

**Square in the Face**  
By APRIL HENRY

**Chapter One**

Standing in front of the kitchen sink in Dante's co-op, Claire slid another plate into the wooden dishrack. The view from his window, eight stories above Fourth Avenue, was still something she had a hard time believing. If she pressed her cheek against the cold pane, she could even see a slice of the Empire State Building.

"I have a feeling we're not in Portland, any more, Toto," she murmured to herself. Even without the Empire State Building, a glance across the street would be enough to let her know she wasn't in Oregon any more. Buildings here were squeezed up against one another, without even an alleyway for breathing room. Directly across the street, two brick buildings bracketed an older one of stone, complete with carved gargoyles on the corners. Behind each window was another life she could scarcely imagine. Actors, editors, students and dancers. Old women who could talk for hours about seventy years before, when the streets bustled with fat Checker cabs and people had streamed into the Horn and Hardart Automat on the corner. Palm readers, chanteuses and cellists, writers of advertising catch phrases. People from every country in the world, because this was New York City, after all. And Claire was just one more person among seven million.

In a way she was glad that she was just visiting. New York demanded the persona she had perfected during years of riding the bus in Portland (and happily discarded as soon as she got a car). No smiling, no chance eye contact, no talking to yourself, no making yourself stand out from the herd. It was the only way to stay safe from the wolves. You walked fast and didn't let your eyes catch on anything.

Behind her, the CD player switched to another of the discs Dante had loaded before he went to a meeting at the Met, a meeting that was unavoidable even if he was officially on vacation. When he came back, they were going to a photography exhibit at a gallery downtown. To Claire, everything in New York

felt like what Portlanders called downtown, i.e., tall office buildings and crowded sidewalks, but to Dante the city lay neatly divided into downtown, midtown and uptown. Afterward they were going out to dinner with some of his old friends. The idea filled Claire with a barely suppressed nervousness that went far beyond wondering which fork she should use. Every time she met an old friend of Dante's she would wonder again what Dante saw in her. Their conversations were filled with references she barely caught. Like Alice in Wonderland, sometimes in New York Claire felt as if she had to run in place just to keep up. She told herself that dinner would go fine, but the part of her that still thought in the language of license plates added a sarcastic SHR SHR.

As her mind moved from thought to thought, her hips began to move, too, echoing the beat of the music, a hard-to-pin-down mix of folk, Celtic and Middle Eastern sounds. Claire walked over to the empty CD cases and flipped through them until she figured out which one it was. Loreena McKennitt. The singer's long red curls looked something the way Claire's hair used to, until she had been forced to cut it all off last fall and dye it black to keep herself from being so easily recognizable.

Claire's hairdresser sister Susie had done what she could to restore her. She had dyed Claire's hair back to its original color, and the match was so close that the roots of the new growth couldn't even be seen. But Susie couldn't do anything about the length, which now brushed Claire's shoulders instead of the middle of her back. Claire missed the familiar weight of it. Sometimes after she put on her coat, her hands would automatically reach back to pull her hair free from the collar, and meet only air.

The next song was a ululating melody, a Middle Eastern sound complete with bells and drums. She turned the music up a tick and began to walk back to the sink. Without conscious thought, Claire's body found the pattern of the camelwalk. The memories of the dance were steeped in her bones, laid down in eighth grade when she had taken a five-dollar beginning belly dance class from Minor's department of Parks and Rec.

The teacher had not only taught them how to dance, but how to dress the part. After stops at FabricLand and Newberry's, Claire had made her own bellydancing outfit. The skirt was sheer nylon,

layers and layers of black with a final hidden underskirt of scarlet. She sewed silver bells on a heavily padded black bra and then in class she was taught the secret of making them jingle. Surrounded by housewives and secretaries, Claire learned how to snake her arms and shake her hips and even how to hold her curved arms overhead, back of one hand pressed to the back of another, while she slid her head from side to side. For the first time in her life, Claire began to feel that she might be graceful and coordinated.

Although she was by far the youngest person in the class, for once she didn't mind feeling different. The other women fussed over her as if she were exotic and special. No one teased her for being too skinny or too tall. Instead, they touched her curls, marveled at her pale skin, exclaimed over her flexibility. When the talk turned to men and babies and blood, as it always seemed to do, they hadn't shooed her away, but let her listen.

The dishes forgotten, Claire thought about all this as she camelwalked across the faded scarlet of Dante's Oriental rug. The camelwalk was a dance that required coordination. As you walked forward heel-toe, your breasts and hips moved in opposition, going towards each other and then away, in a movement that reminded Claire of a clamshell opening and closing. It was the bellydancing version of a strut.

Claire's mind was in the past and her body was lost in the music. She didn't know Dante had come in until she felt his hands on her hips.

"Slow down there, Slim."

A hot flush ran up her neck, but Dante had already turned Claire around and pulled her to him, his lips seeking hers. In her mind's eye, she saw how ridiculous she must have looked, gyrating spastically in yellow dishwashing gloves. But maybe Dante hadn't seen her in the same way, because he leaned down, swung her into his arms, and carried her into the bedroom.

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Shrunkened and somehow pathetic, the yellow dishwashing gloves now lay inside out on the white

oak floor. The floors had been built with Siberian oak before the turn of the century, Dante had told Claire, nailed into place by men who were little more than Siberian serfs.

Dante lay stretched out on the white cotton sheets, his body turned toward Claire, his head propped up on one elbow. With his olive skin, black goatee and a gold hoop in his left ear, he looked like a gypsy or a pirate, certainly not like a Met curator who specialized in Old Masters. There was an amused gleam in his black eyes.

“How many other tricks do you have up your sleeve? Can you do jujitsu? Three-dimensional calculus? A triple axel? How come you never told me you knew how to belly dance?”

“When was that ever supposed to come up? It’s not like I get a lot of opportunity to practice. But you never forget how to camelwalk. It’s like riding a bicycle.” Still lying on the bed, Claire raised her hands above her and began clicking imaginary finger cymbals in time to the music. “And you also never forget how to do belly rolls.” She took Dante free hand and put it on her stomach. Cheating, because you really weren’t supposed to use breathing to accentuate the movements, she sucked in her abdomen, then rolled it up and over with a kick that made Dante’s hand jump. He jerked it back.

“Wow! That felt just like when my sister was pregnant. How’d you do that?” He lay back, eyeing his perfectly flat abdomen, and tried to duplicate her maneuver. He only succeeded in sucking his stomach in and out, without any hint of a rolling motion. Defeated, he turned back toward her. “I was going to tell you I saw a good plate today.”

“What was it?” Sometimes Claire still couldn’t believe how much her life had changed. Only six months before, she would have been in her gray burlap cubicle at Oregon’s Specialty License Plate Department, REJECTED stamp poised over yet another application for 6ULDV8, submitted by someone who thought a government bureaucrat would be too stupid to understand his clever substitution of the number 6 for the word “sex.”

Dante spelled it out. “K-I-D space K-R-8. On the back of a minivan.”

She smiled. “That’s pretty good.”

“Do you ever hear that clock they talk about?”

Claire was staring thirty-six in the face, so she knew what clock Dante meant. “That biological one? I don’t know. Sometimes. Maybe when I look at Eric.” Eric was her sister’s son. “He was resting his head on my stomach the other day and he asked me what the sound he heard was. It turned out he was hearing my heart.”

“That’s a good idea.” Dante scooted over so that his head lay on her stomach. He closed his eyes. When he spoke next, his voice was so soft Claire could barely hear him. “Do you ever think about us getting married?” He must have felt her tense, because he waved one hand. “Rewind. Forget I said anything.”

“It’s not - I don’t think - no.” So many thoughts crowded into her mind that Claire couldn’t complete any of them. Dante rolled away and put his feet on the floor. By the hunch of his shoulders, she could tell that he was upset. “It’s not like I don’t want to be with you. It’s just that I don’t know if I believe in marriage. The only marriage I know that works is J.B. and Susie’s, and they aren’t even married. I come from a long line of people who either don’t get married - like my mom - or get married five times - like my grandmother. Neither one’s the greatest role model. Don’t you like what we have now?”

“Of course I do. But it’s hard for me to enjoy it, knowing that you’re going back to Portland in two days.”

“You know I don’t like to leave Charlie alone for too long. She’s nearly eighty.” Claire noticed that neither one of them had brought up the real sticking point in their relationship - that they both had families and settled lives in cities three thousand miles apart.

Dante scrubbed his face with his hands, then got up and walked to the bathroom in silence.

Claire watched him go. Her gaze fell on the painting that faced the bed, a large oil created with swift, sure brushstrokes. It showed a nude woman, or rather just her torso, beginning just below her bent knees and ending just above her breasts. She straddled a wooden chair turned backward. One arm rested on the top of the chair, the fingers thick strokes of color that suggested rather than articulated. Her body

was half-turned, one shoulder twisted back, as she leaned back onto her right palm resting on the seat behind her. A nipple peeked between the wooden slats, and the other breast was seen in profile. Her figure was nearly perfect - that of a young woman as yet unmarked by time, pregnancy, breastfeeding, or years spent slumped in an office chair.

It was entitled "Passing Through," and Claire had never asked Dante if the title he had chosen referred to the model herself, or the brief window of perfection that she inhabited.

The bathroom door opened. "Claire, I " - .

The ringing of the phone interrupted them. Dante looked at the Caller ID box next to the phone. "It's a Portland number - do you want to get it?"

Fear swamped Claire's heart. Something must be wrong with Charlie. In two strides, she was at the phone. "This is Claire."

"Claire - it's Lori. Charlie gave me Dante's number." Lori and Claire had spent eight years working in adjoining cubicles at Specialty Plates. "I'm sorry for intruding."

"No, you're not intruding, Lori." Claire used her friend's name to let Dante know the call wasn't about Charlie. Still, she could already tell by the tremble in her friend's voice that it was bad, whatever it was. "What's wrong?"

"It's Zach. He's really sick. I'm calling from the hospital. They say he's got leukemia."

"Oh, no, Lori. No. I'm sorry." It was hard to imagine Zach, a dark-haired child who sang and hopped through life, sick. "Tell me what I can do for you. I'll be home in a couple of days."

"I've been thinking and thinking." Her next words were so soft they were nearly drowned out by a crackly background voice paging a doctor. "If Zach doesn't go into remission soon, or if he does go into remission and it fails, then he's going to need a bone marrow transplant. And they've already told us there's no match in our family, no match on the donor registry. But remember how I told you about," Lori hesitated, her voice so soft it was nearly inaudible, "about his sister?"

Claire remembered. They had gone out to eat Mexican food at Alcupulco Gold's one Saturday, a

“girl’s night out” while Havi watched the couple’s two boys. Lori had ended up crying into her empty margarita glass. “I remember.”

“I need you to help me find her. In case she’s a match.”

“But Lori, I” - . This was ridiculous. Claire wasn’t a private investigator. What did she know about tracking down a child from a ten-year-old private adoption?

“Don’t say no to me, Claire. Not now.” Lori’s voice was near tears. “Just promise you’ll talk to me about it when you get home.”

What choice did she have? “I promise.”

“Good. Call me as soon as you get home.” Lori sighed as if a boulder had been rolled off her chest. “And thanks, Claire.”

Claire hung up the phone, wondering what she had gotten herself into.

“What’s wrong with Lori?” Dante asked. The winter daylight was already fading, turning Dante into a dark shape against the white sheets.

“Her three-year-old son has leukemia. He might need a bone marrow transplant, but there isn’t a match available.” Claire put her hands over her eyes and sighed. “She wants to talk to me about finding his sister to see if the girl is a match.”

Dante looked confused. “I thought she just had two boys.”

“When Lori was in college, she got pregnant and gave the baby up for adoption. The guy she’s married to now was the father, but they had broken before she knew she was pregnant. Later they got back together and got married, but Lori never told him what happened.”

“And she didn’t want to have an abortion?”

“No. She and Havi had always been like this,” Claire held up two fingers wrapped around each other, “so she felt really connected with the child. Connected and angry at the same time, because she had broken up with Havi and didn’t want to be reminded of him. That’s why she decided to give it up for adoption rather than keep it.”

“What kind of a name is Havi?”

“He’s Mexican-American, so his real name is Xavier. But no one here knows how to say it right, with an H sound at the beginning and an A sound at the end. They always say Ex-ave-ee-air. So he tells people to call him Havi, and he spells it with an H.”

“So how come this Havi guy didn’t ever know Lori was pregnant? Even if they weren’t going out any more, wouldn’t he have seen her during that nine months?”

Claire shook her head. “After they broke up, Havi joined the army. He only looked her up when he got out four years later. They got back together, ended up getting married. They had Max right away. He’s six now, and Zach is three. Lori was always afraid to tell him about their other child, so she kept it a secret.” Claire thought that Lori must be frightened indeed, to think of trading her secret for her son’s life. She leaned over and kissed Dante, then they both got up and began to get ready to go out.

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“And you’ll have” -. The waiter paused expectantly. He was all capped teeth, artfully streaked blond hair and too-good-to-be true turquoise eyes. He was probably one of those waiters-slash-models. Everyone in New York seemed to be a hyphenated blend of what they were doing temporarily and what they were meant to be.

What Claire wanted was the fresh-caught tuna served with aioli, but even though she knew that aioli was fresh-made garlic mayonnaise, she didn’t know how to pronounce it. Did you say all the vowels? Unfortunately, none of the other people sitting at her table had ordered it. Claire compromised. “The tuna.”

The waiter nodded and scribbled without saying anything, so Claire remained unenlightened. His gaze moved on to Tabitha, who was seated next to Claire. He added a few dozen more teeth to his smile, taken in by Tabitha’s jet black hair and tip-tilted eyes. “The tia pila,” Tabitha said. Handing her menu back with a snap, she continued the monologue the waiter had interrupted. “So they won’t fund the segment on the death camps unless I can get footage. But how can I get footage without any funding? The

whole thing's circular, but they just won't see it."

Tabitha was a documentary filmmaker who specialized in war - specifically its effects, not on the main combatants, but on women and children. (Of course, as a war ground on, it wasn't unusual to find that the person holding the gun was a twelve-year-old, or that a camp follower had scavenged a weapon and turned it on the enemy.) Lately her beat had been extremist Muslim conflicts, and unfortunately, she had a number from which to choose. Disguised behind a floor-length black chador, her blue eyes covered by a screen of mesh, Tabitha ventured into the field with a tiny camera hidden in the voluminous folds of her headscarf. Because she was an American infidel who risked stoning or a headsman's sword, she also kept a revolver strapped to her ankle and a stiletto tucked in her bra.

Unfortunately for Claire's self-esteem, Tabitha was typical of Dante's old friends. They were all vivid, fascinating and more than slightly exotic. Claire sat silent, listening to the play of conversation around her as it touched on war, politics, dance, theatre, art. At one point, Dante gave her shoulder a squeeze, but it didn't make her feel any more sure of herself. What was Claire Montrose - who one year ago had never been farther east than Boise, Idaho - doing in New York City, eating food she couldn't pronounce?

The answer was that she had sneaked in when no one was looking. Six months earlier, she had inherited a mysterious oil painting from her great aunt. After gathering up all her courage she had gone to New York City, taken her painting on the rounds of auction houses and museums. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dante had offered to look at it.

Later Dante had admitted to Claire that he had instantly fallen in love with both her and her painting of a woman in a ermine-trimmed yellow jacket. The little painting turned out to have been looted, first from its original owners by the Nazis, and then by Claire's great aunt's U.S. Army boyfriend. Haunted by the thought of the thousands of Jews whose deaths had allowed both Hitler and Goering to amass enough art for a dozen museums, Claire had turned over the money from the sale of the painting to the World Jewish Restitution Organization. It was only at the insistence of her elderly roommate - herself

a concentration camp survivor - that Claire had kept just enough to give a few things to her family and free herself from the drudgery of Specialty Plates.

The waiter took Aryeh's order and then departed. Aryeh, who was sitting next to Tabitha, was an Israeli artist who referred to his works as "installations." They seemed more designed to shock than to beguile. His latest was a pig, freeze-dried whole, which had then been sliced by a laser beam into one-sixteenth-inch segments. Reassembled in the order they had held in the original pig, the slices were displayed in formaldehyde, each one dangling from a piece of fishing line. Visitors were invited to agitate the Lucite box in which they floated and watch the weird and somehow lifelike way the whole thing rippled.

Next to Aryeh was sara (she insisted on lowercase), a publishing executive who had just returned from a solo trek in Nepal. She wore a black dress the size of a postage stamp and heels high enough to make her a good three inches taller than Claire's five foot ten. Claire wondered if the air was better up there.

Ant was seated next to sara. A silver ring pierced his right eyebrow, and the white tablecloth hid his kilt. His shaven head showed not a trace of stubble. How much work did it take to maintain, Claire wondered. Had he shaved off his five o'clock head shadow before joining them for dinner? Ant played lead guitar in the band Muck. Claire had never heard of Muck - but the way Dante's friends talked about it, she felt as if she should have.

The four of them were now engaged in an animated discussion of Aryeh's and Tabitha's newly remodeled condominium. Only in New York could an apartment encompass more than two floors, and it seemed as if this one had at least four. Claire gathered that the basement housed a triple-width Italian marble lap pool lined with Spanish tile, and on the third floor was a screening room that seated sixty. At one point, Dante rolled his eyes in Claire's direction, but still, she felt intimidated just hearing about it.

To Claire, the four were representative of Dante's old friends from Harvard, the kind of people who climbed Everest and spontaneously flew off for weekends in Paris. They had grown up using

Mommy's charge card at Bloomingdales, and Daddy was either on Wall Street or a senior partner at a white shoe law firm. The one time Claire had ventured this theory, Dante had gently chided her, reminding her that his family had made its money in the bakery business, and that their success had come only after years of hard work. Dante was the anomaly, though. Most of his friends had been born with the benefits that only old money, the best education, and family connections could bring. Now they knew people - or sometimes even *were* people - Claire had only read about *in People*. When she was around them, she felt herself receding behind her face, while always maintaining an interested expression.

"How are you enjoying our fair city, Claire? Do you miss Oregon?" Sara was all sweetness, but Claire noticed how she continued to pronounce the state's name as Ory-gone instead of Ory-gun, even after hearing Claire say it the right way. Sara specialized in ghostwriting celebrity books, and, Claire had quickly figured out, had once dated Dante. Even though her left hand occasionally grazed Ant's pate, Claire sensed an undercurrent of jealousy from Sara's direction whenever Dante leaned over to whisper in Claire's ear. Claire could see herself through the other woman's eyes. Some creature from the piney woods who hardly wore makeup.

"I like it here; I like it there." She realized her words unconsciously echoed the rhythm of *Green Eggs and Ham*, one of Rainy's favorite Dr. Seuss books. Once a week, Claire spent an hour struggling to teach seven-year-old Rainy to read at one of Portland's inner city elementary schools. Rainy was one of four siblings who had one mother and four different but equally absent fathers. "Oregon has things that New York doesn't. Then again, I went to MoMA today, and that's not an experience you can duplicate in Portland."

There was a pause while Tabitha and Sara exchanged a sideways glance. Sara speared a pumpkin ravioli and then leaned forward. "Claire, you should know that the acronym is pronounced 'Mohma.' Not 'Mama.'" Her smile didn't reach her pale eyes. Dante shifted. Out of the corner of her eye, Claire saw him shake his head slightly, but Sara's too-intent expression didn't change. "So what does Oregon have that New York City doesn't?"

Dante squeezed her shoulder. Claire could have launched into a list for the rest of them, one that would have started off with the word 'friends.' She could have talked about living in a green lushness cradled by forested hills and snow-capped mountains, of being less than a two-hour drive from the ocean, the mountains, the desert. She could have talked about the different pace and attitude. Instead she put on her own false smile and added a country twang to her voice. "Oh, you know, sara, maybe Oregon's not much different than here. We just got more pine trees, pickup trucks and poverty. That's all."

Even Ant laughed.

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