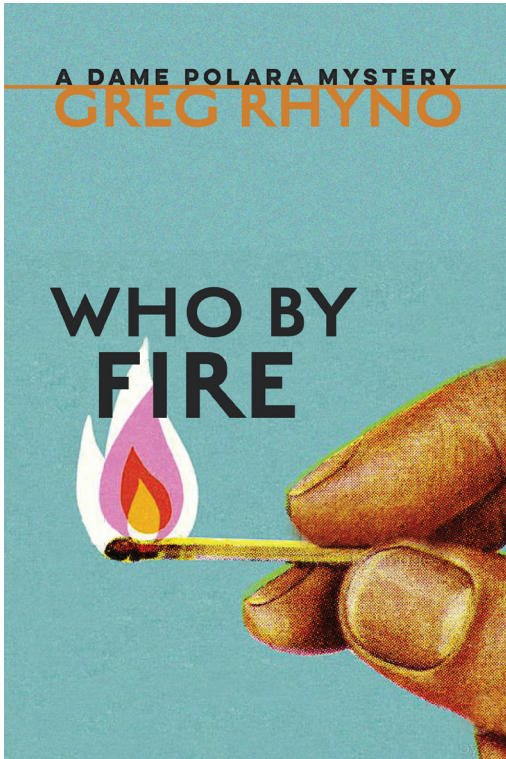


Excerpt from *Who by Fire*

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## Chapter Three

As Dame turned onto Queen, a flock of pigeons cascaded across the streetlit sky from one rooftop to another. She walked past the hardware store and the vegan place, and watched a small garbage cyclone twist itself up against the bricks of the library. She waved at Mrs. Carnegie, who toured a parking lot on her motorized wheelchair, smoking and yelling something into a flip phone. Outside the rec centre, Dollar Sixty-Five was running his usual game: *Hey man, any chance I could borrow a dollar sixty-five for the bus downtown?*

Dame made her way east, against the slick wind that blew gelato to cafés, yoga studios, designer weed, and eight-dollar coffees into the heart of her neighbourhood. She hung a left when she reached O'Hara Avenue.

But when Dame reached her house, she was surprised to find the door to her apartment hanging wide open. She took a step back, adjusted her glasses, and looked up and down the street. The grey October light was already fading, and with the exception of an elderly neighbour trundling his compost bin to the curb, the little avenue was quiet and empty.

Dame waited a moment, listening. Eventually, she climbed the front steps of the house. "Hello?"

A tall, dishevelled man stood in her living room, testing a loose floorboard with his toe. He had his phone pressed against one ear.

"Jesus, Ray. You're supposed to ask before you come in here." Dame closed the door behind her. "At least keep this shut. I'll get mice."

The man held the phone away from his head. "I'm airing out paint fumes," he hissed. "You didn't clear any renovation projects

with me.”

“It’s paint, Ray. I don’t have to clear paint with you.” Dame took off her boots. “Maybe it’s time you and I review the Landlord-Tenant Act.”

The man put the phone back to his ear and held up a silencing finger. “Yeah,” he said into the receiver. “Yeah, go ahead.”

Dame sighed and walked sock-footed down the battered pine that stretched to her little kitchen. On the table sat a stack of unopened bills, stuffed with the usual suspects: hydro, internet, Dodge’s Homecare, West End Fertility, and of course Visa. Her credit card debt was starting to feel like some kind of monster movie blob. No matter how much money she fed the thing, it only seemed to get bigger and bigger.

As she dropped her keys into a tiger-shaped cookie jar, she could hear her landlord’s voice getting louder in the next room.

“Did you let that guy in?” she asked the ceramic cat.

Maybe—Dame allowed herself the faintest hope—Ray was here to fix the dripping tap, or the broken floorboard, or finish one of the countless repair jobs he promised to do when she first started renting this place.

She’d finally just painted over all the burgundy in the spare bedroom, but God, the things she would do to this old bay-and-gable if it was hers. Refinish the floors. Replace the cabinets. Definitely change the locks. But she couldn’t afford to buy a house like this, and she couldn’t bear to invest in some white cube of a condo. The apartment was supposed to be temporary, a nice place to hide while she figured things out. That had been over a year ago, and still, the back porch was jammed with boxes she hadn’t unpacked and things she couldn’t throw away.

Dame found the bottle of mescal in the cupboard and poured herself a glass. The sound of Ray in her living room was becoming

increasingly unbearable.

"I'm very aware of our agreement," he was saying. "Four hundred dollars a day plus expenses."

A pause.

"But you can't just—"

Another pause.

"Well, I'm sorry Mr. Felski, I'm not entirely sure I believe that."

Felski? It had been a while since she'd heard that particular handle. She leaned against the counter and took a sip of her drink.

"... and I was very clear when we entered into this arrangement that—I'm sorry? What?"

Dame could tell by the way Ray's voice was shrilling up that the conversation was almost over. She was just about to open the freezer and dig around for a frozen pizza, when she saw a letter stuck to the fridge door with a magnet. It was addressed to her. Dame tore open the envelope and read it. Moments later, she confronted Ray. "What the hell is this?"

Her landlord was sitting on her couch.

"I'm sorry, I have to go," he said into the phone. "No, I don't think there's anything left to discuss. Goodbye Mr. Felski."

"*I regret to inform you ...*" Dame started reading from the letter "...*sixty days to vacate the premises—you're evicting me?*"

"Look—" Ray pushed himself to his feet "—you knew this would happen eventually."

"Yeah, but I didn't think I'd be out on the street two weeks before Christmas. That's fucking criminal."

"No, I'm afraid it's all perfectly legal. Check the Landlord-Tenant Act, if you like."

Dame balled up the letter and threw it at Ray. "You're an asshole."

She stomped back into the kitchen. As Ray caught up with her,

she was pouring herself another glass. “Jesus,” she said to herself. “I can’t afford first and last on a new place.”

“You’ve been a good tenant Dame, but something’s come up. I might need a new place to live soon, and I don’t have a lot of options.”

She fixed him with a look. “You think your wife’s cheating on you.”

“What? How did—?”

“You were just on the phone with Anton Felski—” she took another pull “—so obviously, you think your wife’s cheating on you.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t listen in on my private conversations.”

“And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t have your private conversations in my *fucking apartment*.”

Ray was quiet for a moment. “How do you know Anton Felski?”

“Not a lot Felskis in the phone book. Especially ones who charge four hundred dollars a day. You’re probably better off without him, though. My dad used to say the guy couldn’t find his ass with both hands and a flashlight.”

“Your dad? Who’s your dad?”

Dame took another sip of mescal. “David Polara.”

“David Polara,” he repeated. “Why do I know that name?”

Dame shrugged.

“He was a cop or something, wasn’t he?”

“Private investigator.”

“And he saved a bunch of people when the Sainte-Marie Hotel caught fire, right? It was on the news and stuff.”

“Yeah. Years ago.”

“I remember that poor little kid died. They ever catch the guy who did it?”

“No,” she said into her glass.

“Is your father still an investigator?”

Dame thought of Dodge, sitting in his La-Z-Boy, watching *Murder, She Wrote*. “He’s got a few cases on the go.”

“Would he—” Ray cleared his throat “—would he consider taking on a new client?”

She snorted. “You think my father would work for a man who’s evicting his daughter?”

“Well, what if I didn’t evict you?”

Dame hesitated. The truth about Dodge hung around the back of her throat, but she swallowed it down with another mouthful of mescal.

“Look—” Ray pulled out a chair and sat down at the table “—my wife’s family has a lot of money. If we ever went to court, she’d take me to the cleaners. But, if your father could find out what Aki’s been up to and bring me something—something tangible, something I could use—you could stay here. In this apartment.”

“Why my father?” Dame drained her glass and put it down on the table. “I mean, I know Felski was a bust, but you could hire anybody.”

“I need someone I can trust.” Ray rubbed his temples. “And soon.”

Dame knew what he wanted. He wanted closure. An end to all the uncertainty. But she also knew that when he found it, it wasn’t necessarily going to bring him any peace.

“Or you could just let this whole thing play out. Who knows? Maybe it’ll all go away.”

“Play out? I can’t—” he let loose with a lung-rattling sigh. “I need to know the truth.”

Dame thumbed the bare skin of her third finger. “Okay. I get that.” She grabbed a second glass out of the cupboard and poured

them both a shot.

Ray sniffed at the booze. "Do you have any mix?"

She brought his glass over to the sink and ran some cold water into it. She put the drink back in front of him and sat down at the table. Ray sipped at his drink and grimaced.

"So, look. My father doesn't really do domestics. He says they tend to be a little messy. But I could talk to him."

"Okay." There was a flicker of a smile.

"Just don't get too cheerful," Dame said. "I'm not making any promises."