

NOW YOU SEE IT

by

Cáit Donnelly

He walked up the stairs, taking his time. Enjoying himself. No need to rush. She'd taken the fucking dog, too, so he had a free hand. She had even left the lights on in the entry. Considerate. Maybe she was thinking of him...

A quick look into her office—he could come back to that. Into the bedroom. The big bed with its dark blue coverlet was gone. That pleased him. Thoughts of her in bed with Doug made him clench his fists until his nails threatened to pierce the latex gloves he'd been so careful to bring with him. The fool didn't deserve a woman like that. There was a new, smaller bed now with a flowered quilt, tucked in on one side, but still folded loosely where she had slept the night before. He stepped closer and raised her pillow to his face, drawing in the scent of her hair and the smell of clean linen, feeling the pleasant response in his groin. He thought how her clothes would feel against his skin, and almost, almost opened the closet, but that, too, would be a pleasure to save for later. He smiled, knowing she had no idea how often he had come here, touching, watching her sleep, dreaming of what they would share, one of these days. When he decided it was time.

On to Doug's office. Things had changed there. The room was empty except for a box of books, a dog toy in the middle of the room. Doug would never have let that stupid creature chew and drool on his floor.

He knelt quickly beside the box and searched through the books, fanning each

volume. Nothing. Only a bookmark from a shop in Redmond. He replaced the books just as they had been and headed back to her office.

Her computer was still on. Trusting soul, she was. All the better for him, of course. He logged out and then logged on with Doug's password, scanning the directories for the information he needed. It might not be there, but he had to know for sure. No need to take foolish chances at this late date.

The filenames scrolled in front of his eyes. Nothing. He exhaled with relief, and logged off. At the dialog box he typed in Gemma's password and hit 'enter.' A chime sounded, and a second dialog box appeared, telling him politely that the system couldn't log him on, and requesting he re-enter his password. He stared at the screen, annoyed, and entered the password again. It was refusing him? He couldn't believe it. He logged back in as Doug, began to browse the files. The bitch must have changed her password. Who told her to do that? he wondered. And what would it be?

He needed a little time to find out, but he would. He would. She wasn't smart enough to keep him out.

Time to go. He smiled. He'd be back.

ONE

Gemma Cavanagh stretched to open the windows on either side of her desk. She was going to miss her office, even though the bleached birch floor was a regimental pain to keep clean in the rainy Seattle winters with big, muddy dog feet traipsing across it. The property settlement she and Doug had agreed on wouldn't require her to sell the house, but she couldn't wait to have a place of her own. Just a small apartment somewhere, maybe near a park where she could walk her dog.

This house was supposed to have been for the baby. She closed her eyes and swallowed. Funny how life works.

Gem shut that thought down. Don't think about the room that should have been a nursery, or the days of lovingly painting the walls and cutting out big felt daisies to mount on them.

Her coffee cup, a cobalt blue Starbuck's mug that held more than a pint of caffeine, sat on the corner of her desk, between stacks of paperwork—folders, charts, pages of text covered with her pencil edits.

She blinked. A corner of an old paperback poked out from under a page of personnel charts. Even half-buried, she could recognize it. She caught in a happy breath as she pulled the book free. *When did that come back?* she wondered.

The historical romance was worn and creased, and the edges of the five-hundred-plus pages were soft and furred with many readings. "It's about time something wonderful *unfiled* itself," she said aloud. *Filing*, she thought with a smile. As good a name as any for sending something into the Twilight Zone. *Everybody mislays things when they're preoccupied*, she had temporized for years, even though she knew that what she did was something really, *really* different. During the last few months, as her

marriage crumbled, she had begun 'disappearing' things at a frightening rate, including a cherry-wood chair that had vanished from the entryway during one of their more painful arguments.

Since Doug moved out, things had started coming back. So far, one earring, a spatula, a stretched souvenir penny from the Space Needle, and a University of Washington t-shirt she'd *filed* during exam week her junior year had all reappeared in various places around the house. The toothpaste this morning had gone away for awhile, but it showed up later in the silverware drawer, so that almost didn't count.

She laughed and gave the battered novel a two-handed squeeze. This was golden. It had to be a sign she was finally getting herself unscrambled. These last few years, she'd begun to feel as if she'd been *filing* pieces of herself, and she'd begun to fear that one day she would disappear completely. She put the book down on top of the pile of documents, and watched it narrowly for a few seconds to make sure it didn't go back to wherever it had come from.

The time on the computer was 1:57. She'd missed lunch. There was some roast beef in the fridge, and a little potato salad to smooth the way for the fudge brownie she'd saved from last night. Her mouth began to water as she started down the stairs. "Come on, Nikk," she said to the prostrate malamute who lay like a gray and white puddle on the cool wooden floor.

She turned and hurried back into her office, and reached for the phone just before it rang.

"Hi, Mike." She could picture her brother's grin on the other end of the line.

"Hey, Brat. Did you get my email?"

"I haven't checked my mail all day. Give me a sec?"

"If it's quick," he said. "I've got a client coming in just a few minutes."

She reached down to start the computer and listened to her brother with one ear as she waited for the Beast to run through its boot-up routine.

The *Flight of the Valkyries* burst out of the computer speakers.

"Mike? *Mike!* Oh my God! The computer. It's Doug's music. He was here.

Doug was here last night, Mike.”

“I told you he was dangerous. Get out of the house, right now. Don’t touch anything, don’t do anything. I’m sending somebody over there. Get out.”

She fled down the stairs, snagging the strap of her purse as she ran, the delighted dog at her heels. Through the kitchen, into the garage, her heart thundering a litany in her ears, *hit the door opener, push the automatic car door control, open the door, shoo Nikki into the driver’s seat and across the shift console, push the door locks down, up—Rats!—down.* She squealed out of the garage into the driveway and stopped at the edge of the empty street.

Nikki clambered into the back seat and began wooing and batting at the windows, demanding fresh air. Gemma opened them an inch each. Safely locked in, with a 360 degree view, she forced in a deep breath, then another one.

The car was getting uncomfortably hot, so she and Nikki moved out to the shade of a large flowering cherry tree to wait, but even though her breathing slowed, her hands and midsection still trembled with anger. What if she'd been in the house? She rubbed the goosebumps that rippled along her arms. Doug was a bastard, but this was seriously creepy, even for him.

An unfamiliar dark blue Saab zipped around the corner and pulled up short in front of the house. The man who unfolded from the front seat was tall, with dark, down-curved eyes and a grim expression. He had black hair and heavy eyebrows--Italian, she guessed, or maybe Black Irish, with those cheekbones. He stopped several feet from her, and their eyes met and held. The contact jolted along her skin all the way to her fingertips. She saw a quick answering flicker before his expression flattened into polite and bland.

“I’m Brady McGrath,” he said. “Mike sent me. Are you all right?”

As he walked toward her she got a whiff of expensive soap—*Richard James*, she thought. *Wow!*

The hand he offered was warm and firm, and his eyes were the color of dark toffee. She wasn’t sure what to say without sounding like a complete fool. *“I’m glad*

you're here, you smell great?" That would be just charming.

He didn't seem to notice that she hadn't said anything. "You were smart not to go back inside alone. Even if you're sure it's safe, it's a good idea to stay out until someone's checked the premises."

"Yes, Officer," she said, with a shaky smile.

"Did you see anyone?"

"No. It was just the computer—"

"Wait one." Brady jogged back to his car and took out a small leather bag. "You should probably wait out here," he said when he got back.

"No." She took a breath through her nose, let it out "I'm going with you."

He looked at her for a long moment, as if he were weighing her request.

"I'm going with you," she said again.

Then that long, flexible mouth firmed. "Let's do it," he said and took off up the walk.

"Could a power spike have switched it over to Doug's stuff, like that?" she asked.

"No."

"Are you sure it couldn't be some kind of glitch?"

"I do this for a living," he said flatly, and stopped just inside the door. "You need to call a locksmith and get all these locks changed this afternoon, and I want you to get in touch with your security company and have them reset your alarm password. That's first." He pulled a pair of latex gloves out of his back pocket and snapped them on as he started up the stairs. "I'm going to have a look at the computer."

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So that was the sister, Brady thought, looking around her office as the computer whirred and bleeped its way through the series of commands he entered. A redhead. He should have guessed it ran in Mike's family. He didn't date redheads—too volatile. Nice eyes, though. Big, green, a little fuzzy from worry. Mike thought the moon rose on her. Baby sister, and all. He'd been less than subtle the last few weeks about fixing them up. Damn. Great face. Not beautiful. Pretty. And a body that wouldn't quit. Slim, subtle—

nice ass. And something else that nagged at him.

Whatever it was about her, it had nothing to do with him. None of his business. Redheads were trouble, and he had better ways to screw up his life at the moment.

Why did she get to him, hit him so hard? He'd only met her a few minutes ago, for God's sake. That jolt when their eyes met. *What was that about?* Wrong question. He knew well enough what it was about. It was his blood rushing from his big head to his little head and the roar of his brain pouring out of his ears.

The shelves above her desk held a row of serious-looking books with snore-inducing titles like *Managing Federal Grants in the 21st Century*, and *Statistical Analysis for Educational Managers*. The top of the desk and the side wing were covered with stacks of tables and charts. Brightly colored file folders and pages full of intimidatingly solid blocks of text lay in what he suspected was some sort of order. On top of the center pile was a well-read paperback novel, its creased cover decorated with masses of roses, a sultry-looking woman and a half-clothed knight. Brady grinned as he took off the gloves to *touch* the surfaces around him, opening his senses to tactile traces of whoever had been in the room. He ran his fingers lightly over her keyboard, the monitor, the desk. *Nothing. No one but Gemma.*

Her energy was clear, like fluid crystal on the edges of his questing *touch*. Warm, strong. Stronger in some places than others. The stacks of worksheets were cool, intellectual, but as his fingers skimmed the novel, he grinned again at the wave of heat. Fascinating. He got a clear flash of her moss-green eyes going soft and misty, and the erection that had been threatening since he saw her sitting under the tree in the front yard sprang up hard and insistent. *Great. Go back downstairs in this condition, probably scare her to death. Just great.* He shifted his weight to ease the pressure. Still, he couldn't resist letting his fingers wander, pausing to explore the fractals of her personality that opened beneath his questing *touch*—piquant—not a word that usually came to him, but there it was—and funny. Echoes of desperation and determination. there. He *touched* a box of men's sweaters on the floor beside the desk, and had to brace himself against surges of her anger layered over Doug—and what a selfish prick *he* was. Brady

jolted at a flare of sharp, feral joy and a vision of the sweaters flying through a doorway onto the hall floor, propelled by Gemma's exasperation and temper. He whistled softly.

He was using too much energy. It was going to zap his abilities for awhile, but he couldn't resist *touching* them again briefly. He let his mind spin with a kaleidoscope of impressions, enjoying the sheer strength and clarity of them. Dazzled, puzzled, he left off with an image of her trapped and breaking free, like a chick in a glass egg.

The computer gave one last little growl and stopped. *Okay*, he hunched forward in the chair. *Let's see what we have in here. And why someone would want to know badly enough to risk breaking into the house.*

Gem's computer had obviously been networked at some point, probably to her husband's, and still needed a password to log on. Getting administrative access was a matter of a few keystrokes, the code so trite Brady smiled grimly as he worked.

He searched through the hard drive. Doug's files were full of toys and applications. *Looks like he downloaded everything that came along. Doug played Age of Empires? Hm. What's this? MYST? Jesus, I haven't seen that in years.*

He pulled a list of every file accessed and sorted them by date, and wasn't surprised to see that dozens had been opened between three and four this morning. He quickly checked the Trash files on Doug's side for deletion times and dates, but there was nothing newer than last month. He took a blank CDR from his pocket and copied off Doug's files, and deleted them.

Moving on to Gem's files, he used the password she had given him and checked the contents of her hard drive. No surprises, nothing to catch the eye. Except MYST, again, in her Shared Files folder. Maybe they played against each other. No accounting for what people did for fun. He plugged a portable backup drive into her power strip, attached the USB cable and made a copy of her hard drive. Then he changed her password.

###

Gem wandered into the living room, ready to plunge back into the task of sorting and packing. She should probably have changed the locks the day Doug moved out. It

was such a rotten thing to do, even for him. If he'd asked, she'd have let him onto the computer any time. He didn't have to sneak in here. He just had to push the limits, had to break the rules. It was what he lived for.

She couldn't keep thinking about it. She looked over the half-packed shelves and sighed with a shake of her head. *Let's get it over with*, she told herself. The light was coming softly in the front window, so she dragged a short stack of empty boxes over into the square of sunshine and began filling them with books and odds and ends from the shelves, cushioning the fragile pieces in blank newsprint. She tried not to dwell on the things in front of her. Too many memories, she thought, too much anger. It was a relief when the doorbell rang.

Nikki came down the stairs in a rush. Gem edged the dog away with her knee and opened the door against the chain.

Two grim-faced men in suits stood on the porch. *Process servers*, she thought immediately. *What is Doug up to, now? Why are there two of them?* Then she saw a uniformed officer mount the steps to stand behind them, and she felt her midsection start to tremble.

"Mrs. Carrow?"

She slipped the chain and opened the door. "Cavanagh. Carrow is my husband's name. Can I help you?"

"Ms. Cavanagh, I'm Detective Sergeant Olsen with the Pierce County Sheriff's Department, and this is my partner, Detective Abernathy, and Officer Teng from Kirkland PD. We need to speak with you for a moment. May we come in?"

"I'm sorry, but what's this about?" For a moment the world seemed to freeze in place.

"It's about your husband. I'm afraid we have some bad news. May we come in?" he asked again.

"What's he done, now?" She tried to keep the irritation out of her voice, but she really didn't have time for more of his games, or the ploys he came up with to keep her off balance. Her mind veered away from Doug. *Cops and vampires*, her dad had said

more than once, *can't come in unless you invite them*. “May I see some identification, please?”

Their picture ID's looked genuine enough. She knew that was simple to fake, but it was the smooth way the men pulled them out that convinced her. As if they'd done it so many times it came automatically. Gem took a deep breath and swung the door open.

When they were all in the entry, Olsen said, “I'm very sorry, Ms. Cavanagh, but your husband is dead.”

She froze. *No*, she wanted to scream at them, *I'm not falling for that again*. That would be about the worst thing she could say. She tried to focus on something concrete. *Pierce County*, Olsen had said. *Doug was in Pierce County?* She wanted to ask if they were sure it was Doug—she knew people always did. But of course they were sure, or they wouldn't have come all this way and involved a second jurisdiction.

But all she said was, “No.” She stood, unmoving. She didn't trust her voice, but she had to say something. “What happened? Was anyone else hurt? Can you tell me what happened?”

“Douglas Carrow was found dead this morning at the summer home of Dr. Robert Mendelson. He was murdered, Ms. Cavanagh. I'm very sorry.”