



BOILED  
SONS STREET  
BLUE MOON BOSTON – BOOK 4  
JUSTIN HERZOG  
STEVE HIGGS

**Boiled Sons Street**

**Blue Moon Boston**

**Book 4**

**Justin Herzog & Steve Higgs**

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## What Desiree Always Knew. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0015hrs

Desiree always knew she was beautiful.

She'd been told as much ever since she was a child, walking hand in hand with her mother through the Back Bay streets, forced to halt every few steps so that strangers could marvel at her.

*“My goodness, aren't you a pretty little thing? Why, you could be a doll!”*

It wasn't true. She'd learned early on that, although they meant well, those strangers were wrong. She couldn't be a doll. She'd tried.

They'd all tried.

Looking back, her childhood played itself across her mind's eye like a giant game of dress up. Endless racks of dresses and shoes. Pearls and hats for every occasion. Clothes on, clothes off. Smile for the picture. Don't squint or you'll get lines. Don't close your eyes. Stop crying or Mommy will make it hurt.

In fairness, her mother had seldomly struck her outright, since any overt bruising would render her ineligible for the spring clothing campaigns, but she found other ways of making her point, and Desiree's vision bore the sting of thousands of camera flashes, a ceaseless parade of lights scarring her gaze.

Some of those scars burned deeper than others, and not all pictures had been taken at her mother's behest. Her uncle had woken her once, when the hour was late, and he believed everyone asleep. He'd snapped his photos, then slunk back to his own room, and, come morning, said not a word. For a time, Desiree thought she must have dreamed it, but the following week, he tried it again, except this time her mother heard him

enter her room, and she'd put a stop to it right quick. Desiree had never seen her uncle again, and every so often she wondered what happened to him, or where those pictures ended up, but she'd never asked.

Some things are better left unknown.

Her beauty was a gift, her mother used to tell her. It made her special, and more importantly, it made her dangerous. Desiree hadn't understood what she meant by that last part, but as she grew, her mother's words began to take shape. People still exclaimed when they saw her, but their faces were different. The older boys' stares lingered too long, and although the women still made a fuss over her, there was something guarded behind their eyes.

Bad as they were, however, the men were the worst.

Their gazes follow her everywhere she went, their expressions hungry, at times even angry. Predators sizing up their prey, seeing only the meal and disregarding the soul behind it. Even the elderly couldn't seem to tear their eyes away, memories of their own spent youth shining out as they cast their sour spit onto the sidewalk.

She always knew when someone was watching her, because someone always was. She'd grown used to the feel of another's eyes. The passing glimpse of a stranger, tugging at her hair. The sideways glance of her professors, tracing the lines of her body as she walked the school hall. The soft, longing look of a woman trapped within a marriage she didn't desire but didn't dare leave. Always the eyes were there, a near constant that she hardly even noticed anymore.

But she'd never felt eyes like the ones that had sent her fleeing into the night before now.

They were alien, and *wrong*, as if something unspeakably foul was peering out at her through the window where another's soul used to reside. She was no stranger to the concept of demons, and had known more than one witch to lay

herself bare before them, but Desiree had never encountered anything like *this*.

The moon hid its face behind heavy clouds, as if it could not bear to look upon its fleeing daughter, and rain poured from the sky, bouncing off the black pavement to splash against her legs. Every breath pulled water into her lungs, and the surrounding shadows lengthened as she ran, casting their forms ahead of her as she navigated through the narrow streets and twisting pathways that made up the city's North End.

Dark stars gathered in the silent windows, and closed doorways silently beckoned her to return to the memories of her youth. If it were only her life at stake, Desiree might have succumbed to their insistence, but she knew her pursuers wanted more.

She came around the corner and passed through a small alleyway before bursting out onto Commercial Street. No cars appeared, and she raced across the roadway lanes and onto the drenched fields of Larone Park. She could feel her pursuers closing in around her, their gazes peering out from behind every shadow, their mouths open in silent anticipation. Speed alone couldn't save her. Years of smoking tobacco in a childish attempt to age her face had taken its toll on her lungs, and her heart struggled to keep pace in her chest, desperately trying to appease her shaking legs. She needed some place safe, some place open, where she could cast her circle.

A sliver of moonlight passed through the storm clouds, touching down upon the baseball dugout at the opposite side of the field.

With a heavy cry, she threw herself forward, racing across the grass, her shoes sinking in the wet muck. Halfway there, one shoe became lodged in something unseen, and she kicked her foot free, leaving it behind. Lightning struck in the distance, momentarily highlighting the ground in front of her, and, she assumed, the foes closing in from behind.



She lowered her head as she passed the last bit of distance and threw herself inside the dugout. As far as defensive structures went, it wasn't much. A lone concrete wall surrounded by chain link fencing on two sides, the roof was comprised of wooden beams lined with aluminum, and the rain tapped its fingers along the top like an impatient visitor before spilling over the side and forming a large puddle at the base.

Desiree edged around the puddle, then kicked her lone remaining shoe free before reaching into her shirt and drawing out her necklace. Attached to the chain was a pendant that, to the casual observer, would have appeared as nothing more than a half moon with a trio of stars connecting the points, but when Desiree twisted the edge, it opened to reveal a finger-length piece of chalk. She blew on the edge, then set its tip to the concrete, her hand shaking as she drew her protection circle. Earth, air, water, fire, and spirit. She connected each to itself, binding them together around her and casting her will into the outer edges to seal them. She felt the moment the circle closed, the change in air pressure sending a shiver down her spine a split second before lightning cut across the sky, illuminating the field and the four figures standing within it.

“Well, we've come to it at last,” the lead figure said as he made his way across the grass. “You've led us on quite the chase, haven't you, *witch?*”

Desiree shuddered and dropped her eyes, gripping her moon pendant to her chest.

“I know you're not like the others. You've been hunted before, but this time there'll be no escape.” The figure reached the dugout and paced along the fence's edge, heedless of the rain soaking through his clothing. “It's a well-made circle, and might even have served to keep us at bay, if not for the weather.”

He raised his head and extended his palms up toward the midnight sky. The rain continued to fall, spilling out over the

roof's edge and down onto the concrete. The ever-increasing flow gave the water the appearance of breathing, its shapeless form contracting and expanding, pushing steadily out toward the edge of her protection circle as more water moved to join.

“That doesn't look promising. Tell me, little witch, how long do you think before it reaches your precious circle? An hour? Two?” The shadowed figure reached down and ran his fingers along the edge of the concrete. “What do you think will happen when the water touches the edge? Do you think your magic is strong enough to repel it, or will it wash away the barrier, dispelling the power within and leaving you naked and alone?”

A low growl emanated from the trio of figures standing behind their leader as they crept forward. Scavengers, sensing the meal to come.

The lead figure held up his hand, halting them, then breathed out a heavy sigh and casually leaned against the dugout wall. “I suppose we'll just have to find out together. After all, we've got all night.”

## A Dead-Eyed Drizzle. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0559hrs

It rained the night Ambretta Greenhall was murdered. A dead-eyed drizzle, reminiscent of a scorned lover peering out from across a crowded bar. Its murky gaze lingered over the city for weeks, weeping into the streets and causing the grass to cling to my shoes as I made my way across the Boston Common.

The oldest city park in the country, the Common was the premier landmark of Boston and served as a home for many notable city events, including ice skating in the winter, Shakespeare performances, fireworks displays and holiday parades. I kept my head down and my pace slow, one hand clutching my purse and the other gripping my umbrella. As I walked, I tried to think helpless thoughts, which isn't as easy as it sounds.

Science tells us that as much as sixty percent of human communication is based on body language, and if you want to avoid being a victim, you need to remain alert, keep your back straight and your walk brisk, make eye contact but don't stare, keep your keys at the ready and avoid flashy jewelry or drawing unnecessary attention to yourself.

All of that is good advice, but it should be noted that the inverse doesn't necessarily make you more victim-worthy, if that's even a word. I'd been trying my best to appear distracted for the better part of three hours, keeping my eyes low and my posture rounded to the point where my back was starting to ache. My keys were nowhere to be found, and while I didn't own any jewelry worth flashing, I figured that was probably okay, since the perpetrator I was hoping to attract wasn't interested in gemstones.

He was interested in blood.

I sighed as I reached the end of the Commons, then stepped from the sidewalk onto the red brick roadway and continued on for two blocks before looping around and circling back. My jacket was the reversible kind, and I'd switched it twice over the last hour, alternating between brown and black in an attempt to avoid being recognized. Likewise, I'd adjusted my umbrella angle, shifting it back to front and to the opposite side, all the while grumbling that male officers never had to put up with this crap.

Male officers have it easy when it comes to being a decoy. Splash some booze on their chest, dab a touch of Tabasco sauce under their eyes to give them that red-rimmed appearance, and commence stumbling through the streets. If they're feeling really inventive, they could drool, or mumble a bit, but usually the liquor and tabasco are enough to make the sharks come out.

Not literal sharks, mind you. That's just what we call the thieves, street hustlers, and lowlifes that hide in Boston's underbelly. Cops like to send the decoy in, then wait for them to appear on the periphery and begin circling their victim. Might be they'll walk past a time or two, maybe even bump the decoy's shoulder to gauge their reaction. Once they're convinced that the decoy isn't faking, they'll seize hold and force them up against a wall, one hand holding them steady while the other rifles through their pockets, drawing out their wallet, cell phone, and anything else they think might be of value.

That's usually when we spring the trap. A dozen or so flashlights come on, and the police officers waiting in the wings, the ones the sharks didn't realize were there, swarm in from all sides, overwhelming them in seconds. Those who fight get a one-way trip to the pavement, and maybe a dislocated shoulder or two if they're feeling froggy. That doesn't happen very often. Most of the sharks give up without violence once it becomes apparent there's nowhere to run, and after they're secured and in handcuffs, we reset the decoy,

maybe move to another part of the city if the takedown was too noisy, and start over again. The glorious life of a beat cop.

Except I wasn't a beat cop anymore, and I wasn't hunting sharks. I was hunting vampires, and I was doing it alone.

I sighed and forced my face to stillness before crossing the last half block to the edge of the Common. I considered going straight through, but changed my mind at the last moment and angled east, toward the theater district, walking at a slow pace.

The vampire in question had been terrorizing the Common for the past few weeks, using an, admittedly, unique modus operandi that made it easy to distinguish which crimes he was responsible for. So far, no one had been killed, but there was no getting around the emotional trauma inflicted on his victims.

The Parkman Bandstand came into view, the circular dome lined with columns enduring the rain's caress with quiet dignity, and I squinted hard into the nearby trees before reminding myself that I was supposed to be staring at my feet. See what I mean about playing the helpless civilian being harder than it looks?

Lucky for me, it turned out that keeping my eyes glued to the grass wasn't a prerequisite for victimhood after all. I felt the moment when someone moved in behind me, the hairs along the back of my neck rising to inform me that I'd just made a dangerous new friend. My heartbeat quickened, and it took a conscious effort of will to keep my face smooth, rather than bursting out laughing or, more sensibly, running from here as fast as I could. Police work can be confusing like that sometimes.

It didn't help that my division was tasked with investigating supernatural activity throughout the whole of Boston, a city that had executed more witches in its time than every other city combined. With a history like that, is it any wonder the rest of the country considers us a special breed?

Blue Moon started as a private investigation firm out of England, the brain child of a man called Tempest Michaels, who found his way into solving paranormal mysteries as the result of a newspaper typo. Its popularity had caught on quickly, much to everyone's surprise, and Blue Moon had since expanded into the states. It was mostly private individuals, at least so far as I knew. Blue Moon Boston was the only official, state-sanctioned unit in the country, and we tried hard to keep our name out of the press, often allowing other divisions to take credit for our cases in an effort to avoid public backlash or, as in more recent times, utter humiliation and a seemingly endless supply of baked goods with handwritten notes containing crude sexual innuendos.

That last one was mostly my fault.

I slowed my pace as I came around the Bandstand, allowing my unseen stalker to close the distance behind me. His footsteps were soft, almost delicate, but I caught a brief reflection of his shadow in the puddle forming along the concrete base.

“Hello, sweet morsel.”

I turned around and released the umbrella, allowing it to tumble from my fingers down to the grass below.

There was no denying that the figure in front of me was a vampire. Or at least, he'd worked hard to adopt the appearance of one. His hair was dyed and slicked back, the water beading along the edges suggesting he'd applied enough hairspray to ensure it wouldn't be getting mussed anytime soon. Briefly, I wondered if he'd used Gorilla Glue. That had become the newest internet sensation, with people super-gluing their hair in various positions, then appearing surprised when they couldn't just wash it out with shampoo. Usually, two or three days was enough to bring their scalp to a boil and send them into the emergency room. The figure in front of me, however, seemed in no immediate danger of that as his ruby-red lips peeled apart into a wide smile, revealing tapered incisors half

the length of my finger. They were the real kind, or at least as real as something like that could be. I suspected veneers, but wouldn't have been surprised if they turned out to be actual implants. I was pretty sure that was last year's internet trend.

I placed him in his early thirties. He was skinny-fat, lacking the lean muscle of a professional athlete or fitness enthusiast. His eyes were glazed over, and his skin was pale, very pale in fact, making me think he'd applied makeup to shave a few shades from his face. If so, then he'd spared no expense, ensuring whatever brand he used wouldn't run off in the rain.

“Speechless, my love? I imagine you're surprised to see me.”

“On the contrary, I've been waiting for you for a couple of hours.” I shifted my purse, angling it against my chest and slipping my hand into the hidden fold.

His only article of clothing was a black velveteen cloak wrapped entirely around his frame. “Don't be afraid, my darling. My name is Damascus, and I've been watching you for years. All of your life, in fact. Gazing at you from within the shadows.”

“In that case, I should probably apologize for all the Love Spell body splash you had to endure during my junior high school years. Victoria's Secret had us all in a weird place back then.”

He bristled beneath his cloak, his gaze sharpening before his eyes returned to their previously glazed state a moment later. “The time has come for you to join me, my love. For us to become one. Tonight, I will bestow upon you my immortal gift. I will bathe you beneath the light of the moon and welcome you into my dark service.”

“Hoo-boy,” I said. “Sounds like quite the party. Should I bring beer, or will alcohol be provided?”

I was pretty sure he didn't actually hear me. Likely, he was too busy playing out the rehearsed lines of his imaginary

roleplaying scenario in his head. “I can smell the blood pumping through your veins.”

“Well, it’s certainly not cherry blossom and fresh peach. I haven’t touched the stuff in years. Even now if I catch so much as a whiff, it’s gag-city.”

“Before I take you into my service, however, you must prove your loyalty.”

“Put me in the game, coach. I’m ready.”

“No harm shall ever befall you whilst under my care, but you must bow to my every whim, indulge my every desire. Surrender yourself wholly to me, from now until the end of time itself.”

“Do I have to wear a promise ring or something?”

Again, his eyes sharpened, but only for a moment. Likely he’d never made it this far through his spiel before the victim ran away screaming. “No, my sweet angel of the night. To pledge yourself to me, you need merely embrace the darkness within, and worship at the feet of your master!”

You can probably guess what happened next.

His arms shot out and his cloak snapped open, adopting the visage of bat wings and revealing the naked form beneath.

I’ll give Damascus credit. He’d taken the makeup all the way down and around, thoroughly coating himself before setting out for the evening. On some level, I could respect that sort of attention to detail. On another level, however, I’m a firm believer that grown men who run around under the guise of a vampire flashing their nether regions to women in the park deserve to get what’s coming to them.

Damascus threw back his head and howled, cackling into the early morning rain and gyrating his hips, utterly oblivious as I reached into my bag through the hidden compartment and drew out the Taser hidden within.



I don't normally carry a Taser. They're unwieldy, and not as reliable as some officers like to believe. In this case, however, I'd opted to make an exception, since the pistol would have been overkill and using pepper spray in this weather seemed chancy at best.

I depressed the trigger, and twin prongs shot out. The first one struck his upper thigh, the second his opposite shoulder. The sound of electrical current emanated out through the park, and Damascus's cackle turned to a shriek as he leaped off the ground.

In real life, Taser's don't instantly render someone unconscious. They're a compliance tool. Follow commands or else. For most people, one hit is enough, but two or three is almost certain to do the trick, provided your opponent is in their right mind.

Damascus clearly wasn't, and whatever scenario he was envisioning in his mind gave him the strength to push through the pain. He hissed, his hands contorting into clawed appendages a split second before he flung himself toward me. I watched him come, timing it just right before I dropped my Taser and brought my fist around.

Something cracked on impact. I wasn't sure if it was thunder overhead or the bones of my hand, but I also didn't really care. Damascus's head snapped back, and he crashed to the ground and let out a low moan.

The impact of the punch carried me off balance, but I caught myself, and turned as shades of red appeared along the edges of my vision. I couldn't rightly claim to be a victim, since I'd been acting as my own decoy, but I had a sudden flash of insight into what the real victims must have gone through. Accosted in the early morning hours, made to fear for their safety. The shame and humiliation as this man exposed himself. It hit me all at once and left me snarling.

I don't remember following Damascus to the ground, but I was suddenly crouched over top of him, pinning him down with my knee and smashing my other fist into his face. The vampire's nose shattered on the fourth or fifth strike, casting bloody lines through his makeup and dropping scarlet ribbons into the puddles below.

I'm not sure if I said anything to him. The next few seconds are a bit of a blur in my mind, and I came back to myself when strong arms seized me around the waist and hauled me up and off him. They spun me around and set me firmly onto the grass, holding me steady as I caught my balance. I was still seeing red and started to raise my fist, but the strong-armed figure was faster, and he caught my arm halfway up and forced it back down to my side.

“Whoa, easy there. Let the uniforms handle it from here.”

It took me a second to recognize the voice of the man holding me, but once I did, my chest loosened a fraction of an inch, and some of the tension went out of my shoulders. Not all of it, but some.

“Hiya, Rick,” I said. “You following me now?”

In his early forties, with dark hair and matching eyes, Omar Rickson was a veteran BPD officer, and one of the bravest people I'd ever met. I hadn't seen him in a few weeks, not since he'd sprung a trap meant for me during our raid of Bloodcuddles' lair and been coated in enough pepper spray to down a horse. He'd spent four days in the hospital, and another two weeks home in bed recuperating before returning to work on a part-time basis. Deputy Bulwark had him transferred off patrol and placed on administrative desk duty, filing reports and dealing with walk-ins.

Evidently, Rickson wasn't thrilled about being away from the action and had taken to moonlighting, or morning lighting, in this case. He was dressed in civilian clothing, including a heavy brown jacket with the collar raised to ward off the rain.

He watched me for a moment to be sure I wasn't going to fight, then released me. I rolled my shoulders, then wiped the rain from my face as the edges of my vision expanded, revealing the two uniformed officers as they dragged Damascus over onto his belly and cuffed his hands behind his back. Evidently, Rickson *was* following me.

“Christ almighty,” the older of the two officers said. “This guy is bleeding everywhere. No way the jail will take him like this. He needs to go to a hospital.”

“Guess he shouldn't have resisted arrest then,” Rickson told him.

“Resisted arrest? Are you kidding me? Look at the guy. She beat the tar out of him and—”

“Officer Abbott, are you saying you didn't witness that man attack one of our officers and then vehemently resist arrest?” Rickson stepped forward, pointedly putting himself between me and Abbott. “Is that what you're telling me?”

Officer Abbott wasn't weak-willed, and he clearly had enough time on the force that he wasn't going to accept being bullied. But he also had a degree of wisdom, and knowing which battles are worth fighting is often more important than actually fighting them.

“Christ,” he muttered and looked away. “You sure? Even the homeless have phones. All it'll take is one video.”

Rickson pointedly peered around, revealing the absence of anyone else, then turned to stare at him. “You let me worry about that.”

Officer Abbott met his gaze for several long seconds, then sighed and turned back to help secure Damascus, all the while muttering to himself,

Rickson watched them for a long moment before he turned and, without actually looking at me, said, “Come on, let's take a walk.”

## Never Have I Ever. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0612hrs

We went directly from the Common to a small coffee shop on Boylston Street near the Emerson College bookstore. Rickson walked ahead of me, moving with a slight limp, the result of a car accident suffered years before, in which he'd intentionally rammed his police cruiser into a drunk driver traveling at triple-digit speed down the wrong lane of the freeway.

For a time, the doctors thought he might lose the leg, but a year's worth of rehab had proven them wrong, and he'd returned to the force where he'd been lauded a hero.

We slipped inside the coffee shop, and I found us a table while Rickson ordered our drinks, along with an icepack for my knuckles. He set them all on the table, then lowered himself down and gave me a pointed look.

“So, you ready to talk about it yet?”

“Talk about what?”

“Whatever it is that's got you so twisted up inside that you can't even think straight.”

I scooped up the icepack and applied it to my knuckles. It burned for a moment, then the cold settled in, and the sudden absence of pain was a welcome relief. “Nothing to talk about. You said yourself the guy was resisting arrest.”

Rickson's look hardened. “I know what I said. I also know what I saw.”

I tried meeting his gaze, but couldn't quite manage it, and settled instead for peering at the table. It took me a moment to recognize the heavy feeling blooming in my chest, but once I did, the sensation of shame grew worse. “You didn't have to get involved. I had it under control.”

Rickson snorted. “Is that so? What were you waiting for? The guy to go comatose? Or maybe just outright bleed to

death?”

“Don’t be overdramatic.”

Rickson leaned forward and tapped his finger on the table’s surface. “Bludgeoning people isn’t part of the job, Chloe.”

“Well, maybe it should be!” I snapped, loud enough to earn us several looks from the other early-morning patrons. I glared at them until they turned back around, then leaned in toward Rickson and lowered my voice. “You’re going to tell me you never laid a beating on someone? That in all the years you were out on patrol, you and the boys never provoked someone into resisting arrest so you could have at them?”

Rickson’s stare didn’t waver.

I blinked, then fell back in my chair. “Seriously? Never?”

He shrugged. “I’m not saying I wasn’t ever tempted. Just seemed kind of pointless. If someone’s not acting right, slapping them around isn’t likely to help.”

“Jesus, you really are a boy scout, Rick.” I took my cup and passed the next several seconds under the guise of a long drink. I didn’t have to fake it much. Boston is a coffee town, and the baristas behind the counter knew their trade. The warm liquid slipped down my throat, filling the space inside and drawing out the chill. “Look, you can judge me if it makes you feel better, but you saw that guy. Streaking around the park, flashing his thing at helpless ladies? You’re going to tell me he didn’t deserve what he got?”

“I don’t care about him. I care about you.”

It might have been my imagination, but the room suddenly got very quiet.

Rickson’s voice softened. “I care about you, and the Chloe Mayfield I know wouldn’t have lost control like that over some dirtbag flasher. She’s smarter than that. Too smart to risk everything she’s worked for just to land a few punches that won’t mean anything in the long run.”

I swallowed against the sudden thickness in my throat, but didn't say anything. Several seconds passed before Rickson leaned back in his chair.

“Something's going on with you, Chloe. I can see it on your face. Is it Alex? Did something happen between you two?”

I shook my head. Alex Gordan was my boyfriend and a special agent in the FBI's financial crimes unit. We'd met last year when thieves robbed the Federal Reserve under the guise of leprechauns. He'd decided to stick around, and we'd begun dating shortly after.

“Things between Alex and me are okay.”

“Just okay?”

A heavy silence descended over the table and lasted until I gave an uncomfortable shrug. “I guess. We haven't spoken much lately. He's been in Chicago for the last couple of weeks.”

“Work?”

“Yeah. Some ex-Wall Street scumbag was running a Ponzi scheme to the tune of fourteen million dollars. He tried liquidating it and moving it all offshore, but Alex and his team froze his accounts and now they're busy cleaning up the mess.”

“That all there is to it?”

“Far as I know,” I replied, which wasn't a lie, but also not the whole truth.

The real story was, although things had started off well, lately it had been hard to find time for one another. Work was definitely a factor, but last month he'd let slip that he'd been thinking about settling down. He'd mentioned purchasing a house in the suburbs. A little two-story with a white picket fence where we could raise a family. He'd tried to soft pitch

the idea by referring to any future children as tomato plants, but the implication had been clear.

I hadn't said no outright, but I hadn't said yes either, and ever since, our conversations had been stilted. The ghost of the future-that-could-be lingered between us, expanding to fill every silence. Going up against the Headless Horseman hadn't helped, or the fact that I'd spent every waking moment since hunting down leads related to Ambretta Greenhall's murder.

"I called Lieutenant Kermit."

My head snapped up, and I felt my anger rise. "You did what?"

"You haven't answered any of my messages."

"Christ, Rick, I don't work for you. If I don't feel like answering my calls, that's my business. It doesn't give you the right to go over my head."

"You're lucky I did. He says you haven't been answering his messages either. In fact, he mentioned that you haven't bothered to show your face down at Blue Moon headquarters for nearly two weeks."

"I've been busy."

"No, you've been AWOL," Rickson corrected me. "And so far, everyone is covering for you out of respect, but it can't last forever. You're the division sergeant, for Pete's sake. You've got to pull yourself together and get back to work before Bulwark finds out and terminates you for neglecting your duties."

A fresh wave of anger rose to the surface of my mind, and I drew myself up, preparing to let him have it, except when I opened my mouth, no sound came out. Some distant part of me recognized the truth of his words, and it refused to let me lambast him for pointing it out to me.

Rickson recognized my struggle, and he allowed me a moment to collect myself, watching the anger drain out of me

before he leaned in. “Can I ask you something, Chloe?”

“Go for it.”

“You and I, we’ve been through the ringer together, right?”

I nodded. “More than once.”

“We’ve faced down witches, killer clowns, and now vampire perverts.”

“Don’t forget walking in on our former mayor getting stuffed by a teenage speed freak.”

“That too.” He spread his hands. “Have I ever turned my back on you? Ever failed to show up when I said I would?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“So talk to me, darn it. We’re friends. I can see you’re hurting, and if it’s not Alex, then I’m guessing it has something to do with that witch lady who was murdered a few weeks back.”

“Ambretta.”

“Right. You’ve been a mess ever since you found out the Horseman got her.”

I flinched, then tried to disguise it by drawing in a breath and holding it for several seconds before exhaling. “Well, that’s the thing. I’m not so sure he did.”

Rickson frowned. “I thought homicide said it was an open and shut case?”

“They did.”

“But you don’t agree?”

I shrugged and seized my cup, taking another sip and swishing the coffee around my mouth before swallowing. “It’s nothing I can put my finger on exactly.”

“But?”

“It’s just too... neat.”



“Neat?”

“Yeah.”

I couldn't rightly blame the brass for writing Ambretta's murder off. The memory of stepping into her home still caused me to shiver, and the playback of my time there came unbidden to my mind.

It was raining outside, and the storm tapped its ethereal fingers along the glass windows as I ascended the stairs to her loft. I was exhausted, hampered by injury, and clutching a dead woman's final letter to my chest, but none of that mattered once I reached the top.

The loft overlooked the church's interior, and was a soft, spacious room, filled with rounded end tables and plush seats. There was a painting easel in the corner, as well as a small craft table near the guardrail. The presence of so many chairs revealed it was a room meant for gathering, for camaraderie. A space meant to nurture long friendships and foster new ones. It radiated warmth, safety, and understanding. A safe haven where the women of Salem could shut out the world and allow themselves to be at peace.

I knew instantly that it was going to be a long time before anyone felt safe in that room again.

Ambretta's body lay on the floor near the movie projector. She was on her back, legs crumpled beneath her, arms cast out to either side. Her corpse had lost nearly all of its color, and blood soaked the surrounding floorboards, filling the spaces between the cracks. A lone scarlet path cast a trail toward the western corner of the room, where her head sat atop an antique wooden desk, her face forever frozen in a pained grimace.

Forensics would later determine that she'd been killed only a few hours earlier, meaning that if I'd been faster or smarter, I could have gotten there in time to save her life. A well-meaning friend would tell me that it wasn't my fault, that I'd been kidnapped at the time, wounded and fighting to bring the

Headless Horseman to justice. All of that was true, but none of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was that Ambretta had asked for help, and I'd agreed to give it. At the time, I'd assumed the murder of the witches was directly connected to the Horseman, but I'd been wrong, and Ambretta paid for my mistake with her life.

She'd died swiftly, if not silently, and the disconnect between head and torso led the homicide detectives to conclude that she was the last victim of the Headless Horseman, who'd been captured hours earlier. The motive for the murder was still a matter of debate down at the district attorney's office, but the general consensus was that the Horseman had killed Ambretta in order to cover up the murder of Jenni Sexton, a fellow witch and one of the Horseman's first victims. It was a plausible explanation, at least on the surface, but it didn't sit right with me, and I didn't need Ambretta's final letter to know that something was off.

"And?"

"And, so far, I've got nothing," I said, running a hand through my hair. "I've been running down every lead I could find, but they all just carry me right back to where I started."

"*And?*"

"And what? I just told you."

"For Pete's sake, Chloe, is that all?" He stood up abruptly and brought his chair around the table, settling down beside me. "You listen up, and listen good. You think you're the only one who's ever run up against a brick wall before? You're not. It's happened before and it will happen again."

"It's not that simple, Rick."

"Like heck it isn't," he said. "You're just looking for the easy way out."

I blinked. "How do you figure that?"

“First, answer me a question. Do you think getting fired will make this case easier or harder to solve?”

“I guess harder.”

“Darn right it will. And yet, you’re giving Bulwark all the reason he needs to send you packing. Ignoring messages, avoiding the office, allowing cases to build up in your absence. Do those sound like the actions of an officer who’s concerned about keeping her job?”

My mouth tightened into a thin line as my teeth ground against each other. Much as I hated to admit it, he had a point.

“I’ve been there, Chloe,” he said. “You think I never had to shelve a case before? Never had to try to convince a family that I wasn’t giving up while also acknowledging that there were no more leads to follow? It’s a horrible feeling, and I’ve known officers who traded away their jobs in exchange for not having to tell the victim’s families they’d failed.”

“I’d like to see how they react when their victim starts casting spells on them from beyond the grave.”

Rickson shook his head. “Spells or not, you’re a sergeant now. You don’t get to wear the stripes unless you’re willing to make the hard choices. And that means acknowledging when you’ve done everything you can for the time being and accepting the fact that it’s time to move on. There are other cases, other victims who need someone to fight for them. This lady, Ambretta, she deserves justice, and she’ll get it, but not if you allow yourself to be so short-sighted that you wind up unemployed. That’s the coward’s way out.”

I leaned back in my chair and narrowed my gaze. “So, what are you trying to say, exactly?”

His eyes widened, but a moment later, he let out a snort. “You are such a jerk, Mayfield.”

“So I’ve heard.” Our conversation trailed off, and we sipped our coffee in amiable silence for a couple of minutes

before I let out a sigh. “I guess I should probably swing by my apartment and change before heading into work.”

“Couldn’t hurt.”

“They’ve probably got some cases waiting for me.”

“More than a few, I imagine.”

I nodded, and rose from my chair, reaching out and tapping the rim of my coffee cup against his. “Thanks, Rick.”

“Anytime,” he said.

I turned and reached the front entrance just as an engine roared from the street outside. A pair of headlights belonging to a black muscle car appeared, spraying water from the road as it came around the corner of the Common. Its tires squealed as it drew up alongside the coffee shop and a figure appeared out the window. He was wearing a dark gray sweatshirt with the hood pulled up, and he was gripping the handle of a sawed-off shotgun.

“Get down!” I threw myself back, seized the two coffee-goers nearest to me and shoved them onto the floor before literally plowing over the waitress. She was college-age and thin, and I came down on top of her just as the first of several gunshots rang out.

The plate-glass windows shattered, showering over us as the shotgun blasts swept past overhead. The car never slowed, and the entire ordeal lasted less than two seconds. I estimated that the gunman fired five or six times in rapid succession before the vehicle sped off, the sound of their engine disappearing into the distance as I rose to my knee and drew my pistol from its holster. I peered out the broken windows, the winds coming in from the harbor giving the rain a westward slant as I scanned the empty roadways.

“You alright?” Rickson asked as he slid up beside me. He had his own pistol out, and was gazing out into the rain, searching for potential threats.

“Fine. You?”

“Never better.” There was a moment’s hesitation before he spoke again. “Uh, by chance, do you recall all that stuff I said about shelving the investigation and moving on to another case?”

“Vaguely.”

“I’ve changed my mind. In fact, you might need to expedite this one.”

“Yeah,” I said, and let out a heavy sigh. “No kidding.”

## Back in the Game. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0650hrs

Uniformed officers arrived on scene within minutes, and the on-call detectives followed shortly after. There were no fatalities, thank God, but several of the victims had shallow cuts and lacerations from the broken window shards, and ambulances were quickly dispatched to take them to the hospital.

I hung around long enough to make sure the officers had the scene secured, then gave my statement to the lead detective. I doubted it would be much help, since I hadn't gotten a good look at the shooter's face. Officers were dispatched to neighboring businesses, those that were open at any rate, to see if we could utilize their surveillance cameras to get a better look at the car, but I doubted it would matter. Even novice hitmen knew enough to remove their license plates before driving along the crowded city streets in preparation of a kill.

Rickson volunteered to stay behind and help maintain the perimeter while I left my contact information with the lead detective and headed toward my car.

I'd parked in the China Town garage, adjacent to the Washington Apartments and only a short walk from the Common. I opened my umbrella and headed east along Boylston Street, passing the St Francis House homeless shelter. A pair of residents were slumped down along the exterior wall. The first looked to be sleeping, or else in the midst of a fix. The second was seated on her butt, clutching a crudely cut bit of cardboard with green writing scribbled onto its surface to her chest. She was sour-skinned, and her hair was cut short and uneven, as if trimmed with a knife in lieu of scissors. She was seemingly oblivious to the rain as she rocked back and forth, speaking softly to herself.

“The moon hides, and Evangeline speaks. Soon the herald will appear, and we will surge forth to take what is ours.

Follow the green tooth and stand for the Great Upheaval. The faithless will fall, and beg us to forgive their sins, but we won't. Oh no, we won't." She broke into an off-kilter laugh, her body shaking as worrying giggles slipped past broken teeth.

I swallowed and side stepped to my right. The motion caused my heel to clip the edge of the sidewalk, and the noise snapped her out of her reverie. She jerked her head around and speared me with her tear-rimmed gaze, her mouth splitting apart so wide that it caused her dried lips to break, the cracks immediately filling with blood.

"You're going to die," she said. "You're all going to die."

I thought about retorting, but didn't have the stomach for it. Instead, I shook my head and kept walking, reminding myself that homeless soothsayers were a dime a dozen in a city like Boston.

I made my way past the adjacent drugstore and crossed into Liberty Tree Square, reaching the edge just as a voice called out my name.

"Sergeant Mayfield!"

I turned my head and noted the man running after me. He was in his early thirties, medium height, and not particularly athletic, judging by his awkward gait. His dark hair was slicked back and had that permanently wet look, accentuating his matching eyes, which were a shade too large to fit comfortably on his face. Most telling of all, however, was the over-caffeinated sheen to his skin. I would have recognized that look anywhere, and knew without glancing at the laminated badge hanging from his neck what he wanted.

"No comment," I said and turned my back.

"Marlon Baker with the Boston Globe." He dipped his hand down into his jacket and came out holding a digital recorder. "Heck of a morning we're having. Would you care to comment on what just happened?"

“No.”

“Witnesses are saying it was a drive-by. Not surprising, given the city’s current climate. Did you know gun violence is up ten percent this year already? Interestingly enough, suicide rates are down, suggesting people have actually started to prefer killing one another rather than—”

I turned on a dime, cutting him off. “I’m sorry. What did you say your name was?”

“Marlon Baker.” He switched his recorder to his off-hand and reached out for a handshake. “I’m an investigative reporter for the Boston Globe.”

I left his hand hanging. “Why are you following me, Marlon?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m new to the Globe, and eager to establish working relationships with the fine men and women who take it upon themselves to protect and serve this city.”

“Uh-huh. Well, Marlon, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but there’s a reason why we have an Office of Media Relations within the department. It’s so that cops don’t start giving unauthorized information to the press. They should be open in a few hours. You can call them then and they’ll update you accordingly.”

“Of course. I certainly wouldn’t want to do anything that might jeopardize or reflect badly on you or your division. Blue Moon, am I right?”

I turned around and resumed walking. “Have a nice morning, Marlon.”

Rather than take the hint, Marlon hustled to catch up. “What if I wasn’t interested in the facts of the crime? What if instead, we were to do a human interest piece? We could keep you anonymous.”

“A human-interest piece without a human? That’s different.”



“Viewers today are less interested in the names and more the experiences. Gun violence has become a national pandemic, and what better voice to tell that story than someone who’s actually lived through it?”

“No, thank you.”

“If not that, what about the sudden rise in public interest regarding the paranormal and subsequent supernatural crimes being reported throughout the city?”

“Excuse me?”

“That is what Blue Moon Division handles, right? Paranormal crime. I like to do my homework, Sergeant. Tell me, does the city pay royalties or franchise fees to Tempest Michaels for the use of his trademarked name?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

Marlon frowned. “Not at all? How does it work then? If there were no agreements or franchise incentives in place beforehand, and the city merely took his name, along with his brand, on a whim, they could have a potential legal crisis on their hands. Tell me, Sergeant, should the public be concerned that the police department may need to use their hard-earned tax dollars to avoid civil or possibly even criminal litigation regarding the Blue Moon trademark and, dare I even suggest it, intellectual property theft?”

“What the heck is wrong with you?”

Marlon smiled. “Nothing at all. I merely try to look ahead in my business dealings.”

“Yeah, well, look somewhere else. Tempest and Amanda don’t strike me as the litigious type.”

“Of course, you know them best. Change of topic, is there any truth to the rumor that you apprehended the vampire flasher who’s been assaulting women in the Common these past few weeks?”

I frowned and picked up my pace. It was too early for rumors to have begun circulating, which meant he'd heard it somewhere else. "You're one of those nightcrawlers, aren't you? Stay out all night listening to the police radio so you can be the first on scene? Or do you just pay for information?"

"Both," he answered without hesitating.

"At least you're honest."

"And committed. I believe in doing whatever's necessary to ensure our readers continue to get only the very best in local news stories."

"Figures." I reached the parking garage and opened the door, turning in the doorway to prevent him from entering after me. "Marlon, read my lips. *Bug off.*"

Marlon blinked, then straightened and gave me a tight-lipped smile. "Of course. I've overstepped my boundaries. Mother always warned me that my enthusiasm could be construed as bullying. You've clearly had a tough morning. Perhaps we could speak again at a later time?"

"Don't bet on it."

He gave a nod that resembled a half-bow, then turned and made his way back toward the coffeehouse, bringing his recorder up to his mouth and whispering what I presumed were notes to himself. I watched him go, then exhaled and frowned.

I'd never really considered the legalities behind the Blue Moon trademark before now. I wasn't worried about being sued. Lieutenant Kermit and Jane were family, and Tempest, if he had a problem, had been given plenty of time to voice his concerns before now. More concerning to me was the city. If Deputy Bulwark got wind of this, he'd have a conniption. None of the brass were going to sign off on a name if it meant leaving us open to even the possibility of litigation down the line. Granted, we could always change the division's name, but we'd be losing something if we did. Something in the

spirit of the place. Better to see if we couldn't get ahead of this. I made a mental note to talk to Pongo and see if he couldn't backdate some permission agreements or something. Then I made my way into the garage.

My Ford Crown Victoria was right where I'd left it, looking unmolested, which didn't entirely surprise me. It was a station hand-me-down, with faded gray paint and a front bumper literally held together by duct tape. The seats were worn and had once served as a home to a family of hamsters. The entire thing smelled of mold and wet cardboard, and if all that wasn't bad enough, black smoke had begun rising from the exhaust whenever I started it.

Today was no exception, and the smell of burning oil filled the garage as I inserted the key and brought the engine to life. I shifted into drive and made my way down the narrow, winding tunnel to the street-level exit, turning right onto Washington Street and circling the block before heading south.

My apartment was located in the South End, on the second floor of a Victorian row house with a view overlooking Union Park. Traditionally, it had always been a working-class neighborhood, but the last few years had seen an increase in trendy hotspots, including restaurants and bars. As a result, parking had become more difficult in recent times, but fate smiled on me this morning, and I turned onto my street just in time to see a red sedan pulling away from its spot.

The driver was dressed in a business suit, and was shouting to himself while punching his vehicle's ceiling. I thought I heard him shout "Seize the day!" as he drove past, and strongly suspected he was listening to one of those self-improvement tapes, the kind peddled by social-media gurus dressed in black shirts with the sleeves rolled up who tell people how to fix their lives. Judging by the time, the driver of the red sedan had bought into the mentality of getting to the office before everyone else. Good for him, I suppose, although I have personal reservations regarding people who make their

living by telling others how to think and act and then charge them for it.

I parked in the newly available spot, gathered my belongings and made my way to the front door, inserting the key and making my way inside. My apartment isn't overly spacious, but it had its own dedicated bedroom, and was close enough that I could walk to everything I needed. I set my belongings down and then made my way over to the kitchen counter, pausing to greet my hamster, Yosemite.

Coming in at just over half-a-pound, Yosemite's fur was auburn colored, with two large white patches rising on opposite sides like twin rock formations. The patches had reminded me of the summer I'd gone hiking in California, and spent three days trekking through Yosemite Valley, hence how he'd come by his name. We'd been together for right around two months now, and during that time he'd filled out considerably, the weight gain showing both in his eyes, which sparkled like little black gems, and in his fur, which had thickened since we first met.

I retrieved some nuggets from the cabinet and poured them into my palm before lowering my hand down inside the cage. At the sight of them, Yosemite scampered out from beneath his lining, rubbing his body against my palm before he took the first nugget and began to nibble. I like to tell myself that Yosemite and I have more of a roommate style relationship than pet and owner. We were both fully grown when we met, and we'd both been through recent trauma and come out the other end deciding that we would rather not be alone. I hadn't intended on keeping him at first, but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't found comfort in his presence. I like to think he feels the same way about me.

I doted on him for another few minutes, then dumped the rest of the nuggets into his bowl and brushed the crumbs from my fingers before withdrawing my hand and making my way into my bedroom.

Have you ever noticed how you can view something a thousand times but it's only when someone points out the obvious that you can really see it? I had one of those moments as I stepped through the doorway, noting with some dismay the dirty clothes strewn across the floor, the used glasses on the dresser, and the empty granola bar wrappers overflowing the wastebasket. The sight of it hit me hard, right in the breadbasket, and left me momentarily stunned. It got worse when I turned and caught sight of myself in the dresser mirror.

I looked bad.

I mean, *really* bad. Like if I were a fish and someone pulled me from the ocean, they would toss me back, hook and all.

My features had always been at odds, my sharp nose contrasting with rounded cheeks, as if my face couldn't make up its mind which way it wanted to go. For the first time in a while, though, my face looked hollow, and the veins and muscles visible in my neck revealed that I'd lost a fair amount of weight lately. Not entirely surprising, considering that I could dimly recall running out of food a week prior. My lunches and dinners had consisted of whatever I could scavenge from the nearby convenience stores, and as my wastebasket could attest, usually came wrapped in reflective plastic.

Weight loss wasn't the only change. There were grayish circles beneath my eyes, and I couldn't actually recall the last time I'd put on any makeup. My hair, at least, was done up in a tight ponytail, but the split and fractured ends suggested it was in need of a wash and I didn't bother to sniff it to find out.

I rubbed my eyes and forced myself to take a breath. It sounded cliché to say that I hadn't realized just how bad things had gotten, but it was the truth. My protests to Rickson that I was fine, and that I had things under control, seemed suddenly comical, or would, if it weren't also disheartening. Thinking back over the past three weeks, I could recall hunting down leads and searching for clues, but the days and nights meshed

together in a giant blur, almost as if I'd been operating under a daze, or, a more pessimistic side of me warned, a spell.

Lucky for me, I didn't believe in magic.

Regardless, it was clearly time to get it together. I counted backward from five, then I stripped out of my clothes, gathering them along with all the other dirty garments and placing them in one corner of the room. There were too many to fit into my clothes hamper, and I made a note to thin the pile over the weekend.

I grabbed a fresh outfit from my closet, then made my way inside the bathroom, placing my pistol on the counter within easy reach of the shower. I'd started bringing it into the bathroom with me a few months ago, after I learned that a deranged clown had broken inside my apartment. I'd also gotten rid of my shower curtain, exchanging it for a cold storage freezer curtain and a pair of old towels along the floor to catch the cast-off water. Alex noted the changes, but hadn't bothered to comment on them before he left.

I slipped into the shower and turned the water on as hot as I could stand, reveling in the feel of the heat flowing over me. I tried to visualize it washing me clean, clearing away the murky fog that had been clouding my mind along with the scent of rain that still poured down over our city. My shampoo bottle was nearly empty, but I filled it with some water and then swished it around, earning some suds for my trouble. I washed and then combed my hair, stepping out half an hour later feeling clean if not entirely refreshed.

I used my towel to clear the condensation from my mirror, then combed my hair for a second time and went about my usual morning routine, applying my skincare lotion followed by makeup. I'd never been into cosmetics the way my sister was, but I knew enough to make myself presentable.

After that was done, I donned a fresh t-shirt, followed by my Kevlar vest. I had to tighten the Velcro straps, yet another

indication that I was in need of a good meal. I slipped a button-down blouse over the vest, then donned my usual pantsuit work attire. Lastly came my duty belt, containing my badge, handcuffs, and spare magazines. I slid my pistol into the holster, then shifted my jacket around to disguise the bulge. Once dressed, I made my way into my closet and gathered up my tactical patrol bag that contained all my law enforcement goodies. I slipped into the living room and set it down beside the couch before making my way into the kitchen.

As faulty as my memory was, it proved correct when I opened my fridge and found it contained only a couple of condiments with questionable expiration dates. The flow of cream pies that had previously filled my fridge and pantry had subsided over the past few months, a fact for which I was grateful, and any new arrivals were taken straight into the police station, to be devoured by our patrol units. Rumor was that even they were getting tired of them, and had taken to throwing out more than they ate. It seemed wasteful on the surface, but it wasn't a battle I cared to fight.

I made a mental note to run through a drive-through on my way into headquarters, realizing in that moment just how fortunate I was that my paychecks had continued to come, and, more frighteningly, just how fast my bank account would reach zero if they were to stop.

I grabbed my tactical patrol bag and said my goodbyes to Yosemite, who'd finished his nuggets and retired to his little makeshift bed beneath the cage lining. I went out the front door, being sure to lock it behind me, and made my way to my car, tossing my bag into the passenger's seat and bringing the engine to life before pulling away from the curb and heading toward the city.

It was time to go to work.

## Pick and Choose. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0800hrs

I've always enjoyed driving. Flying is fine, but I'll take a good road trip over the friendly skies any day of the week. There's something about the mechanical nature of the movements, no pun intended, that helps clear my mind and allows me to think.

And I had a lot of thinking to do.

Starting with Ambretta Greenhall.

The circumstances surrounding the coven leader's death still troubled me. Almost as much as the death itself. As the leader of the Sisters of Salem, Ambretta and I hadn't been close, certainly nothing like friends, but there'd been an uneasy respect between us. I trusted her to keep her word, and she'd trusted me to keep mine. Say what you will about frenemies, but that sort of thing is harder to find than you might think.

Now she was dead, and I needed to know who was responsible.

All my training told me that the answer was in the details, and in the clues left behind, but I'd been staring at them for weeks, and so far all I'd gotten was a headache for my troubles. Although the absence of leads told me a couple of things. For example, I knew our killer was smart, and not afraid to seize an advantage when it presented itself.

There was a reason why Ambretta's remains had been left behind in her loft. The way she'd been positioned, as well as the manner in which she'd died, were deliberately designed to convince forensics and the investigating officers that she was another victim of the Horseman. Which meant that not only was the killer up to speed on the Horseman's modus operandi, but they knew enough to stage the crime scene to ensure it fit seamlessly into what we'd seen at other sites. Furthermore, they'd been careful enough to ensure they left no trace of



themselves, which meant that this wasn't a crime of passion or opportunity. Someone had planned Ambretta's death ahead of time, and then capitalized on the Horseman's killing spree to cover their tracks.

I asked myself why they might do that, but the reasoning seemed clear enough. Anytime you have a murder, how the killer disposes of their victim's remains is a key factor in determining how likely they are to get caught. Most murderers just leave their victim where they fall. Those who make a habit of killing, or who do so for professional reasons, often try to take their victims with them, thereby ensuring any investigation begins as a missing person's case, rather than a murder investigation. Making the switch between the two without a body is more difficult than you might think, and by then, enough time has passed that separating true evidence from circumstantial evidence is chancy at best. If given the choice, the smart murderer will take the victim's remains with them every time.

The scary-smart murderers, however, will arrange things so that another person is set up to take the fall. That's what our killer had done. Arranging the body and adjusting the manner of death to implicate the Horseman ensured that the officers and district attorneys would spend their time and energy trying to get the Horseman, who I'd already revealed to be a college kid named Vihaan, to confess. He could shout his innocence until he was blue in the face, but considering that we already had him for multiple murders, including one committed right in front of me, no one would be listening.

No one except me.

Because I knew, in my head and in my heart, that he hadn't been responsible for Ambretta's death, or the two witches who'd vanished in the weeks before. Unfortunately, I was in the same boat, because I could shout it from the rooftops, and no one within the police station or city hall would listen. Because no one wanted to hear it.

Not even the other witches.

I wasn't overly familiar with the Sisters of Salem Coven, but the ones I did know, Verbena, Flora, and Dahlia, had gone into hiding shortly after Ambretta's death, disappearing without so much as a word and taking whatever knowledge they had with them. I'd tried locating them, but so far hadn't had any success. Outside of Verbena, whose real name was Kimberly Phelps, I didn't know any of them, and I feared that any official search would leave a record that could prove detrimental in the future. Anonymity was important to the sisters, and I'd tried my best to respect it so far.

Unfortunately, time was becoming a factor, and now I had to worry about thugs shooting up restaurants just because I was inside. Granted, there was always the chance that I wasn't the principal target. There were several other early-morning patrons inside, as well as the staff. Heck, for all I knew, the owner could be involved in some sort of winner-take-all java war with the other coffeehouses in the city, but that would be a heck of a coincidence, and I wasn't really big on coincidences these days.

I drew in a breath and held it for a slow three count before releasing it. Regardless of how the investigation was unfolding, it was clear that Rickson had been right. I needed to get back into the swing of things, clear myself some space to breathe, and start again.

Blue Moon Division had been exiled from the police station shortly after its formation and now resided in a three-room hobbit hole inside the adjacent Government Parking Garage. The crisp winds sweeping in from the Charles River ensured it remained cold in the winter, wet in the summer, and always smelled of gasoline and old motor oil. I parked on the ground floor, then made my way over to the stairway and descended two floors to where the sub-basement lay.

When I first arrived, our sign had consisted of a piece of paper taped to the door. We'd upgraded since then, springing

for a magnetized plate that listed Blue Moon Division's name alongside the police symbol. The door squeaked when I opened it, and the smell of fresh paint struck me as I stepped inside.

We'd been on hiatus a few months back, forced to halt all ongoing investigations while the department worked its way through the aftermath of our latest case. Thieves dressed up like leprechauns had stolen twenty-five million dollars' worth of gold from the Federal Reserve and then used it to lure in heavy crowds which they targeted with a series of explosive bombs set throughout the city. We'd stopped them by the skin of our teeth, and the entire affair had come to be known as the Massacre Site case. Its reverberations were still being felt throughout city hall.

I'd used that time to upgrade our little abode, peeling away the rotten old plaster and applying fresh paint in its place. I'd also disposed of the old carpet, bartering new ones with a nearby thrift store in exchange for disposing of the mutant rats plaguing them. The water damage turned out to be a real problem, and the random sink poking out of the wall remained, albeit with several strands of yellow police tape strung across its body so that any innocent passersby wouldn't take it into their head to drink from it. Not only would they almost certainly get sick, but the plumber we'd spoken to seemed to think there was a good chance that the resulting flood would electrocute us all and, quite possibly, bring the entire building down on our heads. But hey, what's life without a little danger, right?

Our division headquarters consisted of a trio of cubicles, as well as Lieutenant Kermit's office, a small kitchen alcove, and a conference room that was barely worth the name. There were two people inside, both seated at their desks. They glanced up at the sight of me, their faces shifting from surprise to something else. I'd like to say it was happiness at seeing me, but honestly, it was probably closer to relief.

“Well look who finally bothered to show up,” the closer of the two said. Robbie Rutledge was in his mid-teens, with matted red curls and black stud earrings in both ears. A smattering of facial scruff was waging a land war against the acne along his chin, with both sides suffering heavy casualties. He had dark eyes and a mocking, I-don’t-care curl to his mouth that belongs solely to the young. “We had a pool going on where you’d ended up. My money was turning tricks down at the Common.”

I snorted and tried to hide my smile. Technically, Robbie wasn’t part of Blue Moon Division. He was Lieutenant Kermit’s nephew and served as our receptionist-slash-computer specialist as part of a plea deal that kept him out of juvenile hall. You’d think he’d be a little more grateful, but that would have involved showing actual appreciation, which was beyond his current level of emotional maturity.

“No such pool existed,” the other officer said, casting an annoyed look at Robbie. Officer Elmore “Pongo” Dwyer was a peanut of a man, and weighed less than some dog breeds, although I avoided mentioning that, given his nickname. Unlike Robbie, he was an actual police officer who’d joined Blue Moon a few months back. Field work had been a bit outside his wheelhouse, but he had a pretty good head on his shoulders and an eye for detail that convinced Lieutenant Kermit to appoint him as our official legal advisor and department liaison. He wasn’t technically a lawyer, but neither were any of the brass, and I suspected we’d need him if the division kept growing.

Pongo rose from his chair and extended his hand toward me. “It’s good to have you back, Sergeant Mayfield.”

I took his hand and gave it a polite squeeze. “Good to be back. And for what it’s worth, Robbie, you weren’t far off, but even with your big-boy allowance, you couldn’t afford me.”

“Eww,” Robbie said before he turned and motioned to the stack of files in front of him. “Now that you’re back, can you

get some of this mess off my desk?”

“Hit me.”

“Alright,” he said and lifted the first set of files. “We’ve got the usual, ghosts in rickety houses.”

“Pass.”

“We’ve got one lady who claims the fairies that live in her garden are warring with the ones in her neighbor’s azaleas.”

“Put it on the maybe list.”

“Then there’s this guy who swears his girlfriend turns into a swan every time the sun goes down.”

“Hence why she can’t stay overnight. Ten to one, she’s married.”

“She’s totally married,” Robbie agreed and lifted the last file. “And then we have an official request from our friends over at the TSA.”

“Bingo,” I said and held out my hand. “What’s their issue?”

“Phantom thief in the airport.”

“Excuse me?”

He shrugged. “According to this, there have been a string of thefts occurring in the airport storage warehouse. Security cameras have caught glimpses of the alleged spirit-thieves, but they keep disappearing into thin air.”

“Hmm,” I remarked. Cases involving other agencies were tricky. Not only did you have to navigate the usual police politics, but we had to be extra careful, since hunting down and disproving the supernatural wasn’t exactly a common practice. That said, the TSA wouldn’t have requested our help unless they were at their wits’ end, and it would be nice to have another agency in our corner for once. Professional alliances were hard to find when you were regarded as the dumping ground of the department. We couldn’t afford to let this chance pass us by.

“I’ll take the TSA,” I said. “Hold the others for now and I’ll get to them as I’m able.”

“Alright, have it your way,” Robbie said. “And while you’re out there, it would be great if you could ...”

“Did I hear someone mention the TSA?”

Robbie cut off, and we turned as Lieutenant Kermit appeared from the hallway leading to his office. In his mid-sixties, he always struck me as a refined James Bond, a visage accentuated by his tailored blue blazer, his refined manner of speaking, and his silver hair cut short in a crisp executive style. Originally from across the pond, Lieutenant Kermit was the head of Blue Moon Division, and godfather to one of its core members. He was also the only officer in the entire department who refused to carry a gun.

“Ah, Sergeant Mayfield. How lovely to see you this morning.”

“Good to see you too, sir.” I straightened my jacket, and it suddenly hit me just how inconvenient my absence must have been for the other officers in our division. The realization caused a heaviness to appear in my chest. “I assume you want to speak to me?”

Lieutenant Kermit shook his head and adopted an expression of feigned bafflement. “I can’t imagine what about. Although, I hear congratulations are in order. It appears our vampire flasher was successfully subdued and arrested early this morning. Looks like we can close the book on that one. And am I correct in assuming that you’re already on to your next case?”

“Yes, sir,” I said and gave the file a little shake. “TSA is requesting assistance. I’m on my way to check it out now.”

“Most excellent,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye. “Best not keep them waiting.”

“Roger that, sir,” I said. “Robbie, you know how to reach me?”

“Uh, yeah. I know how a cellphone works.”

“Perfect. I’ll be in touch as soon as I have something to report.”

“Sergeant Mayfield?” Lieutenant Kermit said. “I understand there was a bit of nastiness at a local coffee shop this morning. I trust you’re alright?”

“Right as rain, sir.”

“Excellent. In that case, I look forward to hearing your report. Happy hunting, Sergeant.”

I gathered my belongings, along with the case file, and made my way back out the door before ascending the stairs.

For the first time in what felt like a long time, I felt hopeful. I’d screwed up, there was no denying, but it wasn’t so bad that I couldn’t make amends, and even if my investigation into Ambretta’s death was currently stuck in the weeds, it was only a temporary setback. I’d been told on multiple occasions that I was nothing if not tenacious, and I had good friends willing to stand beside me. Her murderer was out there, and one way or the other, I was going to find them.

The clouds that had been engulfing my mind shifted, forced aside by a renewed sense of purpose, and the first rays of sunshine reached down, casting me clean of insecurity and doubt. I told myself that today was a new beginning, or at least a reset that would allow me to start anew, and that feeling lasted right up until I came to the top of the stairs and pushed through the doorway.

Topher stood waiting for me.

I saw him, clear as day, standing at the opposite end of the parking garage. Approximately my age, heavysset, with baby fat clinging to his face and the kind of haircut a mother gives her child before sending him off to his first day at school, he

was dressed much like the last time I'd seen him - khaki pants, a short sleeve button up with a crooked tie and a brown jacket. He had his hands clasped in front of him, and was every inch the shy, bashful partner I remembered him to be.

Our eyes met, and Topher's lips parted. He gave a soft, almost apologetic smile, and raised one hand in an uncertain wave.

A block of ice appeared in my chest, casting its frozen spell through my body and causing my hands to tremble. The TSA case file slipped from my hand and hit the floor with a sound like a gunshot. I jerked involuntarily, flinching back and breaking our gaze.

It was only for a split second, but when I looked back, Topher was gone. I glanced left and then right, thinking he must have darted behind one of the nearby cars, but he didn't emerge. I started forward two steps, then stopped and told myself that there was no point. I knew I couldn't have seen what I thought I saw. It must have been a trick of the light, or a momentary flash of memory. Topher couldn't have been there. Topher couldn't be anywhere. Because Topher was dead.

"Are you all right, Sergeant Mayfield?" a woman's voice asked from off to my left.

I blinked at the sound and then slowly turned my head, taking note of the three figures entering the garage from the street.

The woman who'd spoken was named Kimberly Phelps, but more often went by Verbena. She was middle-aged, pear-shaped, dressed in a conservative, yet elegant, black dress that reached down to her wrists and ankles. She wore her hair in an auburn bun and had a kind aura about her as she smiled at me.

The figure to her right wasn't so comforting. She was young, maybe not even old enough to drink, and had embraced the more Gothic aspects of the modern-day witch. Her mascara was dark, along with her lips, and her black hair was



cut short along the sides while the top was shaped into a faux hawk. She had multiple earrings in each ear, and she glared at me as if I just backed over her cat. She was chewing something, I doubted it was gum, and the motion gave her mouth a slack, sullen look.

The third and last figure stood a head taller than me. Dressed in a unisex black pantsuit with a beaded necklace bearing a Native American charm on it, I suspected she might've begun her life as a man but had since transitioned into womanhood. Her make-up was bold, her face turned almost golden, and her shoulder length hair was dyed sea green toward the tips. She stood straight, hands down at her sides, and there was a cautious aura about her that suggested she maintained an enhanced sense of her surroundings that never fully went away.

"I'm fine." I seized my folder and lifted it from the floor before brushing off the dust. "Which is more than I can say for the three of you."

A series of uncertain looks passed between the Sisters of Salem, then Verbena sighed and said, "You're angry."

"Oh, gee, you think? I wonder why that might be?"

"And you have every right to be," she said, raising her hand in a placating gesture. "It has been some time since we spoke."

"Try three weeks."

"Our silence was necessary, Sergeant."

"Is that so? Well, unfortunately, your silence has helped to allow a murderer to remain free in this city. And since every cop or attorney within a hundred miles radius is now convinced that Ambretta died at the hands of the Horseman, trying to tell them otherwise is like spitting into the wind."

Verbena's face became carefully neutral. "Meaning what?"

“Meaning I’ve been reassigned to a new case and you’re at the back of the queue,” I said. “If you’ve got any information to share, you can go down and fill out a report with Officer Dwyer. In the meantime, I have another case to solve.”

“What if we had a name?”

“Whose name?”

“The murderer,” Verbena said. “We know who killed Ambretta Greenhall.”

## Government Parking Garage. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0824hrs

As a general rule of thumb, nothing good ever happens in a parking garage. The strangers tailing your footsteps are never friendly, the dim lighting is universally unflattering, and a dropped cellphone is sure to scratch if not shatter outright. Even the acoustics are poised against you, seizing spoken words and carrying them away before they can reach your ears. That last one was important, because if I'd actually heard them say they knew who the murderer was, then I was going to lose my mind.

"I'm sorry, come again?"

"The murderer," Verbena repeated and swallowed. "We know his name."

Well, so much for that hope. "And is this recent information you've come across?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Uh-huh. So, you've just been, what? Sitting on it all this time? Waiting for the right moment to tell me?"

"No," Verbena said, and then hesitated. "And yes. You must understand, it's for our own protection. There are measures that must be in place before you attempt any sort of —"

"The heck with all that." I shifted my bag, my opposite hand instinctively rising to clench the police shield on my belt. "Give me the name."

"Sergeant, if you would but listen then I—"

"The name, Verbena. Or else you can just slink back to whatever safe house you've been hiding."

"There are no more safe houses," Dahlia said. Her voice came out soft, contrasting sharply with her height.

Verbena's mouth tightened, and she cast a quick sideways glance before exhaling. I watched her mentally weighing her options for a full half minute before the third witch, Flora, let out an exasperated sigh.

"Oh, just get on with it," she said, impatience dripping from every word. "It's not like it's some big secret. Everybody already knows."

"If everyone knows, then why hasn't anyone bothered to fill me in before now?" I glared at the three of them, but none were quick to meet my gaze.

"The situation is complicated," Verbena explained. "A single wrong move could bring severe consequences, both to our coven, and to you, Sergeant."

"Me? How do you figure that?"

"Before we provide you with said name, we must be assured that you will proceed with caution. Any attempt to assault this head on will certainly end in disaster."

"You want my word that I'll play my cards close to the vest?"

"For a start," Verbena said. "We also require your pledge that you will make no overt movements without the coven's approval."

I felt a surge of anger rise up inside. "You want to put me on a leash?"

"We prefer to think of it as a partnership."

"With you having the majority stake?" I shook my head. "Forget it."

"Sergeant—"

"No," I said again, more forcefully. "Hell no. In case it slipped your mind, this isn't some garden party vandalism. It's a murder investigation. If you have information about the

killer and fail to come forward, you could be charged with obstruction of justice or even aiding and abetting.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” Dahlia said, although her voice betrayed her uncertainty. “Would you?”

I fixed her with a hard look. “In a heartbeat if I thought it meant getting a murderer off the streets.”

Flora snorted, turned her head away and crossed her arms. Her distaste was evident in her posture. “I told you this was a waste of time. She doesn’t want to fight for us.”

“Oh, no?” I demanded. “Funny, cause from where I’m sitting, I’ve done nothing but fight for you since the moment I met you all.”

“And what has it gotten us? Our sisters are dead or fleeing. Our high priestess was murdered inside her own home, and the police aren’t even looking into it.”

“Only because they believe the killer is already in custody,” I snapped, my voice rising. “They’re convinced they’ve solved it.”

“But not you?” Verbena asked.

“No, not me.”

“Even so,” Flora said. “The rest of the police department doesn’t care, and you can’t stop the killer by yourself. We need to explore other options.”

“We have already requested assistance from our sister coven in England,” Verbena said. “Those who are available are coming as swiftly as they can.”

“Sister coven?” I asked.

Verbena nodded, and upon seeing my confused expression, explained. “The practice of magic did not begin in Salem. Our beliefs can be traced back far beyond the Mayflower’s voyage. Our coven is one of many, and we have never failed to come to one another’s defense in times of turmoil.”

“Never like this, though,” Dahlia said.

“No,” Verbena agreed. “Our situation is dire, but whatever comes next, we will face it with the strength of our sisters.”

“Not all of them,” Flora said, her voice carrying an unspoken challenge.

Verbena’s mouth tightened. “Peace, sister. We have decided this matter already. You know why it cannot be so.”

Flora shook her head. “Ambretta was the bravest among us, and even she fell. We need help.”

“Even so, we cannot bend on this.”

“And why not? Better to bend a little than face certain destruction. She could fight. She *would* fight! Whatever else she may have become, she loved the coven. Agree to allow her back into our circle, and she would lend strength the likes of which we desperately need.”

“She’s not wrong,” Dahlia said, rubbing one finger across her lips. “There is no denying her zeal, and she does possess a certain aggression that we sorely lack.”

Verbena glanced at her in surprise. “Her spells would purge the very land we call home, sisters, burning the magic from the ground and leaving only thorns and scars in its place. I refuse to believe that is our only option.”

“Wait a minute,” I said and held up my hands. “Who are we talking about?”

Three sets of eyes turned to me, and their grim expressions confirmed my suspicions.

“*Mortianna?*” I all but spat. “You want to ask that crazy witch for help? Are you out of your minds?”

Flora met my gaze and raised me a glare. “We are in need of strong allies.”

“You banished her because you said she and her sisters sold their souls to a demon!”

“Chasm.” Flora nodded. “Mortianna has her faults, but at least she’s not afraid to fight.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Last time we went up against her, she nearly burned down half of downtown, not to mention bringing the entire subway system to a halt.”

“Collateral damage is sometimes necessary.”

“Not this time. Besides, it’s a moot point. She’s sitting in the Suffolk County jail. It’s not like they’re going to just release her because you asked nicely.”

Flora’s mouth tightened, and her chin raised a fraction of an inch. “Nothing is impossible, Sergeant.”

“That is,” I argued, putting emphasis behind my words. “Take my word for it. No amount of magic charms or summoning circles are going to break her out of there. And anyone who tried anything more overt would only end up inside with her. It’s not an option.”

“So you say,” remarked Flora.

“So I do. In the meantime, I’m willing to help you, but you have to extend me some trust. Give me the name and I’ll take it from there. If, by some chance, word leaks out and there’s blowback, I’ll make it clear that the Sisters of Salem are not to be touched.”

“I fear your badge will not be enough to deter him,” Verbena warned.

“Of course, it won’t,” Flora snapped before casting a scornful look my way. “We know how this city works. Come next week, she’ll probably be taking orders from him, nodding her head along to his sermons like a good little lapdog.”

Another surge of anger rose, but I forced it back down. “Who are you talking about?”

“Father Irons,” Dahlia said, her voice spilling out.

Verbena and Flora snapped their heads around, spearing the taller woman in place. She met their gazes passively and then shrugged. “I’m sorry, sisters, but it needed to be done.”

Verbena stared at her for a long moment before she nodded. “Very well then. We are committed.”

“Who’s Father Irons?”

Flora snapped. “He’s the Catholic Church’s hitman.”

“*What?*”

Verbena directed a sharp glare at Flora, forcing the younger woman to silence before she answered. “Not literally, of course. Father Osvaldo Irons is a well-known figure within the Catholic Church’s hierarchy. He has a reputation for being rather stringent in his beliefs and bears a personal animosity toward witchcraft in all its forms.”

“Being a close-minded jerk isn’t as uncommon as we might wish in this city, but it’s a far cry away from proving he’s a murderer.”

“Not as far as you think,” Dahlia said. “Father Irons views himself as a crusader, sent to save the souls of the innocent Christians from the corrupting influence of the witches.” She drew in a breath and held it for a long three count before letting it out in a rush. “We know you don’t believe in us, Sergeant. That you don’t believe in our magic. But *he* does, and that makes him twice as dangerous.”

“Okay, I guess that’s fair. But why do you think he’s resorted to killing?”

“Fear,” Verbena replied. “The Catholic Church is not what it was. Every year, its grip upon this city slips a little more. Father Irons, and those of similar mind, blame us, citing our magic as the reason for corrupting this city. They’ve spent the last three years trying to win back the will of the people, sending in skilled papal orators in hopes of filling their pews,



but to no avail. Now, they've come with torches, hoping fear will drive the populace back into their halls."

I made an acknowledging sound, considering their words and what I knew. It was no secret that churches were on the decline, with congregations dwindling and younger generations abandoning organized religion in favor of more spiritual pursuits. Heck, in this year alone more than half a dozen churches throughout the city had closed their doors for good. If I were in charge of the Catholic Church, I would be concerned for the future, but that didn't mean I was going to start killing innocent women. My gut told me there was more to this than what I was being given, and that it was probably coming from both sides of the table.

"Why now?"

Three blank stares greeted my question, but there was something in them, the lack of emotion possibly, that rang of falsity.

"Ambretta has been gone for three weeks, but you waited until today to tell me about this. What's changed?"

"Sergeant," Verbena began, but I cut her off.

"Something convinced you that you couldn't wait anymore, and I'm not lifting a finger until you tell me what it is."

Verbena closed her mouth, and a long, pregnant silence filled the garage, lasting almost three minutes before Dahlia finally let out a sigh. "I told you she would figure it out."

"You did," Verbena agreed, and paused for several seconds before her shoulders dropped in weary resignation. I thought I heard her mouth the words "We are committed" before she gathered herself and met my gaze. "We believe another sister has been taken."

"What?" I couldn't believe they were just telling me this now. "Who?"

“You must understand, Sergeant, we take our coven member’s safety seriously, and are not in the habit of revealing their identities to local authorities. Each time it has happened in the past, we have been persecuted without fail.”

I waved my hand in front of my face. “Spare me the privacy routine. I’ve heard it before. Who is missing?”

“Desiree Easton,” Verbena said. “She’s been with the coven for almost five years.”

“How do you know she’s been taken?”

“When news of Ambretta’s death was announced, the decision was made to cease all activities within the coven. Sisters were instructed to remain within their homes or, if necessary, take shelter within safe houses spread throughout the city.”

“For how long?”

“Until the city was deemed safe for us to emerge.”

“That’s not an easy thing to ask. These women might be witches, but they also have jobs and families.”

“We would not have ordered it unless we believed it necessary,” Verbena said. “Furthermore, the Sisters of Salem maintain several accounts with discretionary funds that can be used to assist those in need.”

“Was Desiree one of those?”

Verbena shook her head. “Quite the opposite, in fact. She was one of the few sisters granted leave to move throughout the city. She assisted others within the coven, delivering groceries and other bits as needed.”

“Let me guess, she went out for a delivery and never came back?”

“Is it so obvious?”

“I’ve been at this for a bit.” I drew in a deep breath and sighed. “How long has she been gone?”

“Since last night.”

“Any chance she just decided to cut bait and leave town?”

Verbena shook her head, and the looks Flora and Dahlia cast my way said they didn’t appreciate hearing the suggestion. “Desiree had no family, and a string of failed relationships haunt her past. The coven was her only connection to the outside world, and she valued us fiercely, just as we valued her.”

“One big happy sisterhood, huh?”

Verbena blinked and then tilted her head to the side. “We do what we can, Sergeant.”

“And you think this Father Irons has her?”

“Of course he does,” Flora snapped, the effort of staying silent finally proving too much for her. “He’s probably planning on burning her at the stake even as we speak!”

“Please, Flora.” Verbena said, the skin around her eyes tightening. “That sort of talk doesn’t help anyone.”

I shook my head and raised my hand. “Okay, just so I’ve got this clear. Desiree brings the total number up to five?” I counted them off on my finger as I spoke. “Jenni Sexton was a victim of the horseman, we know that. Ambretta was murdered by our killer, and there were two sisters who went missing before her death.”

“Marjoram and Cassia.”

“Right. I assume they haven’t turned up yet?”

What I was really asking was if anyone had found their bodies. The sisters in front of me evidently got it, because the look Flora cast my way could have curdled milk, but she eventually shook her head.

“Sounds to me like its time I have a little chat with this Father Irons. Where can I find him?”

Flora snorted. “Where do you think?”

Right, in retrospect, it was a foolish question. There was only one last standing beacon of Catholic faith in this city, and it sat squarely within the North End. “How can I get in touch with you again?”

“We have an emergency number,” Dahlia said. She drew a slip of paper from her pocket and handed it over. “Just leave a message and someone will call you back.”

“Good enough.”

“Sergeant, there’s more,” Verbena said. “You are not a member of our coven, but we are not blind to your past efforts. Our silence was as much for your protection as it was for ours. You must tread *carefully* with this man.”

“And why is that?”

“This is not Father Irons first time in Boston,” Verbena explained. “Prior to relocating to the Vatican, he attended boarding school here alongside many of the city’s political elite.”

“Anyone I might know?”

“Mayor Altair, for starters.”

I blinked and then let out a low grunt. Mayor Fraser Altair was fairly new to the city, having been recently elected to replace our previous Mayor Clarissa Cherri after she was caught in an illicit affair with her underage lover. I hadn’t met him yet, likely on account that he was the mayor and I was a lowly sergeant in the smallest division within the police department. I guess you could say we travel in separate circles.

“Are they still close?”

“Like brothers,” Verbena said, confirming my fear. “Their friendship is well known throughout the city, and there are many who claim to support Father Irons in hopes of currying favor with our new mayor.”

“Meaning if I go after him directly, he’ll make one phone call, and I’ll either be fired outright or demoted to crossing guard duty.”

“You see now why we hesitated to bring this to your attention.”

“Yeah, message received.”

“Please be careful, Sergeant,” Verbena said. “We do not doubt your desire to see justice served, but passion can be dangerous, and should you fall, I fear there will be no one left to champion our cause.”

## The Heart of the Matter. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0854hrs

I got into my car and closed the door before letting my head fall back against the seat. Whatever energy I'd mustered during my trip from Blue Moon headquarters to the garage was gone, sucked away by the witches' revelations. I felt tired, drained, and the rumblings in my stomach reminded me that I still hadn't found time to run through a drive-through.

But more than anything, I was scared.

Scared, and angry, and a hundred other things that I couldn't adequately put into words. Anyone who's ever worked in law enforcement knows that real life doesn't always emulate the things we see on television. There isn't always a clear motive for murder, or a clue that pops up at the last minute to explain everything. More importantly, killers don't always get caught, and Rickson was right when he said that those officers who couldn't come to terms with that didn't last long.

I never thought I'd be one of them, but I'd also never worked a murder investigation before joining Blue Moon. Take my word for it when I tell you that reading about a murder investigation is a lot different than being involved in one.

I'd spent every waking moment of these past three weeks hunting down leads in the hopes of discovering who killed Ambretta Greenhall, and I'd come away with nothing to show for all my troubles. To say I was frustrated was a gross understatement, but it was more than that. Every day that passed tightened the knot in my chest and left me wondering if this was the day the killer would reach out and claim another victim. I'd been living with that fear for weeks, carrying it around on my shoulders and dreading the moment that I learned another woman had disappeared. Not only because it

was an innocent human life lost, but because it would signal my failure to live up to the promises I'd sworn to uphold.

I clamped my eyes shut and rubbed my hand against the pain in my chest, forcing myself to draw in a series of deep breaths. Thirty seconds passed before I felt my heart rate slow, and thirty more before I was able to clear my mind and start to think.

It made sense why the witches would have sought me out now. If they were telling the truth, if Desiree really had been assisting them with deliveries, then it meant she was one of only a handful of women who knew where the safe houses were. Not all of them. I doubted they trusted anyone with that information, even themselves, but enough to where they feared they couldn't adequately protect everyone.

I can't imagine that admission went over well. Asking people to shelter in place was one thing. Advising them to flee the city was another. Some of the witches would go, but some wouldn't, and if they couldn't convince them to leave, then it meant they had no choice but to go on the offensive. Hence where I came in.

I didn't resent the fact that they were treating me like a windup toy, fueling me up with information and then letting me loose in the city. Or at least, not much. I wanted to bring this murderer in as much as they did, and didn't much care how the job got done just so long as it meant the killings would stop.

Unfortunately, getting started was more difficult than it should have been. I drew my cell phone from my pocket and called the Blue Moon office. Pongo answered on the second ring, clearly surprised to hear from me so quickly. I told him what I wanted, and he dutifully wrote down Desiree Easton's name and ran a quick check through the police department's system. Nothing came back, and he told me he would keep an eye out and inform me should anything new arise. I thanked him, then hung up and tried not to sigh.

It wasn't the end of the world, but it was a pretty hefty speed bump.

I briefly considered putting out a BOLO for Desiree, but quickly discarded the idea. Desiree was a New England resident and a longtime member of the coven. She knew where to find help within the city, and the fact that she hadn't turned up yet didn't bode well for the possibility of finding her alive, which was a hard pill to swallow.

Mind you, there was always the chance that Desiree's remains had been found and were yet to be identified, but in order to find out for certain, I would need to call homicide directly, which I couldn't do. It wasn't that I wouldn't receive a response, but you could bet that anything I requested would be red-flagged and given to Mack to see if it could be used against me. Which brought me to a whole new set of problems.

I didn't have anything against homicide, but the head of their department was Everett Mackleroy. Once upon a time, I'd looked up to him, before I'd understood what he really was. Mack was old school muscle, but he'd spent too many years looking into the dark soul of the city. He'd seen too much, witnessed too many lives lost, and it had changed him. A couple of months back, I'd pegged him for a series of murders that had been happening throughout the city. I'd only been half-wrong, but that was enough to get me on his hit list. He'd come after me swinging, but I'd lucked out and stumbled upon some information regarding the Federal Reserve robbery that forced him to back off.

I knew, on some level, that it was only a matter of time before it all came to a head. Both Alex and Rickson had tried to warn me that it was coming, but I hadn't wanted to hear it. Most days, I could pretend that Mack and I had agreed to a ceasefire, but the truth was, we were more like a pair of battered old boxers circling each other in the ring. Both of us were just waiting for the other to slip up, and I didn't need a



fortune teller to tell me that Mack wouldn't hesitate to exploit any opening I gave him. I also knew that when he threw his shot, he'd do it full-force, and my threats to ruin him wouldn't do much if I didn't see it coming.

All that being said, I wasn't ready to fight that battle. Not yet. The longer I could put it off, the better, and that meant staying off his radar. It also meant that Father Irons was my only real lead, since I'd exhausted all the others over the past three weeks, and even that was mired in complications.

I sighed and peered to my right, down at the passenger's seat, where I'd laid the TSA file, as well as the slip of paper Dahlia had handed me. Logic told me that I should start with the TSA file. Rickson wasn't wrong when he said Deputy Bulwark would jump on any chance to be rid of me, and being terminated for dereliction of duty was akin to being dishonorably discharged from the armed services. Not only would it end my career in the city of Boston, but it would effectively ruin any chance I had of getting on with any other department as well.

If I wanted to remain employed, I needed to start clearing cases. Period. Plus, Blue Moon Division was in desperate need of professional allies, and having the Transportation Security Administration in our corner would go a long way to helping legitimize us in the eyes of our peers.

No matter how I turned it over in my mind, the choice between the two cases was clear. So why couldn't I bring myself to insert the key into the vehicle's ignition? I tried twice, but each time my hand faltered, dropping back into my lap as if someone had replaced my sleeve buttons with gym weights. I let my arm fall for the second time and then turned my head back down, my eyes glazing over the case file and focusing on the lone slip of paper where Dahlia had written the coven's phone number.

I knew what the smart move was. The move that Rickson, Pongo, and probably even Lieutenant Kermit would have

advised me to make. But I also knew what I felt in my heart, and I asked myself, if I were in Desiree's place, how much would it mean to know that someone was looking for me?

Ah, heck with it.

One woman was dead, and another three were missing. Never mind the trio that had just left, who were counting on me to help protect them. The TSA and their phantom could wait for now. Human life takes precedence over the dead.

This time my hand rose almost of its own accord, and the key slipped into the ignition a second before I brought the vehicle to life. Black smoke rose from the exhaust, billowing in my wake as I pulled out of the parking garage and headed toward the North End of the city.

Traffic in Boston is a nightmare at the best of times, the winding roads, one-way streets and claustrophobic buildings leave visitors bewildered and confused. Add to that the fact that most residents have figured out it was actually cheaper to park along the side of the roadway and pay the ticket rather than the downtown parking garage fees, and it's a miracle the entire city isn't stuck in a perpetual gridlock.

The last stragglers of rush hour were still present, and I took advantage of the slow pace, pushing away my doubts and clearing the cobwebs from my mind so that I could think.

If the Sisters of Salem were right, and Father Irons really was waging some sort of religious crusade that involved burning witches at the stake, metaphorically if not literally, although I wasn't convinced on either account, then he was being pretty quiet about it, which didn't track, at least on the surface.

Crusades aren't overly-effective if no one knows you're doing them. Kind of like having a party and neglecting to send out any invitations. Burning out the witches and purging the unclean masses in the hopes of luring people back into the church didn't strike me as the sort of thing that could be done

quietly. I would've thought Father Irons would be a little more vocal in his intentions, although that might have been wishful thinking on my part. After all, this wasn't the late 1600s anymore. The days of state-approved witch burnings were long behind us, and not even a close friendship with the mayor would give him leave to go about openly hunting young women.

Of course, it was hard to prove murder without any bodies.

That was the other thing bothering me. Boston wasn't that large a place, but the criminally inclined within our city had proven adept at making competition and rivals disappear. The Charles River, in particular, was a popular stretch, with eighty miles of waterway that flow around the entirety of the city. I'd often heard seasoned detectives joking that we were only one good drought away from clearing half our cold cases. They laughed when they said it, but something in their voices told me there was an element of truth in their jesting. Assuming for a moment that Father Irons was the kind of man who liked to plan ahead, which seemed likely given everything that was happening, there was a chance we would never find those women.

Of course, there was always the possibility that I was reading the situation wrong. For all I knew, removing those three women could just be the opening volley, and the crusade had yet to truly begin. Might be Father Irons was focusing on gathering his strength, building his numbers while simultaneously weakening the coven in preparation for the purge to come. It was, objectively, the smarter play, provided he had no qualms about killing innocent women. And if that were the case, I had to ask myself, was there anything he wouldn't do?

These were hard questions, and I didn't have any answer except to go and see for myself.

Boston's North End was often referred to as Little Italy, its history woven into the restaurants and shops that crowded both

sides of its streets. The smell of tomatoes, mozzarella and garlic sauteing in olive oil flowed out to fill the streets, weaving its way through the crowds and enfolding them in the scent. You could see the moment the spell took hold, catching unwary travelers and guiding them into the nearby eateries, much like how the mythical sirens used to lure sailors into their watery depths.

I circled the block and parked along the side of the street, taking a moment to secure my tactical patrol bag to the passenger's seat before exiting. As I came out onto the sidewalk, I did a brief check, ensuring I had my handcuffs, pepper spray, badge, and pistol. Bringing firearms into a church is a social faux pas of the highest order in Boston, even for a police officer, but given the fact that I was going to meet with a man who I suspected might be involved in at least four women's deaths, I figured the powers that be would look the other way on this one.

St. Leonard of Port Maurice Parish and its surrounding peace gardens had been a fixture within the city since 1873. It was nowhere near the largest church in the city. That honor went to the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, which had been closed for repairs after the previous winter's snowstorm caused sections of the roof to collapse. St. Leonard's, however, had something that not even Sacred Heart could lay claim to. It was a pillar within the community, and its close proximity to the Italian eateries and pastry shops ensured a steady flock of parishioners eager to answer the church bell's call.

It was still a few hours before the daily mass was set to begin, and I made my way inside through the wrought iron fence surrounding the perimeter. The gardens were in the throes of spring bloom, white and red petals forming a complex tapestry alongside the lavender and pink flowers, their delicate tapestries contoured around marble statues standing in stark contrast to the greenery.

The front door was closed up tight, but the side door leading into the bookstore proved to be unlocked, and I slid it open, reaching my hand around and clasping the small golden bell attached to its handlebar, muffling its jingle as I made my way inside.

Growing up in Boston, the church was a pillar of many families, rich and poor alike, but I'd never been part of it. My mother, a full-time waitress, had relied heavily on those Sunday morning shifts and the tips left by the parishioners fresh from mass to make it through the week. After she passed, my step-father, an accomplished novelist, had no affinity for the church, and preferred instead to take us to the nearby libraries every weekend, ensuring we never lacked reading material. Come Sunday mornings, when other parents were forcing their children into outfits no sane person would ever want to wear and preemptively admonishing them for their behavior within the pews, my sister and I would pick spots around our living room, and explore our new books while my step-father prepared pancakes in the kitchen. It might seem simple, but it surprised me how fondly I look back on those times, although I'm not sure my sister ever truly appreciated them the way I did. For her part, she used to bemoan the loss of those mornings. She believed church was where the action was and longed to be amidst the sea of humanity shuffling in and out of the pews. For me, I had no interest beyond a mild curiosity that was nowhere near powerful enough to tear me away from the newest mystery stories or the promise of butter and fresh maple syrup.

Inside, the church smelled old and musty, the cold stone contrasting with the aged wood to create a depth of history. The lights were off, but the muted, gray-tinged sunlight shone in through the glass windowpanes, allowing me to navigate my way through the gift shop and out into a narrow hallway. I slipped through the doorway and started to turn to my right, but a flash of movement caught my eye, and I glanced left just

in time to see a figure slip through the door at the opposite end of the hall.

I only caught a glimpse, but my mind registered a familiar figure wearing khaki pants and a short-sleeved button up, with traces of baby fat clinging to his jowls. My chest tightened, and a flash of light burst somewhere behind my left eye. I stumbled, hit one knee, and pushed myself back up, grasping the wall and blinking against the dark stars flittering across my vision before starting after him. Half a dozen steps carried me to the end of the hall, and I seized the door and swung it open before walking into the main nave where the congregation would gather.

“Sergeant Mayfield, I presume,” a man’s voice said from somewhere to my left. “You’ve arrived at last. That’s good. I’ve been so looking forward to speaking with you.”

## Toe the Line. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0912hrs

I ran a quick situational assessment and didn't like what I saw.

From a tactical perspective, churches are a nightmare. Not only are you dealing with multiple stories, but the stained glass windows wreak havoc with your line of sight, creating unusual shadow patterns for potential assailants to shelter in. Add that to the vaulted ceilings and large orchestra equipment that fills the upper loft, and any tactical commander worth their salt would order their men out and set fire to the building from afar if given the chance.

Unfortunately, I didn't have any fire.

But as it turned out, I also wasn't under attack. At least not directly.

The last of the dark stars flittering across my vision dissipated, revealing the nave's interior. The gray-cast sunshine filtered in through the aforementioned stained glass windows, casting its light down on the dark wood pews and cherry-red rows of candles. The floor was a white tile, and the walls were painted cream, lined with brightly colored paintings depicting images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus framed in gold. Three-foot-tall marble statues stood in front of every other window, depicting angels, apostles, and images of the crucifixion. As I stepped into the room, I swear I saw the statues turn their eyes toward me, peering out from behind their immutable faces to regard me, but their gazes disappeared in the space of a single blink, their eyes flickering back into lifeless stone.

"Are you alright, Sergeant Mayfield?" a man's voice asked.

I swallowed, and forced myself back to the present, following the voice to my right, where a man stood beside an erected painting easel. He was a few inches north of six feet, with silver hair shaped into a layered cut and age spots

marring the skin around his eyes. A heavy brow ridge caused the gray-tinged morning light to cast shadows down onto his brown orbs, making them appear almost black. He was dressed in a dark robe lacking adornments, and had removed his white tab, leaving the collar open to reveal the flesh beneath. As he turned to regard me, I saw he held an oval-shaped painting palette in one hand, globs of color spread around its surface.

“There was a man. He came through the doorway a second before I did.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Don’t tell me what’s possible,” I snapped, frustration showing through my voice. “I saw him, clear as day. He came through the door and...” My voice trailed off. Assuming I was correct, and Topher had gone through the door ahead of me, he wouldn’t have had time to get clear of the nave before I followed him through. Even if the congregation doorway wasn’t locked up tight. He would have had to cross the entire length of the church in less than a couple of seconds, or else learned to fly.

I didn’t think either of those was likely, especially considering what I knew about Topher to be true, but I peered up toward the rafters just to be on the safe side.

“The house of God is a place of miracles,” the man nearby the painting easel said. “Perhaps the Spirit has blessed you with a vision, one meant to carry you to the here and now.”

“Why would it do that?” I asked, not bothering to hide my skepticism.

“So that we might speak.”

I took a breath and then shook my head, letting it out in a rush before bringing my gaze back down. “The only way we’d have anything to talk about is if...” I trailed off and winced. “Oh, crap. You’re Father Osvaldo Irons, aren’t you?”



The man beside the easel inclined his head a fraction of an inch. “Pleasure to meet you, Sergeant. I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“You know who I am.” It wasn’t a question, but Father Irons gave a barely perceptible nod as I raced to work through the implications. “I didn’t realize I’d become popular.”

“On the contrary, you’re becoming quite well known within certain circles.”

“What circles would those be?”

The corner of Father Irons’ mouth flickered up into the ghost of a smile and he turned back toward his painting, dipping his brush into the soft white paint and bringing it to the canvas with soft, delicate strokes. “Sergeant Chloe Mayfield, adopted daughter of acclaimed novelist Peter Reilly, a Boston native assigned to the recently formed Blue Moon Division.”

I didn’t speak, but something in my face must have betrayed my discomfort, because Father Irons let out a soft laugh.

“Come now, Sergeant. You’ve become the unofficial figurehead of the only division in the entire country dedicated to the investigation of the paranormal, a genre for which my disdain is well known. One could argue that it would be negligent of me not to educate myself as to your capabilities.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want you to be negligent now, would we?”

“Certainly not. Tell me, how are you enjoying your new role?”

“It’s got its ups and downs.”

“And Lieutenant John Kermit? Do you find him a competent commander to serve under?”

“I find him brilliant, as a matter of fact, but I didn’t come here to answer questions about him.”

“Oh, no? What did you come here for? I’m afraid we limit confession to service hours, although I could make an exception should this be of particular importance.”

I shifted my stance, bringing one arm up and resting my hand on the shield on my belt. “Do you do that often? Make exceptions so you can listen to people confess their sins?”

“When the mood takes me.”

“And do you get a lot of law enforcement officers inside your confessional?”

“A fair few,” he admitted, dipping his brush down for more paint. “Although if you’re asking if I take any secret glee from hearing the sins of those sworn to protect and serve, the answer is no.”

“What about feelings of moral superiority? After all, you hear everyone’s little sins and then you give them token penance. I imagine that sort of thing strokes the ego pretty hard.”

“Moral superiority is a failing of many of our kind, though not one I suffer from. Particularly in the case of law-enforcement. The men and women of the Boston Police Department crawl through the darkest streets to catch glimpses of the demons that slink about within. Their souls cannot help but to be touched by the darkness just as one cannot help dirtying up their boots when trudging through the mud. They are neither to be pitied nor scorned for their shortcomings.”

I grunted and regarded him for a long moment before starting forward. I circled wide around the floor, coming up behind him and peering down at the half-finished canvas mounted atop the easel. It was a still-life depicting the statue of Christ in the corner. He was standing within a golden archway, dressed in flowing white robes with a red sash over one shoulder. The rounded stoup of holy water stood before

him. A blue-glass bowl surrounded by a marble base with intricately carved columns running along its exterior. Gold inlay filled the tiny archways, and in the painting, steam rose from the holy water filling the stoup. A soft layer of white represented the tiles beneath our feet, but unlike the ones before me, these bore heavy cracks and blemishes, broken bits standing up at jagged angles where the grout had been worn away to reveal the darkness below. There were no overt demonic figures, but slight variations in the gray revealed formless bodies struggling and writhing against one another.

“You and I are not so different, you know,” Father Irons said, regarding me with a sideways glance. “You seek to disprove the supernatural in order to alleviate people’s fears and suffering. I seek merely to shield them against it. To offer them a place of solace and safety, both for their mortal bodies and their eternal souls. We could help one another.”

“Little early for the let’s be friends speech, isn’t it?”

“I am merely pointing out the obvious. After all, our aims are not so different. The shield and the cross would present a formidable opposition against the darkness that has taken root within our city.”

“No argument there, but I guess it will all depend on how you answer my next question.”

“What do you wish to know, Sergeant?”

I turned and gave him a hard look. “Are you killing witches in my city?”

Father Irons’ face could have been carved from the same marble that made up the statues inside the building. I like to think I’d gotten pretty good at reading people over the past few years, but he gave me nothing, and a long second passed before he turned and laid his palette down atop the nearest pew.

“I could have you fired for even daring to ask me that question.”

“I believe it.”

“And yet you did it anyway?” He *tsked*. “Rather reckless of you.”

“They say with great risk comes great reward. Pretty sure I read that somewhere. Either way, how about it, Father? Any blood on your hands you want to confess to?”

He gave me a wry look and shook his head. “First, answer me a question. How long have you been on the force?”

“Couple of years.”

“Are things in this city better or worse than when you began?”

I frowned and considered a long moment before answering. “Why should that matter?”

“Indulge me.”

I shrugged. “It depends. Crime has an ebb and flow to it. Violent crime is up, white collar crime is down, and vice versa.”

“And your lieutenant? Were you to pose the same question to him? What do you suppose he would say? Are things better now than they were five years ago? How about ten? Twenty even?”

I shifted my stance and cocked my head to the side. “Where are you going with this, Father?”

“The city is in decline,” he said. “It’s people have turned their faces away from the Church, and its leaders gorge themselves on gluttony and lust.”

“Leaders like your friend, Mayor Altair?”

“Careful there, Sergeant.”

“We’ve already established that I’m reckless. I figure why stop now?”

“A darkness has descended upon this city, and its roots are that of witchcraft and pagan worship. They have dug down, deep into the city’s foundation, and they have been allowed to fester to the point where they now burst from the very ground beneath our feet, seizing those who draw too near, and drowning them in the darkness. Even a blind man could see that it cannot be allowed to continue.”

I snorted. “A blind man did see it. The way you speak reminds me of him, except his beef was with money. He wanted to blow up the city and start again.”

Father Irons made an acknowledging sound. “Would that be the recently incarcerated Gerome Reed? Yes, I’ve read his writings. A bit on the grandiose side, but not without merit.”

“You realize you just said that you agreed with a soon to be convicted mass killer?”

“I did not say I agreed with him. I said it had merit. His methods were barbaric, it’s true, but the underlying principles are sound. More importantly, he is correct in that people have lost themselves. Their sense of self, of community, has been all but forsaken, reduced to a brief glimmer of an idea, only faintly recalled in times of attack or crisis.” Father Irons shook his head. “The very insects beneath our feet do better.”

“And you’re going to change that?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. You see, I know the name of the one who assaults this city.”

“Well, by all means, don’t keep me in suspense.”

Father Irons gave me a disapproving look, but he continued on. “The demon’s name is Ego. Walk down any street in this city and you’ll find people under its influence, feeding away their lives to their cell phones while ignoring the needs of those around them. It lingers beneath the streets, whispering soft encouragement to the citizens, urging them to turn their eyes away from the heavens and gorge themselves on images

of sex and pain while music depicting unnatural acts fills their ears.”

“And the witches are to blame? Because last I looked, I don’t recall any of them working for the cell phone company.”

“The witches have laid the foundation from which the demon now poisons the city. While the church leaders looked on in silence, Ego and those under his command have seduced away the populace. They lure the men in with promises of fornication, and draw the women and children close with whispers of unnatural power the likes of which no mortal was ever meant to wield.”

“All that, huh?”

“And more. They have undercut the public’s faith in the church itself. Spreading slander and lies about wrongdoings done to our young.”

“You’re referring to the Spotlight investigation?”

He nodded. “Such filthy lies could only come from the blasphemous witches who willingly give themselves over to the demons that fester beneath the streets. It is they who have brought us to our darkest hour.”

“And that’s why you’re here?”

He met my gaze for a long moment. “Yes, Sergeant. That is exactly why I am here. The witches must be brought to heel and shown the error of their ways, so that the population can repent and return to the safety of the church.”

“And suppose the witches are not in a repenting mood?”

“Then they must be corrected, as a parent corrects its child. If the populace cannot see their way forward, then we must take them by the hand, and purge every witch and idolater who would seek to spread the darkness.”

“And you seriously expect me to go along with this?”

“Why not? Does the safety of the city’s citizens not concern you?”

“Oh, it concerns me plenty, but I’m not convinced by your reasoning and I’m definitely not convinced by your methods.”

Father Irons’ face tightened. “A pity. I’d hoped you would be more open-minded.”

“Me? What about you? Boston’s history stretches back a long time, and more accomplished men than you have tried to stomp out the witches and failed. What makes you different from them?”

“God is on my side.”

“Said every tyrant ever.”

“If the promise of a spiritual reward fails to entice you, perhaps we could arrange for something more concrete? As you have so kindly pointed out, my friendship with the mayor is well known. I could speak to him on your behalf, even arrange a transfer to a more prestigious division, should you wish it?”

“Meaning I’d be out of your way?”

“If I wanted you out of my way, I’d have had you terminated from the department. I was thinking somewhere in which you could do some true good within this city. Homicide, perhaps.”

A small shiver went through me, but I tried not to let it show. “Something tells me that I wouldn’t do so well there.”

“Hmm, you might be right. Then again, perhaps if there were a leadership change. If Detective Everett Mackleroy were to step down or accept early retirement, you might find it a more welcoming environment.”

My eyes didn’t bulge, but it was a close thing. “You weren’t kidding when you said you’d been researching me.”

“I’ve found it pays to know my allies, as well as my enemies. You need not be either, but let me be clear. The battle for the soul of Boston is coming, and I intend to restore this city’s dignity and sanctity through whatever means necessary.”

“And here I thought you said you weren’t one for grandiose ideas.”

“It is not an idea, Sergeant. It is a fact. I have come to save this city, and if you will not stand beside me, then I warn you not to get in my way.”

“And I warn you. If I find even a shred of evidence that you had anything to do with those women who’ve gone missing, you’ll be waging your war from inside a prison cell. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” Father Irons said and smiled. “But I would urge you to think long and hard about where your allegiances lie. You’re playing with the big boys now, Sergeant. Are you sure you’re ready?”

I met his gaze for a long moment, then I forced a smile onto my face. “You know, Ambretta liked to paint as well. The two of you would have had something in common. Who would have thought?”

Father Irons blinked, and confusion settled on his features as I turned and made my way over to the front doorway. I slid the deadbolt, then pushed the doors open, the light pitter-patter of drizzling rain rising to greet me as I made my way out into the street.



# Not All Monsters Have Fangs. May 7<sup>th</sup> 0936hrs

I came out of St. Leonard's feeling like I needed a bath. Normally, the rain might have helped, but there was a greasy feeling in the raindrop's residue that made my skin crawl. I increased my pace, hurrying back to where I'd parked my car, and dropped down into the driver's seat, letting my head fall back against the headrest.

I suppose, in retrospect, my meeting with Father Irons could have gone worse, but short of brawling in the street or an outright gunfight, it was hard to see how.

Driving over, I wasn't sure what I should expect, but having now met the man, he was everything I feared he might be. Pompous, judgmental, egotistical, and not above using his social connections for personal gain. I mulled it over for a moment, then added dangerous to that list as well.

To make matters worse, I still wasn't sure if he was my murderer.

Did I believe he would delight in news of the witches' demise? Absolutely. Would he take human life if he deemed it necessary to accomplish his goals? I was certain that he would. But knowing someone might commit murder is a long way from proving that they'd actually done so, and I was nowhere near certain.

I sighed and brought my arm around, rubbing the back of my neck where a dull ache had taken form. I didn't think I'd pulled anything. It was just exhaustion. I'd been carrying this load for weeks, and now I found myself wishing I had someone to help shoulder the weight.

Sometimes in life it helps to talk it through, and I didn't realize I'd reached that point until I'd pulled my cellphone

from my pocket and laid it on my lap. Staring down, I scrolled through my contacts list, but wasn't sure who to dial.

Rickson was my go-to guy when it came to dealing with department issues, but he'd already stuck his neck out for me this morning, and I felt like it was too soon for me to dump this back in his lap.

I found Alex's name and hesitated before I hit the green Send button. My phone picked up the connection, and it rang a handful of times before going to voicemail. I started to speak, then realized I didn't know what to say and clicked the red End button before letting my hand fall.

So much for that.

I debated a moment, then sighed again. I didn't consider myself to be a whiner by nature, but sitting there on the side of the road, I couldn't deny that I was feeling a little down, and more importantly, alone. I could call my stepdad, but I knew he would want me to drive out to see him, and I couldn't afford the time right now. There was no one back at Blue Moon I felt comfortable confiding in, and the Sons of Liberty maintained a strict hangover policy that ensured they wouldn't be up and moving for several hours yet. I didn't have many non-police friends, and my closest one, Daphne, was still angry at me for the Drowned Harbor incident last year.

As I stared down, it suddenly occurred to me that there was one person I could call. Someone who might be willing to lend an ear. I wasn't sure if speaking with her would make me feel better or worse, but there was only one way to find out.

I dialed my sister.

Cambrie Mayfield had spent the past decade as a full-time student, switching between degrees as a form of camouflage while searching for a soon-to-be rich husband. Age had caught up with her, and last year, after a blunt heart-to-heart chat, she'd taken a leave of absence from her studies and joined the police academy. She'd been going every day since, as well as

volunteering at the station on weekends. I was also pretty sure she was dating my boss, Deputy Bulwark, but neither of us had spoken about it since the first time it came up. That last one stung, partly because I couldn't help but feel as if I were somehow to blame. She'd come seeking my advice, but I'd been tired, and sore, and rather than tell her I didn't think it was a good idea, I said it was her decision to make and washed my hands of the whole affair. Ever since, it had been hard to shake the feeling that I could have done a little better.

Cambrie answered on the third ring. Or at least I thought she did. I could barely hear her over the background noise.

"Cambrie?" I asked, plugging my opposite ear with my finger. "Is that you?"

"Chloe! Hold on a minute." There was some shuffling, and then the background noise faded to a dull roar as she came back on the line. "What's good, sister?"

"Where are you?"

"Impromptu study session."

"Why does it sound like a rave?"

"Oh, well, things were getting a bit stuffy, so we decided to liven it up a bit. Each right answer gets a Jell-o shot."

"It's ten o'clock in the morning."

"So?"

"So, isn't short term memory loss associated with overconsumption of alcohol?"

Silence greeted me for a long moment before Cambrie said, "You know, I'm not sure. I can't remember."

I sighed and shook my head. "Alright, Cambrie. You have yourself a good day."

"Hey, now wait a minute. It's been weeks since we talked, and that's all I get? Almost makes me think you've been avoiding me."

“I’ve just been busy.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah... and no.” I drew in a long breath and let it out in a huff. “It’s just, I’m working this new case, and I’ve come up against a bit of a wall. And I can feel the pressure weighing down on me like a—”

“Oh, my God, Brady, put your pants back on! We’re not doing strip-searches until next semester.” Cambrie was laughing as she said it, and the heavy feeling that had taken form in my chest sunk back down into my stomach.

“I’m sorry, Chloe. You were saying?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Study hard.”

I hadn’t meant it as an innuendo, but Cambrie’s snort told me right where her mind had gone, and I sighed and hung up the phone before dropping the phone down on the seat next to me.

Reaching up, I rubbed at my eyes, forcing myself to take a series of deep breaths in through my nose and out through my mouth. My brain felt like I was moving on autopilot. The lack of sleep and food over the past three weeks had drained my reserve, and I hadn’t had anything to eat or drink since the lone cup of coffee this morning.

“Suck it up, Mayfield,” I said aloud, dropping my hands and peering at my reflection in the rearview mirror. “So what if you’re hungry and tired? Get over it. You’re still a cop, and you’ve got a job to do. Women are dying in your city, and you can rest when you’ve found the one doing the killing and put them behind bars. Now get to it.”

As far as pep talks go, it left something to be desired, but it was enough to do the trick. I did a slow countdown from five, then turned and was about to insert the key into the ignition when my phone rang. I thought for a brief second it might be Cambrie, or even Alex, calling me back, but the number that

showed up was the one for the Blue Moon office. I caught it on the second ring and brought it up to my ear.

“Sergeant Mayfield speaking.”

“Hey, it’s me. You busy?”

I recognized Robbie’s voice on the other end. “Always, but what’s up?”

“That guy from the TSA just called again. He seems pretty frustrated that no one’s shown up yet.”

I winced and managed to not quite curse. I knew the witches were important, but the day was slipping away, and Rickson’s warning about not getting fired rang afresh in my ears.

“Right, okay, call him back and tell him I’m on my way.”

“Will do.”

I hung up the phone, then turned and seized the TSA folder from the passenger’s seat. I flipped open the first page and scanned the contents within. On the surface, it matched with what Robbie had told me. The TSA had requested Blue Moon’s assistance with a string of petty thefts that had occurred in the airport’s storage warehouse facilities. I finished skimming the report, then nodded and set the file aside before bringing the vehicle to life and pulling away from the curb.

Logan International Airport was the premiere airport of the New England area, employing some sixteen thousand residents and shuttling untold millions of travelers to a multitude of destinations. There were four main terminals, each one attached to a large central parking garage. I exited the highway and followed the signs through to where the delivery vehicles went. Along the way, Robbie texted me directions on where to meet my TSA contact, and I circled wide around the north side of the airport, passing a small fleet of Sky Chef vans before coming up alongside a long section of warehouses. I noted a white pickup truck with a blue line down the hood and

the words Transportation Security Administration written along the side. A man was standing beside the truck.

He was stocky and short, with soft blonde hair the same color as a yellow Labrador's fur. Even cut short, his hair had a permanent windblown look to it, mirrored in the red splotches along his cheeks and chin. He wore a standard TSA uniform, bright blue shirt with black pants and a gold badge attached to his left breast pocket. He had no duty belt, meaning no weapons that I could see, and wore his radio on the front of his chest, hooked into his shirt collar.

I pulled my vehicle up alongside his and killed the engine before exiting. I took my time, making a show of gathering my belongings and pointedly ignoring the bewildered expression on his face as he digested the state of my car, including the black smoke rising from the exhaust.

"Are you the one who called?" I asked.

He started to answer, but a plane's engine cut him off, its mechanical roar echoing through the warehouses, rising in volume as it sped down the runway and propelled itself upward into the sky. He waited for the sound to die down, then nodded and stuck out his hand.

"Randall Dagwood. I'm one of the supervising TSA officers here at Logan."

I took his hand and gave it a polite shake. "Sergeant Chloe Mayfield. Sorry it took me so long to get out here."

"Crazy day at the office?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"I've been there," he said and motioned with his head for me to follow. "It's this way."

He turned and led me through the parking lot to the nearest building, pausing beside a doorway and scanning a key fob on his belt. The light beside the keypad turned green, and the door opened with a mechanical click, revealing a large warehouse

stretching roughly the length of a football field. It was segregated into different areas marked by the colored tape along the floor. There were no windows on the walls, but long rows of fluorescent lights ran the length of the ceiling, shining down to illuminate the triple-story warehouse racks loaded down with pallets of boxes covered in cellophane wrap.

“Wow,” I said. “What all have you got in here?”

“What *don't* we have might be the better question,” Dagwood replied as we made our way inside. “Everything that goes into the airport comes through here first. That includes the duty-free shops, restaurant produce, gift store merchandise. You name it. Once it's deemed secure, it gets taken into the airport by way of an underground tunnel, then delivered to the storefronts via a series of back entrances not accessible to the public.”

“Or so you think.”

Dagwood frowned. “Yeah. So we think. Can I be honest, Sergeant Mayfield?”

“By all means.”

“I voted against calling you guys. Nothing personal, but this whole phantom thing started out as a joke, just TSA guys busting each other's nuts, but somehow management got hold of it, and, well...”

“Here I am.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think's happening?”

“Honestly? I have no darn idea. It's a mystery, that's for sure. But I don't much believe in ghosts.”

I made an acknowledging sound. “Can I let you in on a little secret? I don't much believe in them either.”

Dagwood frowned. “Wait, seriously? I thought you hunted them for a living.”

“Sort of. But that doesn’t mean I believe.”

“Is that why you don’t have any of that ghost hunter stuff? You know, the EVP recorders and thermal cameras.”

“Pretty much. I prefer to rely on good old-fashioned detective work.”

“Huh,” Dagwood said, his expression considering. “If you don’t mind me asking, how did you even get this gig?”

“It’s harder than you think. You’ve got to screw up so badly that no one wants to work with you, but not so badly that they can fire you.”

“No kidding?”

“Scout’s honor,” I said and crossed my chest. “When did you first start noticing the thefts?”

“A couple of weeks back. It was little things at first. Missing boxes. Candy wrappers in the trash after they’d been emptied. We thought it was one of our people, or maybe one of the delivery guys, but we’ve checked and come up with nothing. So we turned our attention to the groundskeepers and the baggage movers, thinking one of them might be sneaking in, but again, no luck.”

“How easy would it be for someone like that to get inside the warehouse?”

Dagwood pointed up toward the ceiling. “Harder than you think. See how there are no windows? That’s intentional. There are only three doors in and out of this warehouse, and we have them under tight security. It’s impossible to open one without leaving a digital record, and you can’t leave them propped open without triggering an alarm.”

“What all has the phantom taken so far?”

“Food, mostly. Some alcohol. Couple boxes of cheap perfume.”

“And the cameras haven’t caught anything?”



He shook his head. “The height of the stacks makes it impossible to watch everywhere at once. Our security expert says we’d need to raise the roof by at least ten feet in order for the cameras to achieve any sort of over watch position.”

“Sounds expensive.”

“That’s what management said.”

“So, nothing?”

“No. Whoever is doing this seems to know where the cameras are, and they’re taking pains to avoid them. All we’ve caught so far is little things. Flashes of shadow where nothing should be moving and such. By itself, it might not seem like a big deal, but if they can get into the warehouse—”

“They could potentially get into the airport.” I drew in a deep breath and let it out in a rush.

Everyone knew that airport security had received a significant influx of attention and resources in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Boston was no exception. If anything, we’d become more vigilant since the marathon bombings, and therein lay the problem. If the thief could gain access to a secured area, they could potentially access the airport itself. Follow that one step further and you realized they could potentially access the planes, which sent the perceived threat level skyrocketing.

The case suddenly didn’t feel so little anymore. Especially once I realized that if I couldn’t bring it to a swift conclusion, then the powers that be would have no choice but to shut down the airport. The idea of a phantom haunting a church or an opera house might have romantic appeal, but a major international airport? Where lives would be at risk? Suddenly, it seemed a heck of a lot less enchanting.

I brought my hands up and rubbed my face, forcing myself to clear my mind and examine the possible explanations.

Option one. The airport warehouse was being haunted by a phantom with a sweet tooth. That was an easy discard, since I didn't believe in phantoms, no more than I believed in spooks, goblins, demons or revenants. Whatever was happening here, there was a logical explanation. I just needed to figure out what it was.

Option two. Someone from the inside, likely one of the TSA officers, was using the warehouse as their own personal Quickie Mart. That one was harder to discard, since I'd learned never to underestimate people's ability to self-sabotage. This wouldn't be the first time I'd seen someone throw away a good job because they didn't feel like paying for a soda pop. That being said, this went beyond mere careless entitlement. If it was one of the TSA officers, they had to know that their pilfering hadn't gone unnoticed, and the fact that they continued to do so suggested this was more than just convenience. It was bordering on a personal vendetta, which could take weeks to get to the bottom of.

Option three was that the goods were being pilfered by a third party, one not directly related to the airport but who had access to the warehouse and no qualms about taking without asking. Dagwood wasn't wrong when he said it could be one of the ground crew or baggage handlers, but much like the TSA, they should have realized that someone was on to them by now. That was the part that was tripping me up. Pilfering is one thing, but keeping at it after the thefts had been discovered felt like a step too far.

Which meant it was most likely someone not directly connected to the airport, but who had figured out how to access the warehouse at whim. Which begged the question, how? Peering around, Dagwood had been correct in that there were no windows, and the roof stood at least twenty feet tall. Easy enough to rappel down, but extremely difficult if you are looking to take merchandise back out with you. I considered it for a moment, then concluded that our phantom was most likely coming in via the ground level.

Unfortunately, knowing that didn't make my job any easier. Assuming that Dagwood wasn't over-exaggerating the three entryway doors' security measures, then our phantom was coming in some other way. It was safe to assume that there were no hidden doorways that had gone undiscovered, which meant they had to have some other way of getting inside. I considered it for several minutes, making my way down the aisles and peering at the boxes of goods.

During the day, this warehouse was probably inhabited by dozens of airport workers moving large quantities of merchandise through the security checkpoints, not to mention truck drivers and security personnel. Our phantom must have gone to great lengths to disguise their entrance, or else had some way of ensuring no one would accidentally stumble upon their route. I asked myself how I would go about doing that if I were in their place, and it was three aisles later when it finally hit me.

“Dagwood, how many shops are inside Logan Airport?”

“Total?” He considered for a moment. “I'm not sure. North of fifty.”

“And how many have shut down recently? Say in the last year.”

“Three.”

“Any of them leave their stuff behind?”

He stared at me for a moment, then I saw the light go on in his eyes, and he motioned me to follow. We made our way down to the southeastern corner of the warehouse, halting halfway down the aisle before he turned and motioned to one of the storage racks.

“Tom's Electronics didn't have much in the way of inventory, and the second was a beauty spa that took all their stuff with them when they left. The third one was Jenny Green Juices, and this is what they left behind.”

Peering at the storage rack, I let out a low grunt. There were dozens of boxes lined with green writing and stenciled leaves, stacked high and wrapped in cellophane. When I reached out to touch them, however, they gave way easily, as if they contained no more than packing material. I pulled them off, feeling momentarily like She-Hulk as I lifted the entire pallet and set it aside.

“Whoa!” Dagwood’s eyes widened.

I smiled, feeling a momentary flash of satisfaction. “I assume this warehouse is a pretty busy place?”

“Of course.”

“Meaning no one has extra time to go looking into merchandise that no one’s waiting for.”

I pulled aside the lightweight boxes, clearing them from the racks until only one remained. It was a large box, situated on the bottom of the stack. When I went to lift it aside, it didn’t move. I tried a second time, then reached down and drew out my knife, a gift from our armorer, Robert Warman, and cut across the tape.

It gave way easily, having already been cut before, and the flaps opened to reveal a gaping hole extending straight down through the storage rack and into the concrete floor. It was a large opening, big enough for two people or, more likely, for pilfering stolen goods.

“Think I figured out your phantom problem,” I said and motioned for him to take a peek.

Dagwood glanced inside and let out a surprised grunt. “Geez Louise. Yeah, looks like it.”

“Give me a hand.”

Dagwood took my hand and held me steady as I crawled into the box, coming along the edge of the hole.

“You coming?”

He shook his head. “I can’t. I need to call this in. Then we need to set up a perimeter to ensure the airport remains secure.”

“Suit yourself. Just don’t let anyone seal it until I come back, okay?”

“You’re seriously going down there? That’s nuts.”

“So I’ve been told. But that’s the other prerequisite for the job. You’ve got to be willing to do the things no one in their right mind would want to do.”

## Into the Depths. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1030hrs

There was about a four-foot drop from the tunnel mouth to the concrete below. I landed in a low crouch and drew my pistol from its holster, activating the flashlight attached to the under barrel and slowly peered around.

I was in some sort of circular shaft. It wasn't wet, a fact for which I was thankful, but there was a damp, moldy smell to the air that sent a shiver running down my spine. Lowering the flashlight, I spotted bits of torn candy wrappers along the floor, as well as an old wooden four-step ladder laid on its side. That must be how the phantom was navigating the tunnel mouth and making its way out through the warehouse.

“Sergeant Mayfield?” Dagwood called from above me.

“Yeah, I'm here.”

“Is it... that is, are you okay?”

“Fine. I'm in some kind of service tunnel. I can't see where it connects to.”

“I'm calling it in now. Help is on the way.”

“Good to know. I'm going to go see where it leads. Remember what I said about not sealing me inside?”

He said he did, and I drew in a deep breath, and started down the length of the tunnel.

Most people aren't aware of just how much forgotten infrastructure lies beneath the city of Boston, but the current T-Line subway is the second generation of civilian movers, and the original tunnels stretch for miles beneath the city, extending through the neighboring towns like cobwebs. No one can be certain how far they go, or even how many abandoned stations there really are. The few remaining maps, most of which are in the possession of the TSA, served more like guide markers than concise directions. Which meant that

if I got lost down here, it was unlikely that anyone would ever find me.

I drew in a long breath, and reminded myself that this was better than directing traffic in the Business District, where the ever-changing flow of construction meant you could never be sure what roads would be open. I almost believed it too, until the more cynical portion of my brain pointed out that the kinds of things that live in abandoned subway tunnels don't usually take kindly to strangers.

The tunnel extended most of the length of the warehouse, eventually opening up into a larger version of itself. The damp, moldy smell intensified, and bits of water lined the circular walls, forming a running stream along the center of the floor. There were stains along the walls, brackish, moldy patterns where runoff from the previous winter had leached down from the surface. It was a couple of degrees colder inside, and the chill cut through my skin and settled in my bones.

As I moved, I noted bits of trash, as well as a few remnants of muddy footprints along the floor. I followed the direction they moved, pausing every hundred yards or so to run my knife along the concrete's exterior. Had I thought ahead, I would have brought some chalk to mark my path. Luckily, Warman's blade bit into the concrete with ease, cutting away bits of stone in a simple pattern that would, hopefully, help to guide me out again.

The temperature continued to drop, and tiny bits of frozen slush appeared, interspersed among the flowing water. I picked up my pace and came to the end of the tunnel, where it opened up into a narrow chamber. Bits of the ceiling had collapsed, broken concrete blocks laying atop the space where tracks had once been. I recognized the remains of the loading platform, noting the pile of rotting wood shoved into the corner. More signs that someone had been down here. Or more likely, several people. As I peered around the loading platform, I

noted a variety of footprints. Note that I didn't say shoe prints. They were there too, but they were outnumbered by the former. Some of those footprints belonged to men, large men no less, but it was the smaller ones that really held my focus. Women, possibly, but more likely children.

I drew in a breath and slowly dropped into a crouch, taking a minute to consider. It was no secret that Boston had struggled with its homeless population. A few years prior, city officials had shut down one of the three major shelters within the city, and those displaced had flooded the downtown area. Things had gotten bad, and those same officials had been forced to order the construction of several new emergency shelters, as well as several social outreach programs designed to get people off the street. All the major news outlets agreed those programs had been largely successful, but staring at the footprints marring the platform, I suddenly wondered if there wasn't more to the story than what we'd been told.

I walked past the platform and into the adjoining tunnel. As I moved, I kept my flashlight low, casting it up only when I needed to navigate. The smell of mold grew sharper, and the river flowing along the bottom widened, coating the edges in bits of slick ice that eventually forced me to wade into the river itself. I tried to ignore the chill of the water as it seeped through my shoes and focused instead on what I could hear.

There was no wind inside the tunnels, but every now and again I thought I caught an echo of sound. A woman's voice, I thought, slipping past almost too fast to notice and vanishing into the darkness. I gritted my teeth and increased my pace, pushing through the water and drawing within sight of the tunnel mouth before a low growl rose up from behind me.

At first, I thought it might be my imagination, or maybe the echo of the T-Line subway tram crossing close enough to shake the tunnel, but a second later it sounded again, and there was no fooling the hairs along the back of my neck, which



rose to sudden attention as my lizard brain began blaring the red alert.

I spun around, raising my pistol and the accompanying flashlight just as two figures appeared in the tunnel behind me. They weren't human, that much was clear, but more than that was difficult to say. They moved on four legs and were vaguely canine in nature, but their heavy black fur was darker than any I'd ever seen, and the heavy muscle on their frames suggested that they hunted things like alligators for fun. Worse still were their eyes, which glowed yellow in the darkness, reflecting the light from my flashlight back and sending shivers down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

People underestimate just how destructive animals can be, or how much damage they can inflict in a short amount of time. During my time in the academy, I'd spent some time on the K-9 range watching them train, and had a fairly good idea of their capabilities. That said, I'd never had an animal stare at me like this before. The way these things looked at me was beyond description, save to say there was a savageness to their gazes, a primal energy that made me very aware of my mortality.

I don't remember firing, but my pistol suddenly barked, and the concrete in front of the lead dog erupted, blasting dust and broken bits into the air even as the gun's report echoed through the tunnels.

Time slowed, and several things happened at once. I got my pistol back on target, but quickly realized that any hope I had of the noise or sudden impact scaring them off was grossly misplaced. The low growl that had been echoing in their chests rose in volume, transforming into a snarling howl as they broke into a sprint. They came straight at me, several hundred pounds of primal fury, and I turned and fled down the tunnel.

For anyone who's never experienced running for your life, it's a horrible experience on every level. Fear swept up and around me as I pushed through the icy river, pulling the breath

from my lungs even as it robbed my limbs of their strength and left me wanting to curl up into a ball. Working in law enforcement, I'd grown used to being the hunter. Used to being the one who ran toward the sound of gunfire, or who went first through the door into danger. Now that the shoe was on the other foot, there was a horrible finality about it that left me shaking.

I took off down the tunnel, and the ice actually worked in my favor. On an open stretch, the beasts would have been on me in moments. But they were reluctant to wade into the water, and the ice made it difficult for their paws to grip the concrete, forcing them to spread apart and lengthening the distance between us.

It was a bit of good fortune, but even as I registered it, I realized that it wasn't going to last. I needed to come up with an exit plan, and quick. I lowered my head and sprinted for the edge of the tunnel. If I could reach an open space, then, at the very least, I would have room to maneuver, and maybe even get a couple of obstacles between the dogs and myself. I still had my pistol in one hand, though something inside warned me that it wouldn't be much of a deterrent against the beasts pursuing me. I'd need to get lucky and put them down quick. Otherwise, they would tear me apart in the time it took them to bleed to death from a flank or body shot.

The tunnel mouth came into view, revealing a large chamber. My flashlight was waving too much for me to get a glimpse of what lay beyond, but as I reached the edge, I caught a brief flash of light to my right. My brain registered it as sunlight, and I turned that way instinctively, sprinting forward before the more pragmatic side of me realized that there was no way sunlight could have found its way down here. I tried to stop, but it was too late. My shoes slipped in the slush, and I careened forward, crashing through a wooden barrier and down a flight of stairs I hadn't even realized were there.

I came down hard, landing in a heap at the foot of the stairs, surrounded by broken wooden planks. The back of my skull struck the concrete, and dark stars flashed across my vision, parading across my sight and leaving me dizzy from impact. I tried to rise, but my limbs weren't working right, and a bright flash suddenly appeared, a burning point of focus casting away the stars. Little by little, I blinked my vision clear, eventually registering the lantern hanging above my head, and the faces beside it.

There were six or seven of them. Pale-skinned and dirty, their lips open to reveal cruel smiles filled with rotten teeth. They wore a plethora of mismatched clothes, lining their bodies in layers to protect against the cold as they drew up around me, pressing in close. Panic welled up in me, and I started to rise, but something hit my face, striking one side, then the other. The room flashed, spinning around for a painful moment before grimy hands seized me and forced me up to my feet.

They spun me around, the lantern temporarily dispelling my night vision. When my sight did eventually clear, I found myself standing face to face with a sour-skinned woman with hair cut short and uneven. Unlike the others, she wore no jacket, only a stretched-out blouse hanging off one shoulder, and army BDU pants.

I noted my pistol in her waistband, then continued down to her bare feet, standing in the water, heedless of the cold. There was something familiar about her, but I didn't realize what it was until her mouth split open and an off-kilter giggle rang out.

A flash of memory took me back to this morning, when I'd seen her rocking in the rain outside the homeless shelter. She noted the recognition in my eyes and reached out, shoving the crudely cut bit of soggy cardboard into my face.

"I warned you, didn't I? Mind the green tooth. But you didn't listen. And now, the Great Upheaval has its first

victim.”

## The Great Upheaval. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1047hrs

Every officer who dons the uniform knows there's a chance they might be asked to lay down their life in the line of duty. We know it, we accept it, but that doesn't necessarily mean we want to listen to people cheer while we do it.

A cry went up from the tunnel-dwellers as they seized hold of my arms and dragged me back up the stairs. I fought and kicked, but there were too many of them, and no sooner did I push one back than another moved in to take their place. They laughed as they herded me along, their faces spinning in and out of my vision, and once we reached the top of the stairs, they forced me into the middle of the tunnel and kicked my feet out from under me. My knees hit the water, and I tried to lift my head, but one of them had me by the back of the neck, and I ended up peering sideways and catching sight of the twin dogs that had been pursuing me.

Whatever animosity they had toward me clearly didn't extend to the tunnel-dwellers, and they circled around the perimeter of the group, their eyes reflecting the lantern light as they impatiently pawed at the earth. I was sucking in air, fear and adrenaline causing my breaths to come fast and labored. The tunnel-dwellers surrounding me continued to scream, and the hand around the back of my neck vanished, replaced a moment later by the sour-skinned leader, who sunk her fingers into my hair and yanked my head back, forcing my chin up. Our eyes met, and some distant part of me was surprised that I didn't see any anger in her gaze. Instead, it was as if she were in a trance, encompassed by a madness so dense and dark it bordered on religious fervor. She truly believed this was the heart of something grand, rather than straight up murder.

None of that made me feel any better when her opposite arm came into view, and I saw the knife clenched in her fingers. It was a weathered blade, tapered along the end, curving inward so as to resemble a falcon's talon. The sour-

skinned woman's hand was trembling, but her fingers found their strength and she steadied her arm, preparing to slash her blade across my throat when—

“Stop!”

A man's voice rang out, echoing through the tunnels and carrying the aura of command. The sour-skinned woman let out a low growl, but she hesitated and turned her head toward the sound of the voice a moment before more figures came into view.

The figures that appeared were dressed similarly to the ones holding me, heavy layers designed to keep the cold at bay, but there was a difference in the way they wore them. It was difficult to explain, but the best example I can give is to compare two homeless men sitting on the street. Imagine the first, shaking, jittery, screaming obscenities at every passerby and having animated conversations with the walls. Then picture the second, sitting quietly with his back against the wall, a small satchel open in front of him, trusting to his cardboard sign and the generosity of his fellow man to see him through.

That was the difference between the two groups. The tunnel-dwellers who held me were anxious, unable to sit still, abrupt noises and words spilling from their mouths as they stumbled in and out of madness. The newcomers seemed calmer, wearier, as if they'd seen the road ahead and saw no reason to rush.

The leader of the second party came forward, halting just inside the lantern's light. He was an older man, his shoulder length hair and beard gone almost entirely to gray, but there was a quiet strength in his lined face, and his blue eyes shone brightly as he extended his arm. “Let her go, Sickle. You know the law. We do not kill the surface dwellers.

Sickle snarled and jerked my hair, forcing my head back. “The laws have been suspended. The Great Upheaval is upon

us.”

“The Great Upheaval does not begin until Evangeline says it does. Unless you feel you know better than she?”

Sickle grimaced and made no move to disguise her anger. The two dogs surrounding us picked up on her mood, and they started forward, low growls emanating from their chests as they slunk in from the shadows. The leader of the second party remained rooted in place, and slowly stared them down, forcing each animal to look away before turning his eyes back to Sickle.

“Well?”

“She’s seen our home. The law says she dies!”

“If that is Evangeline’s wish, then so be it, but it is not for you to decide. She must be taken and given a chance to explain herself.”

Sickle jerked my head back, pressing the back of my skull against her stomach and looming over me. “Have it your way, Court, but we will take her ourselves.”

The leader of the second party, Court, snorted and shook his head. “We both know the girl would be lucky to make it fifty feet before one of your beasts left her dead and bleeding in the dark. No, Sickle, I will bring her, and ensure she arrives unharmed.” He extended his hand out toward her.

Sickle stared poison at him for several seconds, then hissed and tossed my head forward, sending me crashing forward onto all fours. Court stepped forward and took my arm, helping to lift me from the frozen water and holding me steady until I found my feet. At the same time, those loyal to him gathered around me, subtly pushing Sickle and her kind back toward the tunnel’s edge.

“We will accompany you,” Sickle said as she slowly retreated.

“Of course,” Court said. “It would be most unfortunate, were we to come to harm en route to Evangeline.”

“Yes,” Sickle said, hissing the last syllable. “Most unfortunate indeed.”

If Court heard the unspoken threat in her words, he didn’t acknowledge it. Instead, he brushed me clean, and then wrapped a blanket around me. It was worn and frayed, but it was clean, more or less, and I instinctively clutched it tight around me as he took my arm and helped me through the first few steps until my balance came back.

As we walked, I tried to get a feel for my situation. Sickle and her people had taken my gun, along with my extra ammunition. She’d also taken Warman’s knife, and my cannister of pepper spray. I still had my handcuffs, not that they would do me much good.

The cold water had seeped its way into my shoes, numbing my feet. I could still walk, but I’d need to see to that before long. In the meantime, the best I could do was stamp down every few steps, trying to work the blood down into them. The force of the impact sent tremors up my body and into my back. I didn’t want to think about the bruises I’d have from tumbling down the stairs come morning, but I was pretty sure nothing was broken.

Court and his people led me through the large chamber and into a narrow tunnel on the opposite side. As we walked, we turned at various intervals, slipping into adjacent tunnels and navigating through the underground. There were no discernible signs that I could see, nor any markers to guide our way. Eventually, I was forced to conclude that they were navigating by memory, and it scared me to think how long they must have been down here for that to be a viable option.

“Who are you people?” I asked, peering around at the figures surrounding me.



Court glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, but took a moment to consider his words before he answered. “Just people, officer. Same as you find anywhere else.”

I noted his use of the honorific. “You know me?”

Court shook his head. “I saw the badge on your belt. Way I figure, you’re TSA.” He drew in a breath and let it out in a sigh. “Told them a hundred times that warehouse tunnel was a bad idea. Easy food, but the airport is too high profile. It was only a matter of time before one of you found your way down here.”

“I’m not TSA.”

“Then who are you?”

“Sergeant Chloe Mayfield. Boston Police Department. Blue Moon Division.”

I watched his reaction closely, trying to see if it would offer me any insight into how I should direct the conversation. I didn’t think needling him would do me any good. He was too collected for that, but I also wasn’t sure which way to pivot.

Court digested the information, working through the implications before he responded. “Court McCune. Never heard of Blue Moon. Can’t see where it makes much of a difference.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“To New Acadia, to see Evangeline.”

“She’s your leader?”

He nodded in a so-so fashion. “In a sense, but it goes deeper than that. She’s the soul of our people. The heart of our community, a beacon of light for those discarded by the surface world. She gives us purpose, and unifies us together for common good.” The corner of his mouth curled down into a sour frown. “I wish I could tell you that you would be safe there, but you wouldn’t believe me, and I am growing too old

for lies. Just know that your kind are not well received, and bear that in mind when you speak to her.”

“My kind?”

“Surface folk,” he clarified.

“How many of you are there down here?”

Court shrugged. “Been a while since anyone bothered to count, but a fair few, I reckon. Plus, it’s always changing as people come and go.”

I peered around, noting the members of his crew, and the others, further back, lingering in the shadows as they kept pace. “That woman back there, Sickle.”

Court’s frown deepened. “She’s a hard one. Best stay away from her.”

“You and your folk aren’t like them. You’re different.”

“Don’t see how. We’re not any cleaner or richer.”

“Call it less crazy then.”

Court let out a snort. “They’re not so bad. Just young and still playing the victim. Haven’t figured out yet that no one’s impressed by their perceived suffering. Give them time and they’ll come around.”

“You think I have that much time?”

Court’s mouth tightened, but he didn’t answer.

“She kept talking about the Great Upheaval. Mind filling me in?”

He considered it for half a minute, debating. “Not sure if I should. Might help you, but it might hurt.”

“I’ve always been of the mind that it’s better to go into any situation informed than blind.”

Court made an acknowledging sound and nodded after a moment. “Alright then. We don’t have much time, so I’ll be

brief. Technically, it would be the second Great Upheaval.”

“Did we miss the first?”

“Only by a few hundred years,” he said. “It took place before this nation was even formed. Back then, our people lived on the surface. We called ourselves Acadians and lived in harmony with those around us. Then something changed.”

“What kind of something?”

He shrugged. “Who can say? Might be it was nothing.”

“It’s always something.”

He glanced at me. “Don’t know that I agree with that. You ever had a friend turn on you for no good reason? One day you think everything’s fine, and the next you’re at each other’s throats?”

I thought of Mack and something fluttered in my chest. “Once or twice.”

“People are funny. One minute they’re content to be your neighbor, and the next they can’t stand so much as the sight of you. Pity how that works. Either way, the New Englanders decided we had to go, and war seemed the fastest option. They forced our people from our homes and burned all that they held dear. Some of our folk fled to other lands, far-off places they only knew by name. Others sought refuge in the vast network of underground caves that once existed here, long before men came with their shovels and pickaxes and began to dig tunnels for their trains.”

“You’re all descendants of those first people?”

Court snorted and shook his head. “No one really knows where any of us come from anymore. People come and they go, but the spirit of those first settlers lives on, providing a home for those who have been shunned by the world above. The lost and discarded. The weak and abused. We take them in, make them a part of something, make sure they have food

and shelter, and in return, they follow the laws set down by Evangeline.”

“What laws?”

“Rule of three,” he said, his voice serious. “Do not grow beholden to the surface dwellers. Do not kill the surface dwellers. And, most importantly, never bring the surface dwellers into our tunnels.” He glanced over at me. “You’re the first one that I’ve seen down here in a long time. Not sure how bad that is, but it’s definitely not good.”

“But I didn’t—”

He raised his hand. “Hush now. We’re close. Best not to speak anymore.”

We fell into silence, and a short while later, the tunnel ended, opening up into a chamber that was easily three times bigger than any I’d seen before. I estimated it at roughly the same size as a soccer field, and the community that called it home was laid out in a circular pattern, with rows of tents and small huts separated by walkway paths.

There were no walls or barriers to entry, and no one standing guard, which made sense. I doubted I could find my way back here if I wanted to, and I had a sneaking suspicion that the two dogs I’d seen weren’t the only ones patrolling the nearby tunnels.

“Stay close,” Court said, and moved ahead of me. I did as he bade, peering around the entire time, taking in my surroundings while trying to avoid making eye contact with anyone.

It quickly became clear that, even within New Acadia, disparities existed. The campsites along the outer rim of the encampment were simpler, consisting of little more than tents and sleeping bags with cannisters of water and the occasional flashlight. There were numerous bicycles littered around, roughly half of which were in various states of disassembly, and campfires burned near the camp edges, providing both

warmth and, I suspected, serving to keep the rats and rodents at bay.

As we moved deeper into the community, the setups became more elaborate. Larger tents contained raised beds laid out atop wooden pallets and various personal belongings stored within plastic totes and milk crates. There were couches and lawn chairs with makeshift legs where the original had broken spread throughout, and there wasn't as much debris on the floor as I would have expected, suggesting they had some manner of disposing of their waste. Clothes hung from fishing-wire strings, and a thick bundle of electrical cords hung from the ceiling down into a circle that served as a makeshift charging station filled with phones and other devices. Evidently, they'd found some way of tapping into the city's power grid, and carefully limited their time so as not to draw notice.

At the center of the campsite was a large tent with a sign out front displaying the universal symbol for first aid. I wondered how they'd managed to convince any doctors to come down here, then realized it was most likely manned by those who, for whatever reason, had lost their licenses and their ability to make a living had been impacted enough to send them down here. Across from that was a makeshift cooking station, lined with a heavy iron grill spread over a campfire as wide as I was tall. There were three or four refrigerators operating to protect the food, and a small table filled with recycled water cooler jugs.

A large whiteboard missing its top right corner stood atop a wide easel in the center of the community, lined with handwritten notes and communications that could easily pass information along.

As we walked, faces began to appear from the tents, their gazes watching us from the darkness, then trailing us as we passed. Men, women, and children. They swept along behind us, as if bound by some large invisible net, their eyes catching

the embers of the nearby campfires as they danced between tents. I tried counting them, but gave up right around the three-dozen mark, realizing that I wasn't even a fraction of the way through. In addition to the curious expressions, I saw Sickle and her company keeping close pace. Their eyes radiated anger, discontent, and the few times I accidentally met their gazes, I could practically feel the hatred pushing back at me.

“Eyes forward,” Court said, his voice gentle. “We’re here.”

The space between the tents lengthened as we reached the opposite side of camp, forming a clear barrier that was roughly twice the width of all the other walking paths. Beyond that stood a series of multi-tiered platforms, the top layer containing an open-face tent with a crème-colored tarp and a trio of seats that looked as if they could have been pulled straight from a subway tram. A pair of cages just large enough to fit a human flanked the tarp. Both were empty, thank Christ, but their presence served as more of a warning than any words could have conveyed.

Court drew to a halt at the base of the platform and adopted a relaxed yet respectful pose, clearly expecting a wait. I tried to mimic the movement behind him, while Sickle drew to a halt on the opposite side, cursing under her breath and letting out the occasional hiss.

For a long moment, nothing happened. There were noises from behind us, soft whispers, and shuffling of feet, but even that eventually died away to nothing, and for a single, poignant moment, the entire chamber grew still.

Then a woman rose from within the tent. She came up from the shadows, rising from an unseen bed and seemingly flowing around the edges of the subway seats. I estimated she was maybe three decades my senior, closing in on fifty, but no less beautiful for it. Her features were fierce, luminous, complementing her pale skin and dove feather hair that fell in loose waves down to the small of her back. The correct term for someone with her condition would have been albinism, but

there was more to it than that. Something in her bearing made me think of a cold fireplace, the memory of heat and laughter having faded into distant ash. She wore a long-sleeved white dress with lace along the neck, and a silver belt fashioned from silver disks that resembled old coins wrapped around her waist. She swept around the dais and lowered herself down into the subway chairs, settling herself before raising her head and peering out. Eyes that were more yellow than blue swept across the crowd, causing a ripple as they moved. They scanned the entirety of the camp before coming to rest on our trio.

“Hello, Court,” Evangeline said. Her voice was polished, proper, but with a musical rhythm to it that I suspected was no accident. “It has been some time since you approached me. Do you wish to continue our prior conversation from where we left off?”

Court’s eyes dropped, and he gave a small shake. “No, Evangeline.”

“That is good,” she said. “For my answer remains unchanged. You knew this to be the case, which means it is something else that has brought you to see me. Something new? Or someone. A visitor, I think. One whose face I do not recognize.” She leaned forward, and I felt the full force of her gaze come to rest on me. It hit like a soft push, forcing me back a step. “Tell me, child, who might you be?”

## The Evangeline. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1112hrs

A gentle rumble went through the crowd lingering behind us, soft whispers carrying Evangeline's words back to those too far to hear. She noted this and held her next words until the echoes of voices had died away.

"Tell me your name, child."

Court took a quick step to the side, allowing me to face Evangeline head on. I drew in a breath, then forced my voice not to shake when I spoke. "First off, I'm not a child. My name is Sergeant Chloe Mayfield, and I'm with the Boston Police Department."

A similar rumble carried my words back, and it occurred to me that this was going to take a while if we kept having to pause for the crowd to relay information. Evangeline seemed to realize this as well, and she raised her left hand into the air, cutting off the sound as it began to sweep back through the crowd.

She allowed them a moment to settle, then motioned toward the space below her. I hesitated, then stepped forward and made my way up to the platform she indicated. Court came with me, as did Sickle, twitching and scratching at her arms on the opposite side.

"There now, that's better," Evangeline said. "Pride of purpose shines through your words, Sergeant, but be cautious, for you are far from home."

I crossed my arms. "We're still technically within the city. That means BPD still has jurisdiction."

"For now, perhaps." Evangeline turned to Sickle, who was positively trembling at the strain of having to remain still. "Something to add?"

Sickle gasped in relief and darted up the final steps to the dais, her motions jerky as she drew up beside Evangeline and



dumped my belongings down onto the chair beside her. There were six items in total. My gun, extra ammunition, cell phone, shield badge, Warman's knife, and my pepper spray.

Evangeline stared at the belongings, considering for a long moment before she swept her gaze back to me. "A formidable arsenal, Sergeant. Did you intend to wage war on our camp?"

"State law requires I carry at all times. Besides, I didn't know it was your camp. Point of fact, I don't think anyone does."

"A fact which has served us well these many years," she said. "Court?"

"It was that darn airport tunnel," he explained. "I warned you this was going to happen eventually."

"So you did. It appears time has proven you correct. Tell me then, what would you advise?"

"Death!" Sickle snapped, jerking and biting out the side of her mouth like a dog. "Kill her. The law says we kill her."

Court didn't look at me, but I could feel him weighing his words. "We all know the law, but it seems to me that we broke it first. Do not grow beholden to the surface dwellers. That's what you said. But we became dependent on that tunnel, couldn't resist going back time and time again, and we refused to be satisfied with what we'd already gotten. We sacrificed safety for greed."

"We needed the food," Sickle snapped.

Court snorted. "Chocolate and the booze, you mean. You've taken more of that than any proper food."

"Liar!"

"Enough!" Evangeline said, silencing the pair. She allowed for several moments before she turned to regard Court. "Always the voice of caution when you speak."

Court dipped his head. “I’m just saying, we’ve our share of blame in this mess, and it doesn’t seem right that she should have to pay for our mistakes.”

Evangeline made a considering sound and then turned to examine my belongings. She disregarded my gun and ammunition straight away, then tentatively lifted Warman’s knife, running one finger along the blade’s flat-side and hesitating at the maker’s mark. “A fine weapon, forged by a master craftsman.”

“I’ll be sure to let him know you approve.”

“Perhaps I may one day tell him myself.” She set the blade back down, then ran one finger along my pepper spray, dismissing it before moving onto my shield badge. “Perhaps Court is right, Sergeant Mayfield, but should we allow you to depart from us, what assurances do we have that—” She hissed suddenly and tossed my shield, jerking back as if burned. “Magic!”

I blinked. “Uh, what?”

Evangeline’s head snapped around, her gaze fierce. “You claim to bear us no ill will, yet your words fall false, betrayed by the witches’ stink. I can smell their magic on you. It burns the nose and stands in offense to everything we have created.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What do you know about witches?”

“More than they themselves even remember,” Evangeline said. “It was the witches who were responsible for our people’s plight. The Sisters of Salem who escaped the church’s flame years before. They coveted our people’s beauty, and when they could not have it, they whispered honeyed poison into our neighbor’s ears, seducing them into seeing us as monsters. The men of New England waged war upon our people, driving us down into the darkness. For three hundred years, they’ve kept us here, imprisoned within these walls, bound by their wards and spells.”

I couldn't suppress the snort I let out, or the words that spilled past my lips. "Well, no one's doing much binding now, I can assure you. Ambretta Greenhall is dead, or haven't you heard?"

I knew before I even finished speaking that I'd made a mistake, but it was too late to take it back, and the expression on Evangeline's face told me that the next words out of my mouth might be my last if I wasn't careful.

"What?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Dead? You're certain?"

I swallowed, trying to buy myself a moment to think, but the cold and the exhaustion had seeped inside my bones, making it difficult to focus. I couldn't erase what I'd said, and even if I could, Ambretta Greenhall's death was a matter of public record. Anyone with an internet connection could google her name and see the truth of her demise. It didn't make any sense to try to hide it now. Better to lean into it and see if I couldn't leverage some information. Whoever these people were, they were clearly familiar with the Sisters of Salem, and they might be able to help me identify anyone who might have cause to hurt them.

"Three weeks past. I saw her body myself."

"Three weeks..." Evangeline whispered, her eyes shining.

"And she's not the only one. Witches have been going missing for weeks. We didn't know it was happening at first, and once we became aware, we thought it was connected to the Headless Horseman slayings, but that turned out not to be the case. Most of the Sisters have gone to ground, but the killer's still out there, picking them off one by one."

"The witches are broken," Evangeline said, then again, louder. "*The witches are broken!*"

Her words traveled through the crowd, passing through the throng before rebounding in the form of cheers. Men and women alike screamed and waved their hands, pounding their

palms flat and stomping their feet until the very concrete beneath our feet trembled. I could feel them coming alive as if witnessing a beast stirring from a long hibernation.

“It is time, my children!” Evangeline screamed as she rose from her seat. She swept past me, thrusting her arms into the air and eliciting more cries from her followers. “Time to ascend from the darkness and take back all that was stolen from us.”

“Whoa there, crazy-pants,” I said, struggling to make my voice heard. “Hold on now, no one’s ascending anywhere.” I might as well have been spitting into the wind for all the notice they paid me. I glanced left and saw Court, watching the crowd with a carefully neutral expression. There was a strange glimmer in his eyes, and it took me a moment to recognize it as fear. The realization caused my heart to skip a beat and my blood suddenly ran cold in my veins. I made a snap decision and leaped forward onto the dais.

I headed for the subway chairs. Sickie noticed and moved to stop me, but I’d anticipated her action, and threw a blind elbow into the space behind me. I felt it connect, heard her gasp as she stumbled and fell onto her backside. I kept moving forward and snatched my pistol from the seat, along with my cell phone. I slid the latter into my pocket, then seized Warman’s knife. I didn’t have time for my extra ammunition, pepper spray, or shield. I spun around to find Evangeline beside me and snapped my gun up, pressing the barrel into her midsection as she pushed against me, halting so close our noses were practically touching.

“Your coming was foretold months before,” Evangeline said. “The prophet warned that a faithless herald would bring word of the witches’ demise.”

“I’m no one’s herald, and no prophet sent me. I came here looking to stop a murderer. Not to start a war.”

“Foolish child. This war began centuries ago, and now, at last, the end draws near.”

The cheers of the crowd continued to ring out, and I suddenly realized that Evangeline was using her body to shield the pistol from her followers. From their perspective, it must have appeared as if we were merely conversing. “I’m not going to let you hurt anyone.”

“It’s too late for that,” Evangeline said. “The Great Upheaval will begin anew, and this time, we shall purge the last remnants of the Salem witches, and all who remain bound under their spell.”

“I don’t think you heard me,” I said, pushing the barrel of my pistol deeper into her breadbasket. A low grunt slipped past her lips, but she remained steadfast. “In case it escaped your notice, I can end your little rebellion with a single pull of my trigger.”

“You think my people would turn from our destiny in the wake of my death? No, Sergeant, you underestimate their resolve. I am the voice of my people, reminding them of all they have suffered, but their heart exists out there, within the throng. By all means, test me and see the truth of my words.” She spread her hands and glanced down toward the pistol barrel. “Spill my blood upon this dais, and you will only hasten the coming change.”

“You can call them off.”

“I could, but I won’t. Too long have we waited for this. To turn from the path now would be to break the spirit of our people.”

“Seems I have no choice then,” I said, tightening my grip on the pistol. “Since I’m clearly not getting out of here alive. I may as well cut off the head of the serpent, so to speak.”

“Ah, now we come to it. You wish a bargain. Safe passage in exchange for your life.”

“Try in exchange for *your* life.”

“Done,” Evangeline said. “But not with impunity. You have played your part well, herald, for all that you are tainted by their magic.”

“I’m no witch.”

“No, but their lies run deep within you, and their magic corrupts your spirit. You are enthralled to them, bound to their will.”

I thought back to the last letter that Ambretta had left me, the one binding me to find her killer, and tried not to shiver. “Quit yapping and get to the deal.”

“As you wish,” she said. “Our bargain then. In honor of your services, you will be allowed safe passage from this cavern. Harm no one, and you have my word that none shall attempt to waylay you. Flee, fast and far, faithless herald. For so long as the cheers continue, your safety is assured, but once they subside, we will be at war, and the cry of our hounds will be at your feet.” She smiled and turned her palms toward the ceiling. “Do we have an agreement?”

## Escape Through the Tunnels. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1130hrs

I fled the chamber, sprinting through the sea of twisted faces and hoarse cries into the tunnels beyond. It was fear that carried me into the dark, but it was forethought that ultimately saved my life.

I couldn't say for certain when the cheering cries of the Acadian throng finally died away, but I was deep in the tunnels by the time I realized I could no longer hear them. An endless maze of twists and turns with shadows hiding imaginary canines, eager to tear my throat out in every corner. I didn't dare slow down, and it was pure luck that I found myself in a tunnel I'd visited before.

I recognized the cut along the wall, and said a silent prayer of thanks to Warman, making a mental note to buy him a lobster roll at some point. Or maybe a burger, considering the state of my bank account. I was pretty sure no one in Blue Moon would be receiving the annual budgetary raise this year, but I also knew I had bigger things to worry about than percentage points on my paycheck and that I was probably only fixating on it now as a way of distracting myself from the fact that I was going to end up in some beast's belly sooner rather than later if I didn't get my butt in gear and get back to the surface.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. I had Warman's markings to guide me, but without a starting point, I couldn't be sure which direction would lead me out of the tunnels. It was a fifty-fifty chance, with escape down one path and a painful death on the other. All I needed to do was decide which route was worth the risk and then—

*"Psst over here."*

I wasn't sure if I'd actually heard the voice or just imagined it, but my head snapped around just in time to glimpse a

familiar figure as he disappeared around the tunnel. It was the third time this had happened, and I went through the usual phases in about a millisecond, reminding myself that Topher couldn't be there, that he was dead, and that I was the one who killed him. But my legs didn't listen, or maybe they just didn't care. I found myself chasing the phantom figure, rounding the tunnel corner and sprinting past another one of my knife markings. As I ran, my conscious brain started to take a backseat, foregoing searching for the knife markings and focusing solely on catching up to the phantom figure in front of me. I caught glimpses of him here and there, always moving at an easy gait that somehow managed to keep him ahead of me. A distant part of me knew that Topher had never been this fast in real life, nor could he have ever navigated the tunnels with such ease, but what I knew and what I saw in front of me paid no heed to one another.

The chill from the water had penetrated deep into my socks and begun working its way up into my legs, but I ignored the pain as best I could, knowing that I couldn't stop. Not only were the hounds almost certainly on my scent by this point, but I feared that if I lost sight of Topher, even for a moment, he would never reappear and I would never find my way out.

As I came around the tunnel corner, I caught a flash of light at the opposite end. It was fluorescent light, rather than true sunlight, but relief flooded through me, and I crossed the length of the tunnel and darted into view, startling the trio of faces staring down into the hole. I can't remember what I said. I doubt it was entirely cohesive, but I jerked my arms through the air and they got the gist quickly enough. Two of them lowered their belts down and I seized hold of the leather cords, holding tight as they hauled me up and through. The sharp fluorescent lights stung my eyes at first, but I blinked my vision clear and peered around the warehouse.

Dagwood was there, along with roughly a dozen other TSA agents, several of them looking to be of higher rank. There



were also a bunch of mechanic types, as well as four or five state troopers with rifles slung over their back.

I snapped my arm out and pointed to each trooper in turn. “You, you, and you, get over here.”

They glanced at each other uncertainly and then cautiously made their way over. “Something wrong, Sergeant?” the lead one asked.

“You have no idea,” I answered back. “You see this hole? Anything comes out and I want you to...” I cut off suddenly, realizing that I couldn’t actually order them to open fire on anyone that followed me out. This wasn’t the army, and we weren’t at war. Those people down there, the Acadians, they were technically citizens of Boston, regardless of whether or not they wanted to acknowledge it. The police department couldn’t just indiscriminately start murdering them. At the same time, however, I didn’t want to undersell the danger. “There are people dwelling within the tunnels. Dozens of them. Maybe even hundreds. Something’s got them stirred up like a beehive. If they come this way, don’t hesitate to defend yourselves. And don’t let them establish a foothold if you can avoid it.”

A round of concerned looks passed among the troopers, but none of them went so far as to call me a liar to my face, which I took to be a good sign. Peering over, I addressed Dagwood. “How fast can you seal this tunnel?”

He motioned toward where three of the mechanics stood. Two of them had a heavy piece of sheet metal between them. The third gripped a heavy welding torch with a fuel tank on his back.

“Gus?” Dagwood asked the torch wielding man. “What do you think?”

“Figure ten or fifteen minutes, assuming these two can hold the metal straight.”

I thought about it, then nodded. It had taken me at least fifteen minutes to get here and I'd been moving at a full sprint. Actually, make that a reckless sprint. It was a miracle I didn't take a tumble on the ice and break my fool neck, much less my ankle. Even knowing the tunnels as they did, I didn't think the Acadians could get here before the tunnel was sealed. At least, I hoped not.

"Do it," I told Gus. Then to the state troopers. "You cover him. And remember what I said about not letting your guard down."

A round of nods greeted my words and the men took up positions around the tunnel, readying their rifles while the mechanics fit the metal into place and began welding it down.

I realized in that moment that I'd done all I could and headed for the door, making a halfhearted attempt at brushing myself clean as I did.

"Hey where are you going?" Dagwood asked. "You're leaving?"

"No choice. I've got to see about a war."

His expression turned baffled. "What war?"

"The one that's about to land on our doorstep," I said over my shoulder before heading outside.

My car was still where I'd left it, and I fumbled with the keys before opening the door. I brought the engine to life in a cloud of smoke and then hightailed it out of the airport, racing past a pair of employees in TSA trucks that stared at me with open mouths as I flew past.

I took the tunnel, passing through the Waterfront and looping up around the east side of Downtown before cutting through the Financial District and into the Government Center. As I pulled into the police station parking lot, I took the corner faster than I should have, and had to swerve around a Mercedes as it went to turn in. The Mercedes jerked and its

tire hit the edge of the curb a split second before the driver slapped the horn. I responded with a one-fingered salute, glimpsing the driver's business suit and figuring him for just some self-important jackass who thought he could forgo traffic court by speaking with one of the command staff directly. I flipped him off then pushed it from my mind and drove into the parking garage, leaving a trail of black smoke in my wake as I pulled into the nearest spot and killed the engine. I exited the car and raced across the lot, taking the stairs down to our office and pushing through the door before drawing to a sudden halt.

Something was wrong.

I knew it the moment I stepped inside. There was a tension in the air, an energy that lay heavy, stifling the atmosphere. It only took me a second to recognize the source.

Robbie was seated at his desk, pretending to type, while Pongo sat opposite him with a yellow legal pad and an open copy of the Massachusetts State Law Book in front of him. Lieutenant Kermit was in the kitchen, holding a teacup by the saucer and gently stirring with a spoon. Standing opposite him were Everett Mackleroy and Deputy Bulwark.

I hadn't seen Mack since the Massacre Site case. He'd ditched the cane since then, and resumed working out, adding muscle to his bulldog frame. Dressed in BDU pants and a leather jacket, he gripped a thick manilla folder, and I had a flash of memory of the last time his hands had been around my throat. My head swam, and my heart skipped a beat as the edges of my vision began closing in. I forced myself to swallow and cleared my throat before drawing in a breath. Mack glanced at me, and something in the slight upturn of his lip made me think he was reliving the same moment. I gathered my will and pushed the memory away, forcing myself to exhale before turning to regard Deputy Bulwark.

The head of the Community Engagement Bureau, Deputy Bulwark, was the person who was ultimately in charge of Blue

Moon Division. He wasn't technically Lieutenant Kermit's boss, since he was outside the rank of command, but it was close enough. Of the two, I was more surprised to see him here, since he often tried to pretend that he'd never heard of Blue Moon. He was dressed in his formal uniform, minus the duty belt, of course. He'd also removed his hat and chosen to hold it in the crook of one arm rather than lay it down on the table in front of him.

I closed the door behind me, buying myself a moment to run through the possible implications of them being there. No matter how I worked it in my mind, none of the answers were good.

Pongo shifted in his chair as I stepped inside, adjusting the textbook and allowing me to glimpse the cell phone beneath. The camera feature was on, had been for some time, and even though the screen was black, it was still recording everything that was said. I kept my face smooth, refusing to acknowledge that I'd seen anything, and made my way into the kitchen, halting at the edge where the carpet met the linoleum.

“What is this? What's going on?”

Bulwark turned, feigning surprise, even though I knew he'd noticed me coming inside. “Nothing that concerns you, Sergeant.” Funny, because I was suddenly feeling very concerned. “You can go about your duties.”

A smarter me might have backed out of the room and departed right then, but the one that was worried about actually saving lives didn't budge. Whatever was going on here couldn't be as important as the impending Acadian attack. At least, I hoped not. Regardless, there was only one way to find out.

“Sir,” I said, addressing Lieutenant Kermit. “I really need to speak to you right now. Perhaps if we could—”

“Best not, Sergeant,” Lieutenant Kermit said, and lightly stirred his tea. “I imagine whatever you have to say can wait.”

“Right, of course, sir. Except it—”

“That will be all, Sergeant,” Lieutenant Kermit said, giving me a pointed look.

Right. Message received. Shut up and get out of harm’s way. I nodded and started to turn, but the door opened before I’d gone two feet, and the suited individual I’d seen driving the Mercedes stepped inside.

He was in his early fifties, tall, with short dark hair curling along the ends and a pronounced nose and strong jawline that gave him an all-American visage. His suit was tailored, showing off his athletic figure, and something in his cologne spoke of money and wealth. He struck me as the kind of guy who had a summer house on Martha’s Vineyard, an elitist island playground just off the coast, and probably his own yacht to drive him there in lieu of the ferry.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered. I’d dealt with money before and wasn’t impressed. I firmly believed that the law applied equally to everyone, regardless of how many zeroes are in their bank account, so if this guy had followed me down here intending to recite some tired old crap about his taxes paying my salary, he was going to find out the hard way that I wasn’t interested.

I stepped forward, purposefully moving into his space, and kept my voice low. “Listen buddy, I don’t know what you’re on about, but the bumpers didn’t even touch, and since you obviously missed the big red sign stating that the parking lot was reserved for law enforcement personnel only, how about you beat off back to the financial district and we’ll call it even?”

Rather than be intimidated, the man stared at me, his gaze considering before his lips peeled back in a humorless smile. “You must be Sergeant Mayfield. I’ve heard quite a bit about you. Clearly the stories were not all exaggerations.”

“Yeah, and who might you be?”

“Mayor Altair!” Deputy Bulwark said, appearing over my shoulder. I stepped aside to let him pass and the pair exchanged a quick, professional handshake before Bulwark motioned him into the room. “Right this way, sir.”

“Let’s make this quick,” Mayor Altair said. “I’ve a dinner to attend this evening, and now I have to drop my car off at the shop to get its tire repaired.” He didn’t so much as look at me when he said the last part, but a low heat rose inside, causing my cheeks to flush.

I’d heard Mayor Frasier Altair’s name mentioned around the city for several weeks now. He’d been sworn in to replace his predecessor, Clarissa Cherri, after yours truly had caught her in an illicit liaison with an underage lover and inadvertently allowed it to be livestreamed to the greater Boston area. Since then, I’d steered clear of politics.

“I’m sure one of our uniforms would be happy to give you a ride while the mechanics in our Fleet Management Division see about your tire,” Deputy Bulwark assured him.

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary,” Mayor Altair said. “Detective Mackleroy, if you would please proceed?”

Mack nodded and raised his folder, opening the flap and drawing out a picture of a beautiful young woman from it. He laid it on the table, turning it so everyone could see. She had cover model looks, only slightly blemished by age, and dark hair that hung in thick waves down her back. “Has anyone here ever heard the name Desiree Easton before?”

A cold feeling swept through me, banishing away the embarrassment and leaving me strangely hollow. I opened my mouth, but Lieutenant Kermit beat me to it.

“No.”

“You sure about that?” Mack asked. “Never came across her name in a case file, or while out working?”

Something in his voice sent alarm bells ringing in my head. It was too poised. Too polite. Mack wasn't a polite guy. He'd just as soon beat a confession out of a suspect rather than spend the hours necessary to wring out an admission of guilt. If he was being polite, there was a reason for it, and something told me that the reason was me. I suddenly realized that my days of being a police officer may have come to an end. There were enough heavy hitters in this room that Lieutenant Kermit couldn't protect me, and if Mack was here, it meant that not only had he found some way of circumventing what I knew about his involvement in the Federal Reserve robbery, but he'd decided the time was right to strike and he was coming for my jugular.

"That's impossible to say," Lieutenant Kermit said, pausing to take a long sip of tea. "We work a variety of cases at any given time, and no one can be expected to know every player in all of them."

"How about active cases, then? Say just you and Sergeant Mayfield. Name ringing any bells?"

Lieutenant Kermit sipped his tea. Like me, he could feel the trap closing in around me, but neither of us could see the shape it was taking. Not yet. "No."

Mack nodded, then turned and looked at me. "You agree with that, Chloe?"

"That's Sergeant Mayfield to you, and yeah, I'm positive I've never met her." It wasn't technically a lie, since I'd only heard her name through Verbena and the other witches. I didn't know how much Mack knew about the Sisters of Salem, if anything, but I wasn't about to share my theory about how they were being picked off one by one by a ruthless killer, or how I thought that forensics had mistakenly credited the Headless Horseman gang with Ambretta Greenhall's death. Not in front of the mayor, and certainly not without hard evidence to back up the claim. Let it never be said that I am completely tone deaf when it comes to professional survival.

“The fact that you’re here makes me think I never will. Is she dead?”

“As a doornail,” Mack replied. He reached into the folder and drew out another photograph, laying it down atop the first. This one was far more graphic, and it sent shivers down my spine. “My boys fished her out of the Charles River just before lunchtime. Forensics is transferring her over to the medical examiner as we speak.”

I’d suspected that I wasn’t going to find Desiree alive, but the knowledge that I’d been right still hit like a gut punch. I exhaled and shook my head, fighting against the sudden surge of emotions. If Desiree was dead, then it meant the others likely were as well, which brought our death count to five.

“Any idea what killed her?”

It was Bulwark who replied. “There are a number of possibilities. We won’t know until the chief medical examiner concludes his report.”

Translation: she was in bad shape. Maybe even tortured. A cold shiver ran through me, and I gripped the nearest chair, holding the back with a white-knuckled grip until the feeling passed.

“What is this all about?” Lieutenant Kermit asked. I was pretty sure he’d noted my reaction, but kept his face smooth.

“It’s about the truth, John,” Deputy Bulwark said. “It’s about finding out what happened to this young woman, and bringing that person to justice so that her family can rest easy.”

“We have reason to believe that you know more about this than you’re letting on,” Mack said. “That you’ve been withholding information that could prove crucial to finding this woman’s murderer. If you’ve got something to say, now’s a good time.”

Neither Lieutenant Kermit nor I looked at one another, but I was pretty sure we were both thinking the same thing. By



“You” Mack meant Blue Moon, and by process of elimination, he meant me. I suddenly realized that he must have known the witches had come to see me. Even worse, he knew they told me about Desiree, that she was missing, and that I hadn’t reported it, even to my own superior. Now she was dead, and he was going to use the argument that it was my fault. Not only had I failed to sound the alert, an action that could have potentially saved her life depending on when the medical examiner’s report concluded her time of death to be, but my continued silence may have inadvertently helped a killer remain at large.

I’ll be honest, it wasn’t what I’d been expecting. I always assumed Mack’s attack would involve something more dramatic, more substantial, but I guess, in the end, it really is the small stuff that counts.

I knew Mack would love nothing more than to put me in the ground. Deputy Bulwark’s hatred probably didn’t go that far, although I doubted he would shed a tear at my passing. He’d settle for handing me my walking papers and count himself lucky to be rid of me. I’d never met Mayor Altair, but seeing as how I’d upset most of city hall, I wasn’t real hopeful that he would argue on my behalf. Even if he did, it wouldn’t matter, since he wasn’t technically part of the department. In fact, now that I thought about it, bringing him here seemed like overkill. It was wasteful, since he wasn’t going to be involved in my termination. Maybe he had taken Mayor Cherri’s departure personally, and wanted to be able to say he’d told me off to my face after I’d been sacked. It didn’t seem like a worthwhile use of time, but people can be petty, and egotistical men are the worst.

All that being said, I wasn’t about to just cash in my chips. If Mack wanted my badge, I was going to make him work for it. “I think I’ve heard enough. How about you stop beating around the bush and just say what you came here to say?”

“Alright, fine, have it your way,” Mack said. “Homicide received an email this morning, sent from a dummy address. The IT guys are trying to track it down, but they’re not hopeful. Inside, it contained the geographical coordinates of Desiree Easton’s body. Her hands and legs had been bound, and she’d been weighed down with rocks to ensure she didn’t float downstream.”

“How does that connect to Blue Moon?”

“The email also contained three pictures which showed someone meeting with the victim prior to her murder.”

I blinked, and then narrowed my eyes. “Hold on, I already told you, I’ve never met her—”

“Not you, Sergeant,” Bulwark said, and it suddenly hit me that none of the three men were looking at me. They were looking *past* me, to Lieutenant Kermit, who was peering back with a neutral face reserved exclusively for police officers who’d trained themselves not to let their emotions get the best of them.

Mack reached into the folder and drew out three printed photographs. He dropped them on the table, and they slid as they landed, allowing me a view of each.

The first photograph looked like it came from one of the nearby traffic cameras. It showed two figures talking on a street corner only a few blocks from here. Desiree was easily recognizable. The second figure was blurrier, but it was a close match for Lieutenant Kermit, dressed in his usual attire.

The second photograph was clearer. It showed the two of them inside the Haymarket together. They’d purchased a coffee, and were perusing the local goods, their heads leaned close together in a way that suggested a certain level of intimacy. Desiree was laughing at something, and there was a shine in Lieutenant Kermit’s eye, captured in the photograph, that suggested he was enjoying making her laugh.

The third photograph showed the two of them together in the Government Parking Garage. They were embracing, a slow, lingering touch that left little to the imagination regarding the nature of their relationship.

“I think it’s time we had a talk, John,” Deputy Bulwark said just as it finally hit me.

They weren’t here for me. This wasn’t Mack’s play, or at least not his last one. They were coming after Lieutenant Kermit. That’s why Mayor Altair was here. Lieutenant Kermit didn’t fit within the department’s hierarchy, which meant they would need the support of city hall if they wanted to bring him in. A police officer on leave from across the pond caught up in a murder of a young woman? It had all the makings of an international scandal, and they likely wanted to get in front of it in an attempt to control the narrative.

“I’m quite sure I’ve said all I intend to say at the moment,” Lieutenant Kermit said.

“Maybe if you give it some time, you’ll think of something new,” Deputy Bulwark said. “In fact, why don’t we move this entire conversation into the police department? More spacious there.”

“I’m going to need your gun, sir,” Mack said, and started forward.

I intercepted him before he’d made it two steps, coming nose to nose and forcing him to halt. “He doesn’t carry a gun, you pea-brained thug.” I left the second part of that sentence off, that if he even thought about trying to put handcuffs on him, I was going to take them and shove them where the sun doesn’t shine, regardless of what Deputy Bulwark and Mayor Altair thought.

“That’s quite enough, Sergeant,” Lieutenant Kermit said. He set his teacup down and took me by the arm, gently squeezing my bicep before slipping past me. “I’ll be more than

happy to speak to Deputy Bulwark and Detective Mackleroy and answer any questions they may have.”

I stared at him. “You will?”

“Of course,” he said. “After I’ve been read my Miranda rights and spoken with my attorney, of course. I trust you’ll be able to cope in my absence?”

“Don’t worry about us, sir. We’ll be fine.”

“Excellent,” he said, and turned back to Deputy Bulwark and Mack. “Well, then, after you, gentlemen.”

I followed them to the door, then watched as Mack, Lieutenant Kermit, and Mayor Altair departed. Deputy Bulwark was the last to go, and I tapped my finger on Pongo’s desk, motioning him to keep the tape running.

“Deputy Bulwark!”

For a brief moment, I thought he was going to ignore me, but then he turned, however reluctantly, and squared off against me. “I already know what you’re going to say, Sergeant, and I’m not interested in hearing it.”

“This isn’t about you taking Lieutenant Kermit in for questioning, although while we’re on the subject, we both know it’s a giant crock of sour clams. This is about the case I’m working. I’ve just come from the airport, where the TSA uncovered a tunnel leading to a subterranean campsite filled with numerous miscreants and ne’er-do-wells. I have reason to believe they’re planning on attacking the city.”

“Miscreants and ne’er-do-wells.” Deputy Bulwark snorted and shook his head. “I suppose this is like that Leviathan thingy a few months back?”

“Much more solid, sir. I saw them myself.”

“And I bet you’d love nothing more than for me to run back out there and tell the mayor all about it.” His features darkened. “You think I’m stupid? That I’m going to stand by

and let you humiliate me? Here's a newsflash for you, Mayfield. You're finished within this department. If this thing with Kermit turns out to be true, he's done, and so are you. Until then, you go ahead and handle your little army of subterranean mole-people however you think best. Heck, you can run the entire division for all I care, but if I hear any more of this nonsense, I'll have your badge as a trophy on my wall. You understand me?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good," he said, and couldn't resist adding. "Tell your sister I said hello."

I stayed quiet as he turned and made his way out, letting the door slam closed behind him.

## World Turned Upside Down. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1217hrs

I wasn't a complete idiot.

At least not all the time. And definitely not when it came to protecting my friends.

I knew Lieutenant Kermit well enough to know that he would never be mixed up in something like this. Older, distinguished gentlemen having affairs with beautiful young women wasn't uncommon in Boston, but Lieutenant Kermit wasn't that type. I'd met his wife, Margaret, on multiple occasions, including a trip to the theater where she'd saved both our lives. Theirs was the kind of relationship you only see in Hallmark Christmas movies, and they had never appeared to be anything but completely and utterly in love. Heck, the entire reason he'd remained in Boston all these years was to be with her. The notion that he would throw their entire relationship away for something as fleeting as a fling with a girl like Desiree was ludicrous.

And if all of that wasn't enough to convince me, the location where Mack said they'd found her body was. Even supposing I was wrong about Lieutenant Kermit. That he'd faltered and found himself in a relationship with Desiree Easton, and for whatever reason, it had gone badly enough that he needed to kill her. He had decades of police experience behind him, including countless murder investigations. The *last* place he would look to dispose of the body was in the Charles River. It was cliché to the point of being embarrassing. Plus, loading the body down with rocks made no sense, since, from a murderer's standpoint, you'd want that body running downriver, far from the dump site, the cold waters and muck washing away any forensic evidence and damaging the flesh as it went.

It probably says something about my friends that I based their innocence on the fact that if they wanted to murder someone, I was confident they would do it in a way that ensured the authorities never found the body, but facts are facts, and it didn't mean I was wrong.

Bottom line, the entire thing felt off, and every instinct I had told me that he was being set up. The question I couldn't figure out was why. And, perhaps even more importantly, who would have reason to do that? Assuming the pictures were forged, then the person who sent them had also known where to find Desiree's remains, which meant they were most likely my killer. I already knew of one killer with a penchant for blaming their work on others. It stood to reason I was dealing with the same person.

So how did I find them?

Traditional wisdom told me that the fastest way to come up with a list of suspects was to figure out who was close to Desiree and see if any of them might have reason to harm her. In order to do that, however, I needed to talk with the people who knew her, which was where I hit my first roadblock. I was reasonably certain that the Sisters of Salem had given me all the pertinent information they had. Reaching out to them so soon would just leave me running in circles, and I didn't have time to waste. Lieutenant Kermit was more than just my boss. He was a friend and a mentor, and the sooner I found the real killer, the sooner he'd be set free. Which meant I needed to make every minute count.

"Well, I'm outta here," Robbie said, rising from his chair. He grabbed his jacket, slid it on over his arms, and started to reach for his computer bag.

"Whoa, wait a minute. Where do you think you're going?"

Robbie blinked at me, then motioned toward the door. "Did you not see what just happened?"

“I saw, but quitting time isn’t for a few hours yet, and we’ve got work to do.”

“Not me. In case you forgot, I’m not a cop, and don’t actually work here.”

“So you’re cutting bait, just like that?”

Robbie shrugged. “What do you expect me to do?”

“Show a little gratitude for one. Or at least some self-preservation.”

“I’d rather go binge play some video games.”

I snorted. “Better enjoy them while you can, since I’m pretty sure they don’t allow games in juvenile hall.”

Robbie hesitated, then turned toward me. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on, Robbie. Go around the corner and buy yourself a clue. You and I both know your uncle didn’t have anything to do with the girl’s death.”

“Of course not. This is obviously some sort of power-play by the upper brass.”

“Maybe,” I acknowledged. “But I’m not convinced they’re behind it, and if we’re wrong, if someone really is looking to set him up, someone like our killer, then Lieutenant Kermit won’t be the only one to pay the price. Both of our butts are on the line, or haven’t you noticed?”

“Uh, no, not really.”

“Let me spell it out for you, then. The only reason you got off with community service after that whole mess with your school is because Lieutenant Kermit stood up for you. But if he can’t appear before the judge and sign off that you’ve completed your required hours, say, for example, because he’s about to stand trial for murder, then you’ll have failed to satisfy the requirements of your probation, which means you’ll be headed for juvenile hall.”



Evidently, Robbie hadn't thought that far ahead, and I watched the wheels in his head turning before they reached the inevitable conclusion. "Well, what the heck are we waiting for? We need to solve this girl's murder and get Uncle John out of this." He dropped back into his seat and set about powering up his computer.

"Thought you might see it that way."

"Yeah, yeah. Less sass and more detective work. What do you need from me?"

"First things first, I want you to try to figure out who sent that email containing the photos of your uncle. Supposedly the techs are already on it but give it a once over and see if you can find anything they haven't thought of yet. Second, I need you to find out everything you can about Desiree Easton. I need information, the type that can only come from people who knew her. See if you can locate any family or next of kin."

"Easy enough. Anything else?"

I hesitated a moment before I added. "Yeah. Run a check through the corrections system and find out where an inmate who goes by the name Mortiana is being housed. Her real name is MaryAnn Sorral. Then call the warden and tell him I need to speak with her as soon as possible."

"Oh, Sergeant, no!" Pongo's eyes were wide, and he was staring at me like I'd just suggested something egregious. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah, unfortunately."

"I don't get it. What's the big deal?" Robbie asked. "She some kind of baddie or something?"

"Something like that. She was a witch we took down shortly before you got here. You can read all about her in the Drowned Harbor case file."

"She's bad news," said Pongo.

“Then why do you want to go see her?”

“Because she might have information that can help me find the killer. She’s insane, but she was also a fighter. And right now, we really need a fighter on our side.”

## Unexpected Complications. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1230hrs

Robbie went to work, and I took a moment to excuse myself, disappearing into the restroom. It was a unisex bathroom, complete with only one toilet that smelled like the Charles River. I drew up next to the sink and drew in a handful of deep breaths, slowly counting backward from thirty before quieting my mind.

I knew what I was asking for was risky, not to mention a longshot, but the way I saw it, I didn't have any other choice. The Sisters of Salem didn't have any more leads for me to run down, and I'd exhausted all of my usual sources in the weeks following Ambretta's death. I hadn't ruled out Father Irons yet, although there was an unsettled feeling in my guts when I tried to ping him as my murderer. Something about it didn't sit right. Regardless, he was protected by Mayor Altair, and for the moment, couldn't be touched.

What was happening to Lieutenant Kermit was nothing short of an attack by someone, likely our killer, looking to remove Blue Moon from the equation. They wouldn't have done that unless they believed we were a threat to them, or that we were getting close. I needed to keep digging, keep pushing, but I didn't know which direction to go.

A memory flashed in my mind. Lying on the floor of the subway tram, beaten and bloody, staring up at Mortiana, her hand engulfed in flame, as she laughed hysterically. Phantom pain flashed through my limbs, and I gave myself a shake, forcing away the memory and pushing it back down into the darkness of my mind. I couldn't afford to entertain those thoughts right now. Couldn't afford to falter. Not when so many people were counting on me.

I drew in a breath, held it for a slow three count, then exited the bathroom, making my way back out to the trio of

cubicles.

“Pongo,” I said. “I need you to start working on Lieutenant Kermit’s legal defense.” I considered having him call Margaret, Lieutenant Kermit’s wife, but I didn’t want to have to be the one to tell her what was happening.

“Do you think it will go that far?” Pongo asked, his face stricken. “I mean, do you think they might actually charge him? That there could be a trial?”

“I hope not, but let’s prepare for the worst just in case we’re wrong.”

Robbie was still typing away, but he pushed one of those Post-It-Notes in my direction. “Here.”

“What’s this?”

“Mortianna.”

I stared at the note and frowned. “Robbie, this can’t be right. I asked you to set up a meeting with the warden at the jail.”

“She isn’t in the jail.”

I blinked and felt my body go cold. “Then where is she?”

“According to our official records, she’s been transferred to the new Inpatient Psychiatric Services unit over at Massachusetts General hospital.”

“*What?*” Whatever else I’d been expecting, it wasn’t this. “Are you sure?”

“See for yourself,” he said and motioned toward his computer screen. I looked, and he was telling the truth.

“Are they insane?”

“Well, yeah, I assume so.”

“Not the patients,” I snapped. “The doctors. And the warden. How did this ever get approved?”

“Uh, you’ll have to ask them. According to the transfer order, she’s under the care of Doctor Harden Eerie. Want me to see what I can find out about him?”

“No need. I’ll head that way now and get to the bottom of it myself.”

I made sure the troops understood their marching orders, then headed out the door and into the parking garage. As I crested the stairs, I felt a small shiver run down the base of my spine, and the hairs along the back of my neck rose to attention, warning me that I wasn’t alone a split second before I saw a figure detach himself from the wall.

“Sergeant Mayfield!”

“Oh, Christ.” I exhaled and shook my head. “Not you again.”

Marlon Baker’s hair shined under the garage’s fluorescent lights, giving it a greasy visage. The Boston Globe reporter was still dressed in the same clothes I’d seen him in this morning, and the jittery gait to his walk along with the crazed sheen in his bulging eyes said that he’d been chugging espresso like it was going out of style. His laminated badge hung from around his neck, twisting as he brought his hands up, gripping a pen and small spiral notepad.

“I was just on my way to see you. Quite a fortuitous coincidence, us running into each other like this.”

“Almost too much to be believed.”

“Ha, good one. But on a more serious note, that was quite a scene in there. John Kermit being escorted out like that by Deputy Bulwark and the Mayor? I mean, it really makes you stop and wonder who you can trust.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know homicide fished a young woman out of the Charles River this afternoon, and that the department received evidence through an anonymous source incriminating

Lieutenant Kermit in her demise. I also know your entire division is now on the chopping block, just waiting for the axe to fall.”

“You seem to know an awful lot.”

“Like I said, I’m eager to make a name for myself in this town.”

I cast a sideways glance toward him, but didn’t stop walking. “Eager enough to plant fabricated evidence on a high-ranking member of the police department in the hopes of selling a story?”

“I’m highly ambitious, Sergeant, and I’m willing to pay for good information in order to establish reliable sources. Neither of those make me a criminal, and they certainly don’t make me a murderer.”

“You better hope not, because if I find out you or anyone else at the Globe had anything to do with this, then I’ll be coming after you directly.”

“Threatening a member of the press, Sergeant? That seems like a poor career choice. I’ll let it slide this time, since you’re clearly under a great deal of stress. You have more than most to lose, should this go badly.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged. “It’s no secret that Deputy Bulwark holds you in poor favor. If Lieutenant Kermit is found to be involved in the woman’s death, it’s a safe bet that it will spell the end of your division. Given Bulwark’s personal misgivings, I imagine he’ll push for an outright termination rather than a transfer for both you and Officer Dwyer. I would say the same for your technical consultant, Mr. Rutledge I believe his name is, except I haven’t been able to find any employment record for him with the Boston police department or the city for that matter.”

“You’re not going to either. He’s a kid.”

“Excuse me?”

“A teenager doing community service.”

“Ah, that would explain it. I would imagine he’s being sponsored by Lieutenant Kermit as well? That’s unfortunate, since if he’s unable to fulfill his court obligations, they’ll likely move forward with original charges and seek incarceration. Worst-case scenario, of course.”

“Listen Marlon, you’re not telling me anything I don’t already know, so how about we cut to the chase and you tell me what you want so I can get you out of my hair?”

“I want the stories.”

“Excuse me?”

“If working at the Globe has taught me anything this last year, it’s that readers attention spans are rapidly diminishing when it comes to local news. Boston is a violent city, Sergeant, and all the stories are the same. Another murder. Another wife dead at the hands of her husband. Another drive-by shooting. Readers aren’t interested anymore. They aren’t *reading*. At best, they skim the headlines. But Blue Moon is different. There’s a uniqueness to the cases. Something my readers can’t find anywhere else. I can bring that to life.”

“Uh-huh, and if it works, you would become indispensable to the Globe.”

“It’s not just me who would benefit. I’ve looked over your past cases, especially the Massacre Site files. What you did for this city was nothing short of heroic. If it were presented to readers in the right way, they would line up to get behind your division. People love an underdog story, and a female detective, born in the very city she now protects, standing up to her superiors and refusing to bow down in lieu of what’s right? People will be begging to give you support.”

“And then what? I become a talking head for the department? A recruitment ad? Spend all my time traveling

around giving speeches?”

Marlon blinked. “Would that be so bad?”

“Maybe not on the surface, but you’re forgetting why this division exists in the first place. It isn’t for personal glory or fame. It’s to *help* people. People who are in pain, who’ve gone through trauma or lost loved ones and are desperate for some sort of reprieve.” I watched his eyes, waiting to see if my words sparked anything, but saw only blankness staring back at me. “There’s a reason we try to keep Blue Moon quiet. It isn’t just because of public opinion. The people who dress up like ghosts or goblins and spooks aren’t doing it to be funny. They’re preying on people in pain. You see my work and you think it’s all one big episode of Buffy. But you don’t see the families that lay ruined in the aftermath. The pain that these people are going through. The bodies that fall by the wayside. I don’t want Blue Moon to get out to the public, not because I’m ashamed of what I do, but because if it were to catch on, you’d have every jackhat and their idiot friends dressing up like God-only knows what and trying to scare their neighbors to death. It would be horrible. Kids dressed up in werewolf costumes being shot. Old ladies taking their last breath because they think the ghost of their abusive late husband is walking the halls. Men burning innocent women at the stake because some pastor gave a sermon that told them to rid the city of witchcraft.” I had a brief flashback to the Acadians. “I’ve seen firsthand what mass paranoia looks like, and it frightens the heck out of me. It would you too, if you bothered to look past your own ambitions.”

“You can’t stop the news, Sergeant. People have a right to know what’s happening in their city.”

“Yeah, they do.” I reached my car and opened the door, dropping down inside and bringing the engine to life. Smoke kicked up from the exhaust, blowing back on Marlon courtesy of the Charles River winds sweeping through the garage. “But



I'm under no obligation to help you. Not today, and certainly not in a way that's going to do more harm than good."

# Massachusetts General Hospital.

May 7<sup>th</sup> 1324hrs

Massachusetts General Hospital was one of the largest hospitals in the state, located in the aptly named West End neighborhood. It was also enormous, practically a city unto itself. I knew it was associated with Harvard's Medical School, but wasn't sure how exactly. Come to think of it, I didn't know much in the way of specifics, but I'd read somewhere that the hospital delivered upwards of four thousand healthy babies annually, and the fact stuck with me because it made me feel nice.

I parked in the garage, then made my way across the street and through the front entrance. Inside, it looked much like you'd expect a hospital to be. Clean, crowded, hints of rubbing alcohol and antiseptic handwash in the air. Doctors and nurses shuffled back and forth, dodging between administrative personnel wielding iPads, while families of the sick lingered near vending machines and snack stations, or else sat quietly in waiting room chairs, lost in their thoughts and staring at nothing.

I half-expected someone to stop me as I moved past the reception desk, but no one did. It was a good thing too, since I'd lost my badge down in the tunnels below the city. Luckily, body language plays an important role in perception, and if you walk around with your head up and your eyes forward, people generally assume you're where you're supposed to be.

I made my way to the elevators and then consulted the directory for the Inpatient Psychiatric Services unit. It was several floors up, and I took the elevator, exiting and following the hallway until I came to the Psychiatric Services Center. I bypassed the outpatient and addiction recovery centers, purposefully avoiding looking anyone in the eye and trying to appear focused, before finally reaching the secured inpatient unit.

A call box stood on the door, and a sign indicated that it was the patient holding area. I buzzed it twice before a receptionist came on the line. I identified myself, and thirty seconds of silence followed before she buzzed me through. I made my way through to the other side, where the aesthetic of the hospital changed dramatically. There were no paintings on the wall, no faux plants or waiting room chairs. Protective coverings secured the lights overhead, and wire mesh lined the windows. The doors became a lot thicker, and each one contained a large glass panel that allowed anyone on the other side to see through. I made my way halfway down the hall before coming to a second check-point. Several seconds passed before a female doctor appeared.

She was on the shorter side, round, approaching middle age, and looked like she'd just finished chewing a lemon, skin and all. She glared at me as she opened the door, then jerked her head impatiently.

I started to walk through, but a pair of nurses appeared around the corner, pushing a hospital bed with the covers drawn up. Dressed in blue scrubs, each wore a hair covering and a surgical mask. I sidestepped to make room, noting that the one closest to me had a silver stud in her left eyebrow. Neither glanced at me as they passed, and they disappeared around the corner before I followed them through the doorway, pausing as the sour-faced doctor closed and locked the door behind me.

I followed her down the hall and around the corner, reaching a series of offices as well as a circular nurses' station sealed in thick glass windows. There were two security guards inside, monitoring a row of television screens showing patients in the rooms beyond, as well as a handful of nurses, all of them male, gathered around a small pharmacy station containing prescription bottles as well as sedatives. An elderly man in a white lab coat stood beside the desk, reviewing a patient's chart.

“Is that Dr. Eerie?” I asked, but the woman only grunted in response, which I took to be an affirmative. I exhaled and rolled my shoulders, twisting my neck like a boxer getting ready for a fight.

Dr. Harden Eerie was in his early sixties and on the upper end of the height chart. He wasn't quite tall enough to seem freakish, but it wouldn't have surprised me to learn that he had played basketball in college. That would have been a long time ago, however. Age had taken the hair from his head and cast his goatee in shades of ash. His eyes were heterochromatic, one blue and one brown, and the differing thickness of the lenses in his glasses suggested different prescriptions within the frames.

“Ahem,” the female doctor said, and motioned for me to halt as she continued past. “Here's your visitor.”

Dr. Eerie glanced up from his chart, and his face broke apart into a wide, welcoming smile that shone back through his eyes. “Thank you, Adelyn,” he said without ever glancing at her. “This is an unexpected treat. Sergeant Chloe Mayfield, I presume? My name is Dr. Harden Eerie. It's such a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Funny, I keep hearing that today, but no one seems to actually mean it.”

“Oh, no? Such a pity. Come then, let's speak in my office and see if I cannot convince you of my sincerity.”

He motioned me toward the corner office, and I led the way into the room. It was much as I would have expected. A large desk dominated the center of the office, flanked by bookcases filled with large medical textbooks, as well as one shelf dedicated solely to philosophy. The chairs were dark leather, and there were no family photographs or personal knickknacks on the desk, though I guess that made sense. When dealing with the criminally insane, it probably pays not to let them know you have a family.

There was a man already inside. He was of medium height, with a light build and an academic aura about him that made me think of Egon from the Ghostbusters. Instead of a power pack and overalls, he wore a white lab coat and had a pencil in his mouth, gripped firmly between his teeth as he read from the textbook open on the desk.

“Ah,” Dr. Eerie said as he followed me inside. “Dr. Parrish, there you are.”

Dr. Parrish glanced up, and he straightened, slipping the pencil from his mouth. “Dr. Eerie. My apologies. I just needed to borrow this.” He motioned toward the textbook. “My own items have yet to arrive, and without it, I—”

“Of course,” Dr. Eerie said, waving away his explanation. “Anything you need, Lyndon. In fact, I’m glad you’re here. I wanted to introduce you to Chloe Mayfield.”

“Pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” Dr. Parrish said and extended his hand.

I nodded and shook. “Likewise.”

“Sergeant Mayfield is heading up the city’s new Blue Moon Division,” Dr. Eerie explained. “Isn’t that something?”

“Oh,” Dr. Parrish replied. Then his eyes widened, and he raised his hand, rubbing his forehead and the scar above his brow. “*Oh*. Yes, that’s... definitely something. Uh, if you’ll excuse me. I have patients waiting.”

He nodded his head without quite meeting my eye and hurried out of the room, leaving the textbook behind.

“I missed something there,” I said, glancing at Dr. Eerie.

“Nothing to be concerned about,” he said, closing the door behind us. “Just a private joke. Please, won’t you be seated?”

“How many of you are there?” I asked, as I lowered myself down into the chair.

“Only three. Dr. Lyndon Parrish, Dr. Adelyn Droll, and myself.”

“That must keep you busy.”

“Indeed, but I prefer to keep my staff lean. I find it helps us to remain focused, plus familiarity is good for the patients.”

“I can see how someone in this setting might be resistant to change.”

“Yes indeed. I confess, Sergeant. It’s a bit surreal, you being here.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, it’s just that I know so much about you. It’s odd to think this is only our first meeting.”

I leaned forward in my chair and brought my hands together. “Dr. Eerie, how exactly is it that you know about me?”

“Why, through my patients, of course. I speak with each of them on a weekly basis, sometimes at great length. They have quite complicated feelings towards you and it’s important that we work through those. I’m sure you would agree?”

“That depends. How many of my arrests do you have housed here?”

“Oh, a fair few. After all, my work coincides directly with the work done by Blue Moon.”

“How’s that?”

He smiled and recited as if reading from a brochure. “The study of the human mind and the effect of mythology and paranormal psychology on the criminally insane. It’s a fascinating subject. For example, your most recent catch. I believe you called him the vampire flasher? I’m speaking with him tomorrow afternoon. And, of course, we have Woodrow Miller. I believe you know him as Bloodcuddles.”

If I'd had coffee, I would have spit it out. As it was, I bolted forward in my chair. "You've got *Bloodcuddles* in there?"

"For several weeks now. Quite the enigma, that one, although he's talked about you at great lengths. And then there's Jeremy Dawngold. I don't normally treat minors, but his particular fascination with the Leviathan and the impending doom of the city was unique enough to draw my attention. I've made several requests to have Gerome Reed transferred here, but, so far have been unsuccessful. I imagine I'll get my way, in the end, but the city is waiting for the media attention to die down. And then of course there's—"

"Mortianna."

"Yes indeed. She was one of our first transfers. I've made arrangements for her sisters as well. I suspect they'll be joining her over the next few weeks."

"Sounds like you've got a who's who of Blue Moon wackos in there."

Dr. Eerie's smile slipped. "We don't use derogatory language in here, Sergeant. These are sick people in need of treatment. I'm more than confident that each of them could be restored to fully functional members of society in time."

"Do you think that's a good idea? Putting Mortiana and her sisters in a minimum-security hospital? In case it slipped your mind, they nearly burned down half the city."

"Sergeant Mayfield, our hospital is anything but minimum security. Prisoners are monitored around the clock and hospital security staff undergo special training prior to being assigned to this unit."

"All at the taxpayers' expense, I suppose?"

"It's for the taxpayers' benefit. The Dean of Harvard Medical School and I have known each other for some time. We both saw the need for this sort of facility years before it

was ever approved. What we do here will help to ensure that Boston has a brighter, safer future.”

“Friends in high places. Seems like there’s a lot of that going around lately.”

“Do you have a problem with my work, Sergeant?”

“Point of fact, I do. You’re treating these people as if they’re victims of some horrible disease. They’re not. They’re adults who made their own choices and they deserve to live with the consequences.”

“Meaning prison?”

“Darn right.”

He let out a low, disapproving sound. “I’m afraid you and I will have to disagree on that particular subject, although in truth, I’m not entirely surprised.”

“Is this the part where you tell me I’m a pessimist?”

“Quite the opposite, in fact. Based on the conversations I’ve had, I firmly believe your outlook on the human condition leans strongly toward the optimistic viewpoint. You are, however, limited in your scope. It harkens back to the timeless adage that if you give a workman a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail. You are a police officer. When you gaze down the streets of the city, you see criminals. Men and women who need to be separated from the general population, locked away and forgotten. You give no thought to rehabilitation or healing of the mind. Your only concern is punishment.”

“Try safety.”

“Perhaps, but only as a byproduct of punishment.”

“As opposed to your more sophisticated brand of medicine?”

“I don’t necessarily appreciate your condescending tone, but yes. The mind is a complex and ever-changing organism,



requiring a sophisticated approach in order to begin peeling away the layers and mechanisms which create our impulses, both positive and destructive. To truly understand it, we must —”

“Quack.”

Dr. Eerie blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I can see why they call you guys that. Quack, quack, quack. Like a duck that loves to hear itself speak.”

Dr. Eerie’s face darkened. “Sergeant, if you’re going to resort to name calling, I fear our audience must come to an end.”

“Wouldn’t that be a shame?” I snorted and shook my head. “Tell me something, doc, do you really think you can fix these people with a few heart-to-heart chats? Maybe talk about their mother a bit? Let them cry on your shoulder? That clown you’ve got hidden away back there tried to feed a live hamster to a little girl.”

“Yes, Princess Pickles. He’s expressed great remorse about that.”

“I don’t care what he’s expressed. The fact of the matter is, he did it, or would have, if I hadn’t put a stop to it. And then he tried to kill me and three of my friends. So don’t sit here and pretend that you hold the key to his salvation, when we both know darn well that there’s nothing you’re going to say that will ever make it safe for him to be released back out into the public.”

“Well, lucky for him, the correctional community does not share your defeatist attitude. He may one day be allowed to return to the public. Supervised, of course.”

“With all due respect, doctor, that’s just stupid. You let him back out, supervised or not, and he’s going to start killing people.”

“I’m not sure I care to hear any more of your toxic opinions on the subject of my patients, Sergeant. Tell me, was your sole purpose in coming here today merely to insult me and my work?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I need your help.”

Dr. Eerie scoffed. “Really?”

“I need to speak with Mortiana.”

Dr. Eerie was quiet for a long moment before he shook his head. “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“Here at Mass General Psychiatric Center, we’re committed to helping our patients heal. Their days consist of musical therapy, guided meditation, and select television programming. All of which is geared towards keeping stress hormones at a minimum. It’s a necessary technique in order to help facilitate communication with our staff. Our patients must trust that they are in a safe place, and that we have their best interest at heart.”

“They may be patients to you, but they’re also criminals, and right now, there’s another one out there murdering young women. Mortiana might have the answer as to who and why. You really want to go on record as being the one who tells me I can’t speak to her?”

“Well, that depends. If you have a warrant signed by a judge granting you permission to speak with her, then I will be more than happy to oblige the court order. If, on the other hand, this is merely a personal crusade or a way to further your own career, then I’m afraid I will have to stand by my own judgment and say that visitors are not allowed at this time. Were she to even become aware of your presence here, that knowledge could undo months of work.”

“Cut the crap, doc,” I said and stood up from my chair. “You can pump all the opera music and nature shows you want

into that room, but we both know that witch isn't going to break. I'd bet my entire year's salary that your sessions consist of nothing more than her laughing in your face or outright insulting you. Probably involve some spitting and biting too."

Dr. Eerie shrugged and spread his hands. "Some degree of resistance is to be expected. It's part of the process. Many of our patients struggle through that stage, but with patience and persistence, they all eventually pass through to the other side."

"Sounds like you're describing a kidney stone."

"Very amusing, but also entirely irrelevant. The fact of the matter is, Mortiana *is* making progress, and letting you see her would sabotage what credibility my staff has established. For that reason, I'm afraid I must deny your request. Unless, of course..."

"What?"

Dr. Eerie leaned forward, bringing his hands together in front of him and resting his elbows on his desk. "I am an avid student of the mind, Sergeant, but those of us who seek to better understand the role that mythology and paranormal psychology play within our psyche often find ourselves limited to studying those individuals that others, like yourself, deem to be criminally insane. Rare are the subjects who don't have some history of violence, or even worse, a pathological need for attention. But you, you're different."

"Because I'm not crazy?"

"That remains to be determined," he said, his gaze taking on a sudden intensity. "For the moment, however, you are unique in that you spend your days combating the supposed paranormal, not by choice, but by circumstances."

"Not exactly. I made the choice to stay in Blue Moon because I think it helps people, and because I think the people who use ghost stories and fairytale creatures as a way of preying on others deserve to be stopped."

“Yes, of course. It’s not your motives that I question. But I’m curious as to the effect it has already had on you. Most creatures found in mythology are simply mirrors of our own fears. Usually involving death and abandonment, as well as helplessness and endless toil. Those same fears twist and bend the mind, resulting in the patients you see within my facility. But what happens when someone directly combats those fears? When someone, like you, peers into the darkness and sees all the things that have terrified man since our inception? How does it alter your perception? If you were to agree to speak with me on a regular basis, say weekly, then it’s possible that a meeting could be arranged.”

“You want me to come to therapy with you?”

“Very much so. Of course, certain stipulations would need to be met. For example, you would have to be entirely forthcoming. My research requires brutal honesty.”

“Forget it. Find someone else to play guinea pig for your little head games.”

“No? Are you sure?”

“I’d give you ten minutes, maybe fifteen, if you throw in a coffee. Otherwise, you can get bent.”

Dr. Eerie made a regretful sound. “I’m very sorry to hear that, Sergeant. Unfortunately, without said promise, I cannot help you at this time. If you should change your mind, do not hesitate to contact me. Until then, I’ll be eagerly monitoring your career from afar.”

## Witches' Reinforcements. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1400hrs

I walked out of the Psychiatric Services Unit feeling angry and discouraged. The sound of Dr. Eerie's voice, as well as the intensity of his gaze, still lingered in my memory, echoing in my ears and making my skin crawl. I slipped inside the elevator and waited for the door to close before letting out a giant exhale.

Clearly, getting in to see Mortiana was going to be more difficult than I'd anticipated, but that didn't mean it was hopeless. Dr. Eerie could turn me away for now, but he said it himself. If I could get a court order, then he would have no choice but to allow me entry in to see her. So how did I get one?

Approaching a judge directly was out. Even if I could convince them that there was a killer in the city targeting witches, and that was a big if, he would still want to hear it from someone further up the food chain. With Lieutenant Kermit out of commission, that meant Deputy Bulwark.

I didn't doubt for a second that Deputy Bulwark would order me suspended without pay if he got wind that I'd tried convincing a judge to sign a warrant without his approval. So what were my other options?

Rickson had been around long enough that he might be able to come through, but it felt wrong to call him. I valued our friendship, and didn't want to risk dragging his name through the mud alongside my own if this went badly. Plus, he was still suffering the effects from the last time he'd helped me. Bottom line, this was my case, and my division. I couldn't just go running to him every time I came up against a wall.

That went double for Alex. With his federal ties, he probably stood the best chance of getting a judge's signature, but Deputy Bulwark would go bananas if he learned I'd

approached a judge without his approval, and he would go absolutely nuclear if he found out I'd tapped federal resources to do it. Of course, this was all assuming I could even get Alex on the phone, which wasn't a sure thing these days. As it stood, it felt wrong to ask for his help. Ultimately, if Blue Moon was going to be successful, then I was going to need to learn to stand on my own two feet. I needed to learn to adapt and overcome.

So what did that mean?

A part of me wondered if I shouldn't have acquiesced to Dr. Eerie's demands, but another part told me to take that idea and stuff it. Ten minutes with that whack job and his stupid theories would have driven me insane. If I didn't need therapy before speaking with him, then I definitely would after. And besides, who the heck said I needed it in the first place?

Granted, the last few months hadn't exactly been easy. There had been a lot of changes, both personally and professionally. There had also been a lot of violence involved, including some deaths, both good and bad. And sure, maybe I was having trouble sleeping at night, but really, who wouldn't? Nightmares were to be expected when people started trying to kill you. Especially when those people are wearing masks and wielding great big swords.

I'd nearly lost track of all the ways I'd almost died in my dreams. There was the obvious, a great leviathan attacking the city, sweeping the rubble away as the tide dragged me beneath the waves. Then there were the leprechauns, chanting in Gaelic as they chased me through old abandoned warehouses, my pistol no deterrent to them. Long walks through the city inevitably featured an appearance by the Headless Horseman, his steed's iron shoes echoing against the cobblestones as he rode me down.

Worst of all were the ones with Bloodcuddles. In those, I was chained to a wall in the tunnels beneath the city. Sometimes, he was taunting me, but more often than not, I was

forced to kneel there, helpless, while a little girl screamed into the darkness. Those were the ones that stayed with me, replaying themselves over and over in my head until long after the sun had risen.

I shivered and rubbed my arms, briefly catching my reflection in the elevator doors. I looked rough, there was no denying it, but I told myself that some weight loss was to be expected, given what I'd been through these past few weeks, and if my makeup, minimal though it was, needed retouching, well, I'd get to it when I had time. Likewise, with food.

As for the other thing, the seeing people who weren't there bit, well, I'd deal with that when I had time. Funnily enough, Topher rarely appeared in my dreams, displaced by the more abject horror shows I'd tangled with, so it made a befuddling sort of sense that I would see him during my waking hours instead.

The elevator touched down, and I made my way across the lobby and headed for the exit. Halfway there, I peered right and glimpsed a trio of women bearing suitcases and luggage gathered around a familiar figure sitting inside the emergency room waiting area. Recognition dawned, and I pivoted, crossing through the doorway and approaching them.

"Verbena?" I asked, addressing the witch occupying the chair.

I made a point of using her nickname, as opposed to her real name, which was Kimberly Phelps. The Sisters of Salem took great care with their privacy, and since I didn't recognize any of the women she was with, I figured it was best to err on the side of caution.

"Sergeant Mayfield," Verbena said.

"I didn't expect to see you here. Is everything..." I almost asked her if everything was alright, but the question was so ridiculous that I couldn't bring myself to finish it. Clearly, things were not alright. What I really wanted to know was if

everyone was alright, and even that was just a roundabout way of asking if anyone else was dead yet.

“They’re fine,” Verbena said, likely referring to Flora and Dahlia. I realized it was the first time I’d ever seen her outside of their presence. “When we received word about Desiree, we all had... mixed reactions. It seemed best to allow for some time to cool off.”

“I was sorry to hear about her.”

Verbena nodded, her eyes shining. “These are hard times, Sergeant, the hardest I have ever encountered. I would be lying if I said I didn’t fear for the safety of our sisters. If I believed for a moment that disbanding our coven would halt the killings, then I would do so in a heartbeat, but I fear that would only further isolate us from one another.”

“Whoever’s doing this isn’t doing it because they believe you are witches. They’re doing it because they like murdering helpless young women. Even if you took off the black hats and ditched the brooms, they would just find another reason.”

“We are hardly *helpless*,” the woman to my left said.

I arched an eyebrow and took a moment to survey them. They were all relatively near my age, plus or minus ten years, dressed in earth tone apparel, save for a blonde who wore tight-fitting athletic pants that showed off her legs. What little jewelry they wore was all floral themed, with braided hemp rope and bits of silver intertwined. Their luggage was gathered together in a small circle. Black and brown suitcases with ribbons of various colors intertwined in the handle.

They felt my gaze, and a small tremor passed through them, gone in a moment as they moved to stand shoulder to shoulder.

“And you are?”

“I’m Lilly,” said the blonde with the legs. In lieu of a purse, she wore a backpack over one shoulder, with a Red Cross



patch on the side. She motioned to the other two sisters and introduced them as they went. “This is Hazel and Rosemary.”

“They’re friends,” Verbena explained. “From our sister coven, recently arrived.”

Great. More witches. Or better said, more targets for our killer to choose from. “You’re from England?”

Lily nodded, her eyes wary. “You’ve been there?”

“No, but I’ve a feeling that might change at some point.”

“Sergeant Mayfield has been a pillar of strength for our coven during this trying time,” Verbena said.

Her words were meant to be kind, but they rang hollow in my ears. I knew in my heart I hadn’t been strong enough to stop the killings. “I assume Verbena brought you up to speed on the dangers we’re facing?”

Lily nodded. “Yes, but even if she had not, we would have known something was amiss the moment we stepped off the plane. The Earth Mother is not blind to her daughter’s suffering. She cries out, her anguished voice resonating in our ears.”

“Uh-huh. In that case, I assume I don’t need to stress the importance of staying together in a group?”

Lily’s eyes hardened. “You need not worry about us, Sergeant. Curses and bindings are not an earth witch’s way, but Mother grants us that which we need to defend ourselves. We will draw upon her power and cloak ourselves in barriers of wood, stone, and soil.”

“I doubt you’re going to find any of that here in the hospital.”

Lily’s face darkened and she opened her mouth to speak, but Verbena cut her off with a gentle touch.

“We came for Desiree,” Verbena said. “To collect her belongings. She and her mother weren’t on speaking terms.”

We've tried calling, but no one is answering the phone. With no other next of kin, it seemed right that we should be the ones to step in and assist."

"I see." The reminder of Desiree robbed me of any desire to prod the witches further, and I drew in a long breath and let it out in a rush. "She's not here. Her—" I almost said corpse but caught myself at the last moment. "She's been transferred to the Chief Medical Examiner's office. It's part of the Boston Medical Center, in the South End. All of her belongings should have gone with her."

"Ah," Verbena rose from the chair, gathering her belongings. "Thank you, Sergeant."

"You might want to call first. Sometimes they get backed up, and then..." I trailed off, fighting against a sudden thickness in my throat. Telling someone that their loved one was lying on a cold slab inside a morgue was hard enough. Telling them that it might be a while, maybe even days, before any of the examiners could be bothered to see to them was more than I could manage in that moment.

Verbena's face slipped, but she picked herself back up and gave me a tight-lipped smile as they left. I watched their backs as they departed, the three recently arrived witches taking up positions around her, forming a protective circle with their bodies as they exited through the door. It was a strangely touching gesture, one that emphasized the importance of having friends in times of strife.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes, reminding myself that I still had a job to do. I exited the hospital and made my way across the road into the parking garage. There were a handful of people waiting by the elevator, so I bypassed it in favor of the stairs, ascending to the second floor and then walking halfway down the rows. As I came to my aisle, I spotted my car and got within twenty feet before a figure stepped out of the shadows.

Time slowed.

The figure drew up beside my car and raised his hand, giving a tentative wave. Light flashed behind my eyes, and for a moment, I forgot how to breathe. The seconds extended out with infinite slowness before things suddenly snapped back into focus, and a breathless grunt slipped past my lips.

“Hi, Chloe,” Topher said. “Want to go for a drive?”

## Driving in Circles. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1422hrs

“So this is how it happens, huh?” I asked.

Topher stared at me, and the corner of his mouth rose in that uncertain smile I could still recall. “How what happens?”

“Madness.” I raised my arm and twirled my finger in circles beside my temple. “I’ve gone looney.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but maybe we should talk about it in the car?” He tossed something underhand to me, and I caught it out of the air, peering down to see it was my own keys.

“I’m not sure I should be driving. Seems like the better choice would be to head on back inside the hospital and have my head examined.”

“That seems a little overdramatic.”

“I’m standing here talking to a dead man. Drama is the least of my problems.”

Topher shrugged. “Fair point. You can do what you like, but I’d think long and hard before making any decisions. If they determine that you’re actually crazy, you might end up under the care of that creepy quack. Or worse, the sour-faced lady.”

“You saw all that?”

Topher nodded. “A little madness seems like a small price to pay it if means staying out of their clutches.”

I had to give him credit. He made an excellent point.

I got in the car.

I wasn’t sure if Topher actually opened the passenger’s door or if it was just part of the hallucination, but given what was happening, I didn’t really have time to stew about it. The engine came to life with a pattering cough, and black smoke

rose, billowing across my rear-view mirror as I backed out of the space and headed for the descending ramp.

“You know I read about this.”

“Read about what?” Topher asked as he slid his seatbelt across his chest. It clicked into place, and he settled back in the seat, as easy as if we were just two old friends going for a drive.

“Back when I was having trouble sleeping. They said night terrors and emotional outbursts were common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, but that I shouldn’t worry unless I started having full on hallucinations.”

“I guess this would qualify as full on?”

I peered over at him, taking in the wrinkled jacket, the uneven haircut and the traces of baby fat clinging to his chin. “Yeah, Topher. I would say so.”

“Are you worried?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Honestly? Probably not as much as I should be. I attribute that to all the other stuff I’ve got going on. Between finding a killer and freeing Lieutenant Kermit, the fear of losing my mind seems like a distant third.”

“I don’t think you’re losing your mind.”

“That’s not real comforting, considering it’s coming from you. By the way, I hope you didn’t come here expecting an apology. Cause that’s not happening.”

“No apology needed, although you know I’m not really him, don’t you?”

“The ghost of Topher? Yeah, I figured as much. Doesn’t explain why you look like him.”

“Well, to be fair, *you* chose this guise for me.”

I frowned and shifted lanes, passing around a white delivery van before merging back right. “Why would I do that?”

“Beats me. Guilt and regret are a little above my paygrade.”

“Who says I’m feeling guilty or regretful?”

Topher gave me a tight-lipped smile, but didn’t say anything as we descended the ramp. I pulled up next to the payment kiosk and swiped my card before pulling out of the garage and turning onto the street toward downtown

“So if you’re not the ghost of Topher, then what are you?”

“I’m *you*.”

“What, like my own personal Jiminy Cricket? Here to tell me to let my subconscious be my guide?”

“Gosh, I hope not. If so, then I missed a briefing somewhere.”

“Then what are you?”

“I already told you. I’m you. Sort of.”

“Like a figment of my imagination?”

Topher raised his hand and dipped it back and forth in a so-so gesture. “Yes, and no.”

“That doesn’t really help.”

“Well, it’s not quite right. Figments of your imagination are wispy. For example, if I tell you to think of a purple elephant, do you think one will appear?”

I shot him a wide-eyed look, suddenly imagining a herd of Godzilla-sized, purple elephants rampaging through downtown. “I don’t know. Will it?”

He shook his head. “No, or at least not outside of your imagination. I’m different from that. There’s more substance to me. Honestly, if it helps, think of me as an early warning system. You’ve had a pretty hard last couple of months, wouldn’t you say? I mean, an unexpected career change saw you become a pariah to most of the city. That alone would be

enough to give anyone fits, but then you were attacked and almost sacrificed to a fictitious sea-monster.”

“Don’t forget that my own partner tried to kill me on my first assignment.”

“Guilty,” Topher said with a sad smile. “But there’s more. You went muzzle to muzzle with leprechaun thieves, as well as a few of your own people. Then you barely had time to breathe before you found yourself facing off against a creature straight out of New England folklore.”

I snorted and waved my hand dismissively. “That Horseman business turned out to be a bunch of money-hungry science nerds.”

“Well, one of them still tried to kill you with a sword. I mean, how many people can say that?”

“Not too many,” I admitted.

“And then, just when you thought you were finally due a break, you realized that you’d mishandled the witch’s investigation and became saddled with the guilt of Ambretta Greenhall’s death. No matter how you slice it, that’s a lot for anyone to deal with. Hence, why I’m here. Think of me like a file cabinet for your mind. You needed an outlet, somewhere to store all the trauma. To help parcel it out so that it’s more manageable.”

“Can’t you just stuff it all into a box and dump it in the dark ocean of my mind?”

“I *could*, but that would be a bad idea.”

“Why is that?”

“Think about it, Chloe. All those things I just mentioned? They have a way of bubbling up to the surface, no matter how deep you think they’re buried. You’ve been around long enough to see firsthand what happens when those sorts of things go untreated. Don’t get me wrong, you’ve done okay for yourself so far, but you’ve had the advantage of forward

momentum. Every time you jump into a new case, you're able to stay ahead of it, but the backlog is getting too big to outrun, and some part of your psyche, the part concerned with survival, can see that you're not going to be able to outpace it for much longer, so you created me as a way to come to terms with it."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

Topher shrugged. "Beats me. I'm working my way through this right alongside you. Turns out, there are no instructions for this sort of thing."

"Lovely," I said. "So you're just *here*? Lurking about?"

"For the moment."

"And I assume other people can't see you?"

"Honestly? I have no idea. Best not to test it though. The mind is a delicate thing, and if it breaks, it's very difficult to put it back together."

"Uh-huh." I drew in a slow breath, exhaling through my mouth and trying to arrange my thoughts into some semblance of order. "Why now?"

"What?"

"You said it yourself. The hits have been coming for months. Why is it suddenly so important that I get a handle on all this now, as opposed to say, next week?"

Topher frowned. "Because."

"Because what?"

"I'm not sure."

"Some warning system you are. No guesses?"

He thought about it for a few seconds. "Well, if you're going to twist my arm, I'd say there are probably two reasons."

"What's the first?"



“Pattern recognition.”

I frowned and glanced over at him. “Huh?”

“It’s rooted down deep into your primal being. Mammals who lack pattern recognition don’t make it very far. And things aren’t adding up.”

“What kind of things?”

“Everything we’ve been through lately. I mean, cults and leprechauns and the Headless Horseman?”

“Not to mention our current bad guy.”

“Exactly. All this in a six-month period? Seems kind of suspect. And it’s not just here, either. I mean, you’ve read the files. Think of all the nonsense Tempest and his crew have had to deal with over the past year and a half.”

“Nonsense being the key word.”

“Exactly. If we’re being honest, Blue Moon should be a snooze. Instead, you’re rushing all over the city just trying to keep pace. There’s got to be something behind it all. Something...”

“Please don’t say supernatural.”

“You have a better word?”

“I don’t believe in the supernatural.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Right. Because you’re me. But if it’s not some Sauron level baddie with an evil ring, then it means there’s a logical explanation, and someone out there really wants people to start believing in the paranormal.”

“Why would they do that?”

“You tell me. You’re supposed to be my conscience.”

He shrugged. “Sorry. Guess I’m not very good at this job either.”

Things got quiet for a moment. “Topher wasn’t a bad cop. Contrary to all the evidence. He just made some bad decisions.”

Topher’s smile told me he knew I was being generous, but didn’t take it personally.

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. “You said there were two reasons. What’s the other one?”

Topher’s smile faded, and his face grew more serious. “You’re tired.”

“Well, yeah, obviously. I didn’t really need you to tell me that.”

“No, I mean, you’re *really* tired. Both in mind and spirit. And it’s causing you to miss things. Things that you shouldn’t be missing. Things that, unless you right the ship, could prove dangerous.”

“What sort of things?”

Topher gave me a tight-lipped smile

“Oh right. I’m supposed to figure that out for myself?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t make the rules.”

“And you can’t help me?”

“A bit, but there are limits. This goes back to your primal self. Pattern recognition and threat assessment. Either of which can become a danger to you.”

“So I missed something, something dangerous, but don’t know where or when.” I sighed and chewed on my lip. I’d never been one of those people who struggled with the feeling of forgetting something important, but I could feel it now, rattling around in my brain, just out of sight.

“It could be anything. I mean, I’ve been looking into Ambretta Greenhall’s death for weeks. If I missed something, there would be no way to know where or when unless I start

over from scratch, and I can't afford to do that knowing it will almost certainly cost more lives."

"That's true," Topher said. "Although while we're on the subject, you know it's not your fault, right? Ambretta's death?"

I clutched the steering wheel and bit down until my jaw ached. "She asked for my help."

"You had your hands full. And besides, it was a no-win situation. If you had turned away from the Horseman case, innocent people would have died."

"Even so."

Topher glanced at me, and his voice came out soft. "You can't claim responsibility for every bad thing that happens in this city, Chloe."

I started to speak, but there was a sudden thickness in my throat, and I had to work to swallow it down before I could get the words out. "Someone has to. Otherwise, it's just chaos."

"It only seems like that because you're too close to it. There are good things happening too. New friendships are formed every day. Lovers meet for the first time over coffee. Heck, four thousand babies take their first breaths inside that hospital back there." He snapped his fingers. "That reminds me, speaking of babies, we need to talk about your sister sleeping with your boss."

"Oh god, can we please not?"

"You're going to have to deal with it, eventually."

"Not today. I'll take madness."

"Okay, but eventually." He shifted in his seat, rubbing at his collar. "Point is, you can no more claim responsibility for the good than the bad. It's out of your control, and always has been."

“That doesn’t mean I have to just sit back and watch it happen. I made the choice to wear the badge, and that means something.”

“Well, to be fair, your badge is down in the tunnels beneath the city, probably being used for—”

“I’ll get another one, Topher,” I said and slapped my hand against the steering wheel. “Listen, you’re telling me that I’m red-lining it, that I need to take some time off and decompress? Fine, I’ll do that, heck I’ll even try meditation, but not until I’ve found this murderer and face planted them into the concrete like a damn tree! Now, you can either help me or get out of my car.”

Topher blinked, then glanced out the window and back to me. “Are you going to pull over?”

“*No!*”

“Okay, okay, I’ll help. So, we need to catch a murderer. Seems a safe bet to start with the obvious choice.”

“Father Irons.”

Topher nodded. “Verbena and the girls seemed pretty sure he was behind it. They might be right.”

“Maybe, but something about it doesn’t sit right. He’s a self-righteous nincompoop who’s living high off his friendship with Mayor Altair, but that doesn’t make him a murderer. The whole thing seems too high-profile, plus I find it hard to believe that Mayor Altair would risk his political career, not to mention his own ambitions, to protect Father Irons if this goes bad.”

“You’re assuming he’s not in on it. He could be involved.”

“Could be,” I said. “But in the meantime, what else have we got?”

“The Acadians down in the sewers have plenty of reason to hate the witches. They’ve been sold a lie that the witches were

holding them prisoner below the surface for their entire lives. Plus, they're obviously not opposed to violence."

"Problem. Whoever killed Ambretta dressed it up to look like the Headless Horseman. That suggests the murderer planned it out ahead of time, and that they had enough forethought and self-control not to incriminate themselves. I'm not saying the Acadians, especially the ones like Sickle, would hesitate to kill the witches. They wouldn't, but I'm not sure they would be able to hide it. More likely, they'd tear them apart and splatter their blood for six blocks in every direction."

"Evangeline might have arranged it. Especially if she planned on using their death to stage her uprising."

"That's true," I said. "But she would have needed insider information into the Horseman case, and I'm not sure where she'd get it."

"Someone in the department?"

"Sure, but how would she have presented it? She couldn't exactly admit to the other Acadians that she'd been up to the surface, and she couldn't have known I was going to appear. Heck, I didn't even know what I was getting into."

"She knew something, though," Topher said. "Remember what she said? '*The prophet warned that a faithless herald would bring word of the witch's demise.*' Makes you wonder who this prophet is."

"It does, doesn't it?" I said. "If they're doubling as our killer, then it means they were setting this up months in advance. Before the Headless Horseman murders even."

"Could the two be related?"

"I don't know. I thought we did a clean sweep of the Horseman gang. No one's mentioned anything, or tried to buy a reduced sentence by giving up anyone else involved."

"Maybe they're scared? Betraying a murderer seems like a risky gambit."

“Yeah, maybe. But they’re looking at serious time. I imagine one of them would decide it was worth taking the chance at some point.”

“You think we’re grasping at straws?”

“I think I already made the mistake of believing the two cases were related, and I’m not keen to do it again.”

“Okay, then supposing they’re not connected, that means the killer’s real aim is still to bring down the Sisters of Salem.”

“Not just them. This whole business with Lieutenant Kermit reeks of a setup.”

“Why would they do that?”

I drew in a breath and exhaled through my nose. “They must have seen Blue Moon as a threat. Maybe they worried we were onto them, and they wanted to remove us from the board in one fell swoop.”

“Remove is the key word there, Chloe. Don’t forget that someone tried to pop your head off back at the coffee shop.”

I grunted. “Blue Moon isn’t as secret as we like to pretend it is. Word is out, and we’re going to have to find some way to defend ourselves.”

“How?”

“I don’t know yet, but we’d better figure it out, because people are going to start taking shots just to see how we react.” I considered it for a moment, then sighed. “Whoever made those photographs did so ahead of time, probably even before they grabbed Desiree. Which means they were thinking three steps ahead.”

“That’s usually a bad thing.”

“No kidding. But it also might help us. Whoever’s doing this doesn’t mind taking their time. They’re careful, methodical, and somehow, they’ve got a read on the supernatural community, particularly the witches.”

“You think we should consult Titus and the Sons of Liberty?”

“Maybe,” I said, and chewed my lip. “Titus knows everyone, but that’s not necessarily a good thing.”

“Why not?”

“Because he knows *everyone*. Ask him for a list of suspects and he’ll start going through and highlighting names out of the phone book. We don’t have time to chase down half a hundred leads. We need something more substantial, something more intimate. We need to talk to the witches again.”

“We just saw them in the hospital.”

“Not all of them. We need to find the others and...”

My voice trailed off as something clicked in my head. I felt it, a literal sensation as it rolled to the forefront of my mind.

“Oh, God.”

“Chloe?”

I grabbed the wheel and jerked left, tires squealing as we cut across traffic. Topher gasped in the seat beside me, and a series of blaring horns sounded in my wake as we narrowly missed the curb. I straightened us out and stomped the accelerator, driving back the way we’d come.

“Hey, what’s the big idea?” Topher asked.

“I saw them,” I snarled, and slapped the wheel. “They walked right past me!”

“Who?”

“Flora and Dahlia!”

“You’ve got to slow down, Chloe. I’m not following you.”

“Verbena said it herself. When they received word of Desiree, they all had mixed reactions and needed some time to cool off.”

“So?”

“So, anger is one thing. It’s normal, but they still should have known better than to separate like that.”

“But they didn’t,” Topher said. “Not really. Verbena was with those other witches. Lily and Hazel and Rosemary.”

“Yeah, but think about it. They still had their suitcases and luggage with them. I’ll give you ten-to-one odds they only just arrived, which means Verbena went by herself to pick them up at the airport.”

Topher frowned. “They shouldn’t have let her go alone like that.”

“No. The only way that would happen is if they didn’t want Verbena around to see what they were doing.”

The minute the words popped out of my mouth, I knew they were true, and even worse, I knew what they meant. “I saw them back at the hospital, but was too tired to realize it.”

“Where?”

“Inside the Psychiatric Services unit. They were dressed as nurses pushing a hospital bed. I stepped aside to let them through the restricted area. They must have recognized me. It’s why neither of them dared meet my eye.”

“I don’t understand,” Topher said. “What are they looking to do?”

“Desiree’s death has them shaken. So much that they’ve decided they can’t afford to wait anymore. They’re taking matters into their own hands.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning they’re going to break Mortiana out of the hospital.”



## The Breakout. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1449hrs

The alarms were already blaring by the time we got back, but there was no sign of emergency vehicles yet. I parked along the curb and raced inside, pausing after two steps to take in the surroundings.

I'd been inside a hospital during a terrorist attack before, and I'd witnessed firsthand the pandemonium that comes when people believe their lives are in danger. This wasn't it. The alarm was blaring, but it sounded more like a fire alarm than a prisoner escape. Maybe security personnel could tell the difference, but I doubted anyone else could. Hospital workers and patients were shuffling into the reception area and mustering toward the doorway. Most were moving at a sedate pace, hesitating with each step, as if hopeful that the alarm would fall silent and they could return to their regularly scheduled activities. I caught flashes of their faces as I pushed my way through the throng, and the expressions alternated between boredom and outright annoyance.

The elevators had returned to the ground floor, and the blinking lights revealed them to be temporarily offline. I bypassed the open doorways and took the stairs, pushing through the door to find a conga-line procession filled with folks wearing white lab coats and paper hospital gowns descending the stairwell. I started to retreat, but quickly realized I didn't have any other means of getting up to the Psychiatric Services' floor, so I bit down and threw myself forward, repeating a chorus of instructions and commands as I fought against the tide.

“Police department! Let me through, please!”

“If you're with the police, how come you don't have a badge?” an elderly man in a paper gown gripping an IV drip demanded.

I bit back my first response, and the impulse to flash my gun. I was pretty sure the sight of a firearm would only induce hysteria, and people panicking in a stairwell was a sure recipe for disaster.

“Please step aside, sir,” I said.

He *harumphed* and twisted to his right, making a point of sticking out his bare bottom and forcing me to brush against it with my back as I passed.

I made a mental note to burn my jacket, but continued on, taking the stairs two at a time. The descending crowd thinned as I reached the upper floors, and the few remaining stragglers allowed me to pass without incident.

I reached the Psychiatric Services floor and blew through the door. Or tried to. The door was unlocked, but it only opened two inches before smacking against something and rebounding back. I stumbled into the stairwell, then gathered myself and tried it again, with the same result. The third time I tried, the door gave way a bit, and I managed to create enough space that I was able to slip through the opening and into the hallway.

The fluorescent lights flickered uncertainly overhead, creating shadowy patches along the hallway where they’d burned out. A wheelchair sat abandoned in the hall, along with a downed IV drip, the spilled contents of its bag creating an expanding pool along the linoleum floor. The air smelled like burned plastic, and the waiting room chairs were in shambles, knocked free and left in disarray as the patrons had presumably fled.

A quick glance down revealed the impromptu door-blocker was actually an unconscious hospital security officer. I thought I recognized him as one of the ones I’d seen back in the circular terminal, but couldn’t be certain. He was bleeding from the nose, and there was a fist-sized lump forming along the back of his head. He was breathing though, and for the

moment, that was enough. I pulled my pistol from its holster and activated the barrel-mounted flashlight, keeping my eyes peeled as I made my way past the outpatient sector toward the security area.

Things were unnervingly quiet as I slipped through the hallways. There were no alarms blaring here, no phones ringing, and no doctors or patients conveying information. The only sound I could hear was my own exhaling, punctuated by the noise of my footsteps against the floor.

I passed the addiction recovery center and came around the hall to find a crumpled form slumped down against the security doors. I kneeled down beside her and rolled her onto her side, recognizing her as the same woman who'd let me in before. Dr. Droll. From the looks of it, she'd been fleeing, or else trying to reach the call box. Either way, she hadn't made it. She stirred as I checked her pulse, her eyes rolling in her head before they came to rest on me.

"Go to hell," she wheezed, sour spit punctuating her words before she slipped back into unconsciousness.

I lowered her head down to the floor, gently since I'm not the type to kick someone when she's down, and snagged her keys, flipping through before finding the keycard. I swiped it against the keypad beside the call box, and the light turned from red to green, the automatic doors opening and pushing Dr. Droll's unconscious form out of the way.

Beyond the doors, the lights ceased to function. Whether by mechanical design or by some sort of electrical default, darkness reigned beyond the security doors. It hit me suddenly, just what I might be walking into, and fear swept through me, wrapping its tentacles around my heart and constricting so hard that it became difficult to breathe.

I'd never been faced with the choice of walking into a pitch-black space where most of the figures who haunted my nightmares dwelt, and it occurred to me in that moment that I

might be better off retreating to the stairs and waiting for backup to arrive. Lots of backup, preferably folks wielding large rifles and the know-how to use them. Unfortunately, there was no telling how long they would take to arrive, and once they did, they'd most likely start working their way through the hospital from the bottom up. Flora and Dahlia would be long gone by then, and likely Mortiana with them. It was a gut check moment, one where I had to stare into the blackness beyond the light and ask myself if I was okay letting the witches go free if it meant not having to confront my own fears?

I let out a low growl, and bit down on the inside of my lip, holding it clenched and pushing against the fear. Several seconds passed, and then, inch by inch, the terror began to recede, loosening its grip along my heart enough that I could breathe. Topher's voice whispered in my ears, reiterating the dangers of burying that kind of fear down inside, but I didn't have time for it, and vowed to myself that I would sort it later, provided I survived.

I went into the darkness.

The smell of burned plastic was stronger here, and there were bits of ash and drywall powder along the floor, suggesting something had detonated nearby. I kept my footsteps soft and my flashlight low, illuminating the space ahead of me as I crept down the hall.

An open doorway greeted me as I came around the corner and I took up position against the wall, slowly pushing open the door to reveal a janitor's supply closet complete with shower and mini bathtub.

Graffiti lined the floor and walls. Bright green paint splashed in thick, swirling lines surrounding a six-pointed star. There were symbols between the star's points, but I didn't know what they meant, and didn't have time to try and find out. Clearly, Flora and Dahlia had used this room as a staging

area, though what spells they presumably cast remained a mystery.

I exited the room and followed the hallway down to the circular nurses' station. The thick glass was gone, shattered into sharp bits that coated the floor. A security officer was slumped over the dead television monitors, and a male nurse lay on his back, spilled medications lining the floor around him. I started to go around, but something shifted, a shadowed movement from the other side of the station, and I shot forward, bringing my pistol to bear as I came around the edge.

A figure kneeled on all fours, and it took me a moment to recognize Dr. Eerie. He was bleeding from the knees and the hands, glass shards having sliced through his pants and embedded themselves into the flesh of his palms.

"S-sergeant," he said, his voice hoarse. "I-it's you."

"Try not to move." I couldn't holster my pistol, since doing so would leave us in utter darkness, but I seized him by the arm and lifted him as best I could. He was too weak and disoriented to help, and he took several more cuts before I got him clear of the glass. I leaned him against the wall, then went and retrieved the abandoned wheelchair from near the elevator, wheeling it back and helping to lower him into it.

"Y-you came back."

"Yeah, but not for you. Where's Mortiana?"

"Inside," he said. "The nurses, they attacked us."

"They were witches. Not nurses."

"T-they used magic. Real magic, I've never seen anything like it before. Fire flew from their fingers, and—"

"I've seen it before. It's not magic. Just parlor tricks."

Laughter echoed down the hall, a cruel, feminine voice, touched by madness. It sent shivers down my spine, and I turned as a light appeared at the end of the hall. A finger-sized

flame danced within the darkness, its orange glow illuminating Mortiana's face as she leaned forward into the night.

She'd never been heavy, but her regimen under Dr. Eerie's care had evidently included starvation, although I suspected he would have called it fasting and rattled off some nonsense about how it was good for brain chemistry. Her face was gaunt, and the veins along her neck and forehead were visible beneath the candle's caress. She'd kept her hair short, but wild, extending out in a bird's nest facade that didn't reach her shoulders. Her eyes gleamed like liquid mirrors, their reflection attempting to conceal the darkness beneath. She leaned forward, holding the tip of a cigarette over the open flame before bringing it to her mouth and taking a long drag.

"Just parlor tricks, is it?" She asked, smoke pouring from her mouth with every word. "Well, why don't you come down here and prove it? Unless you're too scared."

The flame flickered out, and she disappeared around the corner, her mocking laughter lingering in the darkness.

I stared after her, then shook my head and marveled at how some people never changed. The "meet me at the playground unless you're chicken" argument had evidently worked on the schoolyard, and Mortiana was still making use of it. It would have been laughable, except for the fact that there was a part of me that already knew I was going to end up playing along.

I took a minute to make sure Dr. Eerie was stabilized. His wounds looked nasty, but he wasn't in any immediate danger of bleeding to death. A couple of stitches would see him right. That said, he wasn't going to be able to assist me, so I rolled him into his office and made sure he had his cellphone. Once he was on the phone with the 911 operator, I turned the doorknob lock and closed it behind me, effectively sealing him inside. It was the best I could do for the moment, and I drew in a breath and started down the hall with my pistol at the ready.

I wasn't a complete idiot. I knew Mortiana was baiting me, forcing me down a path where she likely had something nasty lying in wait. Presumably, she'd had time to prepare, whereas I was going to be forced to react in the moment, which anyone will tell you is never a good thing. There's a reason why officers avoid going into houses alone. No matter how much training you might have, you'll never have the advantage over someone who's had time to prepare and, even worse, rehearse.

I came around the corner and surged to a sudden halt. Someone had sprayed graffiti along the wall to my right, a bright green pentagram with symbols along the edges. And there, in the center, was an oxygen cannister the size of my forearm. I had a sudden flash of understanding, realizing in that moment what Flora and Dahlia must have been transporting in the hospital bed before the more survival prone part of me noted the flickering flame of the firework strapped to its end. Mortiana had used the cigarette to light the wick on her way past, and I had just enough time to see it evaporate before the firework erupted, the flame catching hold of the oxygen cannister and detonating it.

A giant roar rang through the hallway, blasting me from my feet and sending me crashing to the ground as the explosion tore through drywall and plaster. In a split second, the air went from cold to white hot, filled with smoke and dust. Time slowed, and what felt like half a minute but was probably closer to four or five seconds passed before the room stopped spinning. It was difficult to breathe, and I struggled up to my knees, dimly noting the gaping hole in the wall before a figure emerged out of the darkness.

Flora was still dressed in her nurse's scrubs. She had her mask in place, but knowing what I did now, it was easy to recognize her by her figure. She came out of the smoke with a broom handle gripped in her hands, one jagged end revealing where the end had been broken, and something in my eyes

must have shown, because she hesitated, just for a split second, before swinging with all her might.

The split-second hesitation didn't save me completely, but I was able to roll with the blow, ensuring it struck the top of my skull rather than my temple where she'd aimed. It cracked off my head and sent me crashing to the floor on all fours with a ringing in my ears. Dark stars tap danced across my vision, and the drywall and dust particles filling the air floated down around me. Through the ringing, I thought I heard Flora whisper, "I'm sorry, Sergeant," but that may have just been wishful thinking, since her next blow took me across the back and flattened me.

I didn't go out. At least, not completely. Seconds passed, and the ringing in my ears faded to a dull thud. I struggled to get my hands beneath me, and, little by little, I managed to rise, eventually coming to a kneeling position. The dust particles still floated through the air, forming themselves into powdered clusters along the floor. I blinked against the dark stars until I spotted one that refused to be banished and followed it, crawling on all fours and blinking its brethren away until it eventually revealed itself to be the flashlight attached to my pistol. I seized it, focusing on the warm metal grip, and forced myself up to my feet. The room swayed and tilted, but I seized the wall and held myself steady until it eventually ceased.

I stumbled down the hallway and into the darkness. Along the way, I kept my grip on my pistol, but avoided putting my finger anywhere near the trigger, not yet trusting my own body. A pair of security doors with the sign reading "Patient Holding Area: High Security" were propped open, and I stumbled through them and into the patient rooms. All of the doors I saw were still secured, thank God, and came equipped with glass panels for Dr. Eerie and his staff to look inside. I pointedly avoided glancing through, not wanting to see the residents inside, and made it as far as the last doorway before a wave of dizziness rose up, causing the floor to shift. I hit the



nearest wall and slid down its length, the sudden vertigo forcing me to my knees. At the same time, I pressed my face into the crook of my elbow as a series of wracking coughs ripped out from my chest, my lungs working to expel the dust I'd breathed in.

"Is that you, Sergeant Mayfield?" a voice asked from the room behind me.

Fear, raw and primal, tore through me, silencing my cough.

"It is, isn't it? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. It sounds like quite the ruckus out there. Would that be your doing?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and inched away from the door, my back sliding across the drywall.

"I've been waiting for you. Every day and every night. Wondering when you might show up at my door."

"Keep waiting, clown."

There was a shifting of movement from inside the room, and when next he spoke, his voice came from beside the door, less than an arm's length away from me. "Oh, I suspect I will. For a time. Eventually, though, you and I are going to meet again. There's just too much left unresolved between us."

"You're never getting out of here."

"Oh, we both know that's not true. Dr. Eerie is a simpleton, but he is persistent, and he desperately wants to be proven right. I suspect in a few months' time we'll begin to experience breakthroughs. Little ones, at first, so as not to arouse suspicion, but eventually, he'll convince the parole board that I'm healed, and they'll open the doors and welcome me back into society with open arms. And then, well, you can probably guess where I'm going to go first."

I jerked away from the wall, repulsion and disgust lending me the strength to drag myself across the floor. His laughter, horrid and shrieking, emanated out from behind the secure doorway, but I didn't dare glance back, not wanting to see his

eyes watching me through the glass. I dragged myself around the corner and forced myself back up to my feet, stumbling along the length of the final hallway before arriving at the last door, which had Mortiana's name written on it. I couldn't disguise the sounds of my footsteps, and the door slammed closed a split second before I reached it, the lock turning into place just as I came up beside it.

I peered in through the glass and spotted three figures inside. The first was Flora. She stood in the middle of the room, casting frequent glances behind her, while the second figure, who I assumed to be Dahlia, stood with her back to me.

Mortiana's cell was a far cry from a prison cell, but still only the equivalent of a cheap hotel. Filled with a bed and a small table stand, it was otherwise bare of accents or furniture. It did, however, have a window. It wasn't much of an opening, maybe two-by-two feet, with barbed wire spread between the two plastic glass layers, but it was a way to get to the outside world. And evidently one which the witches intended to exploit.

Two oxygen tanks were taped to the window, along with several small firework explosives and more green paint forming a summoning circle around them. Dahlia was intertwining their fuses, tying them off, and drawing a lighter from her pocket.

"Sergeant!" Mortiana's face snapped into view, and I jerked back as she cackled, her eyes glimmering like dark pools of madness. "You came all this way for me? How very touching."

I brought my pistol up and pressed the barrel against the glass. "Give it up, Mortiana. This glass isn't bulletproof."

"No?" Mortiana asked and pretended to think about it. "That's probably true. But then again, neither is he."

Her arm shot left, and she dragged another figure into view, pressing him against the glass before I could so much as

question who she was talking about.

It was the third doctor. Lyndon Parrish. His hair was mussed, and he had a fat lip, but otherwise appeared unharmed. His hands were bound behind him, and he was panting, his breath fogging up the glass as Mortiana retreated. “Don’t move, Dr. Parrish. Don’t you dare move. Because if you do, then I’m going to slit you ear to ear and wear your tongue around my neck like a chain.”

I couldn’t get a clear shot with Dr. Parrish’s face in the way, and even if I could, there was a good chance the glass would shatter, shards and bits going right into his face and eyes. I tried the door, but it was locked, and for a moment I was stuck, until I remembered that I had Dr. Droll’s keycard.

I snapped my hand down, digging into my pockets just as Dahlia lit the fuse. Mortiana let out an excited laugh, and the three of them took cover, crouching down behind a bed they turned sideways. More green paint lined its underside, forming what I assumed was meant to be a protection circle.

Dr. Parrish stayed pressed against the wall, and the fuses disappeared a split second before the room erupted.

I don’t know if the witches’ protection spell worked, I doubted it since, you know, magic isn’t real, but Dahlia evidently knew her craft, and the majority of the explosion was directed outside of the room, blowing through the window and the surrounding concrete and creating a wide opening they could easily fit through.

I told myself that they were still trapped, since we were still several floors up, but no sooner had the thought occurred to me than a scaffold descended into view. It was the kind that window washers use, little more than a plank and a couple of guard rails, but it was being operated by two women who I assumed to be witches dressed as nurses. Dahlia and Flora wasted no time, crawling out from behind the bed and hurrying over. They slipped through the newly created opening

in the wall and each attached a safety harness around their torso before moving to the sides of the scaffolding.

Mortianna laughed as she skipped across the room, pausing to blow me a kiss through the window before she slipped through the opening and stepped out onto the scaffold.

My hands closed around the keycard, and I slapped it against the keypad. The light turned green, and I yanked open the door. Dr. Parrish toppled forward, and I jerked to the side, letting him collapse before stepping over his prone form. I raised my gun and aligned my sights on Mortiana, who smiled and gave a little wave.

Then the witches tugged the rope, and the scaffold abruptly dropped, disappearing from sight and lowering them down into the city.

## Another Brick to Carry. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1527hrs

I stayed just long enough to ensure that no other psychiatric inmates escaped, then high-tailed it out of there the minute help arrived, brushing past Dr. Eerie and pointedly ignoring him when he called out after me.

Emergency Services arrived on scene only moments after I did, but much as I'd predicted, they began by setting up a perimeter and worked their way through the hospital from the bottom up, securing each floor before moving on. By the time they reached the Psychiatric Services unit, Mortiana and the witches were long gone, and I was in no mood to answer questions. I brushed past a pair of uniformed officers who, as luck would have it, recognized me by sight, and took the stairs down to the ground floor.

I found my car still parked along the curb where I'd left it and noted with some dismay the passenger seatbelt sitting secured in its lock. The engine came to life with all its usual gusto, and I pulled away from the curb, pretending not to see the annoyed looks cast my way by the medical personnel and hospital patients standing out along the curb.

I headed for downtown, and twenty minutes later, pulled into the Government Center Parking Garage. I found a spot on the second floor, and made for Blue Moon headquarters, slowing my pace when I drew within sight of the sub-basement stairway and saw the figure standing there.

In her early sixties, Margaret Kermit had sharp cheekbones and silver hair styled short into a pixie style cut. Dressed in a long-sleeved ivory shirt with a blue diamond-patterned scarf, she had her arms wrapped around herself, and her left hand twitched every now and again, fingers pressing together as if wishing they had a cigarette to pinch between them. A bad habit from somewhere in her past, I suspected, the muscle

memory reasserting itself in the moment of stress as she stared off into nothingness.

“Ma’am?” I asked as I came up beside her. “Are you alright?”

The sound of my voice broke her out of her trance, and she gave herself a little shake. “Oh, Chloe. It’s you. Quite a day, isn’t it?”

“I take it you’ve heard?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “Deputy Bulwark called me at home and asked me to come down. He’s always been a spineless worm, but this, well, he could barely contain his excitement as he shared the news. And, of course, he made sure Internal Affairs was present, supposedly so that I understood the gravity of the situation.” She snorted, and her fingers involuntarily rose toward her mouth before she dropped them back down. “He wanted to humiliate me.”

I didn’t blame her for being upset. Deputy Bulwark had a bloated opinion of himself and disdained anything that might make his department look bad. Unfortunately, that included Lieutenant Kermit and myself. I didn’t doubt for a moment that he had enjoyed bringing Margaret down, and had probably made a great display of showing her the pictures, likely hoping she would burst into tears on the spot.

I didn’t need to ask to know that hadn’t happened. Anyone who’s met the Kermit family and came away with the impression that she was the weaker of the two was sorely misguided. Boston doesn’t breed soft people, and Margaret Kermit was tougher than most.

That being said, it can’t have been easy, knowing that her husband was sitting in a holding cell at that very moment and that his superiors, rather than fighting for his release, likely preferred to keep him there. Not to mention the photographs themselves and what they meant for their marriage.

I drew in a deep breath. “Ma’am, for what it’s worth, I don’t believe those photos are genuine. I’ve never seen any evidence to suggest that Lieutenant Kermit might be in any way deceptive or unfaithful to you or this department.”

Margaret looked at me as if I’d just announced that water was wet, and a long second passed before the corner of her mouth flicked up in a smile. “Do you honestly think I don’t know that, Chloe? That I don’t know my husband? I know everything about that man. He’s a kind, caring, loving husband, but he’s not complicated. He could no more carry on a secret affair than he could balance one-handed on the bow of a lobster boat. No, dear, I’m not worried about some young thing coming in and stealing his affection. I’m worried about what those pictures mean.”

“I might have an answer for that. I think someone, likely our murderer, is trying to set him up in order to get Blue Moon shut down.”

At the sound of my words Margaret’s face slipped, but she picked herself up a moment later, and her expression became one of fierce determination. “I was afraid you would say that. Terrible as it sounds, a part of me was hoping this was just Deputy Bulwark, and a few of the upper brass deciding they’d finally had enough.”

“Of Lieutenant Kermit?”

She nodded. “We both know John means well, but he does have a tendency to lead with his heart rather than his head. I was hoping this was their way of forcing him into retirement.” Something must have shown in my expression, because she reached out and placed one hand on my shoulder. “Don’t look so sad, Chloe. John loves his work, but you have to be pragmatic when it comes to these things. Nothing lasts forever. At some point, he’ll have worked his last case and that will be that. If the department has decided that time is now, well, we can come through that and still have a future. The other possibility is far scarier.”

“A murderer trying to set him up?”

She nodded. “People like that, people who kill for pleasure, they’re relentless. And they’re not going to stop. Today it might be pictures, but if he pulls clear of that, what’s next? A knife in the dark? A drive by on his way to work? Where will it end?”

“It ends with me,” I said, filling my voice with steel. “I’m going to find who did this and put a stop to it.”

Margaret’s eyes glistened, but the smile she gave me was fierce. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Have no fear, ma’am. This murderer isn’t the only one who knows how to be persistent.”

“What’s your plan?”

This time it was my turn to draw in a breath and let it out slowly. “Honestly, I’m still working on that. I feel like I’ve exhausted every angle in regards to Ambretta Greenhall. Likewise, the Sisters of Salem turned out to be a bust.” Bust was putting it mildly. I’m not sure how allowing Mortiana to escape could be classified as anything other than a catastrophe, but I couldn’t afford to wallow in despair. I still had work to do. “Whoever’s doing this is smart, and they’ve had a lot of time to plan. Up until now, we’ve been playing it straight, and they’ve countered us at every turn. Now we’re late in the game and almost out of moves.”

“But?” she asked, letting the word hang in the air.

“But I’m not giving up, and if there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s making trouble. I think I’m going to need to start breaking things.”

“Something tells me you’ll be pretty good at that, too.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“Any idea where you’ll start?”



“With our victim. Desiree Easton. We’ve been trying to locate next of kin information, but so far have come up short. Apparently, she and her mother weren’t on speaking terms and we—”

“Her name is Beatrice Easton, and she resides on the corner of Beacon and Fairfield, in a four-story brownstone with a view overlooking the river.”

I stared at her and blinked once. “Uh, thank you very much. Mind me asking how you know that?”

“I’ve been in this city a long time and have attended more than my fair share of wine tastings and brunches alongside the trophy wives and wealthy socialites. Seems I can recall meeting Desiree Easton when she was just a child. Prettiest little girl you ever saw, but timid, scared, as if afraid to put one toe out of line. It wasn’t hard to see why. Beatrice used to make the rounds, parading her to all the tables, extorting compliments from all of them. She’d prattle on about the various catalogues and fashion shows, and it soon became obvious to everyone that she thought she could use her daughter’s looks to buy herself a better life. I suppose it worked, after a fashion, but at what cost? Once Desiree grew old enough to refuse, Beatrice found she had little left to say, and settled instead for sipping her drinks in sullen silence. I still see her from time to time, enough to know she’s still around, but I don’t think she’s spoken more than a handful of words to anyone in years.”

“Well, let’s see if I can get her to talk to me.”

“Good luck, Chloe. I’m sorry to add to your burdens, but I don’t think it an exaggeration to say that my husband’s freedom now rests entirely on your shoulders.”

## That Boy is Not Right. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1603hrs

Margaret Kermit was right on the money, and Beatrice Easton answered the door herself. She was younger than I expected still in her late forties, suggesting she'd escaped being a teen bride only by a matter of months, and pretty. Not beautiful, certainly not as beautiful as her daughter, but pretty enough to get ahead in life, if she was smart about it.

Her blonde hair was done up in a fancy cut, indicating a recent visit to the salon, but her silk pajamas were in need of washing, and they clashed with the old flannel bathrobe draped across her shoulders. Her makeup was smeared, and her lipstick was absent. She was also drunk, or close enough that it counted much the same. Bloodshot eyes stared at me from the doorway, and the smell of booze wafted from her breath as she said, "You lost, honey?"

"Not at all. Beatrice Easton? I'm Sergeant Chloe Mayfield, of the Boston Police Department. I was hoping to ask you some questions about your daughter."

Beatrice stared at me for so long that I wondered if she was drunker than I initially suspected, but eventually she took a step back and motioned me inside. "You got a badge?"

"Afraid I lost it earlier today. Haven't gotten around to getting another yet."

"That right there is the story of my life." She turned her back and retreated into the apartment, leaving me to close the door behind her. "Drink?"

"No, thanks."

I followed her down the hall and into an open concept living room and kitchen, noting things as I walked. At first glance, the room could have been cut straight from an interior design magazine. Two plush couches with ivory and cream

pillows flanked a glass coffee table with a seashell vase housing some kind of white feathers. Opposite them sat a sitting chair and a small table with a decanter set. Beatrice made her way over and poured herself a glass, dropping in two ice cubes and swilling it around before bringing it to her lips.

The place wasn't dirty exactly. I suspected Beatrice employed a cleaning lady who came in on a weekly basis, but there were signs of disarray. A stain on the couch, a burn marking on the carpet, just below the armrest, where a cigarette might have fallen and burned itself out in the embers. There were scrapes on the wall where the rings of her hand cut the paint as she used it to steady herself, forming mock waves and patterns beneath the pictures.

There were so many pictures they littered the room, and each and every one of them showed Desiree Easton. Framed, canvas, even black and white. They varied in age, beginning when she was a newborn and continuing all the way up through high school. I watched her grow in those pictures, saw her turn from a precious baby into a beautiful young woman. Knowing what I did now, it seemed a morbid thing. A strange sort of tomb, built on hidden resentment and shattered dreams.

"It's okay to stare," Beatrice said. "Everybody does. There's not been a man yet who hasn't made love to me on those couches without staring at the walls."

I made a mental note to remain standing. "Ma'am, you've been informed that they found your daughter's remains today? That she was murdered?"

"My daughter died a long time ago, Sergeant. Today is just the day she stopped breathing."

"Well, be that as it may. I'm still investigating her case."

"Could have sworn I met another detective who told me he was handling it. Bald man, strong hands. Wouldn't mind seeing him again."

"I'm handling a different aspect."

“What might that be?”

As briefly as possible, I filled her in on the circumstances surrounding her daughter’s death and the photos showing Lieutenant Kermit. I avoided using any specific names, figuring that anything I said wasn’t likely to remain in confidence.

“Huh,” she said when I finished.

“That’s it? You don’t have anything to say?”

“I’m not surprised. My daughter didn’t have much in the way of a formal education. Part of me always figured she would end up shacking up with some older man. I was the same at her age. But a police lieutenant? Good for her, I say.”

“Didn’t you hear anything else I said? Someone murdered her and is using these photos to try to get away with more killings.”

“Oh, I heard you just fine, but I’m not sure why it should concern me. The photos are interesting, granted. Makes me think of Davie.”

“Who’s Davie?”

“Ah, he was a snot-nosed little pipsqueak who lived down the street, back when Desiree was just a girl, and we couldn’t afford to live in the city proper. We were out in Salem, stuck with all those bored housewives who thought casting spells was a good way to pass the time.”

“Seems there’s a bit of that in Boston too these days.”

She threw back another hit of her drink, drawing the ice cube into her mouth and passing it from cheek to cheek before spitting it back into the cup. “He used to cut pictures out of magazines. Wasn’t hard to find images of Desiree even back then. He’d paste them together and make little paper mâché witch dolls for them to play with. Stupid little boy. Always had his head in the clouds. Course, it wasn’t hard to see why. His whole family was shoulder deep in that witchcraft nonsense. I

always figured that's where Desiree picked it up from. Course, she knew better than to come around like that when she was young. Pale skin and black eyeshadow don't sell children's clothes."

"Is this Davie still around? Any chance I could speak with him?"

"Not without some smelling salts and strong bourbon. Boy died young, or so I was told. It was a blessing, really."

"It was a blessing that he died?"

She nodded. "Davie wasn't right, and everybody knew it. Can't really blame him. His mother was always nattering on about spell craft and love potions. Blathering on about the goddess within. And the father, well, he liked to dress up in his wife's clothes and pretend he was one of the girls. At least until the day she came home early and caught him. Neighbors say she hauled him out of the house and left him in the street like a stray dog. Word got around, and all her little witch friends came together, told him they'd put a curse on him if he ever dared show his face again. Nonsense, obviously, but it worked. He left Davie and his girls behind without so much as a goodbye and never showed his face again. It's no wonder that things went south as fast as they did."

"What happened?"

"Davie's mother was obsessed with her daughters. She doted on them, told them how they were going to grow up to be powerful spell casters. But not little Davie. No, he could never be a witch, you see. They didn't let men in the circle. It's no wonder what happened next."

"I take it he left Salem?"

"Not hardly. He tried to poison the lot of them. Mom and the older one pulled through, but not the youngest. Burned through her stomach like nothing the doctors had ever seen. Course, the authorities figured out pretty quick what had happened, and they hauled little Davie off to juvenile hall.

Judge ordered him held there until he was eighteen, then kicked him back out into the world. Freedom didn't last long, though. Wasn't like he could go home, and nobody was eager to offer a handout to a man who'd killed his own sister. I heard he spent some time turning tricks down by Methadone Mile. Eventually, one of the Johns got a little too rough, and he stabbed him through the belly. Ended up back in front of that same judge who sentenced him to six years. Couldn't say what happened after that, but I heard rumors they beat him to death."

"This is an all-around charming story. You should try telling it at dinner parties."

She shrugged. "If you want daisies and butterflies, watch a Hallmark movie. If you want the truth, then grab yourself a glass and take a seat. I got a hundred more stories just like that little boy, and they all end the same way."

"You don't happen to remember his last name, do you?"

"Birch. They were the Birch family."

"Any idea if they're still in Salem?"

She shook her head. "The mother died young. Breast cancer. The eldest daughter got herself pregnant out of high school and ran off to be with some corn farmer in Illinois. Guess magic spells are no substitute for chemotherapy or a good condom." She drew in a breath and her eyes grew distant, peering into something yet unseen. "Funny how much I think back to those days. Can't say they were happy, and I'm pretty sure most of those ladies hated the very sight of me. Seems strange to think I've beaten them all."

"Beaten them how?"

She snorted and spread her hands. "Look around, Sergeant. I've got it all. The big house, the river view. Heck, I even scored an invitation to Mayor Altair's little shindig this evening. If that's not high society living, I don't know what is."

I narrowed my eyes. “Mayor Altair is having a party?”

“Sure is.” She stepped away from the decanter and made her way to the dining room table, returning a moment later with the envelope in hand. “Right here. Read it and weep.”

The invitation wasn’t made out by name, but it contained two tickets to the Green Futures Society gala, taking place at the Westin-Copley hotel in only a few hours’ time. Based on the invitation, it was a dual-purpose event, serving as a fundraiser for clean energy organizations within the city as well as Mayor Altair’s first official appearance after having been welcomed into office.

“I don’t suppose you’re taking a date?” I asked.

Beatrice let out a bawdy laugh. “Now where’s the sport in that? No, Sergeant, I’d much prefer to, hey, wait a minute, where are you going with that? Excuse me!”

I pocketed the spare invitation and turned my back to her, walking out without a word.

## One Last Chance. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1700hrs

I made it back to my car and pulled away from the curb, leaving Beatrice Easton screaming in her doorway. I wasn't too worried about her. I'd dealt with my share of alcoholics during my time in the Neighborhood Watch, and was reasonably sure I could predict her next course of action. Might be she'd call the police, the other police that is, and report a theft, but more likely she'd pour herself another drink and grumble and whine for a few hours before eventually dissolving into a sullen silence that would last the remainder of the evening.

Right now, I had bigger things to worry about.

I dug my cellphone out of my pocket and started making calls. I kept my conversations short and left messages where needed. Then I drove back to my apartment and parked along the edge of the block before making my way inside.

I dropped my tactical bag down beside the couch, then walked over to Yosemite's cage and lowered my hand inside. He dutifully climbed into my palm and allowed me to bring him up and softly press my face against his fur. Technically, such an overt sign of affection went against our agreed method of coexisting, but sometimes you just need a hug from something soft and fuzzy that loves you.

Yosemite waited patiently until my heart didn't feel so empty, then I lowered him back down and made my way to the kitchen, returning a moment later with a handful of hamster nuggets. He started toward them, then paused, and glanced at me, his little pink nose twitching in silent concern.

"I'm okay, buddy." I said the words aloud, then stopped, unable to deny the false taste in my mouth. Yosemite seemed to feel it too, and remained where he was, peering at me with a soft expression.



“Okay, maybe I’m not. Truth is, I’m about to do something dangerous, and people could get hurt. Maybe me. I don’t want you to worry, though. I’ve made arrangements for someone to look after you if I don’t come back. You’ll never be cold or hungry or lonely again.”

That part was true. Luke Hubbard, the local elementary teacher whose daughter I’d rescued from Bloodcuddles, had agreed to take custody. He had experience with hamsters, having taken care of Princess Pickles since birth, and the children would ensure Yosemite would never be alone or unloved.

My words seemed to mollify Yosemite, who let his gaze linger for a few moments before he turned and began working on his nuggets. My eyes didn’t quite blur at the sight, but it was a close thing, and I drew in a long breath, letting it out in a rush before stepping into the bathroom. I stripped out of my clothes and set my gun on the bathroom counter within easy reach. Then I took a quick shower, washing and combing my hair before changing into a pair of sweats and an old t-shirt.

Shortly after that, Cambrie arrived, and I met her on the front doorstep.

“Did you bring it?”

My younger sister nodded and held up her makeup case, along with a plastic garment bag housing a trio of dresses. “I did, but I don’t understand why.”

“Remember when we used to play Barbies, and we would give them makeovers?”

“Yeah.”

I motioned to myself. “Today I’m Barbie. I need to get dolled up.”

Cambrie stared at me, then the corners of her mouth split up into a wide smile. “Well, it’s about time.”

Cambrie came inside, and we made our way into the bathroom, borrowing one of the kitchen chairs and seating me down beside the sink. I let her clear some space for herself, then watched as she set up her makeup-kit, which turned out to be a triple layer case filled with all manner of makeup, brushes, and powders. I wasn't a total amateur when it came to makeup, but Cambrie could have given any department store cosmetician a run for her money, and I stayed still while she went to work, beginning with a layer of SPF skincare and moving onto the primer and foundation.

"You know if you'd let me do this more often, that gorgeous FBI agent of yours wouldn't be so quick to keep running out of town." Cambrie remarked as she worked my eyebrows.

"Things with Alex are complicated." I hesitated a moment, then added, "Although while we're on the subject, this is as good a time as any to talk about you and Deputy Bulwark."

"Jimmy? What about him?"

I drew in a breath and carefully considered my words. "He's not right for you. You deserve better."

Cambrie's face softened, but she didn't say anything for a long moment. "We talked about this before, Chloe. We agreed it was my decision."

"I know we did. But it doesn't change the facts."

"He's not a bad man."

"Maybe not, but he's not an honorable man, either. You deserve someone who knows right from wrong. And even more importantly, who's willing to take action when they see the wrong in front of him."

"Is this about the case?"

"Maybe, but it goes beyond that."

Cambrie didn't answer, and we lapsed into silence as she applied my concealer, blush and highlights. She debated adding a bronzer, but ultimately decided against it, and finished with my lips, adding color and gloss before stepping back and admiring her work.

“You know, Chloe, I just may have outdone myself this time. You look like a million bucks. Like one of those high-priced escorts you see in the movies.”

I wasn't sure expensive hooker was the look I was going for, but I understood the sentiment, and appreciated the effort. Glancing at the mirror, I hardly recognized myself, which was a good thing, under the circumstances.

“Okay, that will work. Now let's get me clothed before everyone else arrives.”

Picking out the right dress actually took longer than the makeup, and the rest of the crew arrived before we were done. Cambrie let them in, then gave them instructions to linger around in the living room before returning to help me. She insisted on the tightest of the three, but I eventually convinced her that I needed to be able to move, as well as, you know, breathe, and we settled on a knee-length black chiffon dress with a halter top neckline that left my arms bare. The length of the dress was short enough that I could still run, if I had to, but long enough to conceal my pistol, which I had holstered in my compression short-shorts that I wore underneath. They fit like bicycle shorts, save for a built-in holster which held my weapon secure. I also insisted that I wear flats, ignoring Cambrie's protests and stubbornly refusing to budge. If what I suspected might happen tonight happened, then I'd need to move quickly, and that just wasn't possible with heels.

Eventually, we were done, and Cambrie insisted on exiting first, addressing the room and announcing me like a DJ announcing an exotic dancer. I stepped out, feeling heat rise in my cheeks at the stares and open mouths that greeted me.

Robbie was seated on the floor, his laptop open beside him and a cold cut sandwich in one hand. He stared at me, open mouthed, and a wad of mayonnaise fell out from between the bread, landing on his pants with a wet *splat*.

Pongo stood near the kitchen. I'd placed him in charge of food, assuring him he'd be reimbursed once he brought me the receipts. You can't fight bad guys on an empty stomach, and I'd basically given up on the drive-through by this point. Plus, I was pretty sure that if I had any more coffee, it was going to burn a hole through my gut. I needed real food, and Pongo had come through big time, arriving with a cold cut sandwich platter and a pair of deli soup containers loaded with clam chowder. There is no clam chowder like Boston clam chowder. No matter what anyone tells you.

Rickson was seated on my couch, dressed in civilian clothes, working on a bowl of the aforementioned chowder and a Pepsi. The final member of the crew was Dr. Lyndon Parrish. He sat on the opposite end of the couch, still dressed in his hospital scrubs and looking entirely uncomfortable, an untouched sandwich gripped in his fingers.

Rickson's mouth curled up into an appreciative smile as Cambrie made me twirl in place, and for some reason it brought more heat to my cheeks. I drew the line when she tried to make me twerk, and slapped her hands away before retreating into the kitchen, scooping a half-sandwich and pouring myself a bowl of soup.

The chowder was from the grocery store, but it was warm, and the creamy texture worked its magic in my gut and stomach. I started shoveling it in, then noted Cambrie's disapproving look and forced myself to slow, knowing I didn't have time to redo my lips. I still finished in near record time, and debated refilling the bowl, but the clock on my phone told me time was ticking away, and we didn't have all that much to begin with.

“Okay,” I said and set my bowl in the sink. “Gather around folks. Time to get down to business.”

As if my words had been a signal, everyone stopped what they were doing and gathered in close, readjusting themselves around my living room so they could face me.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat it for you, people. We’re in a bad spot. It’s the bottom of the ninth, and we’re down a couple of runs.” Heck, it was more than a couple if I was being honest, but I didn’t think mentioning that would help.

“Uh.” Robbie raised his hand and waited for my nod before speaking. “Sorry, is this a baseball or a football metaphor? Sports aren’t really my thing.”

“Baseball. Red Sox, all the way, baby.”

“Is that a local team?”

“What, seriously? How can you grow up in Boston and not know about the Red Sox? Fenway Park ringing any bells?” I glanced through their faces, but with the exception of Rickson, only blank stares met my gaze. “Unbelievable.”

“Not really,” Robbie said. “It’s sort of like growing up in the computer age and not knowing how to code.”

I guess he had a point on that one, but now wasn’t the time to discuss it. “Point is, we’re in a bad spot. Lieutenant Kermit’s out of commission, which means it’s up to us. We screw this up, and not only will most of us not have jobs tomorrow, but a lot of people could get hurt.”

“Uh, sorry to interrupt, but why am I here?” Lyndon Parrish asked. “I’m not affiliated with any law enforcement agencies.”

It was a fair question. I’d had Rickson pick him up on the way over, but hadn’t given him much information regarding why I wanted him here.

“We need your help.”

“With what?”

“Information. I thought there was something familiar about your name, but I couldn’t place it. Even when Dr. Eerie made his little inside joke. It wasn’t until I went back to the hospital that I realized where I’d heard it before. You’ve worked with Blue Moon in the past.”

Lyndon’s eyes dropped, and he suddenly looked decidedly uncomfortable. “Well, in a manner of speaking. Tempest and I enjoyed a friendly rivalry for a time, but I’m afraid it went sour during the events of Lord Hale’s dinner party. I’ve considered reaching out to apologize, but given the circumstances, I wasn’t sure it would be welcomed.”

“Well, consider this your chance to make amends. I’ve got a possible lead, but I don’t have the time or resources to track it down myself. You have access to the Massachusetts State Corrections database, right? Including juvenile records?”

Those records were sealed in most cases, and required a court order signed by a judge to access, even for law enforcement. I suspected that Dr. Eerie had worked out a way to gain access using his connections at either the Harvard medical school or Massachusetts General Hospital. It was a fair bet, and it was confirmed a moment later when Dr. Parrish nodded.

“Yes.”

“Good. I need you to look up David Birch. He’s originally from Salem. Supposedly, he did time in a youth detention facility before ending up in adult prison. Charges were probably aggravated battery if not attempted murder. I need you to find out everything you can about him. There’s a chance he died in custody, but if not, then I need to know what happened to him.”

Lyndon grimaced. “Anything in those files would be covered under HIPAA.”

“Not if he’s dead. And certainly not if he’s involved in the murders.”

“All the same, I could lose my license if word got out that I was sharing information with you.”

“You’ll lose more than that if we can’t bring this situation to a close. You think Mortiana is just going to forget about you? Once she’s settled the score with the killer, you can bet she’ll be coming for you. Witches don’t like being contained, and she dislikes it more than most. Way I see it, you’ve only got two choices. Either help me, or catch the next flight out of Boston. Your call.”

Dr. Parrish dropped his head and debated for a handful of seconds before he said. “How soon do you need it?”

“Quicker is better.”

“What about the rest of us?” Rickson said. “What do you need us to do?”

I felt a soft flutter in my chest at the realization that he’d included himself, pointedly disregarding the fact that he wasn’t actually a member of Blue Moon. He was my friend, and he was there when I needed him. That mattered a whole heck of a lot more than any official title.

“Mayor Altair is hosting a gala event for the Green Futures Society here in a couple of hours. It’s technically a fundraiser, but it’s also his first official appearance after having been sworn into office. As such, the who’s who of the city’s bigwigs and political elite will be in attendance, including Father Irons.”

“So?”

“So I think Mortiana is going to kill them.”

Silence greeted my words as concerned looks passed between the team. “How do you know?”

“Think about it. Mortiana isn’t stupid. Right now, she’s on the run. She won’t leave Boston, but she knows the police are looking for her, and she believes Father Irons is hunting the witches, likely with the blessing of Mayor Altair.”

“Is she wrong?” Pongo asked.

I drew in a deep breath and let it out in a rush. “Honestly, I’m not certain one way or the other. Father Irons is pompous, and he’s definitely not going to shed a tear over any of the slain witches, but something in my gut doesn’t like it when I try to name him as the killer. He and Mayor Altair are thick as thieves, according to what we know, and I just don’t see either of them risking it all to kill young women.”

“You’re basing a lot on a gut feeling,” Rickson said.

“Granted, but it hasn’t steered me wrong yet. And regardless of whether I’m wrong or right, Mortiana *believes* he’s the killer, and she likely believes they’ll use the police force as their own personal hit squad. She’ll be looking to take them down quick, before they can begin to mount a true search.”

“That would fit within the parameters of her psychological profile,” Dr. Parrish admitted.

I’d figured that too, since people who are willing to exchange their souls to a demon in return for supernatural power don’t usually score high in the patience department.

“How do we stop it?” Rickson asked.

“I’m going in,” I told them. “I’ve managed to secure a ticket. I’ll be there when they strike.”

“Just one ticket?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What about the rest of us?”

“Assignments are as follows. Rickson, I need you to spread word to the patrol officers on shift, but do it softly. If cops



flood the place, Mortiana and her witches will recognize the trap and pull back. Keep them close, but not too close.”

“What do you want me to say? That some crazy witch is going to attack the Green Futures Society gala, hoping to snuff out some priest?”

“Dress it up a bit. Instead of referring to her as a witch, maybe cast her as a scorned lover, or better yet, put out a rumor that he diddled her, and now she’s coming for payback.”

“You want me to spread false lies about a priest molesting young women?”

I shrugged. “Why not? After all, this is Boston. The church lied to us about that very thing for years. I’d say it’s time we returned the favor.”

Rickson considered it and then nodded. “Yeah okay.”

“Cambrie, how quick can you get word to your recruits’ class?”

“About two seconds after I send it through our group chat.”

“Get them ready to go. If this goes badly, and I think it might, you’re going to have a lot of people fleeing. That’s a lot of chance for collateral damage. I need them nearby, ready to block off the streets and create a funnel to lead people to safety. Can they handle that?”

Cambrie made a considering sound. “Maybe.”

“Looking for a little more than a maybe here, Cambrie.”

“Well, here’s the problem. Blue Moon doesn’t have the most stellar reputation. In fact, it’s kind of garbage. A lot of the recruits don’t look too kindly on it. They’re not going to want to be mixed up in something like this if they know you’re involved.”

“Can we bribe them?”

“With what? They’re not elementary school kids Chloe. You can’t get them to do what you want by offering them a

pizza party.”

She had a point, and I thought about it for several seconds before the solution came to me. “What about last year’s state law enforcement examination test results? Think that might pique their interest?”

Cambrie’s eyes widened. “I’d say so. Can you do that?”

I looked at Robbie. “Can we do that?”

“I can do that.”

I turned to Cambrie. “We can do that.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll spread the word and have them standing nearby.”

“Tell them not to be too obvious. There are a lot of restaurants and bars nearby. Just blend in.”

“Excuse me? What about those sewer people you mentioned?” Robbie asked.

Crud. I’d nearly forgotten about them. I turned to Pongo. “We’re solid, right?”

He shrugged. “From an internal standpoint, yes. Bulwark won’t be able to deny that you informed him of the pending danger. From a legal standpoint, it’s harder to say. If people get hurt and they were to sue the department, their lawyers could argue that we had a duty to inform the public at large. It would all come down to a jury.”

“Who are almost certain to vote against us.”

“Statistically, yes.”

“Okay, so we draw up a press release and leak it to the media the minute we’re finished with Mortiana. Chances are most of them will ignore it, or pass it off as a hoax, but a couple of the smaller sources might run with it.”

“Bulwark won’t like it.”

“Tough cookies. Truth is, these Acadians could strike from anywhere, and people need to be prepared.” I drew in a breath and glanced around the room. “Anyone got anything else?”

Silence greeted me, and I let it go for a few seconds before I clapped my hands together. “Alright then. Let’s go to work, people.”

## Unexpected Aid. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1950hrs

Rickson volunteered to drive, and I could tell something was bothering him as we made our way out to the car.

“Something’s bothering me.”

“You don’t say?” I lowered myself down into the car and pulled my seatbelt across my chest, securing it in place before we pulled away from the curb. “Alright then, let’s hear it.”

“You shouldn’t be going in alone.”

“Not like I have much choice.”

“I’m serious, Chloe. There are a lot of people in there who don’t have any reason to like you. Mortiana might be the most obvious of them, but she’s not necessarily the most dangerous. This is Mayor Altair’s first public appearance, which means if it goes bottoms up then it’s going to reflect badly on him.”

“Meaning he might unfairly blame me? Gee, I never had that happen before.”

“This is serious. He can end your career with one phone call. And he won’t hesitate if he thinks it will help him save face.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Rick. But what other options do I have?”

He was quiet for a moment before he said, “Let me go instead.”

“You got a tuxedo hidden away under those clothes that I don’t know about?”

“No, but I’m sure I can scrounge something up.”

I shook my head. “You’d be in the same boat I am. Plus, Mortiana knows your face. One glance and she’ll know something’s up.”

“She knows yours too.”

“Hence the makeover disguise,” I said. “It won’t hold up under close scrutiny, but hopefully it will allow me to blend in with all the other socialites.”

I didn’t mention the other reason. Rickson was brave and strong, but no one undergoes an injury like he did and ever fully recovers. When Mortiana and the witches made their move, we’d need to act quick, and I was the faster of us.

“Even if we had time for you to change, which we don’t, I don’t have an extra ticket, and trying to crash would be too risky. Plus, I still need you to carry word to the officers on patrol.” That last part was true. Blue Moon’s reputation was short of stellar, and they likely wouldn’t listen to me. But Rickson was known throughout the department. He’d laid it all on the line and shown his true colors. Bottom line, he had the other officers’ respect, and I didn’t. Which hurt to admit, even to myself, but was true nonetheless.

“What about the other witches? The ones who broke Mortiana out of the hospital?”

I shook my head and reached behind me to adjust the pistol in my shorts. “I warned them what would happen. They made their choice, and now it’s time to pay the piper.”

“And Father Irons?”

“He said it himself. We’re playing with the big boys now, and they play for keeps. Guess we’ll find out how much he likes being hunted.”

Rickson grunted and maneuvered us into the turn lane, turning north onto Dartmouth Street. “Speaking of hunting, you know there’s a chance the murderer might be there tonight, right?”

“It’s crossed my mind. I’ll keep my eyes peeled. Hopefully, he’ll give himself away and we can take him down at the same time as Mortiana.”

“That’s asking a lot, Chloe.”

“I prefer to think of it as keeping an optimistic viewpoint.” I swallowed, and some of the mirth died in me. “We’re almost there. Got anything else you need to get off your chest?”

“You sure it’s a good idea to go around handing out test results to the new recruits? If Bulwark finds out about it, you’re toast. Not to mention that it sets a bad precedent regarding honesty. Might come back to bite us in a few years’ time.”

“It wouldn’t be my first choice, but it’s necessary. Plus, if being a police officer was as simple as passing a test then anyone could do it. We both know there’s more to it than that.”

Rickson didn’t argue, and we drove the final few blocks in silence.

The Westin-Copley downtown hotel was huge, and beautifully lit with golden floodlights shining proudly through the multi-layered glass windowpanes. Someone had strung crystal lights around the surrounding trees, and soft music played from the speakers overhead. Valet attendants were scattered throughout the street, directing traffic into a circular pattern that carried them through the front entrance. Rickson waved away the attendant that approached our car and drove me up himself, pulling alongside the curb to allow me to exit.

“Here we go. Wish me luck,” I said as I unbuckled my seatbelt.

“Better to be smart. Then you don’t have to worry about being lucky.”

“Thank you, wise old grandfather. Any other life mottos you want to share?”

“Just the one. If you get into trouble, find some way to signal. I’ll be nearby.”

“Thanks, Rick.”

One of the valets opened my door, and I accepted their hand, rising from the car and making my way up onto the sidewalk. A quick glance around revealed a sea of luxury cars, along with a couple of limousines, all inching forward to take our spot. The valets had laid out a series of red carpets, forming twin lines framed with velvet ropes. Half a dozen hotel attendants stood near the doorways, scanning tickets, while two or three security guards oversaw the entire procession. A quick glance down the block revealed a pair of police patrol vehicles, the officers gathered around the hood, sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups and talking quietly among themselves.

I got into line, feeling a little awkward in my flats, but pushed the thought aside and forced my back to remain straight. The line moved swiftly, and in no time at all, I found myself at the doorway, faced with a pair of hotel staff. I handed over my ticket, and they scanned it using one of those handheld devices, waiting for the light to turn green before handing it back and motioning me through with a rehearsed line about how I should enjoy myself.

Inside, the hotel smelled amazing, the rich aroma containing a dizzying array of spices that were too entangled to unfold, but which instantly made me inhale and relax. The dining hall was on the second floor, and I followed the flow of formalwear to the escalators, stepping on just as I felt someone cut through and push in behind me.

A warning sounded in my head, and I jerked around, one hand clenching into a tight fist before I recognized the person behind me.

“Oh, I don’t believe it.”

Marlon Baker smiled and settled back on his heels as if we were old friends. I’d heard it said that a tuxedo makes any man look good, but whoever said it never met the Boston Globe’s newest hire. His jacket was too big, the extra fabric hanging from his arms, and his pants were too short, rising up to

several inches above the ankle. I caught a flash of his cologne, some kind of cheap knockoff, and below that, a hint of printer ink and stale coffee. He'd had the good grace to run a comb through his hair, but he'd neglected to wash it first, and it was already returning to its previous shape.

“Pleasure to see you again, Sergeant.”

“Don't call me that.” I said through gritted teeth.

“You prefer Chloe? I didn't realize our relationship had escalated to a first name basis, but I would feel honored for you to call me Marlon—”

“I prefer you not call me anything at all. I don't even know how you got in here.”

“The same way you did, I imagine. Bribery.”

Technically, mine involved theft, but in this case, they were one and the same. “What do you want? This can't just be about trying to find a story.”

“It's about all the stories,” he said. “All the lies and false truths, binding together to form the house of cards on which this city is built. My readers deserve to know the truth, and more importantly, they deserve to know that justice wins out.”

“Kind of a grandiose idea for someone who has yet to print their first story.”

“I've always believed it pays to dream big.”

“Yeah, well, keep dreaming. And in the meantime, stay the heck away from me.”

We reached the peak of the escalator, and I took a series of quick steps, drifting left and leaving him no choice but to either chase after me or let me go. He chose the latter, and moved off to his right, disappearing into the crowd as I stepped into the main ballroom.

Two steps in and it became obvious that Mayor Altair and the city had spared no expense. Gorgeous chandeliers hung



from the ceiling, the tiny crystals reflecting the faux gold candlelight overhead. The theme was green energy, and it was reflected in the decor. Each table was numbered and covered in a delicate lace tablecloth, along with a beautiful centerpiece of white roses amidst a bouquet of greenery. Crystal glasses sat beside porcelain table settings, with little napkins shaped into tiny sail boats.

Waiters and waitresses moved amidst the tables, carrying flutes of champagne to the mingling patrons. I estimated there had to be at least two hundred people already inside, if not more. I thought I recognized a few city officials, and there were several well-built men gathered together that I suspected played for the New England Patriots football team. I noted the Chief of Police, as well as a half dozen of the upper brass, including Deputy Bulwark, all adorned in their formal dress uniforms. I made sure to give them a wide berth, and circled my way around toward the eastern section of the room, where a large refreshment table had been set up.

When I say the city had spared no expense, I mean just that. The crown gems of Boston cuisine were on display. Shrimps, with and without the heads. Lobster tails laid out atop a bed of ice. Scallops swimming in butter and raw oysters shucked with lemon and salt. There was even a small section reserved for sushi, manned by a pair of chefs in spotless white coats.

I helped myself to a plate and loaded up a few choice items. A waiter came by, and I snagged a champagne flute, taking small sips to wash down the fare. The first scallop went down smooth, the rich flavor filling my mouth. The one after that, however, halted halfway to my lips, and stayed there.

Standing not two tables away from me was a familiar quartet of women. Verbena stood at their center, dressed in a simple gray V-neck dress with a black shawl. Surrounding her were Lily, Hazel, and Rosemary. The Sisters of Salem were adorned in earth-colored finery that strongly resembled an

autumn landscape, shades of brown and orange blending together with seamless grace that was both pleasing to the eye but not so overblown as to draw attention. The witch closest to me, Lily, wore a heart-shaped pendant necklace that appeared black at first, but on closer examination, turned out to be filled with rich, dark soil.

I dropped my scallop back onto the plate, then laid it on the nearest table alongside my champagne flute and pointedly marched over to where they stood, drawing up alongside them.

“Verbena,” I said, forcing my mouth into a semblance of a fake smile and speaking through gritted teeth. “What are you all doing here?”

The out-of-town witches cast a series of looks my way, and none of them were friendly, but Verbena seemed to read their mood, and raised her hand in a gesture begging patience.

“Good evening, Chloe. It’s nice to see you again.”

At least she recognized not to call me Sergeant in public. “What’s going on? What is this?”

Verbena drew in a breath and straightened her shoulders. “A necessary precaution.”

“Against what?”

“We heard what happened at the hospital,” Lily said. “We know Mortiana is loose, and that she means to strike here this evening. We came here to stop her.”

“Stop her how?”

“Through whatever means necessary,” Verbena said. “The Sisters of Salem have often found ourselves at odds with prevailing government and religious entities within the city, but for all that, Boston is our home. We are as much a part of this community as anyone, and as such, we cannot sit idly by while one of our own seeks to harm its citizens.”

“Mortiana isn’t acting alone.”

“No, we are aware. Flora, and several others of similar mindset are helping her.” She drew in a breath and fought to suppress a shudder. “They are not evil, Chloe. Regardless of what else you might believe. They are young, and misguided, certainly, but they’re doing what they believe to be necessary for our continued survival. There is a certain pragmatism in that.”

“Pragmatic or not, they’ve made their choice, and there will be consequences.”

“Of course.”

“It isn’t just Flora, either. Dahlia is in on it as well.

Verbena blinked and then frowned. “Are you certain? I spoke with her earlier today and she claimed to have no knowledge of it.”

“Yeah, well, you might want to speak with her again.”

“All the same. We cannot stand idle while our sisters give themselves over to vengeance, nor can we allow any innocents to be harmed in our name.”

“That’s all well and good, but are you forgetting that there’s a killer still out there targeting you?”

“We have forgotten nothing, but Father Irons has already proven that he and his followers are able to find us, no matter where we seek to hide. Better to face our adversary out in the open.”

“Yeah, about that. I’m still not convinced you’ve pegged the right guy.”

“You’ve spoken with him?”

“Darn right I did.” A look of alarm flashed between the other sisters, and I could practically see their thought process, wondering if I was now somehow involved or, even worse, enthralled by him. Ridiculous, for obvious reasons, but there it was. “And near as I can tell, his only crime so far is being an

egomaniac. I haven't found anything connecting him to these murders, or anything at all incriminating save for an outspoken distaste for the paranormal which strikes me as just the sort of excuse he might give to the other priests for why he spends so much time studying it. It's as if it were a hobby."

"You've lost your way," Lily said. "You've become blinded by fear."

"Maybe. Or maybe these killings are about something more than I originally believed. Maybe it's about something personal. Something that no one wants to talk about. Something like—"

"Something like what?" a man's voice said from behind me. I watched Verbena's eyes rise up over my shoulder and saw her stiffen as the blood drained from her face. The three witches beside us moved to stand shoulder to shoulder, with Lily at their center, one hand clutching the dirt vial pendant at her throat.

I forced myself to take a breath, then turned around and found myself face to face with Father Osvaldo Irons.

"Good evening, Sergeant Mayfield," he said.

## Green Futures Gala. May 7<sup>th</sup> 2015hrs

Father Irons was dressed in a dark robe with scarlet buttons and matching trim down the center and along his mozetta. A red sash encircled his waist, and a gold cross hung from a chain around his neck. He bore no weapons that I could see, which didn't serve to make him any less dangerous as far as I was concerned.

“Good evening yourself,” I said, and took a step back.

“I confess, I'm surprised to see you here. Especially since I don't recall seeing your name on the guest list.”

I shrugged. “I was a last-minute replacement.”

“And your friends? I don't believe we've been introduced.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Lily spoke first, cutting me off. “We know who you are. And what you stand for.”

Father Irons raised his eyebrows. “I stand for the good of all Boston, child. For the souls of its citizens, and their spiritual well-being.”

“You stand for fear, for intimidation. For blind obedience to narcissistic leaders who hold their institution in greater esteem than the people they claim to serve. You are a fraud, Father Irons, and the day will come when all in this city will recognize it to be true.”

Father Irons' face darkened, and his mouth curled up into an angry grimace. “I see now why you were reluctant to ally yourself with the church, Sergeant. I did not realize you were harboring witches under your protection. I shall adjust to this bit of news in any future dealings.”

“We're perfectly capable of protecting ourselves,” Lily snapped.

“So I've heard. There does seem to be a bit of a steep learning curve though, doesn't there? From what I hear, there

are fewer of you with each passing day. Such a pity.”

“You can’t win,” Verbena said, her voice soft, but certain. “Magic is as much a part of Boston as the stones and streets. It comes from the Earth Mother, and from its people. The power is bound within the very heart of the city, and for every one of us who falls, another hundred will feel the call and move to take her place. Your crusade is doomed to failure.”

“Foolish woman, my crusade has not even begun.”

“Others have tried, better men than you, and yet here we remain. We will endure you like we have all the others.”

“Is that so?” Father Irons shook his head. “You speak boastful words, fool woman, but I see the truth reflected in your eyes. The Sisters of Salem hang by a thread, one that will be cut in short order and banished into the flame where it belongs. You claim to speak for the Earth itself, but it is the Devil’s voice that guides you, rising up from the depths of hell to whisper its cunning words in your ear. Whatever soul you once had was surrendered long ago, bartered away to feed your master’s insatiable hunger. He may have you, but he will not have this city, or the citizens within it. No matter where you hide, or how deeply you burrow, I will not stop until you have been pulled from this world. I will purge you, burn you out, witch, force you to flee a thousand times over, until you’ve nowhere else to turn. Until every citizen of Boston recognizes you for what you are, and cries out for your very blood. I will—”

“There you are, you dirty thief!”

A woman’s voice rang out from across the room, cutting him off. There was something familiar in its tone, and a feeling of dread bloomed in my stomach as I turned and glimpsed Beatrice Easton stalking across the hall. Her hair was still done up in that stylish cut, but it was clear she’d skipped a few steps while getting ready for the evening. Her makeup was smeared, and the slur on her words as well as her semi glass-

eyed expression suggested she'd helped herself to another drink, if not three. The left strap of her dress hung loosely off her shoulder, and she'd abandoned her heels somewhere behind her and resorted to stomping barefoot across the floor to seize hold of an unsuspecting brunette.

A brunette who, in the haze of candlelight and booze, bore only a passing resemblance to me. She was a year to two younger, but her face was similar, as was the shade of her hair. She did not, however, have my survival instincts, and she let out a loud shriek that echoed through the hall as Beatrice seized her by the back of her hair and jerked her back. The young brunette crumpled to the ground, and Beatrice stumbled back, crashing into a nearby table before gaining her balance.

“Think you can come into my house and steal from me, do you? Think I’m too old, too *drunk*, to do anything about it? Well, you listen here, you ungrateful little sow. I’ve choked down more than my share of crap in this lifetime. All those primping and posing harlots laughing at me behind their hands. But I’m here! I’ve made it. I’m at the top of the food chain, and if you think I’m going to sit back and let some smart mouthed junior detective take away everything I’ve worked for, then you’re going to find out the hard way that—”

The brunette managed to twist around and peered up, her eyes meeting Beatrice for the first time. The sudden proximity halted Beatrice in her tracks, and even through the cloud of booze fogging her mind, she seemed to realize she'd made a mistake.

“Oh my god,” Beatrice released the woman’s hair and stepped back, raising her hands into the air. “I-I’m so sorry. I thought you were.” She turned as the first hotel security officer arrived and seized her by the arm. “No, no, you don’t understand. It was a mistake, you see. I thought she was... thought she was.” She peered around at those nearest to her, her eyes imploring them for aid, until they reached me. Her face twisted up into a hate-filled grimace, and she let out an

ugly scream, ripping out from deep within her throat. “It was her! Right there! That’s the one who stole my ticket. It was her! Wait, what are you doing? No! Let me go. Don’t you know who I am?”

I couldn’t say for certain if the hotel security staff knew who she was, but it didn’t matter. They seized her by either arm, and lifted her in the air, carrying her, kicking and screaming from the room.

I took advantage of the commotion to turn and seize Verbena and Lily. The younger witch angrily shook off my arm, but Verbena complied, allowing me to lead her, and by extension the other witches, through the confused crowd to the far end of the room, away from the accosted brunette and, more importantly, Father Irons.

A low murmur rang through the crowd as Beatrice’s voice faded, those closest talking among themselves while those furthest away leaned in, hoping to catch wind of what had happened. A pair of staff remained behind, helping the accosted brunette to her feet and whispering soft comforts as her friends gathered around to support her.

“What are you doing?” Lily asked. “We almost had him! He was going to confess.”

“To what?” I asked. “Not liking you? Not agreeing with your choice of religions?”

“To murder!”

“Oh, keep dreaming. Even if you’re right about him being the killer, which you aren’t, do you honestly think Father Irons is stupid enough to announce to an entire room full of Boston high society that he’s some kind of psychotic murderer? And what if he did? Say he shouted it from the rooftops. Do you honestly think any of those people in there are going to stand before a judge and testify against him?”

“They would if they care about what is right.”



“They don’t. They care about what is in their best interests, and even if a couple of them were willing to prove me wrong and stand with you, we’d still need proof. An overheard conversation in a giant ballroom isn’t enough to win a conviction against someone like Father Irons.”

“She’s right,” Verbena said, cutting off the other witches’ objections. “If Father Irons is to stand trial, then the proof must be irrefutable. Perhaps coming here was a mistake.”

I sighed and shook my head. “Your heart is in the right place, but we need to be smart. And like it or not, I can’t protect you by myself. You need to get out of here before something bad happens.”

“What kind of something?” Lily asked.

I opened my mouth to respond, but all the lights shut off at once, casting the ballroom into pitch darkness a split second before the doors slammed closed. Conversations everywhere ceased, giving way to an expectant pause, as people waited for the lights to come back on. When that didn’t happen, a soft murmur broke out, followed by the shuffling sound of dozens of people reaching into their pockets and purses to retrieve their cell phones.

“Citizens of New England.”

A woman’s voice rang out, carrying across the ballroom and halting people in their tracks. Confused silence reigned, then a bloom of emerald fire erupted near the back of the room.

At first, I thought it was a torch, but then I realized the truth. It was a broom, a long-handled witches’ broom, to be precise, with gnarled sticks and twigs bound together in lieu of bristles. They’d coated the tips in some sort of a fluorescent chemical that turned the flame green, and the emerald light pushed at those nearest, forcing them back and revealing the cloaked figure holding it. I could tell from the height that it was a slender woman, but she had her hood up, and I was too

far away to see past the shadows and into the face. She was dressed in an all-black ensemble, including a skirt that extended down to her ankles.

“For three hundred years, you’ve persecuted our kind. You’ve hunted us, hounded us, hung us from your trees, and burned us at the stake.”

A second plume of fire erupted, revealing another witch standing at an opposite corner of the room. It was followed swiftly by a third, then a fourth, all the way to eleven. All bore burning brooms of green fire, and all were hooded, save for one.

Mortianna appeared near the front of the room. She was dressed in some sort of leather armor, the straps reflecting the light of the burning brooms as she stepped forward, throwing back her hood to reveal the maddened visage beneath. “For this, there can be no forgiveness. The Sisters of Salem may grant you pardon, but the Daughters of Goody say that those deaths must be repaid in kind.”

“Oh crud,” I whispered. By Goody, I suspected she meant Goody Ann Glover. The last witch to be hanged in Boston. She’d been a housekeeper for a mason family in the late 1600s, and when she was dismissed for stealing, legends said that she came back and cursed his house, causing several of his children to fall ill. Most of the town, including her own husband, banded against her, and in 1688, they hung her in a nearby church and buried her remains in the crypt beneath. Supporters of witchcraft liked to use her name as an example of the wrongdoings that had been done to the women of Boston, but some, like Mortiana, viewed her life as one to be admired. A witch, wielding her power offensively to fight back against those who had brought harm upon her. It was just the sort of thing that would resonate with the younger, more headstrong witches.

“Death for you all. Starting with him!” Mortiana’s arm snapped out, her finger pointing like a loaded gun across the

ballroom hall. One by one, people turned, sidestepping their way clear of the path until only Father Irons remained. He met the witches' gaze in cold, furious silence, his face a stone mask.

I heard a soft whimper behind me, and turned to see Lily, standing rigid with wide eyes and her mouth hanging open. I took a step closer and tapped my finger under her jaw, forcing her lips closed.

“Something bad like that. Something just like that.”

## The Daughters of Goody. May 7<sup>th</sup> 2025hrs

We all like to think that, in the dark moments, when the chips are down and enemies abound, we would have the courage to act. That we would dig deep down inside and summon an inner strength we didn't know we possessed. That we would rise to the occasion and become a true hero.

For the lucky few who find themselves in dangerous situations and come out on top, they get to pass through this life knowing they were right. For the vast majority of us, however, we're left never really knowing for sure, always wondering, deep down, if we would have the courage and the skill to pull through.

I never found out the name of the man standing nearest Mortiana. The one who lowered his head and let out a yell just before he charged. On some level, I can respect the bravery, but combat is a skill, one that must be honed for continual readiness. Grand ideals are no substitute for proper training, and there's a reason most major law enforcement agencies insist on continuous training to keep their officers' skills sharp.

Maybe he didn't see things the way I did. Likely, he saw a young, frail woman dressed in a dark cloak, rather than an enemy to be respected and feared. And maybe he'd been a football player in high school, or even college, and thought he could simply plow her over. I bet if I asked him, he would've had a story about how he almost made the pros, and only a fluke injury during his senior year kept him from a life of athletic excellence.

None of that mattered in the moment after he lowered his head and charged. He raced forward, the years and the extra pounds weighing heavily on his knees and joints, allowing Mortiana plenty of time to spin around and meet him.

She wheeled her broom like a quarterstaff, swinging the blunt end up and directly into his face. It struck with a heavy *whack*, and his head snapped up, blood shooting from his nose and splattering against the crystal chandeliers. His momentum disappeared in an instant, the extra weight around his midsection causing his back to bend in the wrong direction. Might be he could've recovered, but Mortiana never gave him that chance. She brought her broom around, and the flaming end cracked him on the side of the head. The heavy stick impacted with a sound like a baseball bat and sent the man toppling over onto his side.

He didn't catch on fire, thank God, but he crumbled to the ground with a painful moan and lay still. A fallen would-be hero, whose demise sounded the beginning of the panic.

People started shouting, and those nearest to the exits ran toward the doorways, seizing the handles and pushing with all their might, but to no avail. Somehow, the Daughters of Goody had overridden the automatic doors, and they refused to budge. Not that the trapped crowd inside let that stop them from trying. No sooner did the first row reach the doors than the next came crashing in behind them. Within moments, those who sought to flee found themselves pinned between the doorways, crushed as more and more people pushed in, screaming to be let out.

The witches danced amongst them, wielding their emerald fire brooms and herding folks into the corners. A few gestured wildly with their off hands, seemingly tracing magic circles in the air as they spit curses in Latin and other languages I didn't recognize.

To the right of the refreshment stand, one of the ballroom patrons failed to move fast enough, and a hooded witch brought her broom down over his back. He squealed as the flame took hold, the fluorescent liquid used to give the fire its emerald glow splashing into his jacket and causing the flames to ride up his back, singeing the sides of his face and beard. The

sight of one of their own engulfed in fire caused those nearest to descend into a full-blown panic. They hollered and screamed and pushed against their fellow Bostonians, the women crying even as the men cursed and screamed at those around them to do something.

I struggled to ignore the sounds of the panic and pushed toward the nearest witch. I briefly considered reaching beneath my dress to retrieve my pistol, but right now the ballroom was filled with so many innocents that I didn't dare fire. Even if my aim was spot on, which, let's be honest, I was a fair shot, but not exceptional by any means, there was a good chance the bullets would punch through the witches' bodies and continue on into the crowd beyond.

Sometimes you've got to do things bare-fisted, and this was one of them.

I pushed through the crowd, squeezing between two of the football players and coming up beside the nearest hooded witch. She caught sight of me at the last second and started to whirl, but I was faster, and I dropped low and swung my leg around, driving my shin bone directly into the side of her knee.

I heard something pop, and the power of the kick swept her feet out from under her, sending her crashing down onto her back. She hit hard, the back of her skull thumping off the ballroom floor, but that was the least of her problems. A second after she landed, her flaming broom crashed down on top of her, the emerald embers shaking loose from the burning bristles and catching in her cloak and dress. Fire and pain caused her to panic, and she screamed and hurled her broom away, slapping at her chest as she scooted back into the darkness. Unfortunately, she didn't bother to peer behind her, and anyone who's ever been in a panic will tell you that the last place you want to be is on the floor. As the broom sailed across the room, it caused those nearest to instinctively head in the opposite direction, and I saw the fallen witch catch a knee to the chin that sent her sprawling. A second after that, her

form disappeared, trampled beneath the soles of Boston high society.

I hadn't really started out with much of a plan. I'd moved forward, trusting in the darkness and the panicked crowd to shield me, allowing me to get close enough to attack from the flanks. Unfortunately, I'd underestimated the witches. They spotted me in short order, likely on account of the fact that I was one of the few people who wasn't screaming or panicking, and no sooner did the first of their number go down than two of them whirled to face me. The first cursed and traced her finger through the air, hissing at me in Latin. I wasn't so worried about her. It was the second one who scared me. She came forward, wielding her broom as if it were a spear, which, in some sense, I suppose it was, since the jagged ends would likely pierce right through my chest before setting me afire.

I set my feet as she swung, whipping her broom through the air with a savage cry. The shift in the flame betrayed her direction, and I ducked low as the flaming broom passed overhead. No sooner had it passed than she moved to reverse the backswing. I couldn't dodge twice, but as I started to move, my hand brushed against a fallen metal champagne tray, and I seized it and brought it up without thinking, positioning it over my head like a shield a split second before the witch's broom struck.

Emerald fire erupted where the bristles struck, sending green embers flying onto the nearest civilians, burning flesh and clothing. I waited for the moment I felt the broom lift, then shot forward, holding the tray over my head with one hand and driving my other into the witch's face. It was harder than I expected, on account of the hood, but I trusted my instinct and felt my knuckles connect solidly.

Unfortunately, that was where the good news ended. As the first witch's head snapped back, the second witch swept up beside us, and drew back her broom, preparing to whip it across my exposed torso. I didn't have time to dodge, or to

bring the tray around, and a flash of fear swept through me, as I instinctively braced for the pain.

A split second before the witch struck, a figure flew through the air. I mean that literally. I caught sight of a foot attached to a pair of muscular legs right before it struck the second witch's head. I followed the leg up to reveal Lily, her hands clenched in a martial arts stance, with her second leg tucked beneath her. She'd thrown an honest to goodness flying sidekick, and the force of the blow caused the second witch's neck to jerk hard to the right a split second before she crashed to the ground.

"Holy crud," I said. "You're a kung-fu witch?"

"Taekwondo, actually," she replied. "You think I got this body by accident?"

"Guess not."

"What do we do?"

I sucked in a breath and peered around. Things were not going well. The Daughters of Goody were down by three, but that still left eight, and they weren't shy about using their brooms. Panicked screams filled the air, even as blood lined the floor. I noted half a dozen still forms, those who'd been trampled. I debated a moment, then reached down and seized the two unconscious witch's brooms, handing them over to Lily.

"We need to get those doors open. Use these to clear a way through the crowd, then find us a way out of here. I don't care if you have to break through them. Just find some way for people to escape."

Lily nodded and seized the brooms, one in each hand. At the sight of them, the crowd dispersed, giving her a wide berth and allowing the other witches to gather around her as they raced toward the doors.



I started to turn, intending to resume my attack, but I'd forgotten one very important detail. This low-light vision worked on both fronts. I could only tell the bad guys, or in this case the bad ladies, apart because they were holding giant flaming brooms. Without them, they would blend into the darkness, and I'd need to be up close in order to tell the difference.

Very close.

Deathly close.

Mortianna beat me to it.

She swept up behind me and seized me by the back of my hair, pressing her chest against my back and swinging her opposite hand around. I acted on instinct, bringing my hands up and catching her arm at the wrist. Had I been a second slower, the knife in her hand would have plunged directly into my throat. As it was, it wobbled a bare millimeter from my flesh, the ceremonial blade reflecting the burning embers glowing nearby.

She was slippery, her thin arm twisting like an eel in my grip. The realization that I wasn't going to be able to hold her struck me hard, and I threw myself backwards, the pair of us crashing into a nearby table and somersaulting head over heels. Her grip on my hair vanished, and I twisted, still gripping her knife hand as she came around.

I can't say with any conviction that I was the stronger of the two. Madness shows itself in all kinds of ways, but she was slicker, and she closed the distance and came down on top of me, forcing me onto my back. From there, it was a systematic dismantling of my defenses. She hooked her heels beneath my legs, forcing my hips up and taking away my ability to move. Next was my opposite hand. She slammed her palm into my elbow and slid her leg up to my shoulder, pushing out and using her knee to pin my arm to the floor. Once that was done, she did the same on the opposite side,

releasing my hips but spreading my arms out to resemble a butterfly with its wings pinned. I was self-aware enough to know I wouldn't be winning any prize fighting competitions, but I'd always assumed I could handle myself in a fair fight. Mortiana showed me how wrong I was. It scared me, seeing how fast it happened, but it was nothing to what I felt a moment later, when I realized I was utterly defenseless.

“Oh, Sergeant,” Mortiana said, her voice positively giddy. She held my arms pinned with her knees and slid the blade up underneath my throat. “I was hoping you'd be here. Can I tell you a secret?”

“Aren't you going to make me promise not to repeat it first?”

She smiled, and slashed at my face, her nails drawing thick, painful lines. “Oh, no. By all means, tell everyone. Tell them I wanted you here so that I'd get to kill you. I'd say it's nothing personal, but we both know that's not true. You see, you cost me everything.”

“Yeah right. As opposed to taking responsibility for your own actions.”

She slashed at me again, driving her nails through the same cuts, digging deeper into my flesh. “I lost everything, including my sisters, because of you, but you know the good thing about losing everything? As I was lying in that jail cell, cold and alone, I could feel my master whispering to me. And I realized, there's nothing more to fear.” She smiled, her lips peeling back into a wide, maniacal grin. “Do you know what you can accomplish when you purge your mind from fear? You can do anything. You can kill anyone. Case in point.”

She snapped her fingers, and the witches nearest to us came forward. The remaining eight had banded together, forming into a loose circle in the center of the room, pushing the innocent civilians into the corners, where they trembled in fear, desperately clinging to one another.

As the witches drew closer, I saw they had a figure between them. Father Iron's hands had been bound behind his back, and one of the witches had twisted his crucifix chain to the point of choking, holding it taut like a dog collar. They forced him down to his knees, then moved to flank him, forming a half circle with him in the center.

"You want to know another secret?" Mortiana whispered from atop me. "None of the Salem witches were ever burned at the stake. They hung them or let them die in prison. Burning was a European tradition. But we didn't have any rope, and sometimes, you just have to play to your crowd's expectations."

She leaped to her feet and stepped aside as two of the witches seized me. They held me by either arm, forced me to my feet, and swung me around to face the crowd.

"Father Irons has been misbehaving for some time. Isn't that right, Father?" Mortiana asked, as she walked a slow circle around him. "He's changed churches six times in as many years. Now, he'll tell you all about how he's doing God's work. Going from place to place, hunting down the evil witches. But there's a little more to it than that, isn't there? You see, Father Irons likes his gold. He likes his silver, and the way people bow their head and lower their eyes when he walks by. Don't you, Father?" She jerked forward, like a striking serpent, until her face was against his ear. "*Don't you, Father?*"

Father Irons shivered and tried to pull away, but his chain held him taunt, and he drew in a slow breath before turning his angry gaze on her. "I'll not play your games, witch."

"Oh yes, you will," Mortiana said. She extended her hand, and one of the witches placed her burning broom in it. She brought it around, until the flame was practically touching his face, so close that the ends of his hair began to sizzle and burn. "You'll play for as long as I tell you to, or I'll burn the flesh from your body in strips." She smiled and turned her head to

face the crowd. “And when I’m done, we’ll start on these others. I’ve got quite a few names on my chopping block.”

A low moan spread throughout the crowd, but it was drowned out a moment later by a chanting cry from outside. It was a rhythmic cry, interspersed with screams, but there was something familiar about it that took me a minute to place. It drew closer, and was swiftly followed by a heavy *crash*, as something slammed against the main doors.

“You hear that, Mortiana?” I asked. “That’s the seconds of your life counting down. Any moment now, those doors are going to open up and the cavalry is going to come rushing inside. At best, you’ll end up dead, and at worst, a cage you’ll never get out of.”

“Oh, is that so?” Mortiana’s face turned into a faux frown. “Poor Sergeant Mayfield. So misguided. You think I didn’t know that you’d have friends waiting in the wings? That you wouldn’t dare come in here alone? I made a few calls of my own, and it turns out, I’ve got more friends than I realized. This city has no shortage of wronged women, and they’re all just as eager for some payback as I am. In fact, you might even say we are legion.”

I forced myself to meet her gaze and allowed the corners of my mouth to rise into a smile that was every bit as mad as the one she usually wore. “Who said anything about friends?”

Mortiana blinked, and her frown became real as she raised her eyes. From outside, another crash occurred, and the ballroom doors gave way, the first sliver of light appearing as the doors were crudely ripped away to reveal a dozen figures standing in the hall.

The smell of airport booze and damp clothing swept through the ballroom, battling against the burning bristles of the witches’ broom for olfactory supremacy as the figures pushed inside. They were dressed in a plethora of mismatched clothing, layered atop one another with little care for fashion

cohesion. Most wore hats or beanies, their edges pulled low, and they were armed with an array of melee weapons and what appeared to be tiny bottles of alcohol, like the kind you might receive on an airplane, as well as duty-free bottles of perfume. Someone had poked holes in the tops, and stuffed handkerchiefs and tissues down inside, binding them into makeshift wicks. I recognized Sickle among their number, her blouse hanging from one shoulder to reveal the sour-skin beneath. She had my police badge pinned to the top of her belt, and was smiling as she gripped her weathered blade in one hand, its tip already stained with blood that extended down to her knuckles.

Mortianna's face might have been comical in another setting, but her mouth tightened as she straightened. "Who the heck are you people?"

"We are the sins of your past," a woman answered, her voice cold and clear.

As if it had been a signal, the Acadians split apart, creating a break between them that allowed Evangeline to come to the forefront of their line. Her pale skin glowed in the emerald light, seemingly harnessing the fire's reflection and turning it back outward. She was dressed much as I'd seen her before, her white dress lined with lace, and a belt of silver disks hanging from her hips. She swept forward to the front of the line and extended her hand, as if reaching for something unseen hanging in the air. "We are the dark specter of your folly, the evil of your past given flesh."

"What the heck are you babbling about? I don't know who you are, old woman, but I'm warning you. Get out of here, or you'll end up paying the same price as all the others in this room."

Evangeline extended her other hand out, and when she spoke, her voice carried throughout the room, seemingly reflecting from every crystal hanging overhead. "Acadians, gather to me my children, in this, our finest hour. Take heed of

my words, and obey with all your might. Now and forever, my children, I command you.” Her serene expression melted, fading away into anger and hatred. “*Kill the witches!*”

## Battle Royal. May 7<sup>th</sup> 2035hrs

If you'd told me this morning that I would end the day in the middle of a four-way battle royal starring the Sisters of Salem, the Daughters of Goody, the Acadian sewer people and whatever remnant of the Boston Police Department still remained outside, I would have called in sick. But that's the wondrous thing about hindsight. It only works while looking backward. And even when every footstep and foreshadowed threat stands out clear as day, you can never be sure exactly when things are going to fall apart.

The Acadians struck first.

Half a dozen handheld lighters sprang to life, the flames casting long shadows along the walls as they passed through their lines, lighting the makeshift wicks buried inside the alcohol bottles and perfumes. Once engulfed, the Acadians hurled them with force, wielding them like miniature Molotov cocktails. Where they hit, they shattered, casting red flame against the green and sending shards of glass in all directions. They were aiming primarily for the witches, but the rush of anger and adrenaline caused more than a few to sail high or wide, and they shattered against the back wall, leaking burning spirits and perfume onto the citizens of Boston who'd sought to shelter there.

The Daughters of Goody had been caught off guard, but they recovered quickly, including the two holding me captive. They released my arms and joined with their sisters, banding together and using their flaming brooms to clear space as well as to shield themselves from the oncoming fire. In some ways, what they did reminded me of a Roman shield wall, except instead of sharpened iron, they used wood and faux magic.

I emphasize faux because I saw one witch break ranks and step forward, chanting in Latin and wielding her finger through a complex series of arcs meant to mimic a protection circle. She didn't get the chance to finish, because halfway

through a bottle of Dolce & Gabbana hit her in the face, just above the jaw. The bottle shattered, and the flame engulfed her hood, burning skin and cloth with equal disregard as she screamed and collapsed to the ground.

From there, things began to dissolve into a more sordid melee. The two sides charged and crashed together, warring amidst the pools of burning liquor gathered along the floor. The Acadians fought with an assortment of hand-held weaponry, mostly stabbing weapons, including rusted knives and old screwdrivers. By contrast, the witches wielded their flaming brooms, whipping their blunted ends around to slam across the Acadian forms, or else reversing course and stabbing with their flaming tips, setting cloth and flesh afire.

I glimpsed Sickle, armed with her inward-curved blade, slashing at a broom wielding witch. She faked high, then shot left, knocking the broom aside and closing in fast, her arm a blur of stabbing motions that ended with the witch lying on her back, eyes staring sightlessly upward.

On the opposite side of the room, Mortiana danced amidst the carnage, her mouth peeled into a wide, gaping laugh as she turned to meet a charging Acadian's swing. The Acadian, a solid man with a crooked nose and heavy overbite, wielded a drilling hammer, and he swung for her temple. Mortiana was too fast, however, and she dropped low, slithering across the ground like a serpent and popping back to her feet in one easy motion. The force of the hammer blow carried the man off balance, and it proved to be a fatal mistake, as Mortiana jammed her knife into the space below his ribs. The extra layers of cloth did nothing to blunt the ceremonial knife's tip, and she cut deep and tore it free with a savage cry. The Acadian stumbled forward, and through the gap in the hood and jacket I saw his eyes widen. Dark liquid spilled out from the wound, staining his clothes and dripping down his pant leg a second before he crashed to the ground, his hammer hitting the floor with a heavy, echoing *thud*.



It briefly occurred to me that, as quite possibly the only person in the room with a gun, I should have been able to enforce some sort of order. But as it turns out, Mortiana had it right. Once you cast your fears aside, the threat of a bullet doesn't really matter anymore. Besides which, I still didn't dare draw my pistol. The fires burning along the floor created a series of dancing shadows, their battle being projected onto the wall and making it impossible to distinguish friend from foe.

Not that I had many friends in here to begin with.

Better to label them as innocents versus combatants, although even that soon became murky. The citizens of Boston trapped inside were unarmed and untrained, but much as they'd done in the past, a small contingent of them banded together, led by Mayor Altair, as well as several of the heavyside football players. They'd armed themselves with knives from the seafood table, and they attacked the Acadians' flank, plowing through the first row and stabbing their way clear. Once clear, they pushed steadily toward the lone open doorway with close to a dozen women, as well as Father Irons and most of the police department's upper brass following after them.

For a brief second, I considered joining them, but fleeing out the back door has never really been my style, and besides, it would have meant leaving behind an untold numbers of innocents to fend for themselves. Instead, I got my feet beneath me, and seized hold of the fallen serving tray, spinning it in one hand and bringing it down onto the back of a kneeling Acadian's head. He'd been too busy rummaging through the tuxedo pockets of an unconscious man to notice, and it struck solid, a low moan emanated out as he slouched forward, ending up unconscious in the downward dog position.

“Oh, help me! Please help me.”

I turned instinctively and glimpsed a woman wearing a peach dress writhing on the floor. She was on her back, holding tightly to the pearls around her neck as a whip-thin Acadian smelling strongly of booze and old motor oil yanked on them. I leaped onto the nearest chair and propelled myself up and through the air like Macho Man Randy Savage leaping from atop a steel cage. I came down practically atop the Acadian and threw the full force of my weight behind my strike, smashing the tray over the back of his skull so hard it snapped in half.

The force of the blow flattened the Acadian onto the floor, and I dropped the separate halves of the broken tray before seizing the woman and yanking her up from the floor. “Get out of here!” I screamed, and motioned vaguely in the direction I’d seen the upper brass fleeing. She nodded, and headed that way, tears streaming from her eyes as she hiked up her dress and fled.

I watched her go, then turned back to find myself standing practically face to face with Sickle.

She smiled when she saw me, and threw herself forward, stabbing overhead. I didn’t dodge back, fearing that if I did, I would crash into something, or someone, and lose my footing. Instead, I threw myself forward, closing fast and seizing her arm with both of mine. I stopped her arm’s descent, but the rest of her crashed against me. Wiry as she was, I should have had the strength advantage, but she’d been living on the streets for who knows how long, and she fought like a caged badger, screaming and jerking her arm this way and that with no care for things like ligaments and tendons. Through it all, I held firm, fearing that any slip would see her knife enter my abdomen. I couldn’t keep up with her footwork though, and I was forced to back up until my thighs hit the edge of a table. I couldn’t get around it in time, and Sickle surged forward, sending me crashing back and causing one end of the table to cave beneath me. Glass, cutlery and porcelain plates crashed to

the floor, sliding off the table along with a water pitcher, whose cool fare spilled out and soaked the back of my dress.

Sickle loomed over me, her eyes glimmering like dark pools, trying to draw me into the madness behind. I kept my grip on her arm, but the leverage was against me, and bit by bit, the knife came down, the tapered end drawing ever close to my torso.

I'd like to say it was skill that saved my life, but remember what I said earlier about emotion being no substitute for practice? Sickle and her kind had been preparing for this day for years, heck, maybe even decades, and I was making it up on the fly. As such, her conviction, not to mention her understanding of leverage regarding close quarters knife combat, was far superior to my own, and I likely would have ended up bleeding out right on that table, my guts opened for all the world to see, if not for a bit of good luck.

A passing Acadian bumped Sickle's foot, catching her on the side of the knee and knocking her sideways. I couldn't say with a hundred percent certainty that it was Court, but the brief flash of beard and long hair I saw matched, and it felt good to think that maybe there was one person in this entire ballroom who didn't want me dead.

As Sickle went off balance, I jerked sideways and let my arms relax. The sudden lack of resistance brought her knife crashing down, and the tapered tip pierced the table, sinking deep into the wood as I reached behind me and seized the fallen water pitcher. I brought it up and smashed it against the top of her skull. The blow caught her by surprise, and she jerked back, hunching her shoulders to protect her head. It was an instinctive action, but it opened up her midsection, and I swung the pitcher around and drove it into the right side of her torso. An involuntary groan burst out of her mouth, and she started to cover up, but I wasn't having it. My next two blows caught the sides of her face, and the third sent her crashing to the ground, twitching and unconscious.

“How’s that for your next great upheaval?” I snarled, before snatching my badge off her fallen form.

It was a rare moment of victory in what was otherwise a revolving picture book of nightmares. Everywhere I looked, people were bleeding, or screaming, or otherwise writhing in pain. Several Acadians rolled along the ground, as well as a few who didn’t, fully engulfed in fire, while the citizens of Boston, those who hadn’t managed to flee alongside the football players and police brass, tried their best to avoid the worst of the fighting.

As I peered around, it became obvious the Daughters of Goody were being overcome by the Acadian’s numbers, and were being forced to retreat back toward one corner of the room. I spotted Evangeline standing between tables, not far from where Father Irons had knelt only moments before. She had her arms outstretched, and was speaking encouragements to those around her, egging them on as they fought and pillaged.

A witch sporting a broken broom burst through the throng and spotted her. She twisted her snapped handle, revealing the tapered end of one side, and charged toward the Acadian leader.

Evangeline never moved. She didn’t need to. As the witch came on, half a dozen of her followers swept in from the flanks, throwing themselves into the witches’ path. They struck with knives and blunt weapons, and beat her to the ground, working over her fallen form with savage delight.

I watched it happen, then forced my eyes away, peering back to the source of the misery. Maybe it was coincidence, or maybe Evangeline felt my eyes on her. Either way, she turned, and our gazes met, as the flow of the crowd seemingly parted to allow us to speak.

“Faithless herald,” she said, her voice flowing out with musical cadence at stark odds with the pain and suffering all

around me. “I did not expect to find you here. Have you come to your senses at last?”

“Far from it. Congratulations are in order, though. You almost had me fooled.”

She blinked and tilted her head to the side. “Oh?”

“Yeah. For a minute there, I almost felt sorry for your kind. Forced to live below the surface. Scraping out a living using any means necessary. It occurs to me now, however, that it didn’t have to be like this. Sure, maybe some of your people, those like Sickie there—” I jerked my head back and didn’t quite spit. “Maybe she and the few like her can’t help themselves. But you? Nah, you’ve got what it takes to survive up in the real world. You just don’t want to. It’s more fun to play queen down in the subterranean realm. More fun to pretend to be a victim, to play the martyr, and to convince all these other people to buy into your little fantasy. But I see the truth now.”

“And what truth is that, faithless herald?”

“That you’re nothing but a lowly sewer rat. A creature who’d rather steal her supper than earn it. If you were any kind of true leader then you would have led those people out years ago, and helped them to find homes and jobs. Ways they could support one another and take care of their families. But you didn’t do that. You did this, and you came here tonight thinking that you were going to find riches or satisfaction. But I’m here to tell you that you’re wrong. The only thing you’ve got coming your way is a good old-fashioned Boston beat down.” I clenched my fists and brought them up by the sides of my face. “You and all your friends made a mistake coming here tonight, and now, you may as well hold your plate up high, because dinner is here, and I’m going to make sure you choke on it.”

Evangeline stared at me for a long moment, her face flittering through surprise, shock, and finally settling on anger.

She drew her hand back, as if holding an invisible ball, and the corner of her lip peeled back into an angry snarl.

“So be it, herald. Die alongside those you love, if that is your wish. This city will serve as your graveyard, and we shall rule over its ashes.”

“Suck my big fat toe, you two-bit B-list Shakespearian wannabe.”

Evangeline’s eyes widened, and she opened her mouth, but the doorways suddenly burst open. All the doorways, letting light spill in from multiple directions and revealing the figures standing there.

Rickson was the first person I saw. He was bleeding from a cut high up on his head, and was gripping a broken chair leg between his hands, wielding it like a club. Close to three dozen men and women stood alongside him. Most were young, early college years, I was guessing, likely comprising Cambrie’s class of recruits. I also noted hotel security, and a few civilians who’d chosen to fight rather than flee. Verbena stood near the eastern doorway, surrounded by Lily, Rosemary and Hazel. Behind them, I spotted Marlon Baker, his thin form practically disappearing in the shadows.

The figure that drew everyone’s attention was Mayor Altair. He stood beside Rickson with his tuxedo in disarray, one sleeve torn free and his bow tie hanging at an awkward angle around his neck. For all that, he looked determined enough to walk through walls, and had armed himself with an American flag, its body rolled into a neat spear. He pointedly took a step forward and pointed the tapered end toward Evangeline and her followers.

“Citizens of Boston!” Mayor Altair screamed. “Charge!”

## A Penny for Your Thoughts. May 7<sup>th</sup> 2100hrs

A heavy cry rang out from the police recruits, as well as the Sisters of Salem and the few civilians who'd come back to fight, as they charged inside the ballroom. They hit the Acadians head on, and while I don't remember making the conscious decision to join in, I somehow found myself among them, throwing fists alongside others as we fought and clawed our way through their lines.

It didn't last long. The Acadians had come for pillage and plunder. Going toe-to-toe in sustained combat against a force unwilling to give an inch wasn't their forte, and green as the recruits might have been, they had some idea of how police riot lines were meant to work, and they moved in cadence, protecting one another. In no time at all, the Acadians began to falter. First a little, then a little more, until they finally broke, like a dam giving way under the pressure. They splintered in all directions, passing out through the opposite doorways and fleeing through the hotel and into the street.

At the same time, police officers and emergency personnel were coming in from all parts of the city, blocking off nearby streets and subway entrances, seizing those they could get their hands on. It was tough going. The flood of innocent civilians who'd been wounded and caught in the crossfire made things difficult, and more of them escaped than were apprehended. A fact which was true for the Daughters of Goody as well.

Several of the witches had been killed in the fighting, but I didn't find Mortiana among their number, or Flora or Dahlia for that matter. I could only assume they and their brethren had escaped in the confusion.

At some point, the fighting gave way to helping the wounded, and when there were no more wounded in need of

immediate attention, exhaustion set in, and I found myself sitting alone at a table in the hallway just outside the ballroom. I still had my gun on me, for all the good it had done, and my sleeveless dress revealed several cuts and lacerations, including a heavy bruise on my left forearm, most of which I didn't remember getting.

None of the other police officers came to talk to me. I spotted Mayor Altair stalking down the halls with half a dozen of the upper brass in tow, including Deputy Bulwark. I was certain he spotted me too, but he moved on without acknowledging me, and I didn't bother to chase him down.

Rickson eventually appeared and sat down beside me, lightly placing a pair of Coke cans on the table.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

I seized the Coke and popped the lid, taking a long drink before lowering it down. “I'm tired.”

“You're allowed to be. You've had a heck of a day.”

“Any sign of Evangeline?”

He shook his head. “No, but we've got a good portion of her people in lockup. It'll take Homicide Division weeks to interview them all.”

“Oh, darn. Poor them. Any chance we got Mortiana?”

“Afraid not. The Daughters of Goody seem to have vanished. Those that made it out at any rate.”

I was quiet for a long moment. “Any idea how many people died?”

Rickson didn't answer right away. “Upwards of a dozen. Not quite two. It would have been worse if you hadn't been here.”

Almost two dozen people, their lives snuffed out like candles placed too close to a window. I brought the coke can to my lips and tried not to shudder. “What happened?”



“You mean before the attack? We were waiting for a signal. Couple of recruits noted a few of the homeless lurking about, but we didn’t connect the dots until it was too late. Acadians hit without warning. Came out of the subways. Took the hotel staff a few minutes to work out what was happening, and by then they’d gotten a foothold and we had to fight our way inside.”

“Couldn’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t, but we managed it.”

“Any idea what happens next?”

He shrugged. “Best guess? The proverbial poop hits the fan. Press are already swarming. They’re out there now, fighting with the ambulances and firetrucks for space on the street. Someone got a picture of Mayor Altair looking all Rambo. Gripping the American flag and everything. It’ll be on the front page come morning.”

“Bet his supporters are going to love that one.”

“It won’t hurt his public perception, that’s for sure.”

“You know what bothers me? I didn’t see any sign of our killer. And we still don’t know who took a shot at us outside the coffee shop.”

“Maybe you did, but you just didn’t realize it.” He sipped his own Coke and then let out a sigh. “Or maybe you didn’t because they were never here. Who knows?”

“Someone knows.”

“Come on, Chloe. There’s being too hard on yourself, and then there’s whatever this is. You single-handedly stopped what could have turned out to be a massacre. Take some solace in that.”

“Won’t matter much if I can’t keep our killer from targeting the witches.” I blinked and frowned. “Speaking of which, where are they?”

“The shorter one took a tumble during the melee and came down bad on her arm.”

I blinked. “Verbena? Is she okay?”

He nodded. “EMTs think it’s a clean break. They transported her to the hospital. The other three ladies went with her. I assigned a pair of officers to escort them and stand guard through the night.”

“Thanks, Rick.”

He raised his Coke can in silent salute. “Anytime.”

“Think I could bum a ride home? I’m in need of another shower, and Yosemite’s probably getting hungry again.”

“I like that you took that hamster in. It’s about time you started taking responsibility.”

“Yeah, he keeps me grounded.”

“It’s also good that you’re not alone.”

I grunted, and pointedly avoided looking at my cell phone, which would have revealed no missed calls. “I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

He nodded and finished his soda, tossing the empty can in the wastebasket. “Best get going then.”

We rose from the chairs and made our way through the hotel, descending via the escalator and making it as far as the lobby before a familiar figure came running in through the front door.

“Sergeant Mayfield!” Lyndon Parrish said.

He was still dressed in his white lab coat, but his shirt was untucked, and he’d lost his tie somewhere back at the office. Add that to the red eyes and the scent of coffee that clung to him, and it was easy to see why his abrupt entrance drew the attention of several officers standing guard. They started toward us, but I raised my hand and flashed my badge to let

them know he was okay. They relaxed and resumed their posts, peering out into the streets.

“I looked into that matter you asked me about,” Lyndon said. He was clutching a manilla envelope in his hand, filled with printed pages. “Here’s everything I could find.”

I accepted the envelope and started flipping through the pages. There was a surprising amount, most of it dating back years, and in some cases, more than a decade. It was a lot to take in, and I was tired. My eyes started to glaze over, and I shoved my knuckles in my mouth to stifle a yawn. I was about to thank Lyndon and tell him I would look it over first thing tomorrow morning, but then I flipped to the last page and saw an old mugshot photo.

I didn’t recognize the person staring at me, at least not right away. There was something familiar about them, though. Something in the cheeks and the slight tilt of their head. It wasn’t until I made a few mental adjustments, picturing them with longer hair, and shifting the colors in my mind’s eye before I realized what, or better said, who, I was looking at.

“Chloe?” Rickson asked. “Is everything okay?”

I snarled and shook my head. “No. Change of plan, Rick. Looks like we’re not going to my place after all.”

## A Killer Revealed. May 7<sup>th</sup> 2159hrs

Ambretta Greenhall's home sat dark and silent, save for a lone candle in the window. I had Rickson drop me off at the curb, then asked him to wait in the car while I made my way up the trio of stairs. Yellow police tape was strewn across the front entrance, but the front doors proved to be unlocked, and I ducked underneath the tape and let myself in, passing through the foyer and into the main living room.

Dahlia was already inside.

The Sister of Salem witch was seated on Ambretta's old couch, staring up at the large stained glass window depicting white roses with long, twirling stems. She wore her full regalia, including gold face makeup and dark hair dyed sea green at the tips. She glanced over at my arrival, and a soft smile lifted the corner of her mouth. "Oh, Sergeant Mayfield. You scared me. I know I'm not supposed to be in here, but it's the only place I can still feel at home. Ambretta was such a comforting presence and—"

I drew my pistol from its holster and placed the barrel against her forehead. Her eyes widened, and whatever else she'd been about to say died before it passed her lips.

"It was the hair," I told her. "I'm not sure anyone else would have figured it out based on the picture alone, but the minute I cast the face in gold and added dark hair, it wasn't hard to see."

"Sergeant, I'm not sure what's happening here. Whatever it is you think—"

"Shh." I shook my head. "No more lies, Dahlia. We're past that. Or should I call you Davie? As in David Birch."

Dahlia stared at me for a long moment, then the look of faux confusion melted away, and she stared at me, bold,

confident, and without a hint of remorse. “How did you know?”

“I’ve got friends in low places.”

She snorted and considered it for a long moment. “Beatrice. I knew I should have dealt with her. I was just afraid it might draw the investigation away from the witches. Live and learn, I suppose.”

“Interesting choice of words.”

“Oh, come now, Sergeant. Drop the act. You’re not going to shoot me.”

“Oh, no?” I pressed harder, driving the pistol into her forehead and causing her to grimace. “You killed Ambretta Greenhall.”

“You can’t prove that. Forensics will tell you it was the Headless Horseman.”

“I don’t care what forensics says. I *know*.”

“Well, lucky for me, we live in a time where police officers can’t just go off and execute someone based on a hunch.”

“I also know you helped Flora spring Mortiana from the prison.”

“Again, you have no proof. I’ll be happy to provide a list of alibis willing to swear to my whereabouts.”

“You think phony alibis are going to protect you? That I’m going to let you walk away scot-free based on some legal technicalities?”

Dahlia’s eyes sparkled and the corner of her lip pulled up into a sardonic smile. “Oh no, Sergeant. I know you live by your morals. In fact, I’m counting on them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I suspected something like this might happen. That’s why I took out a little insurance policy.”

“Uh-huh. And how’s that working out for you?”

She glanced up at the barrel of my gun, still pressed into her forehead. “You won’t do it.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“There’ll be consequences.”

“I’m a police officer. You really think I don’t know how to hide a body?”

The corner of her mouth twitched upward again. “Not for you, Sergeant. For your friend.”

“Which friend might that be?”

“Oh, come now. Don’t tell me you still haven’t put it together? You didn’t think it was odd that Lieutenant Kermit was implicated in Desiree Easton’s death?”

A cold feeling bloomed in my chest, spreading swiftly into my arms. “It was you.”

She nodded. “You can take your vengeance if you like, but you’ll be damning him in the process. Or we can come to an arrangement.”

“I don’t make arrangements with murderers.”

“Think of it as a temporary cease-fire then. We can burn each other to the ground, or we can call it even and save it for another day.”

“People are dead, Dahlia.”

“That’s an unchanging constant. People died today. They’ll die tomorrow. It’s the way of the world.”

I stared at her for a long moment, then exhaled and lowered my arm. “First, answer some questions for me. Start with why. Why all of this?”

For a brief moment, I thought she was going to give me some flippant answer, but then her face changed, and she stared off into nothing, momentarily lost in memory. “Haven’t

you ever wanted something, Sergeant? Craved it with all your soul? From the time I could first walk, all I ever desired was to be accepted into the coven. To be surrounded by my sisters, our hands intertwined as we drew strength from the spirits of the Earth.”

“I know about your family life. I know your mother wasn’t a big supporter of that.”

Dahlia’s face twitched, an involuntary spasm, gone in a flash. “Times were different then. She tried to dissuade me, but I knew who I was inside, and what I was meant to be. It’s amusing to think sometimes. You could make a good argument that the coven ruined my life. It took everything from me. My family, my freedom, even my innocence. But it’s all I ever wanted. The only thing I’ve ever loved or dreamed about. I suspect it has to do with the fact that so many people told me I could never have it. More the fools them. Times have changed, and people are more accepting of others like me now than at any other time in history.”

“There’s more to it than that. Ambretta didn’t care how you were born. She cared about the person inside, and I’ll bet she could tell that something wasn’t right with you. Hence why you killed her.”

Dahlia’s mouth tightened and her features turned angry. “She started digging. Trying to learn about my past. I knew it was only a matter of time before she learned the truth. About my mother and my sisters. About what I’d been forced to do in order to survive. If I was to continue within the coven, it was clear that things needed to change.”

“And Desiree? Why did she deserve to die?”

“Desiree was my friend. She knew how I’d grown up. But she wasn’t strong. She wouldn’t lie to Ambretta, or anyone else within the coven. And once Ambretta was gone...”

“You figured it was only a matter of time before she put the pieces together and told the rest of the coven.”

Dahlia shrugged and raised her palms toward the ceiling. “With Ambretta gone, it was clear the coven would require new leadership. Verbena was the obvious choice, but she had no interest in assuming the role. From there, Mortiana was next in line. She certainly wasn’t about to expel anyone based on some past poor behavior, but she was a little too radical, even for my tastes. She’d have had us all bathing naked beneath the next full moon and spilling our blood on the ground while we pledged our souls to the devil.” She snorted and shook her head. “No, thank you.”

“If she’s so unstable, why did you break her out of prison?”

“It was necessary in order to weed out the more aggressive of us. If the Sisters of Salem are to survive, and make no mistake, Sergeant, we will survive, then it’s clear we must adopt a more reserved approach. We need cool, rational thinking in times of strife. That couldn’t happen while the ghost of Mortiana still reigned in our memories.”

“She’s more than just a ghost now.”

“True, but I’ve read her psychiatric profile. It’s highly likely that she will self-destruct within the next few months. And with her gone and Flora banished, the coven will be in desperate need of someone to step up and assume control.”

“Meaning you?”

She smiled and bowed her head. “And to think my mother always told me I would never amount to anything. If only she could see me now.”

“Why bring Father Irons into it?”

She gave me a flat look. “You, of all people, should realize the importance of having a common enemy. As it stands, I suspect Mortiana will bleed them profusely before her candle ultimately burns out, and a weakened church can mean only good things for our coven.”



“She’s weakened you too. Several of your members were killed just this evening.”

Dahlia nodded, and her face became somber. “Sometimes, you have to cut out the cancer before you can begin to heal.”

“What about Evangeline and the Acadians?”

“A distraction. Something to keep Blue Moon busy. I’d heard about them years before, rumors from within the prison, but I never truly believed until I saw their camps with my own eyes. I thought I might use them to keep Blue Moon occupied. Hence all that prophet nonsense. They ate it up without hesitation, although if I’m being honest, I never thought they would actually rise up. I underestimated their resolve.”

“People died because of it.”

“True, but at least now the city will be better prepared in the future.”

“You tried to execute me outside the coffee shop this morning.”

“It was nothing personal, Sergeant. It had been three weeks since Ambretta’s death, and you weren’t showing any signs of stopping. I thought it best to remove you from the equation, such as it were. Although now that I’ve seen what you’re capable of, I am positively delighted that it failed.”

“What I’m capable of?”

“Indeed. I thought Blue Moon was a ridiculous notion when I first heard about it, but watching you over these past few months, it’s clear there is more to it than mere tabloid fodder. I’ll be most interested to see how things progress in the future.”

“What makes you so sure you’ll be here to see it?”

“Because I know you, Sergeant. I can read you like a book, and I know what’s important to you. Family. Friends. The people you care about. You could never do anything to hurt

them. That's why I'm still here talking to you. You've already made your decision. You just haven't been able to bring yourself to accept it yet."

"Is that so?"

She nodded. "If it helps, think of it as a lesson in foresight. Once it became clear you were not going to be dissuaded, I realized I needed another bargaining chip in case a situation like this should arise."

"Stop gloating and get to the details."

"Have it your way. I'm willing to trade Lieutenant Kermit's freedom for your silence. You agree to keep quiet about what you know, and I'll make sure the photographs are revealed to be fakes. With a little luck, he'll be out of jail by noon tomorrow."

I shook my head. "Even if I were to agree, you have to know this would only buy you some time. The other sisters are smart. Eventually, they're going to figure out what you've been up to."

She smiled and leaned back on the couch, crossing her legs. "You let me worry about them. Now, do we have a deal?"

"If I say yes, you need to understand this is a onetime thing. It doesn't mean we're friends. I'm still going to be investigating Ambretta's death, as well as those other women, and if I find anything that can connect them to you, I'm going to come after you with everything I have."

"I'm confident I covered my tracks well, and come tomorrow, you'll likely have some new monstrosity or monster lurking in the shadows that requires your attention. I'm willing to take my chances."

"There's more," I said. "You come after Lieutenant Kermit again or anyone else within my division, and there won't be any more deals. It'll be full on war from that moment forward. You understand that?"

She smiled. “I understand perfectly, Sergeant Mayfield.”

## Afterglow. May 8<sup>th</sup> 1200hrs

Dahlia was as good as her word, and at exactly 11:59 A.M. the following day, Lieutenant Kermit was released. According to my sources, new evidence was uncovered that revealed the photos to be fake, and Deputy Bulwark was forced to make a formal apology on behalf of the entire department. His first of many, as it turned out.

Margaret and I were waiting for Lieutenant Kermit outside when they released him. He shook my hand and thanked me, but it was hard to look him in the eye, and I made some excuse about needing to get back to the office and left quickly.

The days that followed were a bit of a blur. Mayor Altair's popularity soared in the wake of the attack. Once pictures of him emerged, people started referring to him as a godsend. "Just what this town needs," they'd say. His approval ratings rose higher than any other mayor in Boston's recent history, and they're already declaring him a shoo-in for the next election. They even had a ceremony bestowing on him the keys to the city, although I suspected he'd already had a pair.

Father Irons stood by his side through the ceremony, but kept his comments to himself. He'd been working diligently in the North End, using stories of the attack to draw people in and bolster the church's numbers, readying them for what he calls the coming battle. I'm keeping a close eye on them.

Dahlia assumed the role of high priestess within the Sisters of Salem coven. I'd be lying if I said my decision to let her walk out of Ambretta's house didn't haunt me, but I'm not sure I would change anything if given the chance. She won the round, but the fight is far from over.

Verbena had to have surgery to repair her broken arm. She was released from the hospital a few days later, and was quietly resting at home.

Lily, Hazel, and Rosemary remained in Boston for a few days before flying back home. They sent a bouquet of flowers to the office, and I could hardly bear to look at them. I imagine I'll see them again down the line, but for now, I've had my fill of witches.

Bulwark caught hell once it came out that he'd been forewarned about the Acadians. He tried blaming Blue Moon, but Pongo's video had him dead to rights, and he had to backpedal like crazy to explain to the Chief of Police why he hadn't acted. He managed to avoid getting demoted by saying he believed I was making up stories in an attempt to delay them questioning Lieutenant Kermit who'd also been cleared by that point. The chief wasn't about to go on record and admit they'd had prior warning of the Acadian attack, so the entire ordeal was swept under the rug. Deputy Bulwark is still technically in charge of our division, but every time I pass him in the hall, he pretends not to see me.

Cambrie and her class graduated from the academy and passed the state test with flying colors. I suspect it won't be long before she's officially sworn into the police force, and then God help us all.

Alex called early the following morning. Our conversation was pleasant, but we both agreed it was best to put things on hold for a bit. At least until we got back in the same city and could talk face to face. It was as gentle a breakup as I'd ever experienced, but it still hurt. Rickson got wind of it and showed up at my apartment later that night with pizza and half a dozen cannoli. I opened a bottle of wine, and we binge-watched television for a few hours, gradually drawing closer together on the sofa until I began to think something might happen. But just then, my window shattered and... you know what? That's a story for another time.

Dr. Eerie pulled some strings and was allowed to continue his work in Massachusetts General Hospital, although the recent escape of Mortiana forced them to slow their progress

and undergo new security features, including retraining of the staff and additional security checkpoints. Only the fact that it is a hospital keeps me from daydreaming about someone blowing it to kingdom come.

Dr. Lyndon Parrish decided to remain in Boston and continue his work. We haven't spoken much since, but it's nice to know he's there if I need him.

Mortianna and Flora are officially on the run, with warrants issued for their arrest. I know they're still close, likely within the city limits, but so far, no one's seen or heard from them.

Ambretta Greenhall's case was officially closed, and the Headless Horseman charged with her murder. Vihaan is set to go to trial later this year, but I made sure to secure copies of all the files relating to Ambretta, Desiree, and the other missing, now presumed dead, witches. I meant what I told Dahlia about not giving up on them. One way or another, they would get justice.

I showed up for work the following day and against all odds, the world kept turning. New cases continue to come in, and while I still haven't seen anything to convince me that the paranormal is real, the number of people who believe in it continues to astound me.

It's a dangerous thing, belief.

But it's also kind of wonderful, especially when it encompasses things like love, friendship, and comradery. Those things have a magic all their own, and I, for one, believe in them very much.

**The End**

## Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

There's something magical about witches (I mean besides the obvious). Whether it's the Sanderson Sisters, Professor McGonagall, or a withered old crone looking to lure young children into a house made of candy, we can't help but to be enchanted by them.

I approached this book with a certain amount of trepidation. Not only because I wanted to deliver a fresh and interesting take on modern day witches, but because I was weaving in story elements and plot points that extended back through the previous books. Ambitious? Maybe. But was it fun? Definitely.

Thankfully, I had a few advantages on my side. Having lived in Boston and visited Salem on multiple occasions, I can assure you that the witchcraft scene is alive and well, comprised of people from all walks of life who are usually more than happy to share their stories and beliefs. Like most people, they appreciate good manners, and open mockery is a good way to find yourself transformed into a toad. Don't say I didn't warn you.

The chance to include Lyndon Parrish was too good to pass up. He was one of the first characters I had planned to use in this series but hadn't yet found the right spot to fit him in. Thankfully, the witches provided a unique opportunity for him to play a role within Chloe's investigation, and Steve was generous enough to allow me to keep him in Boston for a bit longer. I've no doubt he'll be back before long.

Lily, Hazel, and Rosemary also provided a fun trio that I was able to pluck from the pages of Blue Moon's 13<sup>th</sup> novel, Lord Hale's Monster. Much like Lyndon, I'm hopeful that they will reappear down the line.

The Acadians were somewhat of a happy accident. My initial plan was to have Chloe stumble upon a group of sewer-dwelling Morlocks who would end up taking over a section of the airport using homemade Molotov cocktails and plastic forks sharpened into shivs. While researching Boston's history, however, I came upon the Acadians, and the story surrounding the Great Upheaval beginning in 1755. It just seemed too perfect not to use, and the subsequent conflict with the witches was a blast to write.

We are now four books in and I hope you are enjoying Chloe and her crew just as much as I am. I cannot thank you enough for the support and kindness you've shown.

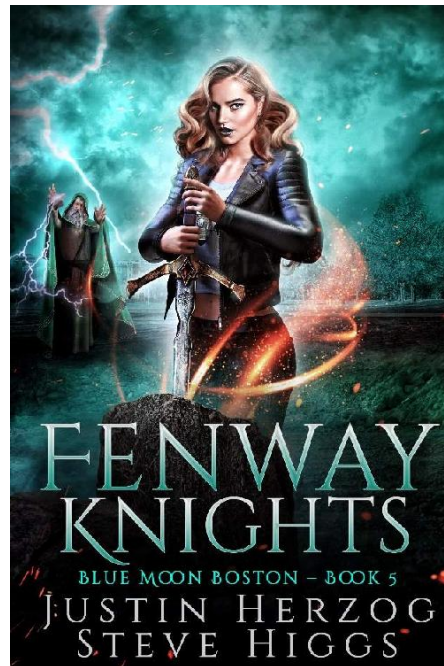
What's next? Fenway Knights, Blue Moon Boston: Book 5, will follow Chloe and the Blue Moon Division as they set off in search of a very unique, very special sword. One that was previously owned by a grumpy old British wizard, who's decided he wants it back. Murders abound as Chloe hunts a killer through green fields, across crystal lakes, and down into the very stones of Boston. Stay tuned, my friends, as Chloe sets out to solve the mystery of Excalibur.

That's all for now. Chloe and the Blue Moon Division will be back soon. In the meantime, take care and happy readings.

Justin Herzog



## What's Next for Chloe?



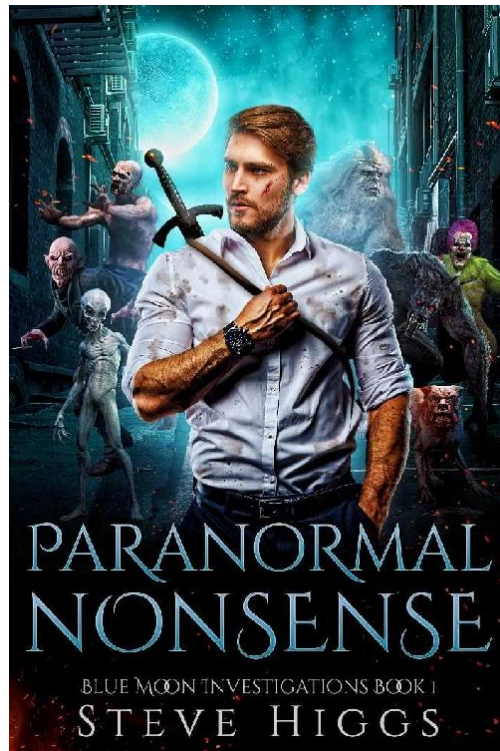
Growing up in Boston, Chloe Mayfield has always felt a special affinity for the ocean. The salt-filled breezes, fresh lobster from the bay, and familiar songs of the sailors maneuvering their ships in and out of the harbor are just a few of the things she loves.

Dead knights washing up on the shoreline? Not so much.

When a figure dressed like he's from Arthurian England winds up in the city morgue, Chloe sets out to investigate. Soon she hears rumors telling of a very special sword reported to be in the city. The mighty Excalibur has reached New England, and there is no shortage of people willing to kill to obtain it. One in particular is keeping her awake at night. Chloe had better buckle up and buckle down, because all sources seem to agree: Merlin is coming to Boston.



## Other Series in the Blue Moon Universe



**Fight a demon, investigate a werewolf biker gang, have tea with mum ... it's all in a day's work for England's #1 paranormal P.I.**

When a master vampire starts killing people in his hometown, paranormal investigator, Tempest Michaels, takes it personally

...

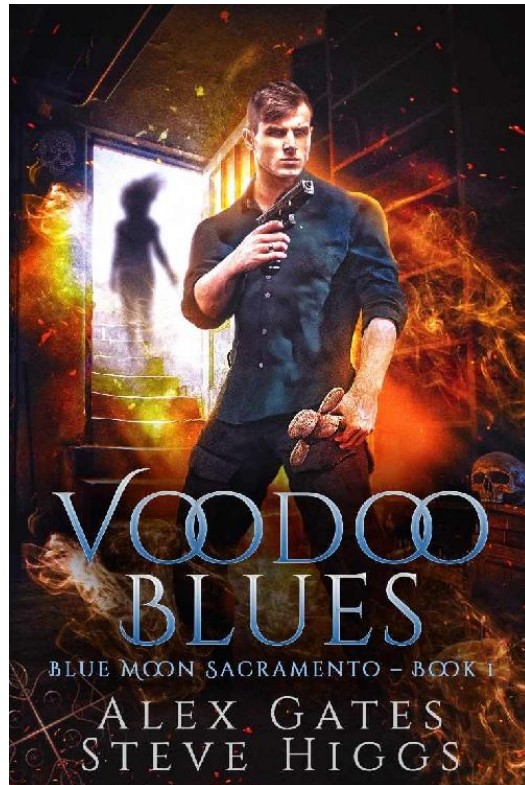
... and soon a race against time turns into a battle for his life. He doesn't believe in the paranormal but has a steady stream of clients with cases too weird for the police.

Mostly it's all nonsense, but when a third victim turns up with bite marks in her lifeless throat, can he really dismiss the possibility that this time the monster is real?

Joined by an ex-army buddy, a disillusioned cop, his friends from the pub, his dogs, and his mother (why are there no

grandchildren, Tempest?), our paranormal investigator is going to stop the murders if it kills him ...

... but when his probing draws the creature's attention, his family and friends become the hunted.



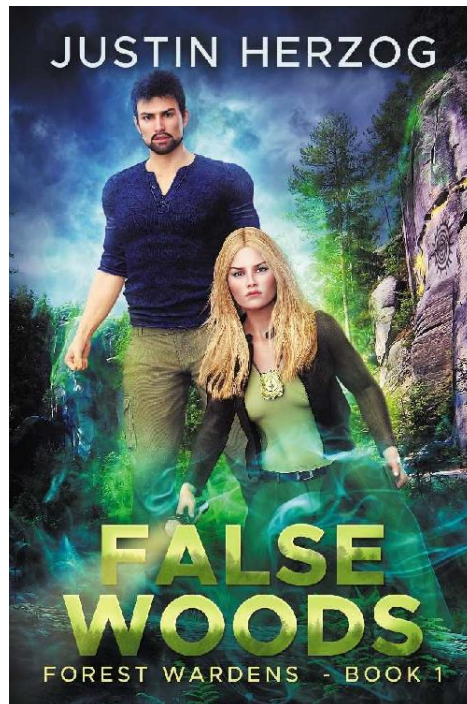
**Curiosity. It's going to get more than just the cat killed.**

Sacramento has its share of spooky, crazy, and unexplained, just like everywhere else, but most other places don't have a self-appointed paranormal investigator to really stir things up.

There are good reasons to fear the night. August Watson is about to kick them in the pants.

With an oversized sidekick, a school-skipping apprentice, and too many bad habits to count, August aims to drag the truth into the light. Kicking and screaming if necessary.

## More Books by Justin Herzog

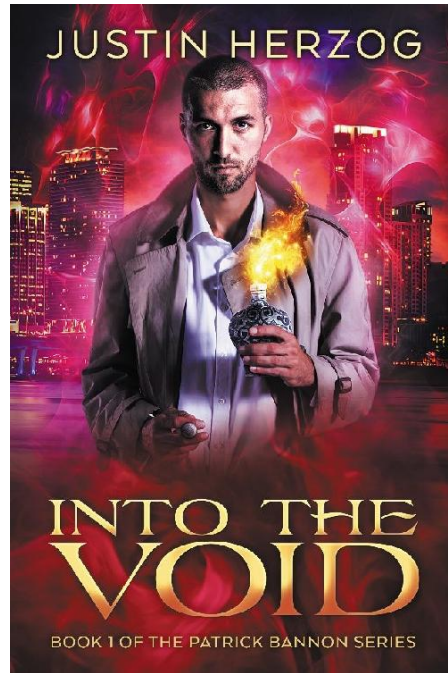


### **Fairy tale legend Goldilocks is all grown up and working for the US Forest Service.**

The newest member of the agency, she spends her days patrolling the Divide, guarding the bridgepoints that separate our world from The Land and the descendants of the Native American tribesmen who reside there.

When a daughter of the Thunder Song Tribe is killed on our side of the forest, Goldilocks sets out to learn the truth. The chiefs want answers, not to mention her boss, and Goldilocks means to find them, preferably before the tribesman declare the Cabot Accords void and cross The Divide themselves.

When the evidence names her oldest friend as the murderer, she finds herself in a race against time, searching to find the truth and catch a killer whose murderous actions could set the whole forest ablaze and see her burned along with it.



My name is Patrick Bannon, and I'm a demonologist.

Most people would agree that the study of demons isn't a practical area of research. Lucky for me, Miami has never been a practical kind of city.

With more reported cases of demonic possession than any other two cities combined, the jewel of South Florida can be a dangerous place for those who don't respect it, and when trouble strikes, it falls to me to set it right.

Now a renowned Catholic reverend is dead, and the church wants to know if it was suicide or murder.

Simple, except when it isn't.

To make matters worse, word on the street is that Tiberius, the demon responsible for my brother's suicide, is trying to claw his way back up from the Void.

One guess who sent him there.

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