



Life
by
the
Sword

Kathryn Hore

LIFE BY THE SWORD

KATHRYN HORE

WWW.KATHRYNHORE.COM

Copyright © 2021 by Kathryn Hore

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contact Kathryn Hore for queries: www.kathrynhore.com

✿ Created with Vellum

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Life By The Sword was originally published in:

Crime Factory - Issue 19

Edited by Cameron Ashley, L. Scott Jose, Andrew Nette, Jimmy
Callaway

Published October 2016 by Crime Factory Publications

LIFE BY THE SWORD

The first thing she did on coming back was head for the pub. The old one, the second-home one. It wasn't because she wanted the drink and it certainly wasn't for the memories. What she wanted was to find Clara. But a drink would be welcome nonetheless.

Maybe it was a mistake though, returning to old haunts. She'd hoped it'd been long enough, or the city big enough, or memories short enough. Management had changed, staff had changed. That didn't surprise. Regulars seemed to have changed, at least she saw no familiar faces in the scattered half-dozen others in the place. Scanning profiles as she stepped into the long barroom with its too-dim lighting, sticky carpet and dependence on fake wood-grain. That hadn't changed. She took a seat at the far end of the bar, dropping her bag by her feet and muttering just loud enough for the barkeep to catch her preferred ale. She threw a couple of coins on the counter, then kept her eyes on the beer when it came and not on the mirrored wall with its shelves of liquor lined up across from her.

Why put mirrors behind bars like that? Did publicans really think drinkers came to places like this wanting to stare at them-

selves? Maybe that was the point. A reminder of where you were and what it looked like when you drank yourself into oblivion.

She saw the young guy approach first in the mirror. Didn't recognise him, but recognised his type.

"Hey. Hey."

She glanced sideways. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five, but there was something about the way he moved, jacket bulking out at the back. Bloodshot eyes still held steady on her, pasty skin but no shake in his hand as he placed it next to her elbow. So. At least one weapon, back of his pants, and a probable history of drug use, but not high at this moment. Thinly built, shorter than her, but no doubt fast enough. She hadn't lost the habit of sizing up a potential antagonist the moment they approached, anyway.

She turned back to her reflection behind the bar, grey hair beginning to dilute faded copper. "Yes?"

"I know you." He paused, as if that were some dramatic revelation. "You're Clarisse. Thought you were dead."

"I'm busy."

She took a sip of her beer and didn't look at him again, staring into her own reflected eyes instead. Too many lines around them now, too many years behind her. The barkeep had disappeared out back. The handful of other patrons were lost in the poorly lit shadows around the edges of the place, shifting away. No, things around here hadn't changed at all.

"Nah. Nah." He was shaking his head. "I work for the Lady, see, an' this is her patch now."

"Is it."

"The Lady, she'll want to know you're here." He shifted, a sharp movement, jittery. Maybe he was high after all. "She'll be real interested to hear you're back."

The Lady's patch now? It was a mistake to return. No amount of time, no measure of years or change of faces or litres of industrial strength disinfectant could wipe away all that had once gone on here. That kind of bad blood stained the souls of buildings and people alike, long after the actual real-life blood was washed away.

She took another drink. The guy was leaning in close; this kind of low-level thug never did have any sense of personal space. For a moment she debated playing dumb, but it wouldn't hold. Even if she put off this guy, there'd be another, then another and then all at once probably. Best meet this head on.

"What's your name?" she said.

"You can call me Leroy. You're coming with me now, Clarisse."

"Leroy." She took one more sip of beer, then turned to face the man. Christ, he was younger than she'd thought. Closer to twenty than twenty-five. Didn't mean he wasn't dangerous, of course, but that hardly mattered now. "Some advice, Leroy. Scurry back to whatever hole of drug-dealers and protection racketeers your Lady has dug out for herself. Spill your guts to her, tell her I'm here. Then tell her I'm done with all that."

Leroy's head cocked. "I heard it said you was bad, back in the day."

"Not anymore. Just a regular old nobody now. So go, Leroy. You'll get brownie points for bringing her the news."

"I'll get more for bringing you in with me."

Young men. Were they all the same? Ambition outweighing common sense. Show them the glimmer of opportunity to impress their betters and their eyes shone with risk and chance. He knew who she was, enough to name her and enough to know his boss wanted her, so he had to know her past. Could she consider that fair warning? Did she care?

She put the beer down with a tired sigh and gave him a simple answer: "no."

He was quick. His body twisted, hand reaching for the gun at his back. But she was quicker. Even after two years, with no weapon on her hip and creaking muscles out of condition, she was ready for him. As he turned, she shifted sideways. A step off her stool so he was lunging to where she wasn't, catching his hand as he flailed it out. His fingers weren't even on the trigger. He was smart enough to know the Lady wouldn't want her dead, not yet, but that was the problem with these young bucks. Too inexperienced to realise you never drew a gun unless you were prepared to use it.

She twisted his wrist behind him, hearing a crack, feeling a shift of bone. The gun fell from his fingers with his pained gasp. She caught it, then kicked into his knee. It forced him down and he fell over the stool she'd been sitting on seconds before. She grabbed him by the hair with one hand and yanked him back, shoved him forward again. He didn't even have time to cry out. His face crashed into the bar at force.

There was a crunch and she let him go. He uttered a muffled cry and staggered back, blood spurting, his one good hand raised to his smashed nose. Not that it did any good, wet-red flooded down his chin, his neck, the front of him. A sticky stain all too familiar and it caught her, momentarily, just how similar the spreading mess looked to what there'd be if she just shot him outright.

She hadn't even wanted to break his nose. But what choice had he left her?

"Go report in, tell your boss," she said, stepping to one side to avoid the blood dripping from his chin. "Tell her she and I need to talk. Tell her I'm looking for Clara. It's that easy, Leroy. You get to walk away."

She leant forward, lips by his ear. "But if you think to continue this, I will kill you."

Then, because he was young and she wasn't sure if he were smart enough to get it yet, she raised his own gun and pointed it at his right eye.

He turned and ran. Maybe he wasn't so stupid after all. She watched him go, that trail of blood behind him, but a broken nose would heal and his arm might hurt, but she hadn't even broken that. She could've done worse. Two years ago, she'd have killed him and been done with it.

Her drink remained undisturbed on the bar. She took a sip, noticing the barkeep miraculously reappeared as she did.

"You run this place now? Still got rooms above?" she asked and he nodded. "You pay your dues to the Lady too?"

Another nod. Yes, well. She hefted her bag over her shoulder and took a battered purse from her pocket. The wad of notes she pulled from it was thick and she threw it onto the bar without counting any. No idea what the prices were in this place these days, but that amount would cover the Grand Hyatt penthouse.

"For the drink and the room for a few days, maybe a meal or two," she said with a nod to the cash and he threw her a key from under the bar. She glanced at the overturned stool, the blood, and dropped another couple of notes next to the spreading stain. "And for cleaning up the mess."

"Ain't no mess. Barely a spill."

He paid his dues to the Lady all right. She shrugged and turned towards the shadows at the back where she knew the staircase leading up was.

"There will be," she said over her shoulder. "There will be."

THE ROOM WAS poky and dark, but clean. And had a private bathroom. The barkeep had done her a favour, maybe the wad of notes had impressed him. Or breaking the thug's nose.

She threw her jacket over the bed and kicked her bag beneath it. The handgun she placed on the dresser in front of a silvering mirror she didn't look in herself. A glance through the single window told her there was nothing out there except an alley far below and the sheer brick of a neighbouring building a few feet across. At least it opened, fresh air and the noise of the city breezing in. The window in the bathroom was small, too tiny to squeeze through and anyway there was only more alley and wall and nothing beyond. She walked back to the bedroom and opened the main door to the hall with a twist of her lips.

Two flights up, one door, one landing, no alternative exit. Maybe the barkeep wasn't doing her such a favour after all.

She shut the door. Examination of the thug's gun showed the ammunition low and the weapon itself serviceable, if mediocre in value. She was tempted to throw it out the window to the alley beyond, but thought the better. There were some types who spoke no other language and those the Lady hired would no doubt include many of them.

She didn't have to wait long. A couple of bully-boys came first, thugs not far different from the guy in the bar. They knocked and she opened the door, taking one look at their thick fists and broad shoulders.

"Tell the Lady to come deal with her past in person," she said and shut the door in their faces.

She waited on the inside, standing to the left of the door in case they decided to shoot through the flimsy wood. After about half a minute they knocked again; idiots, the lock was weak enough, would've been the work of a moment to break through. She counted down from thirty before opening the door again. This time it was to a gun in her face. It was just a pity for the guy holding it that she fired her own weapon before he could utter a single word of prepared threat.

Two shots in quick succession, both hers. One into the leg of the thug in front, so he collapsed before he could get a shot off, the second into the shoulder of the guy behind. A third shot wasn't hers; the first guy fired as he fell. But she was no longer in the doorway, diving sideways, and his aim flew high regardless. She'd taken out his knee, aiming low. Too low, actually; she'd had to estimate height from that first glimpse alone and had planned a groin shot.

She landed on her knees atop his wounded leg, the agony in his cry enough to curdle blood. She heard it at a distance, as if from a far-away place, everything crystallising before her. It'd been a long time since the world had been this sharp, this focussed. The second guy staggered back, hitting the wall, but still tried to swing a weapon around with his one good arm. She reached for the first's gun, taking it from unresisting fingers and raising it together with her own. Fired both.

Forearm and wall. One shot threw his weapon hand back, the other drew a cry. His gun scattered to the carpet and she pushed herself to it, shoving her own into the back of her pants while scooping up his. Holding one weapon pointed at the guy on the wall, the other at his mate on the ground. Both bleeding, but alive. She'd worked hard to make sure they'd live. There were too many bodies in her past as it was, she wasn't here to add more.

She kept her eyes focussed on the one still sensible, her guns trained on both, and backed away through her door, letting it fall shut behind her. The next time she checked the hallway, there was blood down the wall, staining the hallway runner, but no men.

The next knock didn't come until maybe an hour later, by which time three hand guns were lined up on the dresser in front of the mirror and she lay on the bed reading a book.

"Clarisse?"

Her head lifted. Such a familiar voice. She closed the book, a volume of Dickens, *Oliver Twist*. A habit she'd picked up in the last couple of years when she'd had nothing more than time to kill: nineteenth century novels. It helped. It was almost comforting to read the despair of the past and know humanity never really changed.

She paused before replying. "You come to kill me, Darius?"

"I'm not armed." His voice was muffled through the door. "And you can shoot me if you like, but it'll only make this worse."

"I'd rather not shoot anyone, if it's all the same to you." But she did get up and go to the door. "It's not me who's sent shooters. I'm not here for bloodshed."

She opened the door. He was just as she remembered. Well, a little older than her memories perhaps, but in her memories they were all perpetually young. The Lady fixed at a sprightly nineteen, grinning an infectious grin. Darius always that good looking twenty-five she'd been so determined to seduce. Way back in their youth when they were just starting out and all was straight forward, betrayal a long way off. He was pushing forty now, was Darius, and sporting a rugged, stubbled-chin look. Still as tempting as ever.

"You went over to her then?" she said, leaning against the doorframe. She wasn't inviting him in. She believed him when he said he

wasn't armed, but that didn't mean she trusted him. Or herself, where he was concerned.

His eyes were still blue. Of course they were. "Had to find a job somewhere once you were gone."

"Surprised she trusted you."

"I did bring her what was left of your business." He flashed a smile, the one that was all charm. "You always said I knew how to offer the best temptations."

"Yes. You always were a right snake in the grass." Enough of this. She pushed herself to stand straight, one hand on the door. "Tell her to come herself. Stop sending lackeys. Even tempting ones."

She turned to shut the door. He stuck out a hand, held it open by force. "And that's it, is it? After two fucking years of everyone thinking you dead? Of me thinking you dead?"

He sounded wounded, genuine about it. She glanced over her shoulder and found pain in his eyes. But that was the problem with Darius, he always knew how to seem genuine. It was impossible to be sure where his real loyalty lay.

She met those blue, blue eyes. What might've been? If she hadn't been so focussed on building a reputation, on clawing her way up. Fighting for territory, for control, for authorities to slip into her pocket. What might've been had she not been so intent on destroying Clara in all her innocence? The girl who'd loved him too much.

"If everyone thought me dead, it was the Lady they thought killed me," she said. "And you went to her anyway. Goodbye, Darius."

She shut the door on his reply. Returned to her Dickens and nineteenth century poverty.

THERE WAS NO KNOCK. The door simply opened.

That was fine, she'd left it unlocked for that purpose. What was the point of trying to lock the thing when the barkeep would've handed over the keys anyway? This was the Lady's territory now.

Two muscle-men came first, ill-fitting suits with the obvious bulk of guns beneath. Darius next. She hid a sigh, but wasn't surprised. He didn't look pleased to be there, hanging back and meeting her eyes with grim resignation, but so be it. Under orders or not, he was the Lady's man now. None of this, not even him, was hers anymore.

The men filled out the room, but they weren't who mattered. *She* walked in last, all cascading red hair and pale skin. Something ethereal about her even now. But the waif of a girl had long grown into a hard woman, one who knew how to control the men surrounding them. And who's fault was that? Who'd led the way from the streets to the docks, from petty theft to import-exports, from obeying others to commanding them? Who'd taught her that blackmail would always trump bribery, because someone for sale could always sell out, but hold something over someone and they were yours forever? Who'd shown her how to run an empire?

She sighed and put down the book, slowly standing up. Face to face at last.

"They call you The Lady now," she said without rancour.

Green eyes pinned on her. After some seconds came a nod. "A lesson you taught me. The power of names." The woman paused, lips a tight line. "Why are you here?"

"To end this. Hopefully without bloodshed."

"You don't know any other way."

She let her gaze shift around the room. "I've been trying to find one. Two years now."

Darius looked away, not watching either of them. He stared out the window as if the dirty bricks across the alley were the latest in experimental art. By contrast, the two shooters were, of course, watching; that was their job. It was a room weighted entirely to one side.

"It's quite a time." The Lady broke the silence. "You've been considered dead most of it."

"Bullet in my head, another by the heart. I near was."

"Wounds few would expect to recover from." A tight, terse sound escaped from the other's lips. "You should've stayed dead, Clarisse. There's nothing left for you here. There's nothing left of you."

Yes. Two years was a long time and nothing was the same now. But she'd survived her wounds despite herself and seen herself through different eyes since. Seen the world different. Losing everything could do that. Especially losing it to the one most trusted, most loved.

Two years ago she'd have come in guns blazing. But this wasn't two years ago.

"You knew I wasn't dead." Her eyes fixed on the Lady. "So what were you going to do, watch me walk away? Let me live out some long life to peaceful old age in quiet contemplation?"

Crinkles appeared in the pale skin around those green eyes. Amusement?

"Old age was not meant for the likes of us," the Lady said.

"No."

This time it was the Lady's turn to look around, her line of sight flitting about as if unable to decide where it should land. It gave her a skittish air, suggested something insubstantial. A nice trick, lulling others into complacency while allowing her to check the numbers,

the guns, sense mood in the room. Entirely unnecessary here where the guns and the numbers were all hers, so it must be a habit, one picked up these last couple of years. Perhaps she was beginning to realise that once taken, holding onto power was harder than one might expect it to be.

“You always had to be the best, Clarisse,” the Lady said at last, a sharp sound in the silently ticking room. “Always in charge. Feted. Obeyed. Even when we were children you couldn’t stand to be usurped.”

“Is that what this is? Some vendetta from when we were kids?”

Green eyes snapped back onto hers. “You took everything. You always did. What you couldn’t take, you destroyed.” The Lady crossed her arms. She had fingernails long and red, like her hair. “Someone was going to hit back eventually. Why not me?”

“You didn’t have to shoot me.”

“It was kinder than the bloodletting you dished out to rivals and enemies alike.”

She sighed. What part of that wasn’t true? It was even an answer to the question she’d been plagued with for two long years: why? Why did you do it? I gave you everything, I taught you it all. But she’d taught too well and given away too much. Had it really been a surprise to find her own ruthlessness served back to her, in the end?

Too late now. The past was what it was. She tried to hope for the future.

“It’s a different view from the outside, you know,” she told the Lady. “Makes you want life, not death.” A pause. “You forced me out. But I’m not looking for a way back in. I’ve come back to settle things between us, that’s all.”

Faint lines appeared above the Lady’s brow. “You’ve come back for revenge.”

"No. I don't want revenge." Her mouth was dry, she swallowed against it. "I want to end this without further bloodshed. I want to walk away and I want you to let me."

"You? Walk away?"

"It could be that easy."

Understanding dawned in The Lady's eyes. A kind of laugh bubbling up with it. "It's not revenge you want. It's *redemption*."

Well. Something like that maybe. It was hard to know. She'd floated so close to death she discovered what life might be. But hers wasn't a past you walked away from, not without that past's agreement. So here she was, negotiating for a future set apart from the years at her back, one in which nobody else got hurt.

The Lady's derision was palpable. "You think me a fool, Clarisse?"

"No."

"You think I'll just let you walk?"

She closed her eyes. Licked at her lips. "No." Opened her eyes again with one hand raised in plea. "But I'm asking you to do so anyway."

The Lady didn't even grace that with a reply. She turned her back, gesturing to her men so the shooters made to follow. Darius too, if with more reluctance. His eyes met hers as he passed, wary, warning in them. His head jerked towards the window. The sentimental bastard. As if escape could be found that way.

"It doesn't have to be this way," she tried. She had to try. "Please. Lady. I just want Clara back."

At the door, the Lady glanced back. "How else did you think it could be? Clara is dead. You killed her."

Then she was gone, her entourage with her. Only the scent of her perfume and a myriad of unspoken threats remaining to linger in the

air.

THE LADY WAS RIGHT. How else could it be? Lives lived in such a way for so long, with so much blood at their backs, how could they hope to wade clear of it now? They'd long lost any right to a more a peaceful resolution.

But they hadn't been born this way. They made themselves to suit their circumstances, their needs, their ambitions, their desires. There must have been a time before all this. They'd been innocent once, hadn't they?

Hadn't they?

She dragged the long bag from under the bed and unzipped it to a glint of metal. What did it matter now?

The barroom below was empty as she stood at the top of the stairs. It was after closing and the doors would be locked. Barred too, by now; the Lady would allow no easy outs here. Nothing moved down there, only shadows and silence. Dark booths down one side, the bar down the other. That shine of the mirrored wall behind it, with its rows of shelves and their neat lines of coloured bottles reflected in the surface at their backs. Giving each a double. A twin.

She stretched fingers around the all-too-familiar grip of the pistol in her hand. Across her shoulders was slung a long rifle, another handgun at her hip. It'd been two years, but the muscle memory would stand. Hopefully. She wanted to survive, though she doubted her odds. She didn't want to kill, but she didn't want to die either.

There was a plan. Flimsy and patchwork, but a plan it was. She hoped it'd be enough.

"I go, and it is done," she muttered, then shoved the handgun back in its holster and swung the rifle into both hands.

It slotted against her shoulder as she stepped down a couple of steps. They'd all see her, those who waited in the shadows. She was exposed on the stairs. But the moment any took a shot they'd reveal their own position and her reputation preceded her; it seemed no-one wanted to be first in tempting her retaliating fire. She might've been gone two years, but she still had a reputation. Enough for a few seconds' start, anyway.

She sighted the bar through the rifle. Raised it higher. Sighted the rows of liquor bottles along the shelves and began to shoot.

One, two, crack, reload. Three, four. The glass smashed, the mirror crashing down in a rain of shining chunks, bottles falling into each other. A spray of liquor and coloured glass shattering across the bar, bringing cries from those hiding behind it. They began to shoot, but she was ready for that. She dropped the rifle and leapt for the bannister, swinging herself over and down. Gripping for a second, then dropping into the dark below the stairs.

The pistols were in her hands before she hit the ground. Rolling into a darkened corner, listening to feet thumping, the calls to head her off. A man rose from one of the booths, gun pointed in her direction. No time to debate the morals of it now.

She fired, both weapons. Two hits. He fell back and she leapt into the booth; her aim hadn't deteriorated, at any rate, his insides were spread across the table. But she already knew what the insides of a man looked like, for two years now she'd been trying to forget. She'd sworn, no more. Her tally was too high. But now, here she was.

Could she have found another way? Had she tried hard enough for a different solution? Or had she just found herself back in old

haunts and slipped into old ways of thinking: my survival means he must die.

A shot whirred past her head. She yanked at the body, throwing it to the ground, and dived into the booth for some kind of protection. Breathing hard for several seconds before pushing up and around, firing her guns to force her opponents back. Then she turned those same weapons on what was left of the mirrored wall, shooting at the remaining bottles until scattered glass and the stench of liquor were all that remained.

She dropped a gun, reached into a pocket. Pulled out a box of matches.

This place had been home, headquarters and safety, right up until the day it wasn't. She still knew it better than any. The front doors were locked and once barred they would not so easily open again. Dead man's bolts, she'd installed them herself. But there were other ways out. An escape she might trade, perhaps for peace, to buy her a future. Prove to the Lady it was safe to let her walk, and if not, well, she'd tried. At least she'd tried.

She clutched the matches and took three quick breaths. Nothing else for it but to run the distance between the booth and the bar. Shoving herself up and launching across the room, a moving, but exposed target. Time only to run, to light a match. She managed to throw the matchbook with its bursting flame behind the bar before she felt a force punch through her shoulder and another into her gut.

Her whole body stiffened. Breath heaving, she fell back. Even as she did, she saw the fire begin its crawl up the wall.

Hands dragged her behind an overturned table and she found herself staring into a familiar face.

"Darius."

He was shaking, holding hands to the wound in her stomach.
“Gotta get you outta here.”

“Tell me you’re not playing hero.” She gasped it out, or tried to.
“Tell me I taught you better than that.”

“Fuck you Clarisse. I’ve just discovered you’re alive. I’m not letting you die on me again.”

Flames burst high in a shocking flare. They both flinched at the sudden illumination and she saw his face, the desperation in it, the intent, just as she saw the gun in his hand. No. The idiot. She tried to shake her head, to hold him back, but her limbs wouldn’t move, not fast enough.

He stood from behind the table, firing his weapon indiscriminately. As if that could clear them a path out. He’d never been good at the brutal stuff. He was a sharp thinker and a charmer always, but he’d never been much of a killer. That’d always been her territory.

A bullet caught him in the face.

“Darius!”

She tried to leap up as he fell, but barely made it to her knees. It didn’t matter, it’d been too clear a shot. She reached for him, her hands seizing his shirt, rising to his ruined face as if she could fix it when half of it was blown away. She couldn’t see his blue eyes anymore. She gripped at his arms, his hands, pulling him to her, clutching. But he didn’t move, not to hold her back, not even to give her that smile, the one she’d never been able to forget.

“Darius?” she whispered, but he didn’t answer.

Everything around her went very still. From the fire rising up one wall to the hammering against the doors bolted down front. Only she knew of the exit out back, the secret one she’d had installed and never told any about. Down in the basement, between beer kegs and wine shelves, and her plan, her flimsy plan, had been to show them

all to it. Even the Lady. That was how she'd meant to buy peace. You try to kill me, so I will save you, now let me walk away.

It all went distant. She knelt with Darius in her arms, covered in blood, his and hers, and felt the world slide away. So many left dead in her wake. She'd never meant Darius to be one of them.

The cry came out of nowhere, from her chest, her gut. She let him fall, standing suddenly without knowing how. Her gun was somehow in her hand. His gun turned up in her other. She swayed amid the rising smoke, the stench of burning, but only for a moment. There was no pain. A distant thing. Everyone was by the doors down the end by now, desperate to get out. These hardened men and women, killers all, now as terrified as children left to survive the streets. As a couple of parentless girls even, just trying to find their way in a hard world.

She raised the guns and strode down the middle of the room. Shot after shot. There was no hiding from her, not now. She came for them, arisen from the dead and in a swirl of smoke, dripping blood and lit by fire. Her shots landed. They always landed.

The Lady's red hair sold her out. Standing by the doors ordering her people to get them open, which was never going to happen. The Lady had never cared for this place, hadn't bothered to learn its tricks and secrets, dead man's bolts and escape routes through the basement. Those things she might've shown them, if only they'd given her the chance.

No. The Lady had been right all along. How else could it ever be?

Only when her bodyguards on either side were shot away, did the Lady turn with a cry: "you always destroy! Everything you can't have, you destroy!"

"This ends here." She grabbed the Lady by the throat and shoved her hard against the wall. "For both of us. Lucinda."

She pushed Darius's gun under the other's jaw. For one moment amid the chaos their eyes met over the weapon. The Lady's widened in the sudden terror of one confronted with her own mortality.

"Clara, please —" the girl, the waif, the beautiful child said.

"Clara's dead."

She pulled the trigger.

When she let the body drop, her own wounds hit back, her own mortality returned. She staggered, coughing blood and smoke, and slid down the wall beside the woman's body. Hearing the screams and desperation of those still alive around her, the crashing of wood amid the roar of flame. The smoke was too thick to see much now, too thick to breathe. With one hand she reached out and found lifeless fingers next to her, wrapped them in her own. They would see the end out together, after all. Just as they'd begun.

In the distance there were sirens. She closed her eyes and waited to find out if her wounds or the smoke or the fire would get her first.