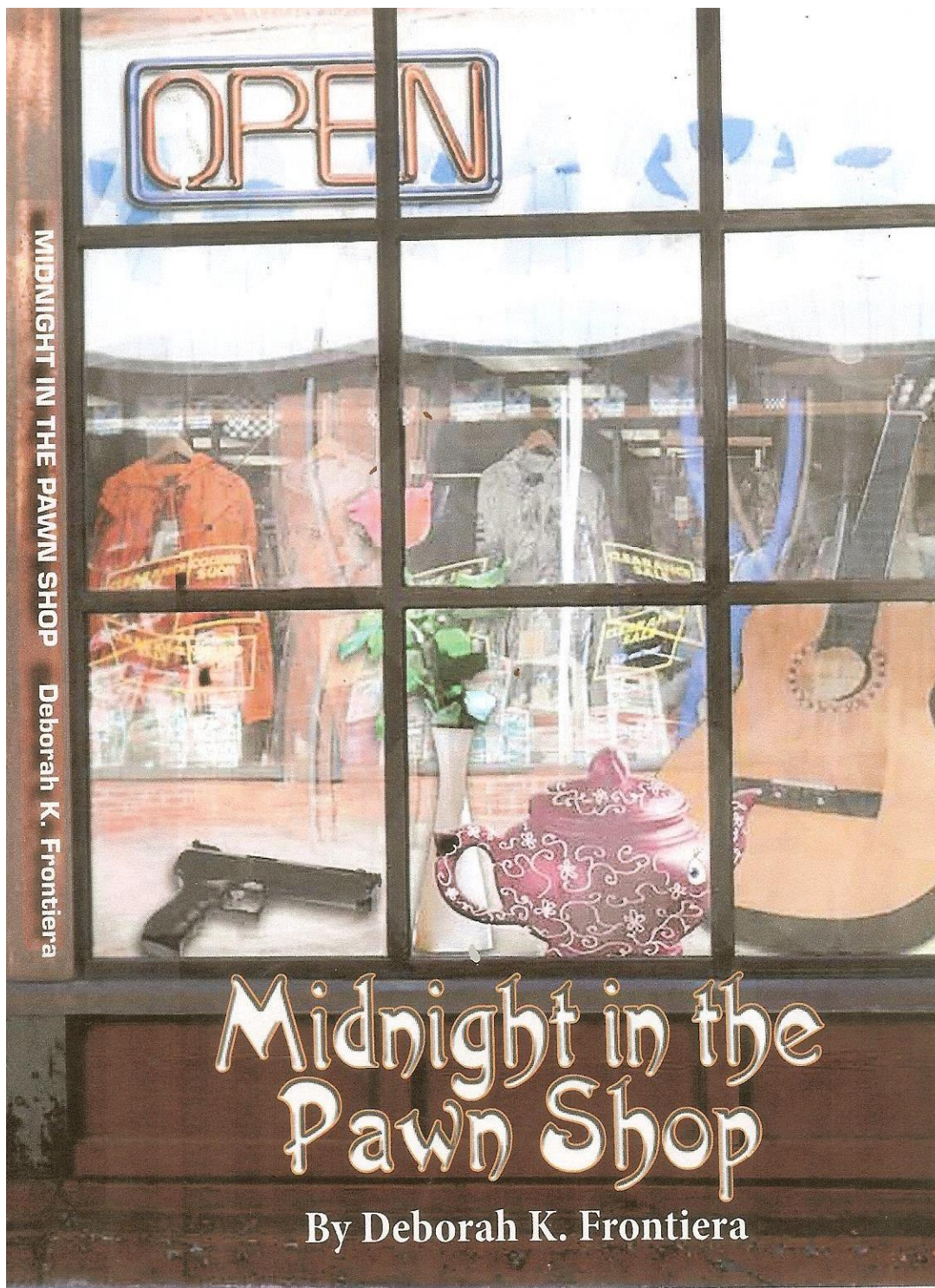




MIDNIGHT IN THE PAWN SHOP Deborah K. Frontiera

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INTRODUCTION

I've been up in the corner of this pawn shop a good many years—rotating automatically between the door and the place where customers stand at the counter. I catch their faces, and sometimes their names. I choose not to talk, but I always think, and record it, so it can all be played back—if anyone ever needed to or wanted to. It hasn't been a boring existence, but usually not all that exciting either. I suppose other security cameras do the same, but I've never met another one to compare my experiences to theirs. If you must have a name, it's Security Camera Model 427, SC427 for short.

Maybe a month ago, there was a tremendous thunder storm—at midnight, of course. One lightning strike was so close it made all the wires in this building sizzle—but I didn't go out because of my battery. Something strange happened after that lightning strike: everything in the place came to life! I suppose they all had some sort of inner life prior to that, could think and remember, watch what happened around them in some way, but never before that night had any of them ever said anything, anytime. At least not on my watch. As the days went by, I began to realize that everything, even objects not in the shop before that night, had had some sort of life inside, and could remember it, as evidenced by the stories they told, but the ability to move around only seemed to happen once they became part of the pawn shop family of things.

That fateful night they all started talking at once. What a cacophony of jumbled sounds that was! They also found they could move around—each in their own way. Finally a handgun yelled at them all and brought some order to the scene.

"I don't understand why we can suddenly move and speak to each other, or how long it will last, but let's try to figure out some way to take turns. We've been watching people take turns when they talk, haven't we?" Gun said.

Everyone nodded. A fancy pen put numbers on slips of paper that a scissors from the office drawer cut up from a bunch of packing paper used to wrap fragile objects when they were sold, and anybody who wanted a turn to talk drew one out. They decided there would be one story per night, and if something didn't want to listen, that item could go to the back room to do other things. Any other discussion was cut off as the night ended. All the things realized they must be back in their places by the

time the shop owner opened the back door. They agreed they must NEVER talk or move when people were around. An old wind-up clock had arrived at the shop the day before and he said he'd always announce when it was time to start telling stories—as soon as he ended his midnight round of chimes.

I never sleep—always on the job, recording, recording, recording. A neutral party—like that old TV detective I once saw in some reruns on a TV that came into the shop: “Just the facts, Ma’am.”

I hadn't planned to share those stories until the day Teapot arrived.

CHAPTER 1

TEAPOT'S TALE

Everyone could see how emotionally wrought she was. Anguished cries came from her pink full-rose mouth and reverberated around the store. Why the humans could not hear her, I'll never know, but everything in the shop remained in place as they had agreed. They didn't want to take a chance on the people knowing they had come to life. So they didn't respond to her right then. I could see she struggled to hold back tears from her tiny pink rose-bud eyes and her bud-nose was a brighter pink. Pale green leaves framed her white porcelain face. Her handle was a spring green curved rose vine, one graceful arm. A larger bud that matched her nose in color sat on her top, easy for a person to lift her lid like a hat. Her white spout reached out like another arm. Her shape was round and motherly.

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"How can I help you?" the pawn shop owner asked the man carrying Teapot.

"Got this teapot, here. Been in my family for ages, I guess. I want to sell it." His voice couldn't have been more snake-like, unless he magically turned into a cobra.

"Okay, let me take a look at it." The shop owner turned the pot over to examine the markings on the bottom. "It's an antique, all right. English, I'm pretty sure, but I'm not all that familiar with this kind of thing. Would you like for me to call an appraiser to get you the best price?"

Like some cheesy cliché character in an old crime movie, the man slid his fingers through long, greasy black hair. "Naw. My mom died. No sisters. My brother's girlfriend didn't want it. I don't want the damn thing either. I'll take whatever you offer."

**

The scream from the pot nearly deafened the closest items on the counter. "Liar! Liar! She wasn't your mother, you murderer!" Why couldn't the humans hear her? Maybe the things didn't need to be so careful when humans were around, but I didn't plan to tell them that idea. Humans might get really creeped out by normally inanimate objects moving around.

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The pawn shop owner said, "Okay, but without knowing a definite age or value, the best I can offer is \$25.00."

"Ahhh! My cups, saucers and I are worth much more than that," the pot wailed, her lilting English accent coming through clearly now.

The young man shrugged, took the cash, slopped a name and other information along with a signature onto a receipt, and stalked out the door.

**

The way he looked, I'm willing to bet we'll have a visit from the police before long.

The shop manager set the teapot on the not-for-sale-yet shelf behind the counter. Gradually the pot's wailing subsided into rasping sighs as a nearby vase gave her sympathetic looks. I thought I detected a whisper, "We'll talk later," definitely against all rules of objects when people were around—a rule the teapot obviously didn't know at the time, or was too upset to follow. The anxiety level of every item in the shop increased as the day wore on.

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Finally, slanted rays of the late-setting summer sun filtered through the dust and burglar bars of the front window. The owner wound up the antique clock—as he did every day when he left—set the shop alarm, and then slipped out the back door quickly before the red light blinked "armed" on the alarm key pad.

Still, everything waited until the old clock struck midnight. Somebody had suggested that time, since by then, it was very unlikely that any people would enter the shop.

"Oh, you poor dear," Vase said, sliding closer to Teapot and caressing her with an outstretched side handle. "Whatever happened to you?"

"I hardly know where to start," she said, a dainty sniff coming from her red rosebud nose.

"Start with the murder part," Gun shouted, hopping out from his case. "Then I'll go shoot that bastard!"

"Be quiet, Gun," 35MM Camera snapped. "You know you aren't going anywhere and you can't shoot anything without a human to pull your trigger."

Vase turned to Teapot. "There, there, dear. Tell us all about it. We are your friends now."

Teapot sighed. "Please understand, I don't mean to insult your good intentions, but I just can't believe that after all these generations, I must end this way—in a pawn shop, sold for a piddling \$25! I'm worth hundreds and hundreds. Why, Abigail Adams once drank tea poured from me at my first mistress's home in Boston. That was back around 1774 I think, when I was brand new. Of course, the day Abigail came, none of us knew that she would one day be one of the nation's First Ladies. We only knew her as our mistress's friend Abigail at the time, but we did know her husband was important in the talk we heard constantly about a revolution on the way. All my little cups and saucers and I were filled with joy at the memory some years later, that the wife of a future president had drunk from one of their sisters and rested her teacake on her brother saucer. I was such a proud mother pot to think that I had poured out tea to her."

It was supposed to be Gun's turn to tell his story that night, but they had all agreed to a rule that the story of a newly acquired item took precedence over the numbering system they had set up. Most of the tools and heavier items nodded in sympathy and clinked away as quietly as they could into the back room to begin the nightly poker game. But the silver set, jewelry items, and other "female" type things gathered around Teapot. TVs and stereos rolled their eyes and prepared for what they probably thought would be a dull history lesson.

Gun started to head for the back room, but stopped and remained by the door, watching the card game begin, but listening to Teapot and ready for action, even though everybody knew he wasn't loaded.

"Go ahead," encouraged Vase. "Tell us everything."

"Well, I continued to live in Boston for many years after that, several generations, actually, and in many different houses. My first mistress passed me to her daughter, who passed me to hers, and on and on. Nothing of real significance happened for a long time. Well, things happened in history, of course, but nothing all that interesting with the families I belonged to—a long string of births, tea parties, marriages, more new babies, deaths and passing me along to a new mistress . . . I watched ladies' fashions change with each generation."

There was a sigh of relief from the electronics. Being "modern", they weren't much interested in history. Gun remained where he was.

"Go on," urged Vase.

"Well, the various families declined over the years—not so wealthy anymore. I vividly recall one day when the lady of the house had a terrible argument with her husband because he didn't want her to go on some march carrying a sign she had made saying that women should have the right to vote. She won the argument and some months later (as a result of her, and many other suffragettes' work, all across the country) I remember she had a grand tea party celebrating with several friends after they had gone and cast their first votes in the next general election.

"The last old house in which I lived in Boston reverted to the bank that held the mortgage about a decade later—after the crash of 1929—so sad, so sad a day was that. My cups, saucers, and I were carefully wrapped in old newspapers and stored away in a box by that courageous mistress. The box bumped around in the back of an old car while she and her husband traveled around searching for work and a place to live.

"A couple of times, he suggested that I be sold—so you see I've come close to this predicament before—but my mistress said, 'Over my dead body will you sell that family heirloom!' and that was the end of that discussion. When I was finally unpacked, they were in a miserable hovel, but I had an honored place on a high shelf where I watched everything that went on. My mistress's husband finally did find a job, and life got better for them. I was so relieved when a baby girl was born—late in life for that couple, and quite a surprise and blessing by what they both said; I knew then that my future was assured."

"Was that here in this city?" Vase asked.

“Yes, it was. And when that baby girl grew up, she chose a good husband and they lived in a bigger house. My cups, saucers, and I were no longer used for tea—seems they drink mostly iced tea here—but I was always honored with a place on a high shelf and treated with utmost dignity. Mothers always told their daughters the story about how I once poured out tea for Abigail Adams and that mother did, too. They were proud of my legacy. Times were good in that generation. But in the next generation there were only boys! No daughter to carry me on. When that lady died, I was given to the wife of the eldest son. But she understood me and was good to me, and they had a daughter.

“Unfortunately, that daughter had poor taste in men. She ran off with a real loser—or at least that’s what my lady called him, or ‘that damned hippie’. She kept trying to get them to break up, but my young mistress packed me up with a few other things one night and jumped into the hippie’s car. He had terribly long hair and said, ‘Hey, man,’ a lot. He smoked weird-smelling cigarettes that he rolled himself, and my—I just can’t call her a lady—smoked them, too. They lived in a dilapidated old trailer on some farm they called ‘The Commune’ out in the middle of a forest where they grew the stuff they smoked. I was so afraid for the baby girl they had.

“One day, that man picked me up and said, ‘What’s with this old Teapot?’ That Missy (I’d taken to calling her Missy, because Mistress just didn’t fit) surprised me by saying, ‘It’s been in my family for generations. Grandma told me some crazy story about some family from Boston that served tea to Abigail Adams once—if you want to believe it.’ The man set me back down carefully with a seemingly thoughtful, ‘Hm.’ So, I still had some respect; at least she had remembered the story.

“Anyway, when their daughter grew up, her choice in a husband was no better than her mother’s—maybe even worse. They actually laughed about it and called themselves ‘bum magnets.’ But I was passed down a few years ago to another daughter whose choice in men was the worst of all. At least she never married that crook. But he hit her constantly and she had no courage to leave! I just don’t understand that. After such a long line of women who lived through so many ups and downs, trials and travails, it was discouraging to have such an insecure owner. At least those before her had kept trying. Maybe it was that son and his wife. Maybe they just didn’t get the right traits passed on to them, because it was never the same after that generation with no girls. I could never call any of my owners from that time on ‘Mistress’.”

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It was interesting to me that for all her Britishness at the beginning of her tale, Teapot’s voice sounded more and more American, and southern, as the story progressed. I’m not sure why, but I noted the change and on successive nights, her voice varied in the same way, as if she couldn’t quite make up her mind whether she was English or not. I’m not trying to be critical, just observant.

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Teapot began to shake and cry. Vase and the jewelry items joined in a circle to comfort her.

“Was that abusive man the one who brought you here?” Vase asked.

Teapot nodded and broke down weeping again. There was a rustle of, “There, there,” and, “You’re safe now.” And, “Tell us what happened.”

Gun’s expression grew angry. He cocked himself since he could do that much.

Teapot sniffed. Vase touched a tissue to Teapot’s red rose nose.

“He was in a drunken rage. He reached up to the shelf where my cups and saucers and I sat. He grabbed a cup and threw it at her! It hit her in the head and crashed! My little daughter crashed on the floor and Missy’s head was bleeding.

“She screamed and ran toward me and the rest of the set shouting, ‘No, no, please, not those! They’re valuable; they’re valuable!’ I was in shock, but still glad to see that she cared enough to defend me. But he was so drunk and angry. He pushed her down. She crawled to the corner, trying to cover her head with her arms while he threw all the rest of my little cups at her, and then the saucers. Each time they crashed against her—their crash their cry of death—she bled in some new spot. It was like he was torturing her. She slumped to the floor, crying and begging for him to stop.

“I felt so helpless. All my little cups and saucers—all eight of each—were gone. He reached for me! *Oh, please don’t make this the end of me!* I thought. Luckily, he was out of breath and had to stop for a minute. From somewhere, Missy gathered strength. She got up and staggered toward me, grabbed me, and hugged me to her heart.”

Gun ambled over to the group as quietly as he could.

Teapot was crying again and it took several minutes for her to calm down.

“They’ll get that bastard!” Gun said with a swagger. “You’ll see. I was FBI you know—they’ll find a clue leading here and catch that guy. Then you might be returned to your owner. You’ll see.”

Finally, Teapot spoke, “Then that monster of a man picked up a baseball bat and hit her with it! She crumpled to the floor and didn’t move. Her arm loosened around me and I rolled to the floor. He looked at her and grunted. He took a shower, packed a suitcase, picked me up and brought me here. What is to become of me?”

Vase caressed Teapot with an outstretched hand. “I’ll tell you what’s to become of you,” she said. “You’ll grow strong again with all of us here. And once you’ve been appraised—because that is why you were over on that high shelf, not with the rest of us that are for sale—you’ll begin another legacy with a new family that will appreciate who you are. That’s what.”

The light of a new day came into the sky. Soon the key clicked in the back door. Everyone hustled into their day places before the owner’s fingers did their daily dance over the alarm key pad.