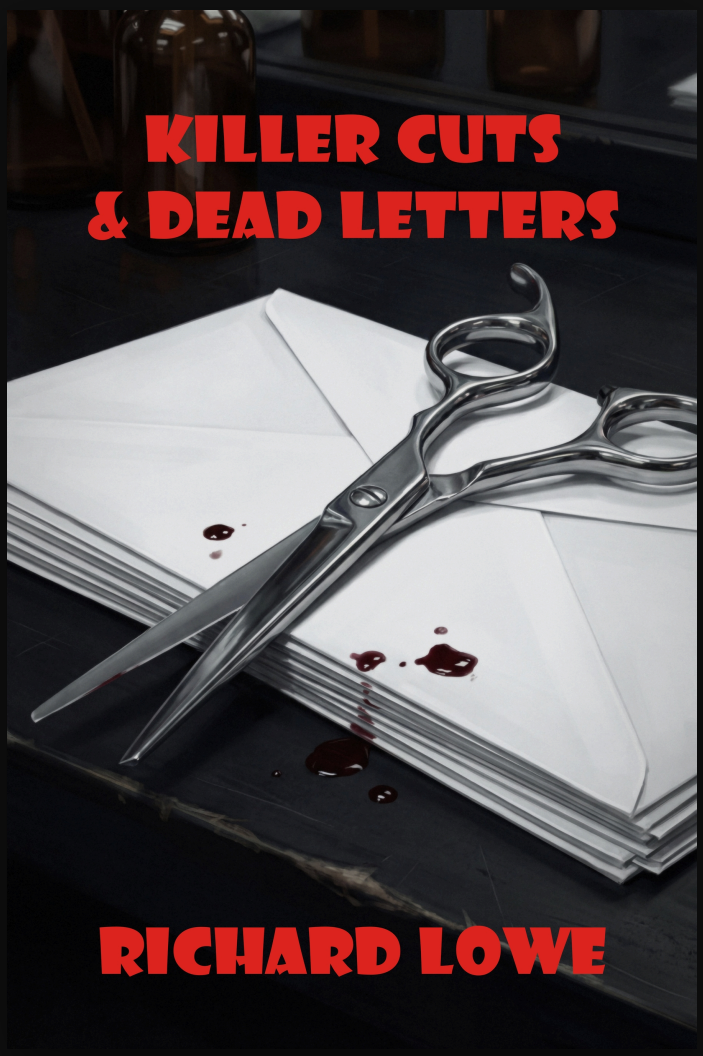
A FREE COMPANION TO KILLER CUTS AND DEAD LETTERS

The Good Scissors

Years before Henderson Avenue, a young Jackie Jackson learns what a salon chair hears, and what Dolores Vasquez does with it.



RICHARD LOWE

The Good Scissors

The coupon was for twenty percent off at the beauty supply on Armenia. It was printed on the back of a register receipt, and Jackie was cutting it out with the nearest pair of scissors.

"Those are not for paper," Dolores said.

She said it from the front desk without looking up. She had the ledger open and her reading glasses down at the end of her nose, and her back was to the room. There were two mirrors between them, and Jackie had worked out on her first day that neither one gave Dolores a view of the second station.

Jackie put the scissors down.

"Paper dulls an edge," Dolores said, and turned a page. "A dull edge makes you push. Pushing is how people get hurt. Use the ones in the drawer."

The ones in the drawer were orange plastic and had come free with a case of foils. Jackie finished the coupon with them. It came out with an edge like a coastline.

Then she took her appointment book out of her bag and turned to the back page, where she had written DOLORES across the top in her first month. Under No coffee after two, in her small even print, she wrote: The good scissors are not for paper. There were two lines on the page now, and she could already tell it was going to need the whole page.

* * *

The salon was on Seventh Avenue in Ybor City, on the ground floor of a brick building that had been three other businesses before it was a salon and still smelled faintly of each. There were four chairs on a black and white tile floor, a front window with DOLORES in gold leaf, and a ceiling fan that had turned at the same speed for eleven years because Dolores had decided that was the speed.

Jackie was twenty-five. She had been in the second chair for a year and three months, and she was afraid of Dolores in the mornings, in the afternoons, and on Sundays when the salon was closed and she was nowhere near it.

Ofelia Prado came in at ten, as she came in every Friday, for a wash and set.

She was seventy-nine. She had followed Dolores to Seventh Avenue from a chair Dolores rented on Fifteenth Street, back before Dolores had her name on any glass, and she had not missed a Friday since. That included the Friday after her husband Tito died, when she arrived with her eyes swollen and told Dolores that Tito would not have wanted her seen like this.

This Friday she came in with a manila envelope held flat against her chest with both hands.

"I want you to see something," she said, settling into the chair. "Before you wet me."

Dolores took the envelope. Inside were six stapled pages and a thick fold of pink carbon receipts held with a paper clip. The cover page said TOLLIVER FAMILY TRIBUTE PLANS in raised blue letters, with a drawing of a dove that had been traced from a better drawing of a dove.

"My arrangements," Ofelia said. "All of it. I've been paying four years. Thirty-eight dollars, the first of every month. Mr. Tolliver comes to the house himself. He won't take a check." She lowered her voice, though there was nobody in the salon but the three of them and a rooster crossing Seventh Avenue outside the window. "He says checks are for people who don't trust each other."

"He comes to the house," Dolores said.

"The first of the month. He has a coffee. He writes me the receipt right there at the table. Pink copy for me, white copy for him." Ofelia beamed at herself in the mirror. "He calls me young lady. Nobody has called me young lady since Eisenhower."

Dolores turned to the second page. Jackie, at her own station, wiping down a comb that was already clean, watched Dolores's face in the mirror and saw nothing on it. She had been watching that face for fifteen months, and she was learning that nothing was the most expensive thing it did.

"Page three," Ofelia said. "Read page three."

Page three was the list.

Viewing: Rubio Funeral Home, Nebraska Avenue. Dress: the blue one with the buttons. Music: the song from the wedding, Tito knows which. Flowers: no carnations. And then, in the same typed capitals as everything else:

HAIR: DOLORES VASQUEZ, SEVENTH AVENUE. FRIDAY SET.

"You're in it," Ofelia said. "I put you in it. I told him, I am not going in front of Father Ruiz and the whole parish with anybody else's set."

Dolores read the line. She read the rest of page three, and then pages four through six, which were mostly small print about the plan being transferable and irrevocable and protected. She read the back of page six, which was blank, and she read that too.

"It's very complete," she said.

"Isn't it?"

"May I keep this until next Friday? I want to make a copy. For my files."

Ofelia put a hand to her chest. "You have files?"

"I have files," Dolores said, and slid the envelope into the drawer under the ledger.

Then she shampooed Ofelia Prado and set her, and the set was exactly right, the same set she had been doing on Fridays for twenty-six years, every roller at the same angle as last week and the week before, the curl coming forward off the temple the way Ofelia liked it so her glasses sat on it. Jackie watched the whole thing. There was no hurry in it and no change in it, and when Ofelia came out from under the dryer and saw herself, she said, "There I am."

She paid in cash and tipped two dollars, folded into a square, the way she always tipped. At the door she said, "Next Friday, my envelope," and Dolores said, "Next Friday," and Ofelia went out into the sun with her hair holding against the humidity like a promise somebody meant to keep.

Jackie waited until the door had closed.

"Is it real?" she said.

Dolores was writing in the ledger. Wash and set, Prado, ten dollars, two dollar tip.

She wrote the tip in a separate column. She had shown Jackie the separate column on her second day and told her that a woman who did not know her own tips did not know her own business.

"Monday," Dolores said. "Seven o'clock. Wear shoes you don't love."

"Where?"

"Rubio's."

Jackie looked at her. "The funeral home."

"I do their hair on Mondays."

"Whose hair?"

Dolores raised her eyes over the reading glasses and held them there until Jackie understood, and then a little longer, to make sure.

"They are the best clients I have," Dolores said. "They don't bring pictures. They don't tell me about their husbands. They don't swear they've only ever used professional color." She went back to the ledger. "And they never come back to tell me it's too tight."

* * *

Rubio Funeral Home was a long white building on Nebraska Avenue with green awnings and a parking lot that was always freshly swept, as if somebody expected the dead to notice. Dolores parked her gold sedan at the side door. She had a rolling case for her tools, an old one with a cracked handle she had mended with electrical tape, and she pulled it up the ramp without looking back to see if Jackie was coming.

Jackie was coming. She had worn her second-best flats, because she did not own shoes she didn't love. She had decided in the car that she would not be sick, and she had decided it four or five times between Seventh Avenue and Nebraska, which was not how decisions were supposed to work.

The room in the back was cold. It smelled of lilies from somewhere and of a chemical edge under the lilies that did not belong to any salon Jackie had ever worked in. There was a steel table and a good lamp and a sink, and on the table under a sheet folded to the shoulders was a small woman of about ninety with a great deal of white hair.

"Mrs. Celia Ortega," Dolores said, the way she said a client's name at the front desk. "Ninety-one. Her granddaughter brought a picture."

The picture was clipped to a board beside the sink. It showed Celia Ortega at about fifty, at somebody's wedding, with her hair up in a set so tall and sure of itself it looked like it had been built by a committee.

"That's thirty-five years ago," Jackie said.

"The family wants what they want." Dolores opened the case. "Pins."

Jackie held the pins. She stood at the end of the table and handed them over one at a time when Dolores held out her hand, and for the first ten minutes she looked at the pins, and at the picture, and at the drain in the floor. Then she made herself look at Celia Ortega's hair, because hair was the job, and hair she understood.

It was wrong in a way she had never felt. It was clean and soft, and somebody had washed it well, but it lay where it was put and did nothing else.

Living hair pushed back a little. It had warmth coming up from under it and a mind of its own about which way it wanted to go.

"There's no heat," Jackie said.

"No." Dolores wound a curl and pinned it. "So the curl won't come from her. It has to come from you. You set it tighter than you'd dare on a living woman." She held out her hand for another pin. "She won't tell me it's too tight. So I have to tell myself."

Jackie gave her the pin.

After a while Dolores stepped back and let Jackie do the left side. Jackie's hands were cold from the room, and the first curl came out loose, and she took it down and did it again.

The second one was right. She looked at her hands afterward. They were steady, and she was not sure whether she was proud of that or not, so she put it away and did the next curl.

They were teasing the crown into the shape of 1970-something when the door opened and Armando Rubio came in.

He was a big, soft-spoken man with a pocket square and the kind of voice people would want to hear on the worst day of their lives. He looked at the picture and then at Mrs. Ortega, and his face eased, as if the two of them had settled an old disagreement.

"Her granddaughter is going to cry," he said.

“That's the idea,” Dolores said. “Armando. A minute.”

She wiped her hands, took a folded photocopy out of the pocket of her smock and gave it to him. Jackie recognized the dove.

Armando read it. He read the cover and then turned to page three, and Jackie watched his face do what Dolores's face had refused to do on Friday. It went to annoyance, and then past annoyance to a tiredness that had been there too many times to bother with the annoyance anymore.

“Ofelia Prado,” he said.

“Four years. Thirty-eight a month. Cash.”

“I buried Tito.” He turned the page. “It says Rubio's. It says Rubio's right here, and I have never seen this paper in my life. I have never heard of a Tolliver.” He folded it back up. “You're the fourth.”

“The fourth what?”

“The fourth widow who's walked in my door with this dove. One came in last spring with her daughter to talk about the arrangements she had already paid for. I had to sit her down in the family room and tell her she had paid for a dove.” He handed the copy back to Dolores. “I called the state. They sent a very nice young man. He took a report.”

“And?”

“It was a very thorough report.” Armando looked at the sheet over Mrs. Ortega's shoulders as if it might back him up. “I have a drawer, Dolores. A whole drawer of very thorough reports.”

“Call the police,” Jackie said.

They both looked at her. She had not meant to say it out loud, and now it was out there in the cold room with the three of them and Celia Ortega.

“I did, mija,” Armando said. He said it kindly, which was worse. “They tell me it's a civil matter until somebody catches him with the book. He doesn't have an office. He has a first name and a phone number that rings at a laundromat on Hillsborough. He comes to the house on the first of the month and he takes cash, and by the time anybody's daughter thinks to ask, he's been gone three years.”

“What does she actually have here?” Dolores said. “Ofelia.”

“A plot next to Tito. Paid in eighty-eight. A deposit on the vault.” Armando shrugged. “The rest she would pay for when she needs it, like everybody.”

“Write down what the rest costs.”

He looked at her a while. Then he took a pen out of his inside pocket and wrote a number on the back of the photocopy, and Dolores folded it and put it back in her smock without reading it.

They finished Mrs. Ortega at a quarter to nine. Dolores stood at the foot of the table and looked at the set from every side, the way she looked at a client in the mirror before she let her out of the chair, and moved one pin a quarter inch.

Then she held the picture up beside it.

“There she is,” Dolores said.

* * *

In the car Jackie held her hands between her knees to warm them and lasted three blocks.

“We have to tell her,” she said.

Dolores drove. She drove the gold sedan like a woman who had paid for every inch of the road personally, at exactly the speed limit, with her hands at ten and two.

“Tell her what?”

“That it's fake. That she's been paying a man for nothing.”

“And then what?”

Jackie opened her mouth and found nothing ready in it.

“She has paid four years for her own funeral,” Dolores said. “She has picked her dress. She has picked her song. She has picked me. You tell her it's a dove, and then every Friday for the rest of her life she sits in my chair knowing she's a foolish old woman who gave her money to a man because he called her young lady.” The light ahead turned yellow, and Dolores stopped for it, which nobody in Tampa did. “That's what you'd tell her.”

“So we do nothing.”

“I didn't say nothing.”

The light was long. A man on a bicycle went through it against the red with a cooler strapped to his handlebars, and Dolores watched him all the way across the intersection with the disapproval she kept for men who did their own highlights.

“People tell the chair things,” she said. “They know what I am. A woman with scissors who talks to everybody on Seventh Avenue. They tell me anyway.” She breathed out through her nose, a long sound like a radiator. “The chair makes conditions, mija. They sit down and they say what they would never say at their own kitchen table.”

“And you do what with it?”

“Mostly nothing. You listen, and you let it go by. That's the job.” The light changed. Dolores did not move until the car beside them had gone first. “Sometimes the right thing to do with what you hear is something else.”

“Something else than what?”

“Than nothing,” Dolores said, and turned on the radio, and that was the end of the conversation.

That night Jackie sat at the kitchen table in her apartment on Twenty-first Street and did the arithmetic on the back of an electric bill. Thirty-eight dollars a month for forty-eight months was one thousand eight hundred and twenty-four dollars. Four widows, if they all paid like Ofelia, was a little over seven thousand.

She looked at the number until the refrigerator kicked on. It was more than she had made in the second chair in her first four months.

She drew a box around it and then wished she hadn't, because now it looked like a plan, and she did not have one.

* * *

Marisol Quintana was Dolores's Wednesday at eleven, a single process and a trim. She was about forty, with a lot of dark hair and a gray streak at the part that she called her filing cabinet, because it was where she kept everything she was mad about.

She worked for the state, in the Tampa office of a department whose name was longer than most of its forms. Jackie knew this because Marisol had explained it once in the chair, at length, and Jackie had not followed a word of it except that the department took complaints about people who sold things to old people.

Dolores did her color. Jackie swept, which was what Jackie did when she wanted to hear a conversation without looking like she was listening, and she swept the same four squares of tile around the second station until they shone.

“A woman I know,” Dolores said, working the color through at the part. “Seventy-nine. Paying a man for her funeral.”

“Pre-need,” Marisol said, with her eyes closed.

“Is that what it's called?”

“That's what it's called when it's real.” Marisol opened one eye in the mirror. “Let me guess. Cash. He comes to the house. Very nice manners. A pink receipt.”

Dolores combed a section straight and said nothing, which was yes.

“I have a file,” Marisol said. “I have a file so thick it has its own chair. Every complaint in it is from a widow, or from a widow's son, after. Not one of them knows where he lives or where he'll be. He comes to them.” She shut the eye again. “I can't sit outside every widow's house in Hillsborough County on the first of the month. I'd need four hundred people and a very understanding husband.”

“Where would you need him?”

“Somewhere I can stand. Somewhere with people. With the book on him, writing a receipt to somebody new, so it's not one old lady's word against a man in a nice suit.” Marisol sighed. “Somewhere and some time. Give me somewhere and some time, and I'll give you a very happy afternoon.”

“Mm,” Dolores said.

Jackie swept her four squares. She had heard Dolores say mm a hundred times. She had never before heard her say it like a woman taking a measurement.

* * *

On Friday Ofelia came in at ten for her wash and set, and Dolores gave her the envelope back across the front desk with both hands.

“Did you make your copy?”

“I made my copy.”

“For your files,” Ofelia said, delighted, and put the envelope in her purse and snapped it shut on the dove.

Dolores shampooed her. Jackie stood at the next bowl rinsing a client of her own, a nurse from Tampa General with a postpartum shed that Jackie was treating like a crime scene, and she heard every word over the water.

“Your Mr. Tolliver,” Dolores said. “What's his hair like?”

Ofelia made a face at the ceiling. “Oh, terrible. Terrible. He combs it over. From here,” she touched the spot above her left ear, “all the way over to here. One long piece, like a bridge. I said to him, Glenn, a man your age should let it go. He laughed. He has a nice laugh.”

“Tell him to come see me,” Dolores said. “Saturday morning. Nine o'clock. The first one is on the house.”

Jackie dropped a comb into the nurse's bowl.

“Pick that up,” Dolores said, without turning around.

“Dolores, he'll be thrilled,” Ofelia said. “He says it all the time. He says he meets so many ladies, he has to look right. He says it's half the business, looking right.” She closed her eyes under the warm water. “I'll call him tonight. I have his number at the laundromat.”

* * *

Glenn Tolliver arrived on Saturday at four minutes to nine, and his cologne came in about a yard ahead of him, the way a good dog goes ahead of a man.

He was in his sixties and wore a tan suit on a Saturday. He had a gold pen clipped inside his jacket and a heavy gold ring, and a face that had been tanned on a lot of golf courses and was still pleasant

underneath it.

The hair was exactly as advertised. It came up from above his left ear in one long, brave strand, went the whole width of his head and lay down on the far side, a bridge over nothing.

“Dolores Vasquez,” he said, and took her hand in both of his. “Ofelia talks about you like you hung the moon. She told me you're the only one she trusts with her hair.”

“Sit,” Dolores said.

He sat. He looked around the salon with approval, the tile and the gold leaf and the fan, and then he looked at Dolores in the mirror and smiled at her.

“Young lady,” he said, “I put myself entirely in your hands.”

Jackie was at the second station folding towels. She had seen Dolores's face do nothing before. She had never seen it do nothing this hard.

“Jackie,” Dolores said. “Shampoo.”

Jackie shampooed Glenn Tolliver.

She tested the water on the inside of her wrist like she tested it for every client, and it was correct, and she knew it was correct, and she stood there with the sprayer in her hand for one second longer than she needed to while the water ran over her wrist.

Then she put it on his head. Correct water, correct pressure, the same as anybody. He sighed at the ceiling and said she had wonderful hands.

At the color shelf, while he was still at the bowl with a towel around his neck, she stood beside Dolores and spoke without moving her mouth.

“Give him a bad one.”

Dolores took down a bottle of conditioner and read the label as if she had never seen it before.

“The work is what matters,” she said. “Not whether the client is happy. The work. Did you do it right? Then you did your job.” She put the bottle back, label out. “What they do with a correct cut once they walk out of my door is their own business.”

“He's stealing from Ofelia.”

“Then he's going to look very nice doing it,” Dolores said, and went back to the chair.

* * *

She took the bridge off first.

She lifted the long strand with two fingers, held it out to the side at its full length, and looked at it for a moment with no expression at all. Then she cut it at the root, one clean close, and laid it on the counter beside the mirror like an exhibit she might need for a jury.

Glenn Tolliver looked at it lying there.

“Well,” he said. “That's that.”

“That's that,” Dolores said.

She cut the rest short. She took the sides down close and left a little length on top, enough to comb straight back, so the scalp showed honestly where it showed and the hair that was there looked like it meant it. It was a plain cut, and it was perfect, and Jackie, who had seen Dolores do maybe two thousand haircuts by then, watched this one with her arms folded so she would not have to think about what to do with her hands.

The chair made its conditions. By the time Dolores was working the back, Glenn Tolliver was telling her about his business.

“I used to do it all house calls,” he said. “First of the month, here and there, you know. Coffee with the ladies. But that's slow, for new business. That's maintenance.” He smiled at her in the mirror. “For new business you have to go where they are.”

“Where are they?” Dolores said.

“Sundays.” He settled lower in the chair, which did that to people. “The tea dance at the social hall on Twelfth Avenue, two o'clock. You'd be amazed. Sixty, seventy ladies, and maybe a dozen men, and half the men can't dance. The ladies come by themselves. They want to dance with a gentleman.” He laid a hand flat on his chest, where his jacket hung on the hook. “And a gentleman wants to talk about the future.”

“Every Sunday,” Dolores said.

“Every Sunday but Easter.” He looked shocked at the idea. “I'm not an animal.”

Dolores combed and cut. She asked him whether the hall was air-conditioned, and he said it was, thank heaven, and she asked whether he danced the waltzes or only the slow ones, and he laughed his nice laugh and said a man in his line danced everything.

“Between the waltzes, that's when you sign them,” he said. “Something about a waltz. A woman comes off a waltz and she's thinking about how long she's got. That's human nature, young lady. I don't make the rules.” He patted the left side of his chest, where the pocket of his jacket would have been. “Book's right in here. Inside left. Always.”

Jackie was holding her own shears. She had picked them up off her station at some point without noticing, and when he said human nature her right arm started to come up into the big sweep she had been making since she was nine years old, the one that meant I'm just saying, the one her mother told her for years would put somebody's eye out.

“Hands down, mija,” Dolores said.

Jackie's arm came down. She put the shears in their slot, blades closed.

Glenn Tolliver did not notice any of it. He was looking at himself.

Dolores turned the chair and held up the hand mirror so he could see the back, and he looked into it without a word. Without the bridge he looked ten years younger and exactly like a man you would trust to hold your purse while you went to the ladies' room.

“Well, look at that,” he said softly. “Look at that. Young lady, you've taken years off me.”

“It's a correct haircut,” Dolores said.

He stood and put on his tan jacket and settled it on his shoulders. He reached inside it, the left side, and came out with a receipt book: a thick little book with a blue cover and pink and white carbons, TOLLIVER FAMILY TRIBUTE PLANS printed at the top of every sheet under the traced dove. He clicked the gold pen.

“I always say a service deserves a receipt,” he said.

He wrote with a flourish. Haircut, complimentary, with thanks. G. Tolliver. He tore off the pink copy along the perforation and held it out to her between two fingers. “For your files.”

Dolores took it.

“And when you're ready to think about your own arrangements,” he said, putting the book away and patting it once through the jacket, “you know where to find me.”

“I do,” Dolores said.

He went out onto Seventh Avenue in his tan suit with his honest new haircut, and the rooster that lived on the corner stepped out of his way.

Jackie went to the counter where the long strand still lay beside the mirror. She swept it into the dustpan with the rest and emptied it in the bin, and when she turned around Dolores was at the front desk, sliding the pink receipt into the drawer under the ledger, flat, beside the envelope where she had kept Ofelia's plan.

* * *

On Wednesday at eleven Marisol Quintana sat down in Dolores's chair for a trim she did not need, because it had only been two weeks, and Dolores had called her on Monday and told her she needed it.

Dolores combed her out.

"Sunday," Dolores said. "The tea dance at the social hall on Twelfth Avenue. Two o'clock."

Marisol's eyes came open in the mirror.

"Between the waltzes," Dolores said. "That's when he signs them. The book is in his jacket. Inside left."

For a while Marisol did not say anything at all. Jackie, at the next station, was setting a perm on a woman who was asleep, and she rolled one rod for about a minute.

"How will I know him?" Marisol said.

"Tan suit. Gold pen. Sixties." Dolores lifted a section of the dark hair and trimmed a sixteenth of an inch off the end of it, for the sake of the appointment. "He has a good haircut."

"Dolores, half the men in Tampa have a good haircut."

"Not this one," Dolores said. "This one is mine."

She opened the drawer under the counter, took out a plain white envelope, and set it in Marisol's lap under the cape. Marisol looked down at it. Through the paper Jackie could see the faint pink of a carbon copy.

"His handwriting," Dolores said. "He wrote it in this chair."

Marisol held the envelope without opening it. Then she looked at Dolores in the mirror, with her gray streak and her filing cabinet and two years of widows in it.

"I didn't hear any of this in a salon," she said.

"Nobody hears anything in a salon," Dolores said, and finished the trim.

* * *

It was in the paper on Tuesday, on the fourth page of the local section, eleven lines under a story about a water main.

A Tampa man had been arrested on Sunday afternoon at a senior social on Twelfth Avenue and charged with a list of things that took up most of the eleven lines. Investigators said he had been collecting cash for funeral plans that did not exist from at least nine women. He had been carrying a receipt book at the time of his arrest.

There was a photograph, small, the size of a postage stamp. He was looking straight into the camera in a tan jacket, and he looked rested, and dependable, and about ten years younger than his age.

Jackie found it first, at the front desk, at a quarter to nine. She stood there holding the paper with both hands.

"He looks good," she said.

Dolores came and looked over her shoulder. She looked at the photograph the way she had looked at Celia Ortega from the foot of the table, from every side, without any hurry.

"It photographed well," she said.

"You gave him the best haircut of his life."

“I gave him a correct haircut.” Dolores straightened up. “What he did with it after he left my chair was his own business.”

“Nine women,” Jackie said.

“Nine that they know.”

Dolores went back to the ledger. After a minute she said, without looking up, “Cut that out for me. I want it for my files.”

Jackie reached for the nearest scissors.

“Those are not for paper,” Dolores said.

Jackie opened the drawer and got the orange ones. The photograph came out with a crooked edge, like a coastline, and Dolores took it from her and slid it into the drawer under the ledger, on top of everything else she kept in there that nobody had ever asked to see.

* * *

Ofelia found out on Thursday. Her son called her from Orlando, because her son read the newspaper with a magnifying glass looking for people he had gone to high school with, and he had found the dove.

She came in on Friday at ten anyway. She sat in the chair with her purse in her lap, and she did not take her eyes off her own hands in the mirror, and when Dolores leaned her back at the bowl she started to cry, quietly, with her face turned up into the water as if that would hide it.

“Four years,” she said. “Thirty-eight dollars. I gave him coffee. I gave him the good cups. Tito would have known in five minutes.”

“Tito bought a used car from a man named Spider,” Dolores said, and worked the shampoo in.

Ofelia laughed. It came out of her wet and surprised, in the middle of the crying, and she put a hand over her mouth. “He did,” she said. “He did. It was green.”

“It was green,” Dolores agreed. “The color of a pool table. For three years he parked it on the far side of the church so nobody would see him get out of it.”

Jackie, at the next bowl, turned her face away so Ofelia would not see her smile.

The state would spend the better part of a year getting a little of the money back, a few dollars at a time, in envelopes that came with a page and a half of explanation each. Ofelia would show Dolores every one of them on a Friday, and Dolores would read every page.

Dolores set her. Every roller at the same angle as last week, the curl coming forward off the temple for the glasses. When Ofelia came out from under the dryer she looked at herself for a while before she said anything.

“There I am,” she said finally.

“Monday,” Dolores said. “I'll pick you up at ten. We're going to see Armando.”

* * *

Armando Rubio sat them down in the family room, which had soft chairs and a box of tissues on every table and a painting of a lake that nobody had ever been to. He had a real form, white, with the funeral home's name at the top and no dove anywhere on it.

He went through it with Ofelia line by line. The dress was the blue one with the buttons. The song was the one from the wedding.

He did not know which song, and Ofelia told him, and he wrote it down without comment. No carnations. He wrote down the plot next to Tito and the vault, paid in eighty-eight, and then a number

at the bottom that was a good deal smaller than the one he had written on the back of Dolores's photocopy, and Jackie, who could read numbers upside down, saw Dolores see it and say nothing.

"Hair," Armando said.

"Dolores Vasquez," Ofelia said. "Seventh Avenue. Friday set."

Armando wrote it.

"I'll be retired," Dolores said.

"Then you'll come out of retirement," Ofelia said, and signed at the bottom in a big looping hand that leaned on every letter, and pushed the form back across the table to Armando as if that settled it, which it did.

* * *

In the gold sedan going back down Nebraska Avenue, with Ofelia dropped at her door and the radio off, Jackie looked out the window at the used car lots going by. There was one with a hundred plastic flags strung over it, flapping in a hot wind, and every car on it was a color somebody had talked themselves into.

"How will I know?" she said.

Dolores drove. Ten and two.

"When to have my own place," Jackie said. "My own chair. How will I know when it's time?"

Dolores stopped at a yellow light. The car behind them honked and went around them, and Dolores watched it go with the look she kept for men and foils.

"You'll know when it comes up," she said.

"What will it be?"

"If I could tell you that, it wouldn't need to come up."

The light changed. Dolores waited for the car beside them to go first, and then she went.

* * *

That night at her kitchen table on Twenty-first Street, Jackie took out her appointment book and turned to the back page.

DOLORES. No coffee after two. The good scissors are not for paper.

She held the pen over the page, under the two lines, until the ink beaded on the nib. Nobody hears anything in a salon. She capped the pen and closed the book.

The World of Killer Cuts and Dead Letters

Who's Who

The people of the novel, as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Jackie Jackson	Owner of a color studio on Henderson Avenue in Tampa, fifteen years on the street when the novel opens. She owns the building, keeps a paper ledger, writes in neat cosmetology-school print and counts everything. There is one subject she cannot let anybody get slightly wrong, and it is hair.
Keisha Burrows	A mail carrier and Jackie's friend and client of six years. She moves eleven hundred pieces of mail a day, believes everything needs a system, and calls people honey and sugar when she is about to tell them something they will not enjoy.
Priya Nair	Jackie's second stylist, a color correction specialist with a binder of women who wanted bangs. She has never once asked Jackie a question she didn't need answered.
Derek Holloway	Twenty-one. He installs security cameras by day, delivers pizza at night, and is the youngest member of the Gulf Coast chapter of the Mutual UFO Network by thirty years. His mother is a Tuesday.
Mrs. Linda Carver	A client of six years who brings the same Pinterest photo of warm blonde waves to every appointment and tips eleven percent, always.
Stanley Tate	Host of Gone Without a Trace, a podcast about missing persons cases with a Tampa connection. He has a warm voice he has worked on and a theory about every case.
Special Agent Raymond Burrell	FBI Tampa. He says the whole title every time, eats the same turkey club at the same diner on Kennedy, and keeps a rule about the back of his notebook.
Gerald Hoffmann	The HOA man on Pelican Bay, who once measured a neighbor's deck on a Sunday in his golf visor and has lodged forty-seven complaints against eleven mail carriers in six years.
Dolores Vasquez	She ran a salon on Seventh Avenue in Ybor City for twenty-two years and trained Jackie from twenty-four to twenty-eight. She has opinions about everything from foils to men, never says goodbye on the phone, and does not say things twice.

In this story only: Ofelia Prado, Dolores's Friday wash and set; Glenn Tolliver, who sells funeral plans; Armando Rubio of Rubio Funeral Home; Marisol Quintana, Dolores's Wednesday at eleven; and the late Mrs. Celia Ortega, ninety-one.

Jackie's Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Age 24	Jackie goes to work for Dolores Vasquez on Seventh Avenue and learns to keep paper, from a woman who does not trust anything that has to be charged.

Age 25	The Good Scissors. A funeral plan with a dove on it comes through Dolores's chair.
Age 28	Jackie opens her own salon on Henderson Avenue with a loan, a lease and four hundred dollars of shears.
Year 8 on Henderson	She buys the building.
Six years before the novel	Mrs. Carver comes in for the first time, with box-dyed hair and the photo. Keisha becomes a client. Jackie buys a 2012 Prius, which comes with a tarp in the trunk that nobody can explain.
Two years before	Somebody calls the city about the salon's ventilation. Jackie is closed two days and pays an inspector two hundred dollars, and the report says UNFOUNDED. She has it framed.
The month before	Derek puts in the salon's security cameras.
A Saturday evening in March	Keisha has been waiting at the restaurant for an hour and ten minutes with an order of calamari. Mrs. Carver is the last client on the book. The novel begins.

Places

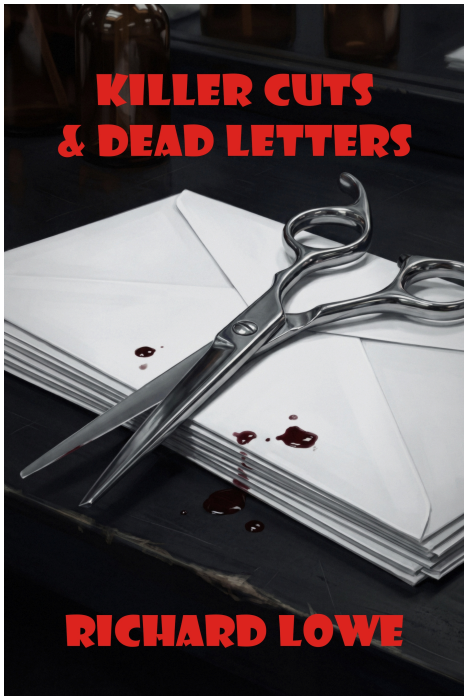
PLACE	WHAT IT IS
The salon on Henderson Avenue	Jackie's color studio. Good light, a lavender diffuser, a Dominican restaurant next door whose sofrito you can smell through the glass, and a storage room whose latch has been broken for two years.
Seventh Avenue, Ybor City	Where Dolores Vasquez ran her salon, and where Jackie learned the trade.
The Publix on Dale Mabry	The new one. Mrs. Carver has views on its bakery and its parking lot.
Keisha's route	Residential sections of Tampa, including Crescent Drive and Pelican Bay Estates, where she knows who is home when and which gates stick.
The depot	Where Keisha clocks in. The coffee machine by the time clock has been broken since October, and three generations of signs say so.
Jackie's kitchen	Where the rice thing gets made, and where most of the serious conversations happen.
Sarasota	Where Dolores retires, to be near her sister.
Rubio Funeral Home	On Nebraska Avenue. In this story only.

Glossary

TERM	MEANING
Toner	A color treatment that corrects the tone of lightened hair. Mrs. Carver's crown needs another round.
Developer	The product that activates hair color, sold by volume. Six-volume is gentle. Thirty-volume lifts dark hair fast, and you do not leave it on a scalp.
Box dye	Drugstore color applied at home in the bathroom sink. Jackie's natural enemy.
Color correction	Fixing what somebody else did to the hair, often the client. It always runs long.
Wash and set	Shampoo, rollers, dryer hood. Ofelia Prado's Friday, every Friday.
Pre-need	A funeral paid for ahead of time. In this story, what it is called when it is real.
The DOLORES page	The page at the back of every appointment book Jackie has ever owned, where she keeps what Dolores told her.
The chair makes conditions	Dolores's rule. People tell the stylist's chair what they would never say at their own kitchen table.
The rice thing	Rice, black beans, a lot of garlic and a secret Jackie will not tell anyone.
Rule one	No phone with a client in the chair. Written in Jackie's appointment book, in her own handwriting.
The parcel quiet	The silence Keisha uses at the depot when a box comes in with no zip code and a smell.
Russell's move	The de-escalation technique from Keisha's two-hour training in Ybor: step back, give them space, let them think they won.
MUFON	The Mutual UFO Network. Derek is the Gulf Coast chapter's regional representative and the only member who can work the projector.
Gone Without a Trace	Stanley Tate's podcast. Jackie has listened to six episodes in the car.
UNFOUNDED	What the ventilation inspector's report says, in capital letters. It hangs over the dryer in the storage room, where only Jackie can see it.

Read the Novel

The Good Scissors takes place on Seventh Avenue, years before Jackie Jackson had her own name on the glass. Killer Cuts and Dead Letters picks up on Henderson Avenue one Saturday evening in March, with a friend waiting over cold calamari, a bill for eighty-seven dollars, and a pair of eight-inch Japanese shears in Jackie's hand when her arm makes the sweep her mother warned her about for twenty years.



Killer Cuts and Dead Letters

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