

Phee believed in souls. As he drove to his brother's apartment he found himself thinking quite a bit of his own. He thought of both the possibility of its redemption and damnation. The key to redemption for him simply meant no matter his failures or shortcomings, as long as he maintained faithfulness to the positive things he honored and valued then he was keeping up his part of his responsibility to the universe. Conversely, he viewed damnation as the willing betrayal of such things. Love, family, fairness and duty. It was that prevailing spirit that he saw as not only the connective force to every other human being, but ultimately to whatever omnipotent entity that claimed credit for our existence. He had on occasion thought about his soul in various contexts before but never considered it in terms of physical or tangible mass. He believed without question that it was real and ever present even though he couldn't see it or hear it, couldn't touch it or smell it.

Phee lifted the pile of his brother's mail that was sprawled on the dining room table and thumbed through it. The name on the envelopes read A.J. Delarosa. Delarosa was his mother Dolicia's maiden name. A.J. stopped using his father's last name the day Clay kicked him out of the house at 16. As Phee placed the mail back on the table he thought about how the history of their rejection cut both ways. Phee turned to face A.J.'s sniffing B.F.F.

"I still can't believe it. You hear and read about this shit happening all the time but you never think it's gonna happen to someone you love."

At 6'2", and oddly shaped, the aging tranny looked like a cross between Lady Gaga and Ozzy Osbourne. Timothy Bale, A.J.'s closest friend had long ago been re-christened Epiphany Chevalier shortly after moving from Arkansas and transforming into a full-fledged working girl. Mascara streaked down Epiphany's face as she continued openly crying from the time Phee had given her the news of A.J.'s death 15 minutes earlier.

"You and A.J. were roommates or...?" Phee asked uncomfortably.

“Neither,” she said flatly, used to the confusion and assumptions. “I’ve just been staying here on and off for the last month. I was in Atlantic City for four days and just got back to the city late last night. I try to stay here as much as possible since A.J.’s other roommate Shay was killed. Did you know about that? Do you think the two murders are related?” Epiphany asked getting more and more riled up.

“Yes we know about Shay’s murder and no, they don’t seem to be related,” Phee answered.

“So how exactly was A.J. killed Detective...I’m sorry what was your name again?” Epiphany asked.

“Detective Freeman. You’ll have to excuse me, but I’m not really at liberty at this point to discuss the case in detail,” Phee said not wanting to get into it.

“The last time I saw my girl she was so happy. She had just finished making some outfits for a few of us for a ball we go to every year. I can’t...” Phee stood uncomfortably by as Epiphany broke into another crying spell. After it passed she turned back to Phee. “I don’t even know what to do next. Have you found A.J.’s family? She never talked about them but once or twice she said something about a younger brother. I think he was an athlete of some kind. As close as she and I were there’s still so much about her I don’t know.”

“We’ll find the family,” Phee said.

“And what about who killed her? You don’t have the faintest idea who did it do you?”

“No, but we’re doing our best,” Phee said curtly.

“That’s exactly what the cops said when Shay was killed and they did nothing. If it wasn’t for us tracking the asshole down who killed her, he would still be walking around free hurting someone else and we would be the only ones who cared. I guess the word “best” means something different when it comes to people like us. But if you had ever met A.J. and knew how special my girl was, then maybe your “best” would really mean something.”

Even though Phee hadn't put much thought into it before, it still caught him off guard when his brother was repeatedly referred to as a female. After a few more moments of mutual discomfiture Epiphany went next door to a neighbor's to tell them the horrible news as Phee walked the small apartment. He wasn't sure if he would actually find anything that would shed new light on the investigation but it was his duty and instinct to look nonetheless. On a purely personal level he just felt a need to be in his brother's space. To get some sense of how he lived. The apartment was a five-flight walk up in a rent controlled building not far from the theater district. The building definitely could have used some repairs and upgrading but once inside, A.J.'s space was neat and welcoming. It was a two bedroom with a pull out sofa. As Phee sat on the arm of the couch and looked around, he thought about A.J.'s ex-roommate Shay Shay DeVane, who had been killed only a few weeks ago. They arrested the john a week later after a group of resourceful trannies tracked him down to an investment firm on Wall Street. That case was unconnected to A.J.'s murder but much more in line with how Phee had often suspected his brother would die. There were many times that Phee viewed his brother as a tragic blurb waiting to be written. The irony was that until his death, A.J. was for the most part an uncomfortable afterthought, a disembodied name with old ties to Phee and their father. Even when Phee spied on him from distant corners he did so with a detachment and assumed indifference. It took A.J.'s death to bring him here. It was only after he had been violently taken away that Phee started thinking of him simply being human and not just something garish and embarrassing. Death had reminded him that they were brothers and not callous strangers. It took A.J.'s murder for Phee to realize that no matter their differences, his older brother was always there with him, connected and a part of his soul.