

# Refrigerator White

## Chapter One: Introducing the Late Leslie Stewart

A pair of pillow-shaped pieces of ice skittered across the stone floor as I drove the fifty-gallon ice bucket into the raised edge of the floor mat behind the bar. Ignoring the errant pieces, I picked the heavy canister up by the handles and walked to the nearest ice well. With a flip of the hip, the contents of the bucket crushed into the well and I put the empty can back on the base with the rollers. Setting up the bar was something I had done a few hundred times before. It had lost its charm some time ago.

I was heading back to the ice machine behind the kitchen for another load of ice when I heard what sounded like crying. Maybe I would have been better off if I had kept moving, but Mondays are light duty days and I was already bored.

The glass door to the restrooms and telephones swung wide on easy hinges as I leaned into the little hallway. Leslie Stewart was holding her cell phone in her right hand and looked like she was trying to hold herself together with her left. She was about five and half feet tall with a pretty face and a slender build. Leslie was ghostly white and the black of her shirt and pants highlighted her pale skin. She reminded me of Snow White's repressed accountant of a sister. Her head turned as I walked in.

"I gotta go, Ami," she said.

"Sorry if I'm butting in, but..."

"Quinn, I'm sorry."

I beamed the cowboy smile her way. "I just thought I heard something."

Leslie wiped her eyes. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What kind of fucking guy just fucking fucks you and doesn't fucking call?"

My face tightened. Until now I hadn't been sure that Leslie knew the f-word existed. "I dunno. Guys with no morals."

Leslie's eyes started leaking and she shook for a second or two. Before I knew it, I had my arms around her and she was absentmindedly wiping her face across my chest leaving a faint makeup trail across my starched white T-shirt. The world stopped for us in the little hallway as she cried it out. After a few minutes, she started breathing normally again and pulled away saying, "I'm pregnant."

I was glad she was backing off. In the back of my head, I was afraid it might have been contagious. "Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure," she said. "I'm late."

"Are you sure? I mean do you always..." My thought faded away having brushed into that no man's land we all avoid.

"Usually, I'm regular as clockwork."

My face twisted as I looked for the right thing to say. Coming up short, I came up with nothing. "Whoops."

"Whoops is right," she said.

"So what are you going to do?"

Leslie stared off into space as if she was looking at a list of options hanging just behind my head. She was wearing tan lipstick. "I have to decide, don't I?"

"Yup," I said, slipping back into cowboy speak.

Leslie fixed her distant gaze on me. "Can you help me?"

"How?"

Leslie wiped her eyes again, "I hear that you do favors for people."

"You make me sound like a hitman," I smiled.

"I heard that too," she said.

Now it was my turn to sigh as a response. It is one thing to

have a reputation in certain circles, but I didn't want that rep in this circle.

"Can you find the guy for me?"

"Sure," I said as a reflex.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Quinn," she said as she hugged me.

"Sure," I said. "Just give me his number."

"I don't have it."

"What do you have?"

"I met him at the Tank and we went back to my place." Leslie pulled back to arm's length and tapped the back of her cell phone with a stray finger.

I brushed her hair back from her face with a steady left hand. "Do I have a name to go on?"

"Jim. Or maybe John," she said as she pushed me away.

Blinking, I asked. "Okay, what did he look like?"

"He was a little taller than you, maybe six foot two with a muscular build."

"Do you have a hair color for me or do I have to wander around the Coppertank feeling biceps?" I grinned.

Leslie laughed a little too long. "He has thick brown hair, a little longer than yours."

"Eyes?"

"Two," she smiled. "A sea foam green, but not as pretty as yours."

I flushed. "I feel like a suspect already."

"Not a chance, Quinn. I know you too well." Leslie deadpanned before going into the Ladies' Room.

Maybe she had just watched *To Catch a Thief*. Sending a bartender to catch a philandering lowlife wasn't a terrible idea. With her problem in mind, I went back to shoveling ice and enjoying the morning.

The tumblers stood in the right order and the lock made a little click that you felt more than you heard. The tight white door to Leslie Stewart's place eased open as I looked inside. She had been

reluctant to give me a key to her place, but I insisted that I needed to look for evidence. I'd been a little squeamish to ask where she might have been when she had been impregnated, so the whole apartment was fair game.

A framed Monet print was staring me in the face, hung from a short wall that was set just a few feet back from the door. The right led off to the kitchen and the left to the living room and beyond. I went to the kitchen and grabbed a cold Shiner Bock from the refrigerator. With a newfound respect for Leslie's taste, I pulled on a pair of latex gloves and went back toward the living room, my evidence collecting tackle box bumping against my leg as I walked.

Sturdy old furniture and fashion magazines were scattered about the room in a pattern I didn't understand. Looking back at the kitchen, I saw that the short wall at the entryway was actually the side of a bar that separated the kitchen from the living room. I glanced around thinking that such a small apartment would be easy to wrap up, until I saw the bedroom.

Seemingly, every scrap of clothing that Leslie owned was in some state of abandoned grace on the bedroom floor. An expensive bedroom suite peeked out from under casually tossed clothes and rumpled sheets and a dog-eared copy of *On the Road* by Kerouac. The carpet was gray where it peeked through the thin film of clothing and life that had kept her from running a vacuum cleaner recently. Somehow, I smelled a ham sandwich. Twitching, I hoped it was a ham sandwich.

Taking a long drink from the bottle, I stepped gingerly across a flat pair of jeans and tiptoed around a matching paisley bra and panty set, which were turned inside out. I found myself wondering that maybe she should consider Velcro clothing in the interest of time. A tall sandal rolled under foot as I leaned at the side of the bed. Squinting, I saw what I was not looking for, the great condom wrapper burial ground. Using a pair of rubber-tipped wooden tongs, I picked up half a dozen items and put them into half a dozen little plastic bags. Thankfully, I didn't find anything organic.

The bed squeaked like a hungry rat as I sat down involuntarily. When it squeaked, I jumped high enough to have my PI license lifted. If I ever get one. I killed the Shiner and with a special kind of resignation, I collected evidence in the bathroom.

## Chapter Two: The Man in the Post-Modern Mansion

Here in the townhouse, I had a smallish temporary lab set up with four or five tables making a horseshoe in one of the converted bedrooms. I had a full fingerprint set up and a few microscopes and one computer dedicated to keeping track of the databases that I used. The townhouse lab was for figuring things out, not taking proof into court. Out at the lake house was where I kept the serious equipment.

Sweat rolled down the side of the Shiner bottle as I twirled black mag powder onto the last of the condom wrappers with a big fiberglass brush. The pattern of wide black whorls told me I had another thumb print. I lifted the print onto a piece of clear tape and pressed it down on a white piece of card stock. A minute later, I had a decent scan of the print. Using my access through the Bell County Sheriff's office and the NCIC parameters, I loaded the print into the automatic fingerprint ID system. It suddenly occurred to me that if I came up with a lot of matches on Leslie's prints, I would be at a dead end.

I waited and watched the computer work. This was a long shot. My target was a lothario, not a burglar or a terrorist or a murderer. If he hadn't had a run in with the cops or applied for a job as a security guard, I would draw a blank. And I wouldn't know until the morning. Even narrowing the search by discriminating by gender and age and digit, the search would take hours.

So, I watched some Monty Python on DVD and cooked a nice dinner. That Monday ended with rather tedious dreams of skiing on black snow. At least, even asleep, I was smart enough to keep from snorting it.

The heat was making my sport coat feel like an old horse blanket. At the top of the stairs, I grabbed my lapels and flapped my arms sharing my body heat with the enclosed concrete landing. As I tried to remember the apartment number, a door on the right side opened. A medium sized guy walked out and started at me like I had just come from the circus.

"Quinn, what are you doing here?"

"Monk. What are you doing here?"

"I live here," he said. He ran a loose hand over the stubble on his head. "What are you doing here?"

"Apparently, I'm looking for you." Not having anything to write on, I started taking mental notes. They're much easier to throw away at the end of a case. "Your first name is Maurice?"

"And."

"And you were busted for Indecent Exposure a few years back?"

"Yeah. I got caught taking a leak at South Padre when I was on Spring Break. It was out of control."

We stood looking at each other for a long moment. He might be a good fit for Leslie, but she hadn't let me know that it was okay to tell anyone about her condition. The heat got to me after another minute. "Well, you have a nice afternoon, I've got to run."

"What was that all about Quinn?"

I started down the stairs and my feet made a clanging noise. "Nothing. See you around, Monk."

He banged a little hand down on the metallic railing. "I'm a Buddhist, not a Monk."

"I know. That's what makes it funny."

"What?"

"See you at work, Monk."

After another two run-ins with brain donors like Monk, I was ready for a late lunch. And maybe an answer or two, so I called Leslie at work. Half an hour later, she was bouncing up the stairs to my place. Leslie was young enough that her outside did not yet match her inside. Her face was fresh and clean and porcelain white as she smiled her way through the front door and into my den. She was wearing a dark sweater over a light shirt and shiny black slacks. Her hair flowed behind her like a CGI effect.

"Oh my God, Quinn, this place is huge."

"Not compared to Texas Stadium."

She stopped and looked around, enjoying the lack of walls in the living area. "This place looks so different from the outside."

"It's supposed to. I picked a small apartment building and took out some of the walls and did some redecorating. I like to think of it

as a horizontal townhouse. With plenty of bathrooms.”

“I think it’s huge. You should throw a party here.”

“Maybe. But then people would come over. It’d blow the whole hermit thing I’ve got going on.”

“Quinn, you’re so funny. What’s that metal on the outside of the building?”

“It’s corrugated tin.”

“And the triangles...”

“Art deco, I think.”

“I don’t think it’s deco.”

“I don’t know. I just live here.”

Leslie flopped into the brown leather sofa that faces the entertainment system. “I could live here.”

“Sure. About that other thing, I haven’t had much luck finding Jack or John.” I wanted to derail any upcoming destination of her mental train.

“It may have been Jim”

“Okay, Jim. Whoever.” I said, stalling for time. Talking about sex made me squirm like a sidewinder in August. “I’m down to my last option. I need to visit the scene of the crime.”

“Crime?” Leslie’s eyebrows knitted as she wondered what the hell I meant.

“Coppertank.” I said, also wondering what the hell I meant.

“Really. Aren’t you a little old for that?”

“I’m little old for a lot of stuff. Can you remember what day of the week you met him?”

“Today. It was a Tuesday.” Leslie pulled the little lever and enjoyed the part of the sofa that was also a recliner.

“How do you know?”

She hit the button and turned on the vibrating heater in the seat. “I remember the drink special. ‘Trippin’ Tuesday, seventy-five cent pints.’”

I sighed. “Let me take you to a late lunch. I need to build a firm base if I’m going to be knocking back pints tonight.” It took a few minutes to get her out of the chair. Maybe I should have met her some where.

## Chapter Three: Of Vice and Men

There was a cold snap in the air as I turned the corner and walked the last half block to the Coppertank. Over the years, I had developed a deep and abiding loathing for what the Sixth Street bar business had turned into. When I had first come to Austin in the early eighties, the pubs along Sixth Street had the easy charm of an old friend who was inviting you in for a few quick ones on the way home. As time passed, my favorite places closed and the area became a full speed freak show. Now there were fights every weekend the UT football team had a home game. On the drinking holidays, frat guys would hang out and drink heavily and vomit on each other. The Coppertank was a half-block off of Sixth Street and had resisted the long slide into stupidity a little better than the others.

The doorman nodded me in and I cleared the front door. If I'd been in a better mood, I might have made a joke about getting a senior citizen discount on pints. I was down to the last resort for finding the mysterious Poppa. A thousand old pick up lines ricocheted off the walls and fought for ear space with the sound of tabs picked up with Daddy's plastic.

I found an empty booth and the new Austin Chronicle kept me company as I worked a pint of stout and waited for the place to fill up. I lost interest somewhere after the News of the Weird and flipped to the movie reviews. Then the ads for the adult bookstores teased me for a while. In the meantime, Frat guys and Sorority girls and thugs and tourists wandered into the place and waited for something interesting to happen. Another pint helped me through SportsCenter on the TV behind the bar. It occurred to me that I was now officially a method actor and interrogator. I was Dustin Hoffman in *Marathon Man*.

An hour and a half later, I felt as oily as a used car dealer. I had casually interviewed two different guys who more or less fit the description, only to come up short. My patience could not stand much more of the type. Another one drifted my way and I swallowed the rest of the beer in front of me and swung into action at the end of the bar.

A little blonde just a half click down from Tara Reid walked past

and smiled at me. I smiled back and said, "Oh my."

"That's right," the guy standing to my right said. He was over six feet tall, dark-haired and green-eyed, wearing a black Tommy Hilfiger shirt. Only a deaf man could have missed my stage whisper.

"I like this bar," I said as we watched her wiggle back to her friends at the pool table.

"Definitely the best fishing in town."

A smile broke out across my face at the fishing reference. "You fish here a lot?"

"A few nights a month."

"Sounds like a lot."

"I've got a few favorite spots," Mr. Hilfiger said.

"I'll bet. If I buy you a pint, will you clue me in?"

"A seventy-five cent pint?"

"As a sign of respect."

He shrugged, as a King might shrug to one of his subjects who had just invented a new accounting system.

So, I wandered back to the bar and bought a couple of pints. Jack, John, or Jim kept his attention on the crowd the whole time. He seemed to be searching the herd for a weak one to separate from her friends. His chance meeting with Leslie Stewart suddenly made sense, if he was the guy. I handed him the pint glass and stuck out a hand. "The name's Hal." One of my favorite aliases is Hal Peno. All right, I have a juvenile streak.

"Brent," he said.

"Nice crowd tonight."

"Whatever," he said as he watched the crowd without really watching.

"I'm lookin' for a girl."

"Good place for it," he said without really listening.

"I left my watch at her place last week and my girlfriend is going to kill me."

"What's she look like?"

"Pale skin and dark hair. About yay tall with a trashed apartment." I gestured about her height.

"Isn't that all of them?"

"Exactly." I drank a little and looked around. "She lived in the Arboretum. I think her name was Lucille."

Brent smiled with just his eyes. "Leslie."

"What?"

"Her name is Leslie and she lives off of Great Hills Trail behind the P. F. Chang's."

"So what, you know her?"

"More than that."

"Really."

"I wouldn't want to see her again. She doesn't put much into it and I'm looking for a freak."

"Good luck with that," I said.

"Uh huh."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm going to go talk to that little blonde."

"See ya."

It was a stretch, but I managed to let Cici, the Tara Reid twin, beat me at a few games of Eight Ball. It was helped because I watched Brent work his magic from across the room. Around midnight, he put his pint glass down on the bar and headed toward the door. Obviously the girls at the Coppertank had returned God's gift to women. I knew what I was going to do when I saw Brent leave. Easing the last empty pint glass onto the nearest bar, I got Cici's number and followed him into the night.

He walked across the street and through an alley with a spring in his step. The hustler wove through the cars and stopped beside a silver Montero with tinted glass.

In the faint glow of the scattered streetlights, I checked the parking lot for other late nighters. Every sense dull from the beer, I closed the distance as Brent fumbled with his keys, finally getting the right key in the lock. There was no betrayal from my soft-soled shoes as I stopped striking distance from my prey. I breathed quietly, "Brent."

"Wha..." he said as he turned, his eyes white and startled.

My right fist traveled in low and hard like a wrecking ball and

struck Brent just below the ribcage. He blew out a lungful of sour beer breath. I drove in a hard left on the same spot and avoided what breath he had left from the first blow.

Brent's eyes were wide as he gasped and started to raise his hands.

"You're not going to be able to breathe too well for a minute," I said through a poker face. "It makes this easier on me." I shifted and hooked a right into his ribs.

"Fu... fu..." Brent stammered as he swung a high looping left my way.

A short left hooked into one of his kidneys as I turned him with my right. His back was to me and I drove a right fist into his other kidney.

Brent gasped as he leaned against his Montero, making a face print on the black glass.

I stood close behind him and talked in a low voice, a knuckle at the base of his skull pinning him like a butterfly. "Right about now, you're wondering who I really am. I am a professional thug and a pissed off boyfriend."

"S-sorry," he gasped.

"Don't apologize. This is business. Just another day at work for me."

I let him go so he could slide down to the pavement. Pinching the car key stuck in the door between my knuckles, I unlocked the door without leaving a print. With a closed hand, I swung the door open and looked back at Brent.

My victim was slouched by the back tire, glaring at me as he struggled to get his wind back.

"I'd bet you want to get in your truckster and go home."

Brent glowered and spit, carefully keeping eye contact.

"If you do what you're thinking about doing, I'll have to hurt you, Brent."

He sneered, showing me his perfect teeth.

"Did you know that if you break someone's knee sideways that it never comes back right? It never heals properly. Will the ladies like you as much if you walk with a permanent limp?"

Brent's face slowly twisted as he worked to stand.

I stepped back. "Why don't you go home before I decide to do some permanent damage to you?"

The gasping man slid along to the side of the vehicle, inching closer until he reached the door. He fell into the driver seat and I closed the door with a forearm.

The Montero's engine roared to life and he left as quickly as he could considering the maneuvering room in a downtown Austin parking lot and the tenderizing he just got. I watched him leave, not quite ashamed of what I had just done.

The next morning, my face was flat and emotionless in the mirror as I buttoned my collarless bar shirt to the top. Strangely, I missed the days when I had to wear a bow tie to tend bar. A man who can tie his own bow tie has secret knowledge, like a man who knows when to use 'who' and when to use 'whom'.

Leslie bounced up, giddy and glowing, "Quinn."

"That's me."

"You miss your tie, don't you?"

I faked concern. "What are you, a mind reader?"

"No, I've just heard you bitch about it before."

By instinct, I looked either way to make sure we were alone. "Listen up, Leslie, I couldn't find that guy who..."

"What?" Her face was the picture of innocence, having put that little thing behind her.

"You know."

"Oh, that," she gushed.

"Yeah, that."

Leslie leaned and touched my arm. "It's okay. I'm not pregnant."

I rocked back and forth. "That's good news, then, I guess, considering that I came up short."

She leaned in and cooed, "alright, Quinn. You're still my hero."

"You should aim higher," I said as I extended an arm. She put hers through and we walked arm in arm toward the morning staff meeting. For a second, I considered asking her out, but I liked her and I wanted to keep it that way.

