

Lisa Chiles

## dignity

three times in my life i been asked that question. just three, which is not a lot if you think about it. the answer, well, that varies, depending on the time of day, whether my belly is full, whether i was able to sleep with any degree of comfort last night, whether the last person that looked at me looked right through me or saw that there was an actual human being standing there. so, dignity. dignity was the answer two of those three times. the third time i was a little more... pragmatic? or maybe just more honest. it was boots. combat boots to be specific. yeah, these right here. i got them off Val Gaines after she was dead – no, she was already dead when i got to the scene – and i helped myself because one, the local fuzzery hadn't arrived yet, and two, she wasn't going to be making use of them anymore, was she? well, all i can tell you is these combat boots were, i don't know if magic is the right word, but yeah, magic. sounds woo woo, yeah, magical boots, but i don't mean *woo-woo* magic, i mean the kind of magic that happens and changes your life, right? that's the way those boots were. man, i can't begin to tell you what it was like when i put those bad boys on. it was like i was possessed by the spirit of the soldier that wore them. i don't know who the guy was. i couldn't even say for sure that they belonged to a guy or even that they were worn in combat, but at the same time, i knew. i knew they'd been worn in Afghanistan, and i knew the wearer was kick ass as hell. i didn't need to be told, i just knew. the only thing i wasn't too sure about was whether mr. kick ass died wearing my boots or not. i preferred not to think about that. Val Gaines had already died in them, i didn't want the body count on my boots to be so high that i'd start feeling they were cursed. those boots saved my life more than a couple of times. i'd grown sort of attached to them. they were like a part of me, so if they were cursed then i'd be cursed too, right? yeah, well, i guess that's another story for another time. but right now, the story is that when i put those boots on, my stock shot up, into the stratosphere, no kidding. it wasn't just the boots, it was the way i felt when i was wearing the boots. like i was invincible, like i was somebody, like any one of those people passing me on the way to their homes or their stupidly important lives didn't have any clue. about anything. i had the answers, i knew what this – this thing called life – i knew what it was all about and hell, no, i wouldn't tell them if they got down on their knees and begged me, or even if they paid me. you look at me like i'm the shit under your shoe, no, worse, you look at me and don't even see me, you homeful jagoffs, you get what you pay for – which is to say, not a damn thing. what, homeful? yeah, i came up with that, it's my word. like it? it's like the opposite of homeless, you know, so it makes sense. homeful. that's what they are, full of home, but empty of... whatever... something else. no, i'm not gonna say it, i'm not trying to pull nobody down, but just because these jagoffs are homeful don't mean that their home is full of what it needs to be full of, right? so, yeah, right, the question, well i don't answer dignity to that question anymore because, yeah, that was

my stock profound answer to anybody looking for a few words of wisdom from some colorful streetwise old bird. i mean, i can come off as profound if i have to, i ain't a total rube. hell, as an old lady living on the streets, sometimes profound can get you a meal, and sometimes something a little bit more valuable, you know what I mean? one time i met this dude who thought i was some oracle or something and he started pumping johnnie walker black into me like it was water and he kept telling me that the drunker i got the more profound i got. yeah, well, whatever, jack, just bring on the johnnie walker and i can be the goddamn oracle at delphi if you want. so there you go, that was my dignity. so really, my stock profound answer was pretty much full of shit, right? because what is dignity really? it's different for every person. for somebody it might be, i don't know, not having to shuck and jive to get yourself a plate of food, and for somebody else it might just be having food, period. yeah, well, for me, yeah, it was the boots. what, this scratch right here? it's nothing. well, it's something. i mean, yeah, i got whacked over the head pretty good but i didn't press charges or anything. i didn't even know who it was anyway. hey, the police have better things to do than to be hunting down some jerkoff for a simple assault. i get that. i'm not kicking up a stink about it. it was just one of those things. true, i ended up in the hospital. they had to shave the side of my head right there. got four stitches. woke up in the emergency room with my boots gone. i'm not gonna lie, i went apeshit. i was so damn sure one of those nurses or orderlies or somebody in that place grabbed them while i was out cold, but turns out i came in without the boots on. so yeah, i feel kinda bad about losing it with those nurses like that and calling them a shitload of stuff. if i ever see them again, i will, i'll apologize. it wasn't their deal, it was somebody else entirely, the jagoff who opened up my skull, who smashed me over the head to get my boots. yeah, that's right, these boots right here. so you're wondering how i got them back. well, it's a funny story. well, not funny like ha-ha funny, funny like in what-in-the-hell funny. which i guess isn't funny at all, it's more like weird as hell. it was the night after i came out of the hospital, i woke up, i was sleeping down by the riverwalk, you know, over there by Stranahan House, and i woke up in the middle of the night, and there they were, the boots, right there next to me. i don't know, whoever took them felt guilty and brought them back i guess. it's crazy as shit, i know, but i don't know how else they could have appeared there like that. it's not like they're homing boots or something. they couldn't come back to me all on their own. could they. all i can tell you is i don't take these babies off now, not for a second. eat in them, sleep in them, hell, i'd bathe in them if i could. as it is, i take 'em into the stall with me when i go down to the shelter to get myself a shower. these girls don't leave my sight. not again, not ever again. that's right. you know, when you find your boots, you should hang on to them. boots don't just happen in a person's life, you know?