated “Annabelle Simms” over and over, then focused my thoughts on yet another journey of renewal.